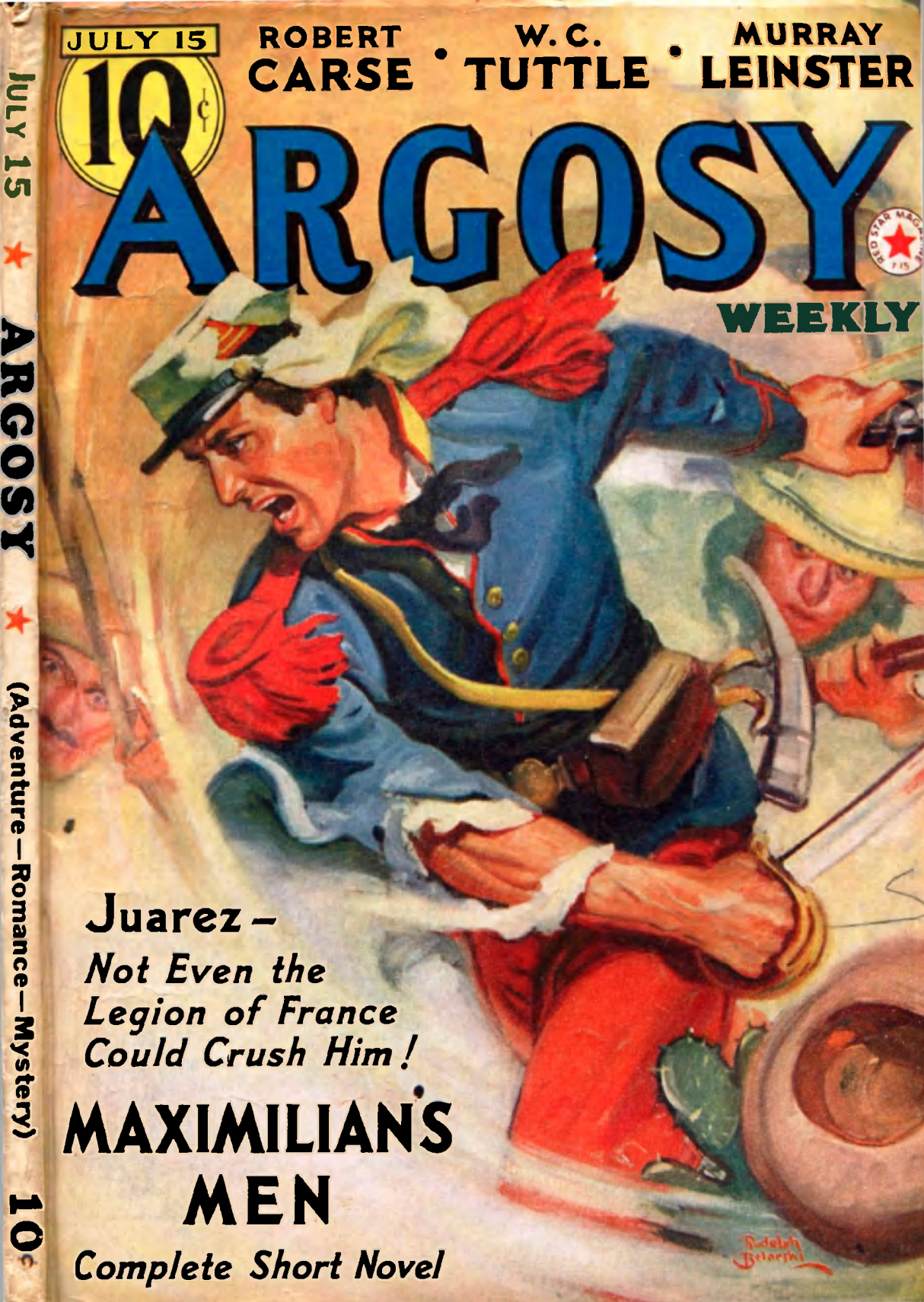
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5.25-18		2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19		2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20		2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21		3.25	1.35
5.50-17		3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18		3.35	1.40
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Cover by Rudolph Belarski
Illustrating Maximilian's Men

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Maximilian's Men

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "Crusader," "Seven Came by Sea," etc.

To Mexico came the Legion, to serve the vicious greed of Napoleon; and there these stepsons of France threw themselves blindly against something as indestructible as the earth itself—a people's fierce love of freedom

CHAPTER I

SOLDIERS, SURRENDER!

TWICE, out by the dusty yellow road, they had formed a hollow square, let the Mexican charges crush themselves against the Legion steel. Now this low-walled adobe farmhouse Captain Danjou had found seemed like a fortress. But they had lost a lot of men, Jacques Fleric saw. The patio was full of them.

He strode back into the patio, his hand tight against the shoulder that had been caught by a machete blow in the first charge. "Let me take a look at that, Lieutenant," Palmaert said. "They got you pretty good."

Palmaert was his senior corporal, and adept with a tourniquet. But the pain as he applied it made Fleric gasp. "Enough," he said. "I'm all right."

Men were dragging tables, planks and bundles of fagots to barricade the pair of doorways giving on the road. Behind, another squad was slamming rifle butts

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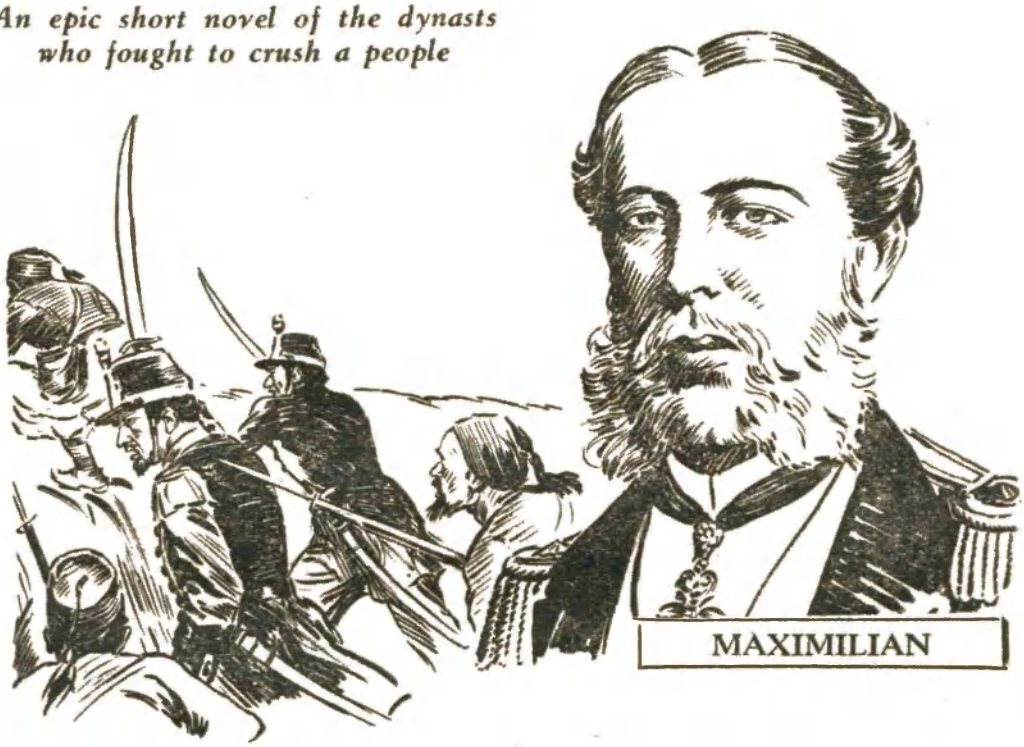


against the rubble wall of one of the rooms. From inside that room were yells in Spanish, the reverberant roar of muskets. The Mexicans were in there, Fleric realized. They were already beginning a new attack.

He staggered to where the Legionnaires made the breach in the wall. "Slow about it," he commanded them. "Be sure you're covered before you open wide." Then he sagged back in a corner among a pile of straw, took out his revolver, reloaded it. The pain had ebbed, leaving him very weak, but with his brain clear. He looked around him with an odd abstraction.

Garlics hung from a beam overhead. In a corner was a gaudy little statuette of the Madonna, made of clay and crudely colored. A worn pair of leather sandals was beneath the stool by the door, and the straw he sat in had been fashioned into a hollow by the recent pressure of bodies. Probably the man who owned this place slept here with his woman, Fleric thought. They might have knelt before the Madonna this morning to say their prayers. Now destiny and death had marched to Camerone. Here the Legion was making what would be called history.

He reached in and took from his pocket his diary, turned to what he had written half an hour ago. His thought had been of his mother as he had written it, he remembered, and then the outfit had been bivouaced beside the road for morning coffee:

"April 30, 1863, at a place called Palo Verde, outside the village of Camerone. We, sixty-two men of the Third Company of the First Battalion, have been assigned to guard duty along the route between Vera Cruz, on the coast, and the inland city of Puebla. This we welcome, after the months of inaction in Vera Cruz. Hundreds of our comrades are dying every week in Vera Cruz of the typhus and of what is called here the vomito negro. The Mexican people seem to have no appreciation at all of what the Emperor Napoleon is trying to do for them and

their country. Since our landing, they have shown a very hostile attitude toward all the French troops. The task of conquering the country is not an easy one. Maximilian and Carlotta will have to be extraordinarily fine rulers if they hope to bring peace and happiness to their new subjects here. It's quite probable that we—"

Where his pencil had scrawled down off the page was the moment when the point sentry had seen the Mexican column. About two thousand of them, the man had reported, and coming from the south. The company had formed right after that, marched at the double right through the village. But the Mexicans had caught them beyond, still had them.

FLERIC closed the diary, put it in his pocket. Out in the patio, Danjou and the two young sub-lieutenants, Vilain and Maudet, were organizing the defense by squads. The men crouched behind the door barricades and at the windows, their powder-blackened hands taut on the *chassepots*. They fired at will, laughing a bit when they were sure of a shot, and cursing when they missed. But the wounded had started to moan, to ask for water. There was no water, Fleric knew, except what little was left in the canteens. He closed his eyes to keep himself from looking at the wounded, slowly slipped into a fitful doze.

For a time he dreamed he was back in Villeneuve, his home village on the Loire. It was Spring and he had taken the rowboat out; he was drifting downstream from the house. The poplars cast reflections in the water, slim, pale and lovely, and the mottled gold of the beeches had the same glint as the sun upon the meadow grass. Near the old mill there were trout that lifted flashing at the water-bugs and bottle flies. But he had to return to the tall old house, to sit in the never-warm library and study Clausewitz.

That was almost a family name, Clausewitz. His father had studied the same volume before he had taken his battalion of Zouaves out to the Crimea. Across the flyleaf in flowing characters was his father's signature, his rank and unit carefully marked below. But what his father had learned from Clausewitz hadn't saved him at Alma. He had died there, miserably and slowly, of a chest wound in a corpse-clogged ditch.

War wasn't something you could put down on paper. His father had known it, and now he knew it, too. War was dirt and hunger and disease. In the Crimea, more Frenchmen had died of cholera than the Russians killed. But Clausewitz made of war a glorious science, and of course Commandant Fleric's son had to go to Saint Cyr, then the Legion. . . .

The shrill of bugles roused Jacques Fleric. He sat up, groping at once for his revolver. The men had stopped their fire. They were staring at each other, their faces radiant with hope. One of the wounded swayed to a loophole, his bloodied, puffed hands stretched rigid. *"C'est le regiment!"* he said. "It's Saussier, with the outfit from Paso del Macho. Listen, and you can hear them shouting."

They all listened, very still. Then the wounded man gave a wild, screaming, cursing cry. He reeled back from the loophole and out into the patio. "No," he said, over and over. "No, not the regiment. More Mexicans. One battalion, and another and another!"

Jacques Fleric went over to him, took him by the shoulder. "Be quiet, *mon gars,*" he said. "We don't want the Mexicans to think we're licked."

The soldier made a jerky movement. "Look at him there," he said. "Danjou. He's quiet—for keeps. You remember when we were in Algeria. Danjou and you and all the other gold-embroidered boys sent a petition to the Emperor. Sure, you asked him to send us here. The Chasseurs d'Afrique were going out, so the Legion had to go, too. Now Danjou's dead, and soon we'll all be dead. But can you tell me why?"

Jacques Fleric looked down, his breath withdrawn. Danjou lay in a pool of blood and brains. His kepi was over his smashed face, his sword beside him. Flies crawled

over the gold lace of the kepi, then back into the blood.

"We're Legionnaires," Fleric said. "That's the only answer. Now sit down. Keep still, or I'll draw a number for you." He lifted the muzzle of the revolver, trained it on the soldier's chest. "No matter how we got here, we have to get out."

He crossed to where Vilain stood when he left the soldier. Vilain's voice cracked with fatigue. "Glad to see you, Jacques," he said. "It was pretty bad after the captain got it. Just a couple of minutes before, he'd made us all promise not to surrender."

How many are we up against now?" Fleric said.

Vilain shrugged. "Three thousand, at least. That last lot was about eight hundred men."

"Bon," Fleric said. "Then we hang on. There's nothing else to do."

HE KEPT on his feet for most of the following hours, going from loophole to loophole, rationing ammunition and watching the men's fire. He forgot his pain, the heat, the smoke. He was an officer of the Legion; he held command, and these were his men.

But near two o'clock Vilain was killed, caught through the lower jaw by a musket ball ricochet. When he straightened Vilain out, put the kepi over the high-rolled eyes, the wounded lifted up around him. They cried at him in a strange and terrible chorus.

Water, they said. They had to have water. Some of them had been drinking their own blood. The lieutenant knew that they had marched all night, fought all day. Food—a Legionnaire was used to going without that. Water, though, water . . .

He went a little crazy after that. He didn't answer the wounded men. There were no words he knew for them. He went back to the loopholes, took a rifle, knelt and fired until his finger could not hold against the trigger any more.

Once, from somewhere out in the grass tangle of the field, a Mexican in a bright tunic shouted another demand for surrender. He killed that man, cursed him as he twitched kicking. On all sides of the patio now fires were burning.

The Mexicans had crawled up, piled great heaps of brush. The straw thatch of the roof was smouldering into flame. Looking back, Fleric saw the patio as a nightmare vision. The men who could still stand stripped the wounded and the dead. They emptied every cartridge pouch in turn. They reeled back to the walls, their bodies huge, demoniac in the cinder-streaked smoke haze.

"Those are the last cartridges," Maudet said. "And not enough. *Parait que nous sommes foutus.* Saussier will never get here in time to save us now."

"Don't talk too fast," Fleric said. He had just seen Palmaert. The corporal's clothing was pitted by cinder burns, part of his great blond beard was a charred stubble. But he carried his rifle still, and he held a bunch of cartridges in his other hand.

"Hot up there under the roof, Lieutenant," he said. "Chased me out, the camels' sons. Saved these, though, for a little last fun. . . . They've knocked a hole through by the door. Unless we step out now, I guess we don't go at all."

Jacques Fleric had the impulse to take the big man in a close embrace. It was Palmaert's kind who kept the Legion alive, he thought. There was meaning to the Legion tradition as long as they were with you. If war had any justification, any true glory, it was because of them. They made you proud of them, of yourself as a man.

"So, *mon vieux,"* he told Palmaert. "Then we'll go. Get them together, all of them who can stand."

They were hunched by the door, the bayoneted rifles between their knees, when they noticed that the force of the Mexican fusilade had slackened. "They're in the house across the road," Fleric said. "One of their officers called them back."

"That's Milan, the loud-mouthed slob who's in command of them," Bartolotte said. Bartolotte was a Spaniard, and all

day long he had been yelling Aragonese obscenities at the enemy. "You want to hear what he's saying now, Lieutenant?"

"Go ahead," Fleric said. "Translate."

"He's giving his outfit hell for not finishing us," Bartolotte said. "He says that we're all through, and that they should come over and crush us like lice. *Carai!* I'll rip that rat open myself. I'll—"

"Now's your chance," Fleric said. "Follow me, the Legion!"

He kicked aside the riddled planks that barred the doorway, plunged through, the men right behind him in a solid knot. Corpses heaped the ground there; he was clambering over them as the bullet got him. It hit his thigh with a dull, clubbing impact. He went down sprawling, gasping. White gaiters and baggy red pants swung through and out of his vision. Steel met steel. *Chassepots* and muskets rang in simultaneous discharge. Then he heard the clear and high voice:

"Rendez-vous! Give in, soldiers! You've taken enough."

He reared up to try and see before him. Mexicans were all around the Legion. Maudet was down, a great stain of blood across his tunic. Cotteau was beside Maudet, and Cotteau's body gaped with a dozen wounds. But a mounted man was between the Mexicans and the Legion. He was tall and bestrode a tall horse. It was he who had called out in French and English to surrender. Now he was kneeing his horse through to Fleric. "You in command of what's left?" he asked in French.

"So," Fleric said, his voice a creaking whisper. "And if you're a man of honor, I surrender."

The mounted man smiled shortly, swinging down out of the saddle. "Thanks," he said. "It's been a long day."

CHAPTER II

LIBERTADOR AND LEGIONNAIRE

THE Legion wounded kept very quiet in the horse and mule litters the Mexicans had contrived. Sleep claimed most of them, Jacques Fleric realized, and the rest thought that any moment the Mexicans would close in and massacre them. But the stocky, hard-faced *peones* stayed in their places along the flanks of the column, and only the tall man was anywhere near the Legion. Fleric pulled himself up in the lurching litter and made a sign to him.

"Where are you taking us?" he said when the tall man rode back to his side.

"The whole lot will be left in Huatrisco, all but you. I want to talk with you a bit. There's a few things I might tell you, and some you might tell me."

"Who are you? I had the idea this was Milan's outfit."

The tall man slightly smiled. "It is," he said. "But I take orders straight from President Juarez."

"Juarez's not the president. Miramon is."

"That's one of the things I want to talk about with you."

Jacques Fleric studied him with a steady glance. "You're not a Mexican," he said. "You look to me like a *Yanqui,* an American."

"You're right," the tall man said, and held out his hand. "The name is Lewis Dayton. Let me compliment you now on the way you fought today. If there was more of the Legion out here, your crackpot emperor might have some chance of stealing Mexico."

Jacques Fleric had been drawing upon the ultimate reserves of his will to stay conscious and speak. Yet this man's words stirred anger in him. He swore at Dayton rough-voiced. "You look and act like a soldier," he said. "The least you can do is give me some small respect as your prisoner."

Dayton rode for a number of paces in silence. He kept his long-boned head turned from Fleric, staring out into the violet darkness. Then he suddenly swung around. "Touché," he said. "You deserve plenty of respect, soldier. But say goodbye to your outfit now. That's Huatrisco ahead, and we're leaving them here."

Jacques Fleric went from man to man to

say goodbye. "You'll be all right," he told them. "The Legion won't forget you. France won't forget you. . . ." He choked up, then, couldn't say any more.

They had raised in their litters, and as they passed him each man brought his hand flat and stiff to his forehead in salute. They, too, were beyond the point of speech. That simple, familiar gesture expressed their determination, their pride, and their love of him.

It was many minutes after they had gone before Lewis Dayton moved. He came close to where Fleric lay, peered down at him. "Try to sleep, Lieutenant," he said in a strange, soft tone. "We've got to put in a pretty tough night."

Fleric nodded, the emotion of that parting still holding his throat. No more than a score of men from the Mexican force had stayed here. They were all Indians, small and dark, their blue-black hair low across their broad foreheads. Their supple bodies naked except for worn leather trousers. Dayton gave them a quick, guttural command. Then they swung the horses, cantered fast away from the trail. Sleep, Fleric thought, sleep and forget you lost today. But hang onto the memory of how you and the lads fought. You really did make history at Camerone.

THE Indians sat about the fire as immobile as idols. Dayton's long-legged strides back and forth made the contrast between him and them all the more striking. Dayton was his enemy, Jacques Fleric decided, but he liked the man. The American had just redressed his wounds, brought him food and water, rolled him a cigarette. Now he was finally still, standing by the fire and staring down into it.

"You told me last night," Jacques Fleric said, "you had a couple of things you wanted to settle with me."

"So," Dayton said. "And now's the time. We'll only stay here until you and the horses are rested. But will you talk freely with me?"

Fleric flipped the ash from the corn husk cigarette and laughed. "You first."

"Fair enough," Dayton said. "You must know why the French forces came to Mexico. A man as smart as you must have some idea of what's behind that, and the plans Napoleon has for this country."

"Surely. Napoleon wants to bring law and order to the Mexican people. He has their interests at heart. This man, Juarez, is just a bandit. Juarez has put a moratorium on all the foreign loans here; he's trying to break up the Catholic Church holdings and kick out all the big landowners. If his *Leyes de Reforma* system went through, Mexico wouldn't be safe for anybody."

Lewis Dayton spat straight into the heart of the fire. "So that's the talk they gave you on the other side," he said. "Juarez's nothing but a bandit . . . Emperor Napoleon thinks so much of Mexico he'll— Ah, to hell with such stuff! Listen, soldier! Listen to a little truth.

"Your fine emperor has wanted Mexico all for himself, and for a long time. When he was in the States in exile, before our Civil War broke out, he had conferences with a lot of the Southern secessionist leaders in Charleston. He promised those men that if they ever broke from the Northern states, and if he got to be ruler of France, between them they'd form a great big Central American empire. But he was lying. He didn't, and couldn't, mean anything of the sort. That's impossible. There's a document called the Monroe Doctrine. North America—the United States—has to uphold it. They have to fight for a free Mexico with every bit of strength they've got."

"Just now," Jacques Fleric said quietly, "they seem to have plenty of fighting to do right within their own borders. Even if what you say is true, they couldn't stop France here."

Dayton dropped his cigarette butt, ground it out hard. "You're part right," he said. "But mostly wrong. You see, soldier, in Washington we know all about Maximilian and Carlotta coming out here to rule for Napoleon. Our agents in Europe warned us some time ago. Juarez is an

honest man, and he's fighting for a free Mexico. And pretty soon the war is going to be finished in the States.

"Then Mister Maximilian Habsburg will be chased out of here very damn' fast. All the land hogged by the big fellows will be given back to the people, and all the crooked loans will be settled on an honest scale. Out on this continent, we really believe in a thing called democracy. Every man in Mexico is going to have a chance, just as every man will in the States."

"Magnifique," Fleric said. "But why take such trouble in telling all this to me? Do you consider me for the kind to turn traitor to my flag?"

Lewis Dayton stared down at him, his muscles tightened, his hands shut. The man's courageous as hell, he thought. He knows I'm making sense. But he doesn't want to hear it. If I convinced him, then he'd be disloyal to everything he's held worthy in his life. So now he's trying to get you angry enough to crack his head in. He's like yourself, you big clown, and just as stubborn.

He relaxed his hands, busied them rolling another cigarette. "You just about guessed it," he told Fleric. "I saw how you fought yesterday. And any soldier who's that good should be on the right side. I did a couple of years soldiering myself before I was sent down here. My outfit was the Second Massachusetts. We got along all right for a lot of volunteers."

"In the Legion," Fleric said, slightly smiling, "we heard a bit about that regiment. Our report was that it fought very well, for any sort of troops. But why not let me go now? The Legion is the only place where I belong."

Lewis Dayton inhaled smoke deep. "Some of those *peones* with Milan," he said, "had you marked out for themselves. They were set to hack you up in small chunks. Don't forget you were the ranking Legion officer left back there. Your outfit killed more than three hundred of us, and wounded a couple hundred more. I'd let you go right now if you were in decent shape. But you're not."

"Eh, bien," Jacques Fleric said. He stared squarely up at him. "Let me thank you."

"Thank me," Lewis Dayton said, "when I can get you to some place where you'll be safe. These Yaquis take orders from me alone. They're from the north, though, and don't know much about the country here. We'll just have to ride until we find some big *hacienda* where the folks think the same way you do—that Juarez is crooked and the Legion just about the finest thing on earth."

"Ça c'est la guerre," Jacques Fleric said, dragging himself erect.

"Sure," Dayton said. "It's war, but not a very pretty one."

THAT place was set at the summit of a high ridge among great clumps of shade trees that stood like sentinels around the low, broad buildings. They came to it across a plain where century plants lifted in tall-stemmed bloom and the sun was an evil white fury. But Tecal, the little, ugly man who was Dayton's chief scout, had galloped on ahead, returned smiling.

"He says it's our for the taking," Dayton told Jacques Fleric. "Only a couple of women and a bunch of work-spavined *peones* around. Those are *maguey* fields out behind. That means they must make pulque here; we'll have a drink when we get in."

Jacques Fleric tried to grin. "Aren't you taking quite a chance for me?"

"No," Lewis Dayton said. He was loosening his heavy Navy Colt .44 in the holster. "I need fresh horses and food for my lot. Now keep your head down. We may get a couple of shots tossed at us."

The Yaquis went in among the trees around the buildings first, sloped far over on the off sides of their horses. A gun cracked, then another. Then there was silence. "Come on," Dayton said. He took the bridle of Fleric's mount, sent the beast forward at the trot.

One of the Yaquis sat in the dust staring without surprise at a bullet-gouged

shoulder. Beyond him the rest waited, dismounted now and with their Sharps rifles at the ready. Tecal nodded at the house. "Woman," he said. "She fired the shots."

Lewis Dayton got down from the saddle and hitched with both hands at his cartridge belt. Across a smooth green stretch of flower-set lawn was the main building of the *hacienda*. A girl rested motionless under the broad arch of the doorway. She was slender, small, but her grip upon the pair of silver-worked pistols in her hands was very steady. "Stop," she called. "Right where you are."

"Buenos dias, señorita," Lewis Dayton said, and kept on moving toward her. "Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you."

She fired both the pistols at once, her body jerking back with the recoil. One bullet cut Dayton's sombrero brim; the other dug the turf at his feet. Then he was beside her, had the pistols in his hands. "You're wrong, *señorita,*" he said. "We're not here to make trouble."

"Who are you?" she said. There was a sudden, slight note of hysteria in her voice. "What do you want?"

"We're of the army of *Libertadores,*" Dayton said. "Men who serve President Juarez. But we have with us a wounded officer of the French Legion. He's in bad shape, needs attention quick."

"Libertadores," she said, her head back. *"Ladrones,* you mean—thieves and robbers." She made a move to break from him and into the house. But he held her by one wrist, smiled at her. "Wait until you see the Legion officer," he said. "Then you will believe me. He's very handsome."

Jacques Fleric had tilted forward in the litter. "Dayton!" he called. "Let her be! You have no right to do this."

But the girl had seen him. She slid her wrist from Dayton's grasp, came running across the lawn. She lifted up at the side of the litter, and Jacques Fleric saw that her eyes were very wide, very dark, and every bit of color had left her oval-shaped face. *"Vous êtes bien Legionnaire?"* she said breathlessly. "Tell me!"

"Yes," Fleric said. He touched the edge of his kepi visor. "Senior Lieutenant Jacques Guillemin Fleric. Captured at Camerone by that gentleman there."

The sound she made was half sigh, half laugh. "Señorita Antonia Lopez y de las Vegas," she said. "This is my father's house. I regret that he is not here. But may I ask you to enter?"

Jacques Fleric could not hold back his smile. A moment ago this girl had wounded one man, tried to kill another. But now she greeted him with perfect manners. Even in Mexico, the punctillio of caste existed. "You'll have to talk to him," he said. "The big *Yanqui.* I surrendered myself to him two days ago."

Dayton still slouched against the doorway arch. He did not straighten up or look directly at them. "All right, 'Tonia," he called. "You can bring him in."

The pain was quite intense as the servants took Jacques Fleric out of the litter. He groaned through his locked teeth once and the girl let him clasp her fingers. "Thanks, 'Tonia," he whispered, almost inaudibly. "Thanks a lot." Then he vaguely began to think about her name, and that he'd used it in the same form Dayton had. That was Dayton's way, he decided. The American had a free, simple manner with anybody. Maybe that was part of what the man meant when he talked about democracy.

He lost any clear continuity of thought after the servants brought him into the house. He was aware of a broad, white bed, and Tonia's and Dayton's faces above him. Then he was gripped, engulfed in flaming agony. They were taking the bandages off his arm and leg. While the servants held him, Dayton probed the leg wound. He heard Dayton say, "I've got it. Now that will heal clean." Then he fainted, went swinging off into endless and dark abysses where there was no sensation, no sound.

LEWIS DAYTON had told the servant to serve him alone. But as he drank his coffee he saw the slender silhouette at the end of the room. Tonia stood there

just inside the door leading to the hall. She had changed her dress, he noticed, wore a low-cut evening gown. He rose from his chair and bowed to her as his mother had taught him years ago in Great Barrington. "Your cook is fine," he said. "I'm tempted to take her along with us."

Tonia did not answer until she had reached the table. She rested with the tips of her fingers touching the candle-bright oak, staring into his eyes. "I still don't understand," she said. "Your kind usually kills prisoners. You have no honor, or you wouldn't be fighting for Juarez. Why did you save that man's life?"

Lewis Dayton slowly moved around the table to her. He took out his tobacco pouch and rolled a cigarette, but his hands were shaking so he tore two corn husks right in half. "I used to be a soldier," he said. "An officer like Fleric. But I saved him because he isn't sure just yet what the issues out here are."

"You wish to say, then, you're no longer a soldier, but a *Yanqui* spy. Your motive in keeping him alive was to learn what you could about the actions of the French."

"For an *hacendado's* daughter, you're smart enough."

"*Gracias*," Tonia said. Color touched her cheekbones in two high spots. "I know right now your men are out in the corral taking my father's horses. Who will pay for those?"

"Nobody, until the French are out of Mexico and there's a real day of reckoning. But you can tell your father the horses I'm leaving behind are as good as his own."

"My father is in France."

"That's the wrong place for any wealthy *hacendado* to be. Seeing you know so much about me, tell me one thing about yourself. Don't you realize this is a place you can't protect from the Army of the People? They'll take all your father's horses soon, and the *hacienda*, and you, too."

She stood straight, her eyes hot with scorn. "You fool," she said. "The Emperor Napoleon is about to make Maximilian emperor of Mexico. All the plans are ready for Maximilian and Carlotta to sail here and take over the country. They will hold it against the United States, against anybody.

"Go back and tell your bandit friend Juarez that. Send the same word north to your stupid countrymen in the United States—Mexico is to be an empire protected by all the wealth and power of France. Your lot can never win. We will drive you out of the land like whipped dogs. My cousin, Ernesto Lopez, is a colonel serving with the French forces in Mexico City. He'll be here in a day or so to guard this place. So go now, while you still have time!"

"Very nice," Lewis Dayton said. "You've told me a whole lot more than I hoped you would." Then he stepped forward, caught her in his arms, kissed her very hard. "*Hasta luego.* Take good care of Fleric. But don't fall in love with him. From now on you're my girl."

He turned then and went from the room. She stood with her hands up against her mouth, wanting to scream, wanting to call out after him words she had heard the *vaqueros* use in the corrals. But he moved fast, and before the house his men waited with the eagerly stamping horses. His voice came back to her; he was talking in the Yaqui dialect, laughing in answer to something some man said. Then they were gone, the hoofbeats swift on the soft turf.

CHAPTER III

SALUTE FOR THE EMPEROR

SUNLIGHT fell like a cascade against the fragile banks of the garden flowers. It paled the colors of the flowers, and cast a dim golden surf over the grass blades. Only the chameleon possessed brilliance.

The chameleon lay in the middle of the garden path. For many minutes it had glittered emerald green. Now purple, amber and scarlet banded the back, and the close-curled tail was mango yellow.

Tonia stared up from the chameleon at

Jacques Fleric. He's very handsome, she thought. Just as much as the big *Yanqui* said he was. It wouldn't be hard for you to slip into love with him, and maybe you're in love with him already.

Jacques Fleric sat completely quiet in the chair the servants had carried out from the house for him. His head was back, his eyes half shut. The suffering he had gone through in the past weeks had given his features a new, fine quality of dignity, Tonia reflected. Camerone had taken the last of his youth from him, replaced it with a deep, inner force and fire.

But the *Yanqui* had warned her of this. He had told her not to fall in love with Jacques Fleric. His last words, after he had kissed her, had been that she was his girl.

The point of the embroidery needle she held slid through the fabric, brought a drop of blood from a finger end. It trickled down, stained the delicate tracery of the design. Then with an odd, savage motion she flung the needle and fabric to the grass. She was suddenly aware that she had been saying Lewis Dayton's name beneath her breath, and wishing that he were here, kissing her again.

Jacques Fleric swung around. "Tonia," he said, "what's the matter?"

He was troubled, she saw, shocked by the intensity of the emotion she showed. "Oh, I'm a fool," she said. "I just thought I was getting to be like the chameleon. This life can't go on forever. I've had enough of inaction, sitting here day after day in the sun."

He leaned over and took her hand in his. "I've had the same thought," he said. "Although"—he spoke more slowly, his eyes dark, intense—"all of it here has been so lovely. Back at the regiment, they'll have me down as a deserter soon. The colonel's probably got the idea by now that when I went off with Lewis Dayton I meant to stay. He's a good man, that one, the kind the colonel should fear."

Tonia got up from her chair. She strode the path for several paces, her skirt hem swirling along the gravel. When she stopped, it was directly in front of Jacques Fleric. "You talk about him all the time," she said. "A great, rude clown of a *Yanqui* bandit. Keep on doing it and you will go over to the Juaristas. Then you'll learn the truth of everything I've told you. If you don't sack churches, burn and loot and murder for them, they'll cut your tongue out of your head, send you back to the Legion a mumbling wreck."

"Par exemple!" Jacques Fleric said, and smiled. He hobbled upright, put his hands wide on her shoulders. "You think more of Dayton than just a murdering bandit; I know that."

"Yes," she said. "I have enough sense, enough imagination, to realize what his kind will do if they ever get Mexico. Why do you think I was alone here when you and he and his pack of outlaws arrived? Why do you think my parents are still in Europe?"

"It might be," Jacques Fleric said, quite slowly, "because you and they don't really understand what's going on in Mexico. Down at the coast, more than a few of the French troops went over to the Mexicans. They got around in the towns and talked with the local folks, finally ended up believing Mexico should be run by Mexicans. If you—"

Her face, her lips had gone absolutely pale. She stood staring with an intense, almost terrible fury into his eyes. "My people," she said, "have lived here ever since the days of the Conquest. This is their home, and they love it. But they were driven from here because if they even stayed a few hours more they would have been burned alive. My uncle and aunt were more foolish. They exiled themselves in Europe, too, but they insisted upon returning. It was their hope they might live in Mexico once again in peace. They brought me back with them, and for a time we all stayed together here."

She was silent then, and Jacques Fleric was grateful for the drone of the bees among the flowers. But she spoke again, and her voice was vibrant with the shock of remembered horror:

"This place was supposed to be safe. So my uncle decided he could make a visit to his own estate, near Orizaba. He took my aunt with him. They never came back. They were killed the third day after they got home. Right away, there was trouble with the *peones*. My uncle had some of them flogged, and several died. Word of it got out to the Juarista army. A detachment of *Libertadores* went there, and burned the house to the ground. They took my aunt and uncle and tied them together, then staked them out where the vultures came down and—"

"No," Jacques Fleric said. "Don't tell me any more. There's no need." He clasped her close, and the salt of her swift tears was bitter on his lips as he kissed her.

She met his embrace with a passion wilder than his own. She's like a child, he thought, a youngster who's suffered almost as much as the mind can take. So comfort her with your strength. Make her calm and quiet. Make her love you. . . .

SHADOWS from the trees glanced cool across them before they stood back from each other, and the droning of the bees had stopped. She touched her cheeks where the tears had coursed, then smiled. "Don't you see, Jacques," she said. "It's men like you we need to save Mexico. But come in the house now. I'll play waltzes for you—the ones I danced to when I was in Vienna with my parents."

"You feel really gay?" he said, surprise and an eager, wistful hope behind the words.

"Yes," she said. "I just remembered that today I got a message from my cousin, Ernesto Lopez. He's the one who is a colonel attached to the French staff, and he will be here this evening, to take me to Mexico City with him. Then, of course, silly, I know that you love me. In Mexico City, when the Emperor Maximilian gets there, you and I, everybody will be gay."

She was at the piano still, playing one waltz after another, when Jacques Fleric heard the mounted men outside. They were armed, he realized; they moved with the arrogance of certain strength.

The first of them into the room was small, almost as slender as Tonia. He had Tonia's liquid and wide eyes, but his mouth had a sullen cruelty, and as he saw Fleric the full lips tightened hard. Then Tonia was up and across the room, laughing, talking very fast in Spanish. "It is good, very good that you are here. I have been waiting so long! But let me present you to Lieutenant Fleric of the Foreign Legion. The lieutenant came here very badly wounded. Now he is almost well, and can go with us to Mexico City."

Ernesto Lopez wore heavy-roweled *vaquero* spurs at the heels of his long hussar boots. He carried a sword with a gold hilt, and there were four or five medals on the breast of his frogged tunic. *"Con mucho gusto,"* he said, stiffly bowing to Jacques Fleric. "Glad to be of service to you, Lieutenant." Then he turned and faced the men who had followed him to the door.

The sergeant was of mostly Spanish blood, Jacques Fleric judged. The rest were half-breeds, and all of their uniforms were filthy. In the candle-shine their eyes had a sharp animal glint, unblinking as they stared at Tonia.

He wished they wouldn't look at Tonia that way, Fleric thought. It was as if she were some camp woman, made for their sport. He had the impulse to get up and crack the sergeant over the jaw, kick them all out of the room. But Lopez was giving a command to the sergeant:

"Get out to the stables and corrals and take a look around. If any of those *vaqueros* talks back to you, shoot him. We're here to make them remember us. Understand?"

"Si, mi coronel," the sergeant said, but he failed to salute as he left.

Ernesto Lopez noticed that. He took a rapid pace toward the door, grasping the quirt that dangled from his wrist. But then he stopped, seeing the way Fleric watched him. "Not quite like your lot in the Legion, eh, Lieutenant?" he said.

"They will be, though, before I'm through with them. Now serve us a little wine, Tonia. We should drink a toast."

It was Veuve Cliquot the servant brought. Lopez filled a glass for Tonia and one for Fleric, then lifted the bottle to his lips. "Here's to us!" he said. "Maximilian sails next week for Mexico. *Vive l'Empereur!*"

Jacques Fleric drank no more than a sip. The wine was fine, he thought, and he certainly loved Tonia. But her cousin was the kind of man who made him wish he'd stayed with Lewis Dayton.

THEY, the Emperor and Empress of Mexico, were frightened. Jacques Fleric was sure of it. The tall, blond-whiskered man stood in the carriage and bowed right and left, and the dark little woman rose and bowed with him. But there was bewilderment, almost open fear in their faces.

This great, filthy and magnificent city was not what they had dreamed of as their capital. Here even in the lines of the buildings, the jolting sunlight and the voices of the crowd was a savage starkness they had never expected. A Habsburg wasn't the man to hold the Mexican throne, Fleric thought. Right now, Maximilian was scared more than his wife. Carlotta was of stronger stuff; her father was the King of the Belgians, but he ruled a tough-willed people who knew what their rights meant. She was able to stare squarely back at the crowd, smile with something a bit like calm.

The Emperor's carriage rattled over the end of the causeway, swung on into the heart of Mexico City. A quick hush came upon the crowd. They watched silently as the other carriages passed. In them rode the members of Maximilian's court and Carlotta's ladies-in-waiting. A stone cracked against the side of one, chipping the freshly painted gilt of the imperial arms. "Mexico for Mexicans!" a voice shouted from the rear of the crowd. "Go back to Europe, you flock of buzzards!"

Old Marechal Bazaine had been standing rigidly at the salute before the guard of honor. He wheeled around with a bull-like bellow, his fat belly in the way as he jerked his sword. "Be still!" he called. "You won't yell so well without your tongue!"

But the crowd was laughing, jeering. More stones struck, and among the lines of the Legion and Zouave guard. "By companies, about face," Bazaine commanded. "Clear this place." He smiled as he said that, his little eyes red-shining.

Men, women and children went in a wild scramble back toward the city and the Zocalo. It was a mean sort of chore, Jacques Fleric, told himself. He was ashamed to have to take part in it. Then he heard Bazaine.

Bazaine had mounted, galloped his horse hard. "Fall out your platoon and form it as a patrol, Lieutenant," he told Fleric. "I want the Zocalo cleared all the way to the Palacio Nacional."

Fleric put the platoon at route step after Bazaine was out of sight. The men were new to him, but already some of them had begun to curse. "Easy with that," he said. "We're not going to kick any women and kids around."

All across the immense stretch of the Zocalo the crowd had broken into isolated groups. Most of them ran again when the Legion approached. But some of the lank-haired, scrawny men were stubborn, stayed until the platoon was nearly upon them. *"Vamos,"* Fleric kept repeating in a clear voice, his hand away from his sword. "We've got orders for you to disperse."

A knife was whipped out at him once from beneath the cloaking folds of some man's *serape,* and a lad dressed in jean pants hurled a cobble stone that just missed his head. He strode on, steady, implacable, his eyes searching their eyes. Then they sprinted away and he turned the patrol in the direction of the Palacio Nacional.

Several hundred people had gathered at a street corner across from the vast mass of the building. Over their heads he could

see the red felt fezzes of the Zouave troops. He halted the platoon in double-rank formation, the front rank kneeling. Hoarse cries, the sounds of blows came from within the close-pressed wall of bodies around the Zouaves. He forced his way through with his revolver in his hand. This was really nasty, he knew. Here was trouble.

ABOUT twenty Zouaves stood in the center, their rifles raised. They were from some Algerian company, obviously had been given the same kind of duty as his own command. But the swart-jawed sergeant was taking pleasure in what he did.

The sergeant held a young Mexican *peon* flopping before him on the cobbles. He struck the man blow after blow with his rifle butt. The sweet, yet sharp odor of blood he had smelled last at Camerone filled Jacques Fleric's nostrils. "*Bassef*, you unclean camel's son," he said to the sergeant in Arabic. "What's got you to treat a man like that?"

A drool of saliva slid down the sergeant's jaw. "*Plenty*, sidi," he muttered. "He yells at us, mocks us. He says—"

The man who had been beaten was swaying part upright. "Let me tell you," he said thickly. "You're an officer. Maybe you can get in to talk to that fool Napoleon sent. Too many of us have given our blood to stop now. Mexico will belong to us, never anybody else. Your marshal has had men and women beaten naked here. And laughed while it was done, and said it was 'to prove the benevolence of the invader.' Yes, the benevolence . . . So take our message to this Habsburg. We are free men, will die free men!"

Wild, deep shouts thrashed over his last words. They came from the people who stood behind and surged against the Zouaves' rifles. The sergeant started to lift his weapon high again.

Jacques Fleric struck straight, and very fast. The sergeant's nose broke with a popping crack. Then he went down, and Fleric saw that the nose had become a bloody pulp. "Get up," he said, and kicked the sergeant. "Get your outfit out of here. *A moi, La Legion!*"

The Legion came forward like a wave sweeping along a littered beach. Two of the Zouaves waited long enough to pick up the sergeant. That was all.

Jacques Fleric felt sudden weakness. Then he was able to laugh. "It would've been better," he told the Legion, "if they'd left the Algerians back home stealing sheep. Fall in. I've got to make a report on this."

He was striding out ahead of the platoon when he thought he saw Lewis Dayton. The man had Dayton's stature and shoulder breadth, and the eyes beneath the pulled down sombrero brim held the same steel-gray keenness.

"You, there! Wait a minute!" Jacques Fleric called. But the tall man kept on, was lost in the last swirling rush of the crowd.

"Some fellow you want, Lieutenant?" the right guide asked.

"No," Fleric said, breathing deep. "Not now, anyhow."

Where Lewis Dayton stopped to look back was quite a distance from the steps of the Palacio Nacional. Fleric left the platoon at the bottom of the steps, he saw, went in alone. "Pretty close," Dayton said silently. "Closer than you want it. There's a real soldier, though, and a real man. You'll use him yet. Mister, how he belted that Zouave."

He stood for some time watching the palace after Fleric had entered. Tonia must be there now, he realized. She had come to Mexico City with Fleric and that slick little colonel, Lopez. In this moment, he wanted to see Tonia more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. But that was a risk he couldn't take.

"Later, maybe, but now," he said soft-voiced. "You're in a war, too, Dayton, the same war as your friend, Fleric."

His eyes lit with the lifting pleasure a man feels when he has met his equal —when he sees bone and blood and muscle to match his own. He smiled to himself.

CHAPTER IV

WALTZ IN WARTIME

IT SEEMED to Jacques Fleric that Tonia's dress was luminous. A kind of dim incandescence was about her as she moved through the gloom of the great palace corridor. He stopped and brought his heels together. saluted her.

"What's the matter, Jacques?" she said, seeing the way his mouth lines gathered.

"A bit of trouble with the crowd in the Zocalo," he said. "I'm looking for the colonel."

"You can't see him," she said. "He's with His Majesty and Maréchal Bazaine. They're having a conference. But the emperor is strikingly handsome—far more so than any officer of the Legion. And the empress is adorable. Tonight there's to be a Grand Ball. Waltzes, Jacques, the real Viennese!"

"Parfait," Jacques Fleric said, the image of that young Mexican's face and the thought of Dayton in the back of his brain. "But I still should find the colonel."

She pouted slightly at him. "You can't," she said. "They'll be in conference most of the afternoon. Then there's to be a review. Countess Vichy told me. She said a Lieutenant Fleric will be decorated for his heroism at Camerone. Isn't that worth a kiss?"

"You talk," he said, "just like a lady-in-waiting." Her hands were upon his sword belt, and she stood very close to him, yet he did not kiss her. "I am," she said. "Her Majesty made me one right after she arrived. Will you wear your very best uniform for me tonight?"

"Yes," he said. He was stepping back from her, trying hard to grin. "Certainly."

"Merci mille fois," she said. There was a note of hurt pride and anger in her voice. "But when you ask for a waltz, remember just now you refused a kiss."

ROACHES skittered over the seamed walls of the grand ballroom. Wind that rattled the window frames made the flames of the candles swerve, and gouts of wax fell stinging hot upon the bare shoulders of the ladies. But the emperor's champagne was excellent, constantly served. The music the orchestra played was all Viennese waltzes.

The officers of the regiment had seen to it that Jacques Fleric had drunk a little brandy before he started on the champagne. Now the fire of the alcohol and the fire of the music had fused in a flame that rippled through his veins, yet left his brain clear and cold. He had given up watching Tonia; she danced with nobody but the youngest and best-looking officers. Beside him, though, on the dais that had been improvised for them, sat the emperor and empress. He turned slowly around, wondering what the champagne and the music did to them.

Maximilian was in conversation with Maréchal Bazaine. He called Bazaine *"mon maréchal,"* and the Bazaine never stopped smiling. "You see," Maximilian said, "all of us had different ideas of this back—back home. I and my younger brothers had read a great deal of the works of an American author named James Fenimore Cooper. We liked one volume in particular. The title of it was *The Deerslayer.*

"Somehow, I thought life out here would be a great deal like that. More color, more wealth, naturally, than is to be found among the North American redskins, and much less dirt."

Maréchal Bazaine made a small coughing sound. "Your Majesty's pardon," he said, "but over there is an officer with whom you might talk about this country. Lieutenant Fleric. You decorated him this afternoon, you recall. May I present him to Your Majesty?"

The pale, weak eyes brightened in the long face as Maximilian greeted Jacques Fleric. "Splendid, Lieutenant," he said. "Really splendid, your deed. It's my impression you were one of the detachment who inflicted a severe defeat upon the enemy at Camerone. How did you find them, all cowards?"

Jacques Fleric wasn't sure whether it was laughter or anger that choked his

throat. Anyhow, he couldn't speak. He looked past Maximilian and at Carlotta. The empress had sat far back in the huge chair, her brooding glance upon the dancers. But she leaned forward as she heard her husband's words.

"Maxl," she said gently, "for us this is a strange land. Still, it cannot be populated by a people that is entirely stupid and cowardly. Colonel Lopez has pointed that out to me already."

Ernesto Lopez stood at the other corner of the dais. He wore a tunic crusted solid with gold leaf and he held himself at his full height. "The proof of Mexican valor should not come from a French officer, Your Majesty," he said. "We who have lived here since the Conquest have countless times shown the quality of our bravery. Now we shall bring further, greater glory to the Empire."

Here was his time, Jacques Fleric thought, to do what the pain-wracked young Mexican had asked of him in the Zocalo. And these two were good folks; they just didn't understand.

"The colonel," he said, "forces me to speak as a Frenchman, Your Majesty. All I can tell you is that the troops against us are surely worthy of being regarded as serious enemies. Among a large number of them is the profound desire to be free from any foreign domination."

Color widened in Carlotta's cheeks. She looked quickly at her husband, then back at Fleric. "I know you speak with the utmost sincerity, Lieutenant," she said. "But this for you should be a moment of gayety, not one for more talk of war. I have noticed you watching Dona Antonia Lopez as she danced. She is lovely. Please bear to her now my wishes that she give the next dance to you."

Tonia's partner was a big captain of artillery. He broke from her with bad grace, but Tonia was smiling. "If I'm loyal to my empress," she said, "I must give the dance to this gentleman. Excuse me, *mon capitaine.*"

Then she slid lithely forward into Jacques Fleric's arms.

IT WAS an Offenbach waltz that brought crescendo after sweet-shrilling crescendo from the violins. Don't dance like a damn' soldier, Jacques Fleric thought. Remember the steps and turns you picked up the last time you were in Paris. Tomorrow, you may not be here. Bazaine will probably be sending you out into the blood and rottenness again.

He was not sure when the music stopped, kept on holding Tonia in his arms. She looked up at him, and her cheek brushed his cheek, the scent of her hair and perfume through his brain like another, more marvelous music. "The lieutenant should be complimented upon his dancing," she said. "But there is such a thing as ballroom manners. You'll release me, until the music starts again?"

"Give me the next dance, Tonia," he said. "Give me all the rest of your dances tonight."

She laughed at him, her fan lifted wide. "It must be the music," she said. "You forget, Jacques, I am in waiting to Her Majesty. Her express command was that I dance with you. But the rest of my card is full. That captain of artillery is very bold; he has taken the next three for himself."

Jacques Fleric gave her a short bow. his hands tense at his sides. "Then let me thank you," he said, "for your obedience to the empress."

"No," she said, softly, swiftly. "I don't mean to hurt you, Jacques. You've suffered enough. I'll meet you after the next dance. Over there by the door."

Maréchal Bazaine stood beside the servant who carried the champagne. "Take a drink, Lieutenant," he told Jacques Fleric. "It will be your last of this kind of wine for quite a time."

"Sir?" Jacques Fleric said, and then saw the heavy, dark light in Bazaine's eyes.

"You're a good enough soldier," Bazaine said. "As good as your father ever was. But Mexico City isn't the place for you. Colonel Lopez has let me know what happened out there in the Zocalo this morning, and what you told the empress just now.

I don't think you're getting bothered by thoughts of treason. I know you too well for that. But right tonight I'm sending you out with a marching company bound north for the posts past Monterrey. A couple of scraps like that at Camerone will cool you off. You're a man who's all right as long as he's on active duty. So report to the Seventh Company before midnight. The outfit leave at one o'clock."

"Très bien, mon maréchal," Jacques Fleric said. There was a lot more he wanted to say, but Bazaine was already waddling off across the room.

Tonia wore a long cape that came down over her slipper toes. "The captain's chasing me," she said. "But he won't look for us out on the terrace."

"We can't go out on the terrace," Jacques Fleric said. "I just got my orders. Bazaine is sending me north on outpost duty. The outfit leaves in an hour."

"Why?" Tonia said. "Why did the great sack of grease do that?"

"Because he thinks I'm a fighting man and nothing else, I guess."

"That's all?"

"All I can tell you, Tonia."

"No," she said, and shrugged. "I'll know more before you leave. I'm going to ride with you out to the causeway. *Soyez vite, mon cher.* Find me a horse I can ride side-saddle, and a groom who will bring me back."

SOME of the poplars along the causeway were white and some were black. But their shadows made a design as flat and smooth as metal over the cobbles. The Legion marched swift-striding, closely ranked, and Tonia had the strange thought that they, too, were nothing but shadows. Then they began to sing. It was the marching song of the Legion; every man's voice caught the chorus, loud and strong. Her horse shied a bit, so that she had to pull up hard on the bridle rein. "Goodbye, Jacques," she whispered. "Good luck, *mon brave.*"

"We'll be lucky," Lewis Dayton said, "if we ever see him again."

He rested in the darkest of the shadow at the roadside, started his horse forward as he spoke. Tonia did not cry out to the groom; she had seen the revolver in Lewis Dayton's hand.

"Tell the man to go back," Dayton said. "I know he's armed, and I'll kill him if he moves this way. All you need to say is that I shall accompany you home."

The groom was an Austrian, one of Maximilian's servants. He blurted something in German in answer to what Tonia said, then wheeled around at the gallop for the city.

"You take a very great risk," Tonia murmured to Lewis Dayton. "There's sentries at every street corner behind."

"I know that, too." He had holstered the revolver, brought his horse close to hers. "I've been here some little time, waiting for you to make your farewell with Jacques Fleric."

"So now," Tonia said, her gaze steady, "you want to mock me about that. You'd like once more to make me feel I'm a fool."

"Not quite. I noticed the way Fleric kissed you goodbye. Somehow, he really didn't want to do it. He's afraid of you, because of what's happening to his sense of loyalty. You're an element in his life that he'd like to understand much better. When he's with you, and your beauty works on him, he thinks the empire is sure enough the thing for Mexico. But when he's away from you he begins to doubt that. He wonders why Maximilian's out here, and just what Napoleon is going to make from the deal. Briefly said, you've got my friend in a very unhappy state."

She harshly laughed at him. "But you waited until Jacques is gone to tell me."

"Of course." He was standing up in the stirrups to lift her from her saddle into his arms. "You're my girl, and not Fleric's. Tonight this is the only way I can talk to you."

"Then you'd better tell me right away how it is you can afford to love me. Aren't you worried about me working my siren's wiles on you?"

"No," he said. "Lovely as you are, I'm not afraid of you. My part in the war is very plain. I know just where I stand, and what's going on here. Pretty soon, you will, too. After I've explained a couple of angles to you, you'll know that Maximilian was only sent out here to be the gaudy, silly puppet for Napoleon. He can't rule this country, and he won't.

But Napoleon will rob it of all he wants, unless folks like you and me stop him. Right now, the French are out to get the whole state of Sonora for themselves. They want the titles to the gold mines, and every bit of ore that's being produced."

"But Mexico will never let them have it!" She had turned around in his arms, tensed and vibrant. "That's impossible!"

"Maybe. But if Maximilian doesn't give in to the French sooner or later, Napoleon's going to pull his troops out of here. Then where will your fine new empire be, *chiquita?*"

Her hands thrust hard against him, she slid down and to the road. "You're lying," she said. "You must be. The Emperor Napoleon has given absolute assurance to Maximilian to keep the French troops here until the country is fully pacified."

"It won't be under Maximilian's rule. You know yourself that nine-tenths of the population is for Pablito Juarez, and against the Habsburg. Still Maximilian has to keep on paying for the French troops here. Where's that money going to come from, your one-tenth?"

She started away along the road, then halted, turned. Her posture was strangely like that of a soldier's, her hands at her sides, her body held erect. A vast and passionate wave of love for her came over Lewis Dayton. She's a soldier, too, he thought. Right now, she's fighting in her own style. So let her be. Don't dismount and go and make love to her. You're on the winning side, and she's still got to learn her lot hasn't got a chance.

"I don't understand," she said fiercely, "why you've done this. You're against everything my life means. You know I can never change my loyalty."

"As soon," Lewis Dayton said, "as you get over being dazzled by a couple of Viennese dancing tricks you'll learn that Maximilian and Carlotta are being terribly cheated, and your own, beloved Mexico, too. Your folks will get stripped of all they own, the same way the lads fighting now for Juarez have been. But get on home. It's late, and a girl as pretty as you needs her sleep."

She walked past him then, straight to her horse. But after she had mounted and swung the folds of her cape into place, she gazed fully into his eyes. "I should think," she said, "that if you don't lie to yourself, too, you'd be out fighting for what you call your side of the war. Wouldn't that prove more than haranguing me and playing at being a third-rate spy?"

Knots of muscles raised on his jaws, and his big hands flexed. Then he smiled. "The Civil War is about finished in the States," he said. "Now there's plenty of other Americans to help Juarez's army in the field. That's why I told you we'd be lucky if we see Jacques Fleric again. The French troops are in for an awful whipping.

"But, aside from that, my job's here, and later on I hope you'll understand why I've got it. I'm sorry you think so little of me. Because I'm going to be around quite a while. We're going to meet a lot more times, whether you like it or not. Good night, *mi corazon.* Be good enough to bear my best wishes to Their Majesties."

She rode past at a furious pace, striking the horse with the bunched bridle reins. I hate him, she thought. If I had a gun, I'd shoot him out of the saddle, laugh as he fell dead. But he's brave; there's no doubt of that. It's a different kind of daring, his, but just as fine as Jacques'.

CHAPTER V

DYNASTS DOUBLECROSS

THE sentry at the inner portal was of the Legion. He came smartly to the present arms as he saw Jacques Fleric, but then he said low-voiced, "How's it

going up in the north for us, Lieutenant?"

"We're taking our share in every scrap," Jacques Fleric said. The words sounded dull, stupid to him and he felt a sudden irritation with himself. He couldn't even tell this Legionnaire the truth, he realized. The months in the north had dazed his brain; the savageness of them was too great for any words he knew. It was just thought of Tonia that had kept him going, brought him back.

"I want to find Dona Antonia Lopez," he said. "Where can I reach her?"

"This here Chapultepec is better than that louse-trap palace down in town, Lieutenant. But it's so big we got to have a map to get around in it. You'll have to ask a fellow named Scherzenlechner. He's the valet-secretary to the emperor, and he usually hangs out in the salon right past the guardroom. I'm glad the lieutenant's back. We heard a lot of good guys got killed in the north."

"Thanks, soldier," Jacques Fleric said. His fatigue seemed to ebb out of him as he strode forward through the high-arched passages. When he talked with Tonia, everything would be all right.

Scherzenlechner sat at a gilt table playing patience with cards that bore the imperial monogram. He blinked up at Jacques Fleric, the cards still in his hands. "Impossible, Lieutenant," he said. "It is too late at night to disturb any member of the court. You officers who have been on active duty often forget that there is a definite etiquette which much be maintained. His Majesty has ordered me—"

Jacques Fleric lifted him bodily from the chair. "Where's Dona Antonia's room?" he said. "Show me, quick."

"Lieutenant, please. I insist to you that it is too late to see the lady this evening. Tomorrow, when you have had a chance to rest and change your uniform, get clean. Dona Antonia would never receive you in such a condition."

The grip of Fleric's hands slightly tightened, and Scherzenlechner almost screamed. *"Très bien,"* the skinny little man said. "You're stronger than I, Lieutenant. You force me to show you. But he assured that I will report you to His Majesty."

"Shut up, *macquereau,"* Fleric said, "before I crack you good."

Where Scherzenlechner squirmed away from him was at the end of a passage that gave onto a vast garden. "Straight across there," he said. "The first door. But if this causes scandal, you alone are responsible."

Fountains rilled plashing in the garden. It was redolent with flowers, and moonlight crested the mossed trees. Fleric stopped there beside one of the fountains, stared out over the city. Mexico, he thought, the place the Aztecs called Anahuac. Beyond the black-shimmering lake, the volcanos rose bold against the night. He said their names aloud, and thought of them steadied him: the Smoking Mountain, Popocatepetl, and the White Maiden, Ixtaccihuatl. It was the old legend that they were lovers, and the Smoking Mountain jealously watched his frozen mate.

He smiled at that. You can't be jealous, he told himself. You have no right. She never said she loved you, and right now you're not sure you love her. But somebody must break the red horror in your brain. It has to stop, or you'll go crazy. You've seen too many good men die for a cause they can't understand. When you see her, be calm, and quiet, let her do the talking. She's the one who knows.

He went on then, slowly, his body relaxed. The door was of solid mahogany, and he rapped upon it with his sword hilt, softly called, "Tonia!"

NO DREAM of his had been lovelier than the reality, as she stood before him in the doorway. She wore a peignoir of deep blue velvet over her nightdress, and her hair fell dark and loose about her shoulders. "Jacques," she said, whispering. "Jacques, what are you doing here?"

He was not fully aware his facial expression changed, could only tell it by her eyes. But he stepped forward and clasped her close, kissed her repeatedly on

the lips and throat. She struggled against him for a while, at last was still. "What's the matter?" he said. "Are you afraid of me, Tonia?"

"No," she said, but then behind her in the candle-lit room he saw Lewis Dayton.

The American stood clear from any piece of furniture. He was dressed in a simple linen suit and his hands were empty. Yet as Fleric's eyes met his, he spoke in a sharply commanding voice:

"Come on in and shut the door. This way you're endangering all of us."

It was Tonia who shut the door. Jacques Fleric was crossing the room to Dayton.

"What do you mean?" Fleric said thickly," when you say 'all of us?' "

Lewis Dayton made a quick, steady gesture. "You look as though you're pretty much played out, soldier. Take it easy. Listen to me, and listen to Tonia. Then maybe you'll understand."

But Fleric's hand had closed over his revolver butt. They're in love, he thought. Tonia loves him, the American. And what's one more death, after what you've seen?

Then Tonia touched his arm. "Believe us, Jacques," she said. "There are a number of things you must be told, and every one of them the truth. If you're not able to trust us now, a great many more good men will lose their lives for a false cause."

"Then tell me," he said. His face was a white, frightful mask. "But don't think I will believe you. And don't lift your hands, Dayton. Up in the north, I've killed more than a couple of men like you."

"Sure," Lewis Dayton said. "That's what Tonia and I are out to stop. There's been a lot of treachery, soldier, and finally we've found it out. Scherzenlechner is crooked, and working to get Maximilian kicked off the throne. So is the Papal Nuncio and a number of other folks who think Maximilian's too honest for their good. Just tonight, Bazaine received his orders to take the French troops home. I've got a copy of those orders right here in my pocket. Do you want to see them?"

"Not now, no. Don't move!"

"But you want me to tell you what they mean?"

"Go ahead."

"The American minister to France went in to see Napoleon last week. He asked him precisely what the hell French troops and the French flag were doing on Mexican soil. There wasn't any good answer to that. And Austria has just got licked in a war against Prussia; Franz Josef is broke, can't help out brother Maxl any more. Leopold died a while ago, and since then Belgium hasn't been sending men for the volunteer corps here.

"In New York and in New Orleans. there's an organization called the Defenders of the Monroe Doctrine. They're sending guns, money, help of all sorts to Juarez. Maximilian is stuck, and stuck bad. So Napoleon has called all bets off. Mexico was too big a gamble for him to win cheap."

Veins throbbed in the back of the hand Jacques Fleric kept about the revolver. "Where do you figure in this?" he said. "Where does Tonia figure?"

"We've worked together to get at the truth. Maximilian's in a daze. We can't make sense with him. But we can with Carlotta. Tomorrow Tonia's going to talk with her."

"And tell her you're a spy?"

The moment he asked the question he knew is was stupid. Dayton cared nothing at all for his own life.

"If she has to, sure. Carlotta will probably go right back to Europe and see Napoleon and the rest of the folks who gave her husband this no-good crown. Somehow, she'll arrange to stop the slaughter here, bring about a peace. As it is now, you've been fighting to satisfy the rotten, selfish dream of one man—Napoleon. He wanted an empire, and he was willing to sacrifice the lives of his own crack troops and those of thousands of others to get it. Believe me when I say that everything you've done out here has been for his personal, private gain."

JACQUES FLERIC kept his eyes open, staring straight at Dayton. Yet across his brain passed the images of the men who had died beside him at Camerone and at Monterrey, San Ysabel, Chihuahua and a score of other places whose names he'd never learned. In the recesses of his memory he heard once more the moans, the cursing, echoing cries of the wounded, the dying.

Then, as if it were sung right here in the room, he heard the marching song of the Legion. He straightened, and the hand holding the revolver was very cold, very still.

"Maybe," he said, "that's true. You make it sound so. But all this time you must have been doing more than finding out how crooked things are here. You must have reported the troop movements of the Legion to Juarez, let him know where he could trap and ambush our detachments. Tell me—yes, or no."

One clear drop of sweat rolled down the long line of Lewis Dayton's jaw. "A fair enough question," he said. "And to a man like you it demands an answer. . . . Sure, I reported troop movements to Juarez. As often and as completely as I could. That's been the most important part of my job."

Tonia had been watching the revolver until the power of death it possessed had almost lost all meaning for her. She would never forget, she knew, the blunt length of the barrel, the small glint of light upon the sight, and the way Jacques Fleric's finger bent about the trigger. She couldn't stop him. He would fire it despite anything she did. But she could keep him from killing Lewis Dayton. That she must do . . . Lewis was the man she loved.

The pressure of Jacques Fleric's finger against the trigger was gradual. Tonia sensed it, felt it through every fibre of her being. She struck with a chopping, downward swing of her hand.

Scarlet and orange flame whipped from the muzzle. Somewhere out on the floor beyond her vision the bullet whacked the floor tiles. She heard it nicker in ricochet, the thud of impact as it buried in the wall. Then she heard Lewis Dayton.

He lunged wide-armed at Jacques Fleric. They went down locked close and the revolver jerked away to the floor. But Fleric was fighting with a desperate, terrific violence.

His elbow clipped Dayton's throat. His knees pinned the bigger man's shoulders and he struck right and left for the jaw.

"Lewis!" she cried, unconscious that she spoke at all. "Stop him!"

Lewis rolled free. He rose and met Jacques Fleric square. They went headlong across the room, crashing down vases, tables, chairs. They halted by the wall, braced there in another straining grip.

She could hear every breath that rasped from their lungs. Then Fleric got one hand back, hit jabbing at the jugular.

Lewis went to his knees, and prone. He tried to cover his head, seeing Fleric charge him. Fleric had gone quite insane; he kicked with his iron-hobbed boots in the way the Legionnaires kicked when they fought in some barroom brawl.

Those blows drove Lewis' hands down. Blood filmed his face. He made slow, clumsy motions to rise.

"Now," Fleric said. "Now you'll know how we took it in the north. Ten men to our one all the time. Never enough food, never enough ammunition. No bandages, no water for the wounded. With the *Indios* coming in at night to—"

His hands groped out and found a splintered chair. He rent the scrolled, heavy back-piece loose, lifted it like a club. "Get up. I won't torture you. I'll let you start running for the door."

"No," Tonia said. "No, you won't." She had the revolver, walked forward until she was right before Fleric. "Look into my eyes if you think I'm lying. I'll kill you if you don't drop that. Lewis is my man. I love him with all my heart. Once, I thought I might love you. But now I know for sure. My loyalty's all for him and Mexico. I give you one more chance—drop that!"

Jacques Fleric let it drop soundlessly to the floor. He blinked his eyes as though

emerging from some dream whose terror was beyond comprehension. But he said, "You can't stop us, Tonia. All you do now is hold us back from finishing this."

She did not look at him. She was helping Lewis Dayton to his feet. "You're all right?" she asked.

"Yes," Dayton said. "But I've got to go now. I can't stay any longer here. Somebody must have heard that shot."

Tonia brought his hand against her cheek. "Tell me what you wish me to do," she said. "Where shall I see you again?"

"Stay here," Lewis Dayton said. "Take care of Fleric. Do your best to keep him from being killed. Talk to Carlotta tomorrow, and go right on with our plans. I don't know where you'll see me again, or when. It won't be until all of this is over. I'm going north now, to report to Juarez at Paso del Norte. But don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I never can be, as long as you love me." Then she released his hand, and he lurched to the door, out into the night.

She was there with Fleric, the revolver hidden beneath her peignoir, as Scherzenlechner and the sergeant of the guard came into the room. *"Un gros scandale!"* Scherzenlechner said. "A lady of the court in a lover's quarrel with an officer! What will Her Majesty think?"

Tonia gave him a brief glance. "There will only be a scandal," she said, "when I tell Her Majesty the truth about you. Get out of here, or I shall have the sergeant throw you out. Sergeant, please find me a bottle of brandy. The lieutenant needs a drink. Then I'm sure he'll be able to go to his quarters by himself."

JACQUES FLERIC counted the steps. There were twenty-five he could take up the salon, twelve across, and twenty-five back. This was his sixty-second time around, and still the door to where Tonia sat with the empress was shut. You're a fool, he thought, and you were a much bigger one last night. Sit down. Keep still. You're an officer of the Legion, not a schoolboy who is waiting to be spanked.

The empress preceded Tonia. She came straight across the salon to Jacques Fleric. "Dona Antonia has explained to me," she said. "You have been a very brave and loyal officer, and I sincerely hope you will continue to be so. Please bear this note to Maréchal Bazaine. Now I wish to thank you again for what you have done. *Au revoir.*"

She held out her hand, and he bowed silently and brushed it with his lips. This woman has already heard too many words, he told himself.

Tonia waited by a door that led to the garden. She walked forth into it with him at her side. "One roach has been squashed," she said. "Scherzenlechner is to be sent home today. But there are a number more who can't be finished so easily. The empress is sailing on the next packet for Europe, to get things straight. Maximilian insists on staying here. He thinks that some way or other, all alone, he can save the empire."

"How about you?" Jacques Fleric said, stopping squarely before her in the path

"My duty is here, just as yours is in the north."

"The empress must trust you a very great deal."

"She does. She had me write the orders you have there. Bazaine has promised her you will carry them out. You're to evacuate the posts north of Puebla. Those men are in a bad way. It will take an officer like you to handle them safely. Some of the Belgian volunteer corps have started to shoot their commanders."

Jacques Fleric started to flush to the roots of his hair. "I don't mind," he said, "taking my orders from you. But I've got one question to ask. How can you love Lewis Dayton?"

Tonia looked away from him and at the pigeons fluttering on a fountain rim. "He and I believe in the same things," she said. "I was slow in learning, but he taught me that liberty means more than life itself. When you think as he does, money doesn't count, or crowns, or glory. You live to

help somebody else, those who haven't got as much as you, and who need your strength."

"That sounds nice," Jacques Fleric said. "That's the sort of stuff Danton and Robespierre talked in the French revolution. Then Napoleon Bonaparte took the country right away from them and the people, almost conquered all of Europe."

"So," Tonia said. "Then, though, the people came back. They always come back. They will here, no matter what this Napoleon and poor Maximilian try to do."

"I took an oath," Jacques Fleric said, "when I joined the Legion. I swore to be loyal to my emperor and my flag. Nothing can ever make me change. If I meet Lewis Dayton in the north, I'll finish what I started last night. He saved my life once, but it was only to convince me to fight on his side. I belong to the Legion, and we're not through here yet."

"Then be careful," Tonia said. "My man can use a gun, too."

CHAPTER VI

THREE SOLDIERS OF LIBERTY

SOME of them were so badly wounded they could do no more than crawl. Others hobbled using broken rifles and flag standards for support. Every few yards a man fell down, but nobody touched him, looked at him. Their gaze was forward on the road that led to Puebla and then to the sea.

The sea was just one more figment of his throbbing brain, Jacques Fleric thought. The sea had evaporated. This sun had lapped it up, left more barren and terrible land where men might march, and fall, and die. Then he brushed his hands across his face, forced himself to a degree of sanity. He was in command, he remembered; his single will kept these men alive.

He turned and called to them to halt and they shunted one against the other in sprawled knots. A brook ran along the road, and he went to it, filled his canteen and kepi. But when he got back they fought to take the water from him, knocked the kepi into the ditch. He sat down after that, his back against the ditch, too weary to move.

Flies were clouding over the men. They settled in black, close hordes. An effluvium of rottenness, of death rose up in the sun-white air.

One young Wallooner from the volunteer corps had a gangrenous leg. The swelling had split the seams of his trousers and maggots crawled the open wound. His fingers tensed like claws, the lad ripped his shirt, tried to make a bandage. But then he seemed to become fascinated by the sight of the maggots, gaped down at them as though they performed some weird, marvelous rite.

He sees his life being eaten away right there, Jacques Fleric thought. He's going rapidly insane.

It was true. The Wallooner suddenly screamed. He got up and lunged headlong against the boulders beside the road. Time and again, he bashed himself with awful blows.

"No, soldier," Fleric whispered. "You needn't do that." He straightened quietly, took slow aim.

The shot awoke the rest. They started wild-eyed, their mouths twitching with the old fear. Fleric watched them for a moment as if they formed a frieze painted on a wall.

Among them were Negroes, massive men recruited for Napoleon by the Khedive of Egypt. Their homeland was the Sudan, beyond the Sahara. They had never been told why they had been brought here to fight, yet they still clung to bits of their bright chasseur uniforms. Several had their red-tasseled fezzes and short tunics, and wore nothing else. All of them held rifles; the white men had taught them thoroughly how to kill.

Apart from the Sudanese were the Algerians. The stronger ones had sacks of loot, ornaments stolen from churches, and silver spurs, buckles and bridles taken from the Mexicans. A greedy wariness informed their eyes. They were born brigands.

But right behind them was the Legion, intact and closely grouped. The others had come to Mexico, Jacques Fleric realized, because they had been duped, told glittering lies of wealth and adventure. But the men of the Legion were possessed by greater, deeper reasons. For them, the words *La Legion* were almost holy. They worshipped the Legion, and it gave them a strange, almost monastic sense of unity. When they fought, it was not as common soldiers, or as men, but as Legionnaires.

He got to his feet and talked to the Legion. "We can't halt any longer there," he said. "We have to get to Puebla, and then we'll be all right. But now the Mexicans are closing us off."

Dust flung tawny plumes where the Mexicans marched. They came in two flanking columns, one on each side of the road. "They're stupid," Jacques Fleric said beneath his breath. "There's no need to attack us. Just leave us for the sun and buzzards to finish. I've lost fifty men in the last six days."

But the column had stopped. Only a few mounted men moved forward near the road. All of them were Yaquis except their leader, Fleric saw. That was was Dayton.

"SURRENDER while you have a chance, soldier," Dayton called. "You can't get through to Puebla. General Escobedo and the Army of Liberty hold the road this side of Queretaro."

Jacques Fleric fired from the hip, with a quick-drawn shot. It made Dayton's horse stumble, rear. Yet Dayton did not fire in return, and the Yaquis held their rifles down. Dayton was giving them a command; they cantered back together to the column.

Yells of derision and defiance came from the Legionnaires. They went to the sides of the road, began to throw rapid volleys into the Mexican ranks. Jacques Fleric was forced to use the flat of his sword to make them cease firing. "We'll fight," he said. "But not here. We have to get to Puebla, as I told you before. Start moving. Haul those other lads up on their feet."

Night swept the sky before they had gone three kilometers. In its purple spread the Mexican camp fires sprang crimson. Dayton had told the truth, Jacques Fleric knew now. The road to Puebla was blocked. That was the army of Escobedo, Juarez's crack general, aligned all across the ridge. Fleric and the Legion, the rest of these poor sons here, were finally trapped.

He tried to form a bivouac at a turn in the road, stationed Legionnaires as point sentries. But only seventeen rounds a man was left, not counting the seriously wounded. "Every man must have a last round for himself," he told them. "It looks like here is where we get it. Some outfit is coming straight down the road."

He could hear the clack of hoofs over the stones, the chafe of saddle leather, then a voice he knew. Tonia was there, among the men riding the road. It was his name she called.

He answered slowly, instinctively afraid of her and what his love for her might do to him. "Halt there!" he commanded. "Don't advance any further."

"No," she said. "I must talk with you. Let me advance alone."

"All right," he said. "But be sure you're alone."

Her cloak was stiff with dust, and her horse could hardly stand. When she dismounted, she clung to him for support. "I've come right from Mexico City," she said. "Everything is finished there, and you should know what has happened."

Jacques Fleric took her by the arms and led her to the little fire the men had built for him. "Tell me," he said. "You'll have to talk fast, though. The *Libertadores* won't give me much more time to talk with anybody."

"You're wrong," she said. "You have nothing to fear from them. They're willing to let you surrender honorably. The danger for you is if you listen to Maximilian. He's desperate and lost, but still he's got together an army that will follow him. Now he's leading them this way, to give battle to the *Libertadores.*"

"How is that a danger to me?"

"He thinks you and these troops will join him."

Jacques Fleric cursed. "What else do you think we'd do, after what the *Libertadores* have done to us?"

"But you can't win. The treachery is complete. Before he left Mexico City, Bazaine had every cannon spiked that he couldn't take with him. Then he had all the small arms flung into the canal. Carlotta—Carlotta was betrayed in the same sort of way when she reached Europe."

"By whom?"

THE firelight touched roseate upon Tonia's face. But the lines of her mouth were deep, the bones of her jaw showed sharp beneath the smooth skin.

"Carlotta," she said, the words slow, clear, hard, "was betrayed by three people. First, Napoleon, who all along had promised to support her and Maximilian here. Then her brother-in-law Franz Josef, who had helped Napoleon put Maximilian on the Mexican throne. Then the Pope, whose blessing had been given to Maximilian for restoring the church.

"Finally, in Rome, she went insane. They had difficulty getting her out of the Vatican Palace. Her mind couldn't take any more. The lies and the half-truths that they had told her, the months and months of waiting for some honest—"

A sob broke the words. Tears rolled Tonia's cheeks. She let them fall unashamed. "I loved Carlotta," she said.

Jacques Fleric would not allow himself to put his hands upon her. This tragedy, this grief must not sway him from his purpose, he told himself. There was a barrier between him and Tonia now, and it had been made by Lewis Dayton.

But Tonia looked up into his eyes. "I know you," she said. "I have real respect for you. So let me say to you that if you listen to Maximilian and fight for him, you will be very wrong. Your duty to him is over. Bazaine has taken all the other French troops out of the country. His last orders to you were to evacuate these poor men, but not to fight any more."

"You'd have us surrender?"

"It's the only thing you can do, Jacques. If Maximilian comes here, don't let him persuade you to join your troops with his. Mexico has seen enough blood. He will only cause further, useless slaughter."

"Back at San Ysabel," Jacques Fleric said harshly, "the *Libertadores* tortured any Legion prisoners they took. They tore their tongues and eyes out, mutilated them beyond recognition. And they did it before that, and will do it again. . . . I can't surrender; my men would kill me, kill themselves first."

"You won't take my word you'll be treated honorably?"

"No. You say you're loyal to the empress. Perhaps you are, in a personal way. But you're certainly disloyal to Maximilian. Right now you're doing your best to wreck the empire."

Tonia sat quite still. "I'm loyal," she said, "and always have been, to Mexico. When the empire was created here, I thought it was going to do good for my country. But that hasn't been true. Maximilian has only brought disaster. The empire was just a trick conceived by Napoleon for his own profit. It never really existed, and it is already finished. So as a Mexican I ask you once more to surrender while there is still a chance."

"The American used that exact expression," Jacques Fleric said, "when he asked me to surrender this afternoon. My answer was a shot. Tell him next time I'll get close enough to use the sword. You might add I'm going to join my outfit with Maximilian's as soon as I can. I'm sorry for the empress, and I'm sorry for you. But now get out of here. You picked the wrong side and the wrong man. You and I are enemies."

She went silently to her horse, swung up into the saddle. Then as she wheeled away down the road she saluted Jacques Fleric. "You're a fool," she said. "A brave and stubborn fool. I hope, though, you can escape the fate marked out for Maximilian."

"Merci, mademoiselle," Jacques Fleric said, and gave her a flat-palmed salute in return.

MAXIMILIAN was very calm. It was the Mexican officers of his staff who made all the noise. "The citadel at Queretaro is ours," Ernesto Lopez shouted. "Once the people know that, recruits will come to us from all sides. Still, we must drive these dogs back from the road and hold the way open to Mexico City. Are you ready to lead your detachment in a sortie, Lieutenant?"

Jacques Fleric gave him a narrow-eyed glance. "You were lucky," he said, "to get here and make a juncture with my outfit. You were luckier yet to take Queretaro. It's my belief we should hang on there until we get more troops. This lot of mine has about one more charge left in them, and that's all. They shouldn't be wasted. Like it or not, the *Libertadores* are tough men to lick. We know; we fought them plenty in the north."

"I've been in the south," Lopez said. "I held command of Oaxaca for the Imperial Army, and there we drove them before us at will. But if the lieutenant has lost heart and thinks—"

"Gentlemen, please," Maximilian said. He smoothed his gloved fingers down the sides of his whiskers. "Take command of your units. We shall consolidate with the force holding the citadel. Then couriers will be sent to Mexico City to tell of our victory. Popular support should be with us after that. But now every man must do his duty."

The Legion was the vanguard for that march to Queretaro. Jacques Fleric led it, stumbling, seeing the enemy only as wraiths who rose out of the dark to fire, then to retreat and disappear. He came to believe that he and the Legion were unconquerable, past defeat by mortal men. They were part of death itself, forged out of the fury and flame of countless battles.

Then they reached the escarpment, entered into the mud-brick walls of the citadel. His mood of exaltation left him; it was all he could do to stand while his men found places to sleep. Lopez and other of the Imperial officers yelled at him, but he did not listen. He dropped down and was at once asleep, his revolver and his sword still in his hands.

Maximilian awoke him. The big, blond man gently shook him, saying his name. "No more time for sleep, Lieutenant. Things are not going well. The road to Mexico City has been cut again. We're forced to go out and attack. If we don't, we shall be trapped here."

"Bon," Jacques Fleric muttered. "I understand. The Legion draws another front-row ticket. But don't think they can hold it all alone. They're just too damn' tired."

For a moment he stood there, his muscles sagging with weariness, then he raised his voice:

"Come on, *les gars*—there's no place to go but ahead!"

He took the Legion out at the double. There was no other way, he knew. If they went any slower, they'd slump down in their tracks.

The *Libertadores* held the slope right opposite the citadel. They had dug rifle pits, emplaced a lot of canon. As the Legion started up at them, canister shot cracked the full length of the line. "Come on, you sons!" Jacques Fleric shouted back over the piles of torn bodies. "This is better than getting your tongues yanked out!"

A fierce madness burned within him—a hot, uncontrollable will to blot himself out against the wall of flame and lead and steel that reared itself up to bar his way.

About twenty men were with him yet as he jumped into the first rifle pit. He cut hard, fast sword blows right and left, but it was the Legion bayonets that finished the job. "Up and at the next one," he told the Legion. Whiskers is right behind us."

Maximilian strode erect before the rank of Imperial infantry. His pale eyes flamed; his voice carried clear. He was calling the men behind him his comrades, telling them to hurry, hurry.

But you're too late, Jacques Fleric thought. You're too late, and you haven't got enough comrades, Whiskers. These guys up top know how to kill quick.

Then he recognized Lewis Dayton. The American stood on the parapet of a rifle pit. His big Colt revolver was in his hand, and beside him Tonia crouched.

Jacques Fleric felt a rage that seared his brain. They stand and watch, he thought, while we get killed. But I'll get Dayton. When I go, he'll go with me.

He scrambled up, went reeling forward through the smoke and streaking flame.

"NO," TONIA said. "Don't go down. There's no need for you." Lewis Dayton stared at her as if she were a stranger. All of us are strangers in war, she thought. It does something to us inside that's rotten and terrible, tears our hearts away, fills them with madness. But hold on to him; keep Lewis here.

She reached out and took his arm. "Stay with me. Don't—don't kill."

"I have to now," he said. "They've brought themselves to death. Peace wasn't good enough for them."

He went down the slope with wide-legged and deliberate strides. He fired the big revolver from the hip, taking his time for every shot.

She saw the men he shot at fall. They wore the red-topped kepis of the Legion, and they formed the leading wave of the attack. Jacques must be there, she told herself. Lewis will find him.

A desire to scream locked her throat. Fleric was rearing forward through the smoke.

Only two or three paces were between him and Lewis Dayton.

Dayton's big body loomed up through the blood-red haze—then slowly it seemed to drown in the smoke from the *clacketing* muskets.

. . . The sword-grip was slippery with sweat. Jacques Fleric took his hand away, brushed it along his trouser leg. "Now you've got to be sure," he said hoarsely aloud. "There he is—he's come to fight."

Lewis Dayton halted, his body slightly slouched. He brought the Colt muzzle up with a short, steady motion. "I'll kill you, Fleric," he said, "before you can take another step."

Fleric laughed at him. He swung the sword from shoulder height, straight at Dayton's head. Then his feet skidded from under him and he tripped, went sprawling.

It was the bullet shock that had knocked him down. Dayton's shot had caught the sword-guard square, flung off in ricochet. But Dayton could have killed him. In the second that he had struck with the sword, the Colt had been aimed right at his heart.

He rolled over, trying to get up, trying to find Dayton. Dayton was right beside him: he had his boot-heel on the sword.

"Give me that. Let's finish it."

"No dice, soldier. You've had enough. You're my prisoner now."

Jacques Fleric tackled him below the knees. Then as they pitched down together he got hold of the Colt, took it tight in his own hand. "You're pretty careless for a lad trained as a spy," he said. "Saving my life the first time made some sense. But this time you gambled too much. Get up. The Legion will be glad to see you."

"The Legion," Lewis Dayton said, "is gone. And Maximilian's outfit is gone with it. Take a look."

Jacques Fleric let his breath go in a great, sobbing gasp as he looked. The Legion, all except the wounded, the dead, was gone from the slope. Now, separated and staggering, they were dragged back through the portals of the citadel by Maximilian's men. Maximilian was the last to enter. He turned to stare up the slope once more, and his face was gray-colored, his eyes like the eyes of a dead man.

"Here," Jacques Fleric said. He could only whisper. "Take back your gun." Then as he thrust it at Dayton his legs gave, the world blinked out black around him.

TONIA kept her hand upon Jacques Fleric's hand. "Ernesto Lopez," she said, "the man who is my cousin, had a part in it. He and some of the other Im-

perial officers turned Maximilian over to the Army of Liberty. But Lewis is there at the trial now, trying his best to get clemency."

The fever had left Fleric very weak, but he sat upright as he heard her. "You mean that not even Napoleon will help Maximilian?"

"Yes," she said. "They've all left him to die. But Lewis hopes the court-martial may not give a sentence of death. If Maximilian disowns any right to the Mexican throne, promises never to return here, there's a chance."

"But if he refuses?"

"Then he'll be shot."

It was an hour after dawn when Lewis Dayton came back into the prisoner camp. He walked slowly, keeping his eyes on the ground. "Tell us," Tonia said. "Let Jacques know."

"They shot him," Lewis Dayton said. "They took him out right at dawn. He was still the Emperor of Mexico, he said. No man would ever take his throne from him. . . . The officer in charge of the execution squad was some young kid. He couldn't bring himself to give the order to fire. Maximilian gave it for him. He opened up his shirt, and told the squad just where to shoot."

Jacques Fleric got gradually to his feet. "When," he asked, "is my turn?"

But Lewis Dayton smiled. "You haven't got any turn. The job ahead of you is to get your outfit home. There's a train waiting at Tomalto, and a ship at Vera Cruz. You should have them all aboard by tomorrow night."

"Thank you," Jacques Fleric said.

The eyes of the two men met and held, and each was thinking of the many times their eyes had already met and of how this would be the last time.

"No," Dayton said. "There's no reason. You're men who fought for what you believed in, too. But when you get back to Europe you can do something for Tonia and me. Tell the folks there what it means when a lad like Napoleon tries to take a country that doesn't belong to him. That's easy to forget when people have been living in peace for a while. But we can't let them forget. Peace and freedom mean too much."

"I'll tell them," Jacques Fleric said. "Now I know, and I'll make them understand."

He smiled then, as he shook hands and said goodbye.

They sat silent for quite a time after he was gone.

"There goes a soldier," Lewis Dayton said finally.

"True," Tonia said. "But a soldier for freedom."

Her hand came to rest on his arm.

The parade was fine until Abdul Hakim went sprawling on his hands and knees and the rear file began to get tangled in his turban

Fool of the Regiment

We proudly present the Genius of Disaster. He was big and brown and cheerful. But he could smash a wireless, set fire to a tent, break up a parade as easily as he could walk—or easier. Meet Abdul Hakim of Spindle's Own

By GARNETT RADCLIFFE
Author of "The Pit of Punishment," "The Doomed Liner," etc.

THE mess of the 72nd (Spindle's Own) Punjabi Rifles F.F. could be divided into two very unequal portions, those who thought Sepoy Abdul Hakim was the biggest fool in the regiment, and those—or rather he, since there was only one dissenter—who thought otherwise. The majority included the colonel, the second-in-command, the adjutant, the four company commanders—in short everybody except Pickering, the signal officer.

They varied in the intensity of their belief in proportion to how well they knew Sepoy Abdul Hakim. The quartermaster, whose only dealing with the gentleman was only one dissenter—who thought ment of the articles of equipment he had lost or destroyed, thought he was just a little dense, but Fawcett, commander of C Company, who knew Sepoy Abdul Hakim very well indeed, had a theory that if an implement could be procured strong enough to open his skull, it would be found that his head had formed turnip-wise around a rock.

"He's no use," Fawcett used to com-

plain. "Great brown grinning lump! The other sepoys laugh at him. I wish to goodness there was some way of getting him out of the regiment."

Pickering, however, was pleased to take the opposite view. He was fond of arguing, was the signal officer; also he prided himself on having a deep knowledge of the psychology of the natives, and in particular of the psychology of the Pathan. In an unguarded moment, partly out of sheer cussedness, and partly for the sake of starting an argument that might relieve a little tedium of life at Abel Penam, he announced that he thought Sepoy Abdul Hakim had in him the makings of an excellent soldier who had never been given his chance.

EVEN at Abel Penam things other than sandstorms sometimes happened. It chanced one day that the Divisional Commander took it into his head to visit the station and carry out an inspection of the regiment.

". . . and I am sure," he wrote to the colonel in an informal letter that accompanied the official intimation, "that I will find Spindle's Own justifying their reputation of being the smartest battalion on parade in the Indian Army!"

A psychologist, the Divisional Commander. He knew how to put men on their mettle. When the colonel read that letter aloud to the battalion the air became vibrant with keenness.

The men rehearsed till the plain rang with the smack of hard brown hands upon rifle butts, barked commands, stamp of marching feet, and shrilling of bugles. Backward and forward the tireless, sweating lines with their towering turbans, their silver buttons and their mailed shoulders, marched and countermarched, wheeled, halted, and formed fours.

From the slope they crashed to the "Present," eight hundred rifles leaping as one; when they marked time the Abel Penam hills trembled, the sharp orders were as a crackle of gunfire, and the colonel, eagle-eyed on his charger, vowed to himself that the Divisional Commander would find Spindle's Own the smartest unit, not only of the Indian Army, but of all the armed forces of the Empire.

"They'd lick the Guards," he thought as he watched the blue and silver lines roll past for the umpteenth time, eight hundred men marching with metronomic precision to the proud skirling of the native pipes.

. . . Came the great day. On a morning when bayonets flashed in the sunlight, and commands rang sharp in the clear air, Spindle's Own drilled as men will only drill when there's a reputation at stake, or another regiment to be beaten. There was a snap and a fire in their movements that would have rejoiced the heart of a grenadier sergeant-major.

Slap, bang, crash! To a volley of barked commands they aligned themselves in column of companies three hundred yards from the saluting base. A ripple of light as the bayonets flashed to their shoulders, another command that must have torn the throat of the second-in-command, down came the poised drumsticks, and the motionless lines became a blue and silver centipede of marching men.

In perfect alignment they swung towards the saluting base. The colonel's heart swelled with pride, the Divisional Commander's white-gloved hand went stiffly to the brim of his topee. And then . . . !

IT HAPPENED when A and B Companies had gone triumphantly past, and were again marching with eyes front. Fawcett, leading C Company on his charger heard the crash that broke the rhythm, the horrid metallic clatter that chills the heart of every soldier—the clatter of a rifle with a fixed bayonet falling on the hard ground.

And he didn't need to make two guesses as to who the culprit was.

But Fawcett didn't see the worst. He was far too well drilled to look around, and he missed the spectacle of Sepoy Abdul Hakim charging and being re-

pulsed by the rear rank of his own platoon in an effort to get back to his rifle lying on the ground. The rear rank was not disposed to give him passage. They opposed him solid as a wall, and in the scuffle Sepoy Abdul Makim's turban fell from his head.

It unwound when it fell, fifteen feet of blue drill, which wrapped itself about the legs of the rear rank. Abdul Hakim, now plunging between the ranks like a cow caught in a gate, seized one end of his headdress. If he couldn't get his rifle he meant to get his turban. He pulled as if he had been assisting at a tug-of-war, and that was when the march past of Spindle's Own ceased to be a march past and became a riot.

One cannot drag fifteen feet of strong cloth from among the legs of men marching in quick time with their heads turned to the right without causing mishaps. A sepoy fell on his face, two others tripped over him.

Abdul Hakim himself, oblivious to everything but the necessity of recovering his turban, was on his knees and tugging like mad. His turban was taut across the path of the battalion, an obstacle some men jumped over, but over which many more men tripped.

And as the hind ranks swept resolutely on, confusion became worse confounded. The mound of the fallen grew, staggering men stabbed their helpless comrades with their bayonets, men yelped and swore, D Company commander's horse bolted from the fray, hysterical commands were yelled, and no one heeded. Only the band opposite the saluting base kept their heads, They went on playing like so many Neros fiddling in the face of disaster.

"Most original!" said the Divisional Commander. "I think this movement should be incorporated in the new drill book. And now, colonel, if your men have quite finished their scrimmage, I'd like to see a march past."

The battalion was reformed, and there was another march past. It was a sullen affair, quite devoid of the snap and elan of the first effort, but at least, it passed off without incident. Fawcett had had the wisdom to order Sepoy Abdul Hakim off parade.

"AFTER all," argued Pickering, putting down his glass in the mess late that night, "a mishap like that might have happened to anyone. Knowing the Pathan nature as I do, I'm pretty sure it was excess of zeal and not carelessness that made Abdul Hakim drop his rifle. Possibly his hand was sweaty with excitement.

"And, after all, does it really matter so much if a soldier is not smart on parade? Wasn't there a regiment known as the Dirty Dicks that distinguished itself at Waterloo? In my opinion spit and polish are over-rated, and—"

"And in my opinion," snapped the adjutant, "you talk unmitigated tripe even for a signal officer. However, I've got some good news for you."

"What?" Pickering asked.

"Abdul Hakim is to be your orderly from now on. Don't look so dismayed, my lad. As Napoleon once remarked, a dirty orderly is better than no orderly at all, and if you won't have him you'll have to do without."

Everyone was laughing. Pickering raised his refilled glass with dignity:

"I'm delighted. And I bet you'll find I'm right when I say Abdul Hakim has the makings of the best soldier in the regiment!"

. . . Three weeks later Pickering found himself resting at the side of a goat-track in a desolate spot twenty koss from Abel Penam. It was a sultry, ominous evening, an evening that matched his mood as he waited for Sepoy Abdul Hakim, of whom he had come to think in his own mind as the Magnificent Fool.

He hadn't changed his theories about Pathans, but he had come to the conclusion that Abdul Hakim must be the exception who proved them true.

A log of wood would have made a better orderly. Far better, for at least the log could not damage his kit.

A log of wood wouldn't have used brown polish on white canvas shoes; it wouldn't have tied firm knots in the legs of an expensive pair of slacks, and have used the slacks themselves as a sack for carrying boots; it wouldn't have polished a sword with tooth paste, washed a Sam Browne in boiling water, smashed a valuable wireless, put its foot through a camp bed, dropped a lamp and set fire to a tent, spilled ink over a pile of dress shirts, and assisted its master to mount his pony with such misplaced vigor that he shot clean over, and fell on his head on the further side.

All those things, and many others too numerous to recount, Sepoy Abdul Hakim had accomplished in the course of three weeks.

HE HAD driven the signal officer to the verge of a nervous breakdown. Only pride had restrained Pickering from going to the adjutant and saying:

"He's got the brain of a flea, the body of an elephant, and the obstinacy of a mule. For heaven's sake give me another orderly before he pushes me to murder."

What he actually did say when questioned by sceptics was:

"Oh, he's shaping up very well. Of course he's new to the work, but he'll soon get used to it. He's strong, willing, and faithful, and that's the main thing."

They were twenty koss now from Abel Penam, Pickering and the Fool. The hunting of snow leopard was Pickering's objective. He would have preferred a half-witted baboon as his companion, but in face of all he'd said in praise of his orderly, it would have been difficult to find an excuse for leaving him behind.

In the wilds Abdul Hakim had proved himself even more maddeningly stupid.

What he could spill he spilled, what he could break (and few things could withstand his herculean hands) he broke. He had dropped a pair of valuable field glasses over a cliff, lost a prismatic compass lent to Pickering by the colonel, had all but shot Pickering dead with his own spare rifle, and had shown himself utterly incapable of lighting a fire, calling his master, making a cup of tea, or opening a tin.

It began to rain while Pickering sat by that goat track. A queer sort of rain —great oily drops as if the sky were sweating. And there was a sense of strain and pressure, as if great forces were collecting themselves for a titanic struggle.

It was as if a thunderstorm was approaching, yet there were no visible indications of a storm. Pickering's nerves were tingling, he felt an instinct to hide, from what exactly he didn't know. Then he saw the giant form of his orderly, walking as he always did, with his head bent and his eyes on the ground.

"Hurry up," said Pickering. "There's a storm coming and we must find shelter."

Abdul Hakim showed his teeth in the grin with which he always acknowledged an order. It was impossible to tell from that grin whether he understood or not. Apparently on this occasion he had. He put out a hand as vast as a plate, and stared stupidly at the drops that fell upon his palm.

"It is raining, *sahib!*" he announced.

"You don't say so!" Pickering scoffed. "If you go on at this rate, Abdul Hakim, you'll be a *subedar* in a year. What else have you got to say?"

Abdul Hakim's grin deepened. He lifted his head and looked around.

"There is a cave yonder, *sahib*, in which we could find shelter for the night."

"Splendid," said Pickering. "That's the most intelligent thing you've said since you became my orderly."

THE cave was in the side of a hill, and a few hundred yards above the track. When they had climbed up to it Pickering decided it would make an admirable shelter. It was deep with a high vaulted roof that seemed to stretch far back into the bowels of the hill.

Pickering was tired. After he had eaten his supper he wrapped himself in his sleeping-bag, and lay down upon the dry

rock. The rain outside had stopped, but he was still conscious of that horrible tense feeling of suspense.

Even if a storm did burst they would be safe in the cave. Just before he closed his eyes he heard a low moaning sound that might have been distant thunder. It reverberated strangely through the rock on which he lay.

About an hour later he woke with a yell. He had dreamed he was lying on a camp-bed. And Abdul Hakim had crept beneath the bed, and was rocking it like a boat.

He was roaring as he rocked. An indescribably, deafening noise intermingled with a crashing as of toppling mountains. A sense of insecurity and terror, such as he had never known before seized the signal officer by the throat. He leaped to his feet, only to be flung down by a shock as if planets had collided. He lay still feeling the rock beneath him trembling and pulsating as if the foundations of the hill were being smitten by a giant hammer.

Now there was a rolling sound of sliding rocks. The cave suddenly became dark, and filled with stinging particles of dust. Small fragments of rock rained upon him from the roof. And he knew another and even more awful terror.

If he stayed where he was he would be buried alive. Sick and dizzy as if he was in a burning house, he staggered toward the entrance. But he could see no entrance. All was darkness, and when he put out his hands they encountered the surface of a rock.

He told himself he must have missed his way; that it was the side of the cave his hands were feeling. He groped to the right and then to the left. Everywhere there was rock. His mouth felt dry, and his heart began to hammer swiftly in his throat.

He realized what had happened. The mouth of the cave had been blocked by a fall of rock caused by the earthquake. They were buried alive, sealed up like toads in a stone vault.

"AND so, Abdul Hakim," Pickering said quietly, "it would appear that there will shortly be two vacancies on the roll of our regiment. A new signal officer will be required, and also a new orderly. It is our Kismet to die in this place."

It was hours after the earthquake—how many hours he couldn't tell, since his watch had stopped. All was once more still and silent in the cave. The dust had subsided, and by his electric torch he had been able to inspect the boulders that had imprisoned them.

They had fallen so as to form an impenetrable barrier. Great boat-shaped masses of splintered rock were piled together in the cave mouth.

Abdul Hakim showed his teeth in his unvarying grin. He had displayed no emotion on discovering their plight. Too dense even to feel afraid, Pickering had thought.

A good thing, perhaps. Stupidity was the next most desirable quality to courage in an emergency such as this.

"What does the *sahib* propose then that we should do?" the orderly asked after a long pause.

Pickering had already decided. He had reckoned up the amount of food and water they had, the possibility, or rather impossibility, of a speedy rescue, and had come to a decision.

"We will endure as long as we can," he said. "When our thirst becomes insupportable, and there is no more hope, we will make a clean end as befits soldiers. There is a rifle and ammunition. I will shoot you first and then myself."

Abdul Hakim's reception of the announcement was to scratch his head and grin. Then he withdrew to the further side of the cave, lay down, and went to sleep.

More hours dragged away. Pickering fell into a feverish doze. His throat was smarting by reason of the volcanic dust he had breathed, and he was already suffering acutely from thirst.

A sound aroused him. He flashed his torch, and saw Abdul Hakim standing at what had been the entrance to the cave. He called out to him.

"What are you doing? Have you found any way of escape?"

The Pathan didn't answer. Instead he bent and seized the protruding end of a rock. Pickering had to smile. Did the Fool imagine—?

Apparently the Fool did. He was straining, heaving. The light of the torch showed his huge body bent to its task like that of a wrestling elephant.

By heaven, there was a sound of scraping, moving rock! He was performing the impossible . . . The rock was moving. . . .

And then there was a thud as Abdul Hakim dropped it, and reeled back against the wall of the cave.

His uniform was wet with perspiration. It was minutes before he could speak.

"I can do it, *sahib*. After I have rested I will raise it again, and you can crawl under. But you must be very quick. It is so heavy, I can only keep it up for a few seconds."

Pickering didn't answer at once. It was a chance, a faint chance for his life—but what about Abdul Hakim. He couldn't possibly both support the rock and crawl under himself.

The Pathan spoke again. He seemed to have read the white man's thoughts.

"Better one should die than both, *sahib*. And if you can get help quickly there may be a chance for myself also. Unless you go it is certain death for both!"

He peeled off tunic and shirt. Again he bent to his colossal task. Pickering crouched at his side, ready to crawl through directly there was space. It seemed hours

Slowly, slowly the rock rose. A patch of light showed beyond. Flat on his face Pickering watched it widen.

He heard Abdul Hakim's gasping breaths as he crawled forward. If the orderly's muscles failed he must be crushed like an insect. But it was the only chance, and he forced himself into the tiny tunnel.

It was impossible to go quickly. He could just wriggle along without an inch to spare. Fortunately he was slim; for a man of Abdul Hakim's girth the passage would have been impossible.

Once he stuck. His heart was in his mouth as he felt the constricting rock holding him in its grip. He could move neither backward nor forward. Then with the strength that only the fear of death can give, he forced himself forward.

At last he was clear. Just in the nick of time. Barely were his feet clear when the rock crashed down, and he could imagine Abdul Hakim on the further side falling exhausted in the darkness.

. . . Was Abdul Hakim saved? He was—but only just. When the rescuers brought by Pickering from Abel Penam arrived they found him insensible, both hands trapped beneath the rock.

He is still Pickering's orderly, and just as stupid as ever. But when people who do not know the story ask Pickering how he can endure such clumsiness, he tells them he'd rather have Abdul Hakim at his side than the famous Napoleon himself. Especially in an earthquake.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

Frijole took care of the rope-work; Oscar was to provide the mayhem

Thirty Days for Henry

By W. C. TUTTLE

Begin now this hilarious saga of Sheriff Henry Harrison Conroy of Tonto Town

"TONTO City" remarked Judge, "is on a steep downgrade, with brake-blocks busted and a crazy driver at the lines." And even the crazy driver, Sheriff Henry Harrison Conroy himself, was compelled to agree. Tonto City was undoubtedly in for a mess of trouble.

For one thing, there is that large and sinister man, King Colt, who controls the Tonto Saloon and Gambling Palace, as well as a gang of lawless hombres. At present King has a worry of his own; the crippled Gila Jim Tallant pays him a visit, to remind him that twenty years ago King Colt's bullet made it impossible for Gila Jim ever to walk again. The cripple has fostered his hate, and King knows he is as dangerous as a rattlesnake. To make things worse, Gila Jim's reckless, handsome son, Jack Tallant, is fascinated by La Mariposa, the beautiful singer at the Tonto Saloon; and Jack is capable of showing his devotion by blowing the place apart. Finally, in the midst of his dubious enterprises, King Colt cannot forget the wife and daughter he lost track of years before.

THEN, before he can take two drinks, beacon-nosed Sheriff Henry has a murder mystery on his hands. The stage-driver has been killed, his treasure-box stolen; moreover, old Hailstorm Miller has been murdered and robbed of the money with which he was about to pay off the mortgage on his ranch. Someone is in possession of twenty-three thousand dollars, a fact which interests King Colt quite as much as it does Sheriff Henry. King suspects that some of his "boys" may have engineered the double robbery, and so he orders his henchman Pancho to investigate. Pancho, incidentally, has become a problem, because he, too, is smitten by the beauty of La Mariposa.

There is one clue to the mystery—a glove found in the stage, which belongs to Jimmy Miller, Hailstorm's son. Jimmy furiously denies having robbed the stage; he insists

This story began in last week's Argosy

that he has been framed, and Sheriff Conroy seems inclined to believe him. Determined to clear himself and revenge his father's murder, Jimmy Miller teams up with wild Jack Tallant; the two visit the Tonto Saloon, and there Tallant warns King Colt that he is gunning for him. Jimmy Miller, meanwhile, is assuring Henry that he is going to find his father's murderer and bring back his ears to the sheriff. Tonto Town is boiling. . . .

CHAPTER V

THE KING AND THE BUTTERFLY

THE double inquest drew such a big crowd to Tonto City that they were obliged to use the dance hall, where a sufficient number of chairs were placed to seat about half of the audience. Several men from the Shoshone Chief Mine, including Tom Page, the superintendent, were there. King Colt and Pancho Lopez secured front seats. Jack Tallant was there, watching, listening, but talking to no one.

A jury of six was quickly drawn. No one had witnessed either murder, so there was no direct evidence. The inquest over Hailstorm Miller came first. Doctor Bogart, the coroner, testified on the condition of the body, and Howard McRae, the banker, giving evidence in regard to the mortgage, said that he had been informed that Miller had collected the ten thousand dollars.

"In my opinion Hailstorm Miller was murdered," stated the coroner. "His skull had been smashed and there were unburned hairs in the brain. Moreover, there was no evidence of smoke in the lungs. My opinion is that Miller was killed by a vicious blow on the head, and later burned in the stable. The fire was very likely of incendiary origin."

The jury immediately brought in the usual verdict of death at the hands of a party or parties unknown.

Thunder and Lightning Mendoza wanted to testify as to how they had discovered the bodies, but Doctor Bogart deleted that part. In the inquest of Ed Clay, the coroner was also chief witness. Tom Page said that he had taken six hundred and fifty ounces of raw gold to the bank, from where it was loaded on the stage. He saw the money put into the treasure-box and locked tight.

"When did you decide to ship that money by stage?" asked Henry.

"The night before," replied the mining man. "I saw Mr. McRae on the street, and told him I would bring in a shipment for the morning stage."

"Who else knew of this shipment?"

"My assayer. He didn't want to keep that much in the safe, but we only made the decision late that afternoon. He is an honest old man, with no bad habits and few acquaintances. You can count him out, Sheriff."

Henry nodded. "Did anyone hear you tell Mr. McRae?"

"We were alone, when I told him."

They called Steve McRae, the banker's son, to the stand. Steve was a blond-haired, colorless sort of young man, who had often admitted that he did not like to work in a bank.

"You knew about this shipment of gold, Steve?" queried Henry.

"Certainly," replied the witness. "My father came home for supper that night and told me we'd have to get to the bank a little earlier, because of that shipment of gold. It takes a little time to seal up the stuff properly."

"You were at the bank when the stage left town, I presume?"

"Yes, I was at the bank at that time, sir."

"Thank you, Steve. That is all."

They called Harry Levis to the stand, handed him the gauntlet, and he testified that it was the gauntlet he had found tucked under the seat cushion of the stage, when he drove the vehicle back to Tonto City. Henry gave the gauntlet to the jury for examination.

"Jimmy Miller," explained Henry, "admitted that it was his gauntlet. He said he had not seen it or worn it for weeks."

After a whispered consultation of several moments, the foreman of the jury got to his feet and said:

"It seems to us that the natural thing for a feller to do would be to tuck a glove under the cushion. We ask that the sheriff arrest and hold Jimmy Miller on suspicion of murderin' Ed Clay and stealin' that gold from the stage."

John Harper, the prosecutor, grimaced sourly, but said nothing.

"That is a mighty serious charge, gentlemen," said Henry. "That gauntlet may have been left there to incriminate Jimmy Miller; and it may be that Jimmy Miller can prove where he was at that time."

"The gauntlet is good enough for us," replied Tuck Darnell, who was acting as foreman. "Let him prove where he was at that time."

Henry nodded grimly and sat down. Someone in the back of the room said:

"There's a job for yuh, *nariz rojo.*"

"My nose," retorted Henry, "is habitually red because I blush for the manners of such as you, my friend."

The crowd roared with laughter as they filed outside.

Harper came to Henry and they discussed Jimmy Miller. From where they stood they could look through a window into the main street. They saw Jack Tallant mounting his horse at a hitch-rack, and saw him ride away.

"Do you know where to find Jimmy Miller?" asked the lawyer.

"An hour from now, I believe he will be in Agua Frio, John."

"Jack Tallant carries the verdict, eh?"

"I hope."

"So do I," sighed the lawyer. "I should hate to chance a conviction on such evidence. A jury, my dear Henry, does queer things."

"Yes, sir, I believe you are right," nodded Henry thoughtfully. "The more I see of juries, the more I wonder why Justice doesn't take off that blindfold and look at what she has done."

LA MARIPOSA was becoming more and more of an enigma to King Colt. She never spoke to him, unless he spoke first, never seemed to pay any attention to the life about her, and did not mix with the rest of the honkytonk girls. King Colt called one of these into the office and questioned her. She was a hard-eyed, bleached blonde, who had been in Tonto City a long time.

"She's a queer one, King," admitted the blonde. "She sings her songs, and she sure brings a lot of men to this place, but she don't have a thing to do with anybody."

"Stuck up?" queried King.

"No, she ain't; it's just her way. She's a damn nice kid, and she don't fit into this place. Men are crazy about her, but she don't pay any attention to 'em. And her voice makes it pretty bad for the rest of us. I used to think I could sing, too."

King Colt mulled over this scanty information. It was true, La Mariposa did not belong in a honkytonk. And with her singing ability, he wondered why she ever came to Tonto City, to work for twenty-five dollars a week and a place to sleep.

Her sleeping quarters were directly above his office, and she spent much of her time in her room. Occasionally she received mail, but the letters were addressed to La Mariposa, which King Colt knew, of course, was not her name.

When King Colt had wondered long enough about anything, he usually investigated. At nine o'clock at night, La Mariposa sang a song, together with at least one encore. He watched her come down the stairs just before nine that evening, and went directly to her room, using a passkey. There were two windows to the room, covered with curtains.

King lighted a lamp and looked around. For lack of a closet, her clothes hung on nails driven into the wooden walls. An old dresser intrigued him, so he carried the lamp over there and started to open a drawer. Suddenly his hand jerked back.

On the dresser, propped against the mirror, was a photograph. Staring at it in amazement, he slowly reached out and picked it up. The face of a gray-haired woman smiled out at him. King Colt's hands trembled as he held the picture to the light. From far away he could hear

the voice of La Mariposa, singing. Slowly he replaced the picture, wiped his brow and started toward the door. But he stopped and came back.

He yanked open a dresser drawer and searched swiftly. He found several letters, all postmarked from Chicago, addressed to La Mariposa. Feverishly he opened one of them and began reading the small, careful script, his heavy lips moving as he spelled out the words.

With a blunt pencil he noted down the address in the letter, replaced everything, and was about to extinguish the lamp when a handful of pebbles rattled against the window. He turned the lamp low and went over to the window and carefully opened it. A voice from below said quietly:

"Leesten, *señorita;* I mus' speak weeth you. I 'ave long ladder, and eef you weel let me—it ees important. Eef it ees all right, blow out the lamp."

King Colt blew out the lamp and stepped back to the window. He heard the thump of the ladder as Pancho Lopez placed it against the wall. La Mariposa was singing her encore. The ladder-rungs creaked, and then in the darkness King Colt could see Pancho's head just below the window.

"Señorita," panted the Mexican, "you are ver' sweet to let me talk weeth you. Because of this damn Keeng Colt I never have chance to tell you that you are the mos' beautiful—"

Whap! King Colt estimated the distance perfectly, and his huge, right fist struck the amorous gambler square in the face. The long ladder swayed away from the wall, clattered back and teetered sideways. There was the sudden thud of a body striking the ground, followed by the crash of the ladder.

King Colt closed the window, locked the door behind him and went down the stairs. He had barely reached the bottom when La Mariposa, flushed from her reception, hurried past him, up to her room. He sauntered around the gambling tables for a while before going to his office. There he locked the door and sat down to light a fresh cigar.

He drew out the address he had penciled and stared at it, shaking his huge head. "Mrs. Alice McLean," he muttered aloud. "My wife." And La Mariposa's name, he knew now, was June McLean. She was his own child, singing here in the honky-tonk, and she could not know that she was working for her own father.

He had recognized the photograph immediately. And from the letter he had learned the truth about La Mariposa; she was working here to support her mother. He had learned, too, that Alice McLean, his wife, was ill, in desperate need of five thousand dollars for some sort of operation.

Some one knocked on the door. King Colt jerked around and quickly unlocked it. It was Joe Hake, one of his cowboys.

"What do yuh want?" King Colt demanded.

"Well, I'll tell yuh, King. I tied my horse to that old corral fence out back a little while ago, and I found Pancho Lopez tryin' to crawl under the lower rail. Said he was tryin' to find a place to sleep. He acted so damn queer that I lit a match and looked at him. Man, he'd been hit square in the nose and knocked silly. I asked him what happened to him, and he mumbled somethin' about you keepin' a mule upstairs. It didn't make sense."

"Where did he go?" asked King Colt soberly.

"I dunno. Last I seen, he was crossin' the street toward the hotel, and he was limpin' kinda bad."

King smoked thoughtfully for several moments.

"Queer idea he had—about you keepin' a mule upstairs," remarked Hake.

"Mexicans get queer ideas," said King. "Forget it, Hake."

CHAPTER VI

THE TIPPLING ROOSTER

HENRY and Judge rode down to the Tallant ranch, ostensibly to look for Jimmy Miller, but knowing well that he would not be there. From his home-

made wheelchair on the rickety porch of the ranch-house, Gila Jim Tallant scowled at them. Gila Jim hated the law and so now he sneered at Henry.

"Well, what's the idea of you two damn fools comin' down here?" he asked.

"Oh, we are just looking around," Henry answered.

"Lookin' around for Jimmy Miller, eh? Well, damn yuh, he's in Mexico."

"It seems to me," remarked Judge, "that nature did not put rattles on all the rattlers, Henry."

"Meanin' me, eh?" snarled the cripple. "All right. I don't know why I should chuck you two under the chins and lie about my feelin's toward yuh. At least, I'm honest. Of all the damn-fool officers of the law I've ever seen, yo're the worst. You," pointing at Henry, "you, red-nosed, fat-headed specimen! Sheriff! Hell!"

"Sorry," murmured Henry.

"Sorry? You? Wild Horse Valley should be the one that's sorry."

"Oh, they are," assured Henry. "But it is their own fault, Mr. Tallant."

"Well, I reckon that's true, too. So yo're lookin' for Jimmy Miller, are yuh? Want him for robbin' that stage and killin' the driver. Why don'tcha find the guilty parties? Go find the man who killed Jimmy's father and stole that ten thousand dollars. Fine sheriff you are!"

"Well, have you any ideas on the subject?" asked Henry quietly.

"Me? Settin' here in a wheelchair? How would I know anythin'?"

"Well, you might have an idea on the subject," said Judge.

"Yeah, I might, at that. Why don'tcha talk with King Colt? If anybody in this valley knows who pulled them jobs, he does."

Henry squinted thoughtfully at Gila Jim Tallant. "Just what do you know about King Colt?" he asked.

"What do I—not a damn thing! How would I know anythin'?"

"Then how would you know that King Colt might know something?"

Gila Jim shut his thin lips tightly, and his eyes narrowed as he looked off across the heat-hazed hills. "I know when to quit talkin'," he said. "Forget King Colt."

"You knew King Colt, before either of you came here," said Henry.

"Did I?" Gila Jim laughed shortly. "You know more'n I do, I reckon. Jack tells me about him. He's a bad boy."

"Who—Jack?" asked Judge.

Gila Jim snapped back: "No! I'm talkin' about King Colt."

"As a matter of fact," said Henry, "I have never spoken to Jack about the rumors that he is sending horses and cattle into Mexico—horses which he has not paid for. You might caution him, Mr. Tallant. Jack is a nice boy, and I would hate to see him jailed as a rustler."

"So that's it, eh?" said Gila Jim. "Accusin' an innocent boy! That's like you. Yuh hear a lie and yuh believe it. Jack's an honest boy, and—who started a thing like that?"

"Like you," smiled Henry, "I know when to stop talking."

"Oh, yuh do, eh? Well, you've got all out of me that yo're goin' to get. Yuh can shut the gate as yuh go out—and if yuh hear any more lies about Jack, yuh can believe 'em or not—we don't give a damn. Good afternoon to both of yuh."

"I told you that all the information you could get from that old devil, you could put on the sharp end of a needle," said Judge as they rode back toward the JHC. "Torturing my old, rheumatic legs by forcing me to ride a horse down here in all this heat."

"We learned something, sir," replied Henry. "Gila Jim Tallant has been here several years, while King Colt has only been here about a year. I learned that Gila Jim and King Colt knew each other previous to their meeting in the Tonto Saloon a few days ago. I also learned that Gila Jim hates King Colt."

"He also hates us," added Judge.

"True, but only on general principles, sir. We are the law."

"Sometimes I wonder, Henry. The *Clarion* doesn't think so."

"That editor was suckled by a rattler and raised on skunk-cabbage," declared Henry. "In other words, I do not like him one little bit, Judge."

"I tremble at thought of the castigation we shall receive in the next issue," said Judge. "His vials of wrath must be overflowing by this time. However, the man has a certain flair for words. In the last issue he intimates that our actions keep the people so amused that they almost forget their misery. He said that the voters, most of whom must have been color-blind, voted for you, in spite of the blob—and I love that word—of red, which shines in the center of your moon-like countenance. He cites the fact that in all signals red is the warning sign."

"Must you recite word for word, sir?" demanded Henry. "Do you forget the fact that I have read all his editorials? Or is it your idea of humor to rub the salt of criticism deeper into my wounds? I assure you, Judge, I have winced so often that some believe I have a touch of St. Vitus Dance. However, no matter, sir; we must hew our own pathway."

"But with added dignity and decorum, sir."

"I believe," said Henry, "that we will go to the JHC, before returning to Tonto City."

Judge groaned, for that it would require about two more miles of riding. "That last batch of prune whisky was damnable," he remarked a moment later.

"I realize that," agreed Henry, "but a genius like Frijole Bill Cullison must have a certain latitude. The man is an experimenter. He is trying to create a super-whisky—and he nearly had it."

"He nearly had something," agreed Judge. "That last batch boiled at ninety in the shade. We spilled a bit on the wicker covering of that demijohn, and it burned the wicker so badly that it all fell off."

THEY rode in at the JHC and tied their horses at the front porch. Frijole, Thunder and Lightning were asleep in the patio. Near them was a gallon jug, the cork lying on the flag-stones.

Frijole Bill Cullison, the little cook of the JHC, opened one eye and looked at them. Frijole was past sixty, wizened, thin-faced, and with a mustache that belonged on a giant.

"Hyah, Law," he said sleepily. "Set down and have a snort. Where's that danged jug? Oh, there it is. Help yourself. How are yuh, Judge?"

Henry sniffed at the jug, shook it violently and put it down.

"The jug is empty," he said.

"That danged stuff e-vaporates awful fast," declared Frijole. "I dunno what's in it that makes it thataway. Can't hardly keep it corked. By golly, yuh should have seen William Shakespeare on that last batch of mash! Whooee-e-e-e! Why, that danged rooster—"

"Wait a minute," begged Judge. "I have no liking for lies, Frijole."

"Lies? Oh, Judge, you hurt me. But you never believed in Shakespeare."

"I know you have a rooster by that name," replied Judge soberly, "but I never have believed any of the lies you have told about him."

"What happened to Bill Shakespeare, when he ate the mash?" asked Henry.

"Well, sir, that was shore a feat. I dumped that mash out yesterday and Ol' Bill tuck right to it. I warned him to go easy, but he jist cocked one eye at me as much as to say, 'Who's eatin' this mash?'

"Well, I'm kinda gittin' ahead of m' story. About a week ago Bill fell hard for a female road-runner. Since then he ain't given a hen one look. Every mornin' early he's out in the hills, keepin' a date with that speckled road-runnin' vampire. Well, it wasn't none of my business if Bill wants to pick hisself a pardner, and mebbe the hens was kinda relieved, 'cause when Bill got full of mash he got astigmatism. 'S a fact. He'd whip hell out of a hen as quick as he would a rooster.

"Well, I kinda felt sorry for Bill Shakespeare, runnin' around in the hills, 'cause

of lions, wildcats, coyotes and once in a while we see a lobo. All them varmints are partial to chicken. Anyway, yesterday afternoon I'm out along the canon, seven, eight miles from here, and what do I see but Ol' Shakespeare and his light-o'-love pickin' a fight with a rattler out there in a cactus patch.

"Well, it wasn't none of my business. Anyway, Bill has handled a lot of rattlers bigger 'n this'n; so I didn't worry. But I'm halfway home, with the sun gone down, when I heard a pack of coyotes runnin' on a track, 'way out yonder. Suddenlike it strikes me that they're after Bill Shakespeare.

"'Well,' I says to myself, 'Goodbye, Bill; take care of yourself,' and I comes on home. He wasn't in the hen house that night, 'cause I took a look. This mornin' I kinda felt bad about it. Ol' Bill's almost human, and he's shore good company, even if he will fight yuh when he's drunk.

"I got up this mornin', started a fire, and went out back to get some wood, and there's Bill Shakespeare, settin' on the back porch, shy a few feathers, but still hale and hearty and layin' beside him was three coyote ears, all off different coyotes. That old son-of-a-rooster had whipped that pack of coyotes and brought back three scalps."

"I do not believe a word of it, sir," declared Judge.

"But what became of the female roadrunner?" asked Henry.

"Well, sir, I dunno," sighed Frijole, "but I'm scared she's a goner. Tell yuh what makes me think so. Old Bill Shakespeare has allus been kinda choosy of his drinks. I watched him through the winder for quite a spell, and he seemed to be workin' up a mad about somethin'. Then he kicked them three ears off the porch, jumped up and down on 'em for a spell, and finally went down to the stable. I went down there, peeked inside, and there's Old Bill, drinkin' some old horse-liniment out of a cup, where it's been since I put some into that last batch of prune whisky to flavor it. Yessir, he was so despondent that he was willin' to drink horse-liniment. I reckon Ol' Bill's heart is busted."

"Frijole," said Judge, "of all the damn liars on earth, you take the first prize."

"I can prove every word of it, Judge," declared Frijole.

"How can you prove such a thing, sir?"

"Well, there's old Bill, settin' on the corral fence, all tired out, and if yuh look in that old horse-liniment cup you'll find it empty."

"Behold the walrus-tooth," quoted Judge soberly.

"What didja say?" asked Frijole.

"Nothing."

"I'VE saved a jug of my latest manufacture, Henry," said Frijole. "I think she's jist about the best I ever made, too. She's about twenty hours old now, as tawny as a lion's eye. I'm right proud of her."

"Personally," replied Henry, "I am getting afraid of your distillations. As long as you stuck to prunes, it was excellent, but your experiments are dangerous. Prunes, corn, rice, raisins, apples, potatoes and horse liniment in varying quantities, soured to the bursting point."

"The last batch had a little sody, too," added Frijole.

"Did that help it any?" asked Judge.

"Jist sort of a safety-valve," replied Frijole. "It blowed out my upper plate twice, before I got smarted-up and went around with m' mouth open, until the power died down."

"And you ask us to drink that dynamite?" asked Judge.

"It's all right if yuh don't try to confine it, Judge. Man, yuh can jist hear it crackle when yuh pour it, and she's shore aromatic. As a se-dative, as the doctors say, she can't be beat."

"We will be glad to take a jug with us," said Henry. "In these days of storm and strife, a sedative might help us out, Frijole."

"Storm and strife? Oh, yuh mean two dead men? Well, yeah, that does kinda

give yuh somethin' to ponder about. Oscar was out this mornin'. He took a couple quarts back with him. What's wrong with that knot-headed Swede, anyway? Him and Josephine had a fight? I noticed a lump on his head."

"Julius smacked him with a horse-collar," said Judge.

"Oh, that Norwegian stable-hand, eh? Oscar did mention him. Said somethin' about him and Julius figurin' on a duel—the winner to get the gal. Anvils at sixty yards, or somethin' like that."

"The law," declared Judge, "will not countenance duels."

"Nor murders," chuckled Frijole. "But we still have 'em, Judge."

"The law," sighed Henry, "doesn't seem to have much choice in the matter. Murder should be licensed. Then we could refuse a license to anyone—unless they were going to kill one of our enemies. I do not favor dueling, but I believe that the one Oscar contemplates might be worth seeing. Or we might make it a contest of skill."

"What sort of skill?" asked Judge.

"See who could throw the most ringers on each other with horse-collars. It has possibilities. Frijole, if you can confine that liquid dynamite in a jug, we will be going back to town."

"Well, I'll tell yuh what," said Frijole. "I'll fasten the cork with rubber bands. Then if she wants to *squee* a little on the way in, she can do it instead of bustin' somethin'."

"By the gods of my fathers," sighed Judge. "To think that a Van Treece would sink so low as to quaff willingly a liquor so wild and so vile that it requires a rubber safety-valve to cry *Squee,* crackles in the pouring, and blows out upper plates."

"The Conroys, sir," declared Henry loftily, "had their place in the sun, until I came along. I—I suppose I can not stand the heat. When my beloved uncle died here in Tonto City, I became the last of our race. In me, Judge, you see the last of the Conroy strain."

"It has bee quite a strain," said Judge.

"Thank you very much, sir. Your sympathetic understanding touches me. Some day, when conditions are right, I shall tell you about my uncle, Horace Greeley Conroy. There was a *man.*"

"So the name implies, Henry. You carry the jug, please; I am just a bit suspicious of that *squee.* I understand that rubber deteriorates quickly in this climate. Frijole, I give you good afternoon, sir."

"I'll take it, Judge. If yuh don't mind settin' in a chair to take yore liquor—you'll find it safer. I tried to jump that seven-foot corral fence. My intentions was good, but I reckon my agility busted several years ago. I'll give yore regards to Bill Shakespeare, when he wakes up. He'll be sorry to have missed yuh both. *Adios amigos.*"

IT WAS late that evening when Pancho Lopez rode away from from Agua Frio and came across the desolate border. At times he would meet the Border Patrol along the road, but this evening they were not in evidence. A mile from the border he turned to the left, following an old dirt road, deeply rutted, but showing signs of little travel. There was enough moon to show objects distinctly, and he drew rein near a tumble-down huddle of small buildings. There was only a tiny light showing in one of them. Pancho went carefully to the front of an old stable and he entered, looking back at the tiny lighted window. After pawing around in the dark for a few moments, he lighted a match.

Two old, sway-backed gray mules twitched inquisitive ears at him from their rough stalls. Hanging on pegs were two, well-worn harnesses, which Pancho quickly examined. Then he looked all around the stable. Swearing softly in Spanish, he went out of the stable and cautiously approached the little shack. He peered in.

Evidently satisfied with what he saw, he went around to the door and knocked loudly. After a few moments an old Mexican woman came to the doorway, opening it only a few inches. Pancho spoke to her in their native tongue.

"Where is Juan?" he asked her.

"Juan?" she replied. *"Madre de Dios!* The officers took him away this evening. For what, I do not know—nor did he understand. They have taken him to Tonto City, and I am alone, *señor."*

"Por Dios!" muttered Pancho. Then. *"Gracias, madre. Buenas noches."*

Pancho hurried back to his horse, returned to the main road, and headed for Tonto City. Something had certainly gone wrong. The arrest of Juan, a simple *maguey*-cutter, caused him to curse and to ride faster than usual.

He tied his horse behind the Tonto Saloon and entered by the rear door. Business was good, it seemed, but Pancho was not interested in gambling and drinking. He started toward King Colt's office door, but changed his mind and sauntered toward the bar. Sitting at one of the tables, smoking and apparently uninterested in their surroundings, were Henderson and Manley, two of the Border Patrol.

They nodded indifferently to Pancho, who smiled amiably. Pancho believed in being pleasant to the Border Patrol. A passing waiter whispered, "King wants to see yuh," and went on with his tray of glasses. La Mariposa began singing, and when the two officers turned to listen, Pancho went to the office.

King Colt was sitting behind his desk, a quart of whisky and a glass at his elbow, the room blue with cigar smoke. He looked at Pancho, grunted softly and fanned the smoke away from his eyes.

"W'at ees wrong?" asked Pancho quietly.

"That's what I'm waitin' for you to tell," replied King Colt. "Them Border officers brought Old Juan in this evenin' and put him in the jail. Now what do you know?"

"The stuff ees not there," replied Pancho angrily. "I search everywhere, but those damn sweat-pad are gone. Juan's woman, she says the officer tak' Juan to jail. That ees all."

"Them sweat-pads are gone?" rasped King Colt. "Yuh mean to set there and tell me they got 'em?"

Pancho shrugged his shoulders helplessly. *"Quien sabe?* Eef not, w'y ees Juan een the jail."

"My God!" exclaimed King Colt. "That stuff was worth—how much?"

"All of eet, Keeng. We breeng everytheeng."

"Five thousand dollars worth? Pancho." King Colt leaned across his desk, his big jaw clenched for a moment. "Pancho, how in hell *could they* know? Juan didn't even know. Nobody knew—except me and you."

"That ees true, Keeng. Nobody but me and you. And this ees only the second time we have had them sweat-pads with the stuff. Once, eet ees fine. Twice—they get heem. Why? How? Don't look at me like that! You theenk I throw away my own money?"

"Somebody in Agua Frio knew," declared King Colt.

"Por Dios, no!"

King Colt scowled heavily, trying to puzzle out who could have known how the contraband drugs were brought across the Border. Suddenly he struck the desk-top with a huge fist.

"Gila Jim Tallant!" he grunted. "He's the one, Pancho. In some way he figured it out, damn him!"

"But, no," said Pancho. "He would take the stuff heemself. He would not tell the officer."

"He couldn't sell the stuff. All he wants to do is break me. We've lost a fortune, but them officers ain't got a thing on us. Don't say a word. Leave it to me, and I'll find out things."

CHAPTER VII

OSCAR BY NIGHT

OVER at the sheriff's office, Jim Henderson, chief of that district, sat down with Henry and Judge. "We bungled the whole deal," sighed the big Border Patrolman. "We thought that this old Mexican knew about the thing and that we could make him implicate the men behind him. It was all very simple. Old Juan

drives his team of mules across the Border in the mornin', cuts his load of *maguey* and hauls it to that little tequila distillery outside Agua Frio.

"While he is eatin' his meal at the distillery, somebody goes into the stable, removes the stuffin' from his sweat-pads, and fills it up with drugs, all tied up in oiled silk. Then the old man drives home, puts up his team of mules, and later somebody removes the drugs, puts back the paddin'—and get ready for another cargo."

"Old Juan was merely a cat's-paw," nodded Henry.

"That's right. You may as well turn him loose, and we'll take him home on our way back. He's scared white, 'cause he don't know a thing about it. We should have located the stuff and waited for someone to try and get it. Now they won't try that scheme again."

"I can understand all that part of it," said Judge, "but I do not understand how you gentlemen ever figured out that drugs were coming across, packed inside the sweat-pads on a pair of wornout mules."

Henderson smiled slowly and got to his feet. "Judge," he replied, "we listen to the little birdies."

Henry smiled and remarked, "It is fairly evident that the little birdie only sang part of the song."

"Maybe," replied Henderson, "the little birdie only *knew* part of the song, Henry. But, even a half-song is better than none."

THE next evening Oscar Johnson, wearing a We Mourn Our Loss expression in his round, blue eyes, was sitting on the office cot, trying to coax a tune out of a leaky accordion, when Frijole Bill Cullison came in. Frijole was just inebriated enough to be sympathetic, and Oscar was inebriated enough to accept sympathy.

"Yo're plumb blue to the gills, feller," remarked Frijole. "Somethin' is eatin' of yore heart."

"Yah, su-ure," agreed Oscar sadly. "Ay am hort-sick, su-ure."

"Josephine?" queried Frijole.

"Yah, su-ure—Yosephine. She say she is going to Scorpion Bend vit Yulius Swensen to a dance tonight."

"Is that right? Is there a dance up there? Yeah? Man, I shore crave to shake a laig. I'm right nimble. Mebbe I'll decide to take it in."

"Ve both go," suggested Oscar. "Ay am nimple, too, you bat you."

"Good! Have yuh got any of my homemade whisky around here?"

"Ve have vorse dan two quarts. Ay vill get it. Und den ve vill go to a dance, eh, Free-holey. Ay yust vant von poke at Yulius."

"Have one on me," suggested Frijole, "and bring a couple cups.."

Frijole shuddered over his own concoction, and after each of them had drunk two cupfuls apiece, Frijole suggested that Oscar saddle his horse, while he still knew which was the front end of the animal. Oscar managed to saddle the steed, and as they were mounting, Julius drove past in a horse and buggy from the livery-stable. He tied to a hitch-rack in front of the hotel and entered the building.

"Ay am goin' dere and knock ha'al out of him," declared Oscar. "He is calling for Yosephine, and Ay von't stand for it, Free-holey."

"Hook up yore cinch, feller," advised Frijole. "You start a fight in the hotel, and you'll get hell. Everybody in the place will land on yuh. I've got a better scheme. We'll ride out by the old adobe, and when they come along, I'll rope the horse, stop the ve-hickle, and you can show Josephine what a real lover can do with his fists."

"By Yudas, you are smort man, Free-holey!" exclaimed Oscar. "Come on."

They galloped out of town in the darkness, and drew up at an old adobe about a half-mile from town. Oscar dismounted and removed his coat, while Frijole, an expert with a rope, flung out his loop and prepared for a cast in the dark.

"Ay can hear de boggy coming, Free-holey," called Oscar. "You stop 'em, and Ay vill do de rest."

"I ain't missed a cast in forty years,"

declared Frijole. "Don't cha worry about me, feller—just spit on yore hands and go to work."

They could hear the rattle of buggy-wheels, the *thud, thud, thud* of a trotting horse. Frijole twisted his horse around, and as the vehicle went past him he flung a large loop. He felt the hondo snap tight around the neck of the horse, and took a quick dally around his saddle-horn.

A woman screamed, as the horse was stopped so short that it nearly went over backward. Roaring like a Viking, Oscar Johnson went into action. But the buggy horse, shocked and frightened, whirled, cramped the buggy so short that it upset, throwing its ocupants out the opposite side from Oscar. Frijole realized that the horse had whirled; so he took no further chances, and slipped the rope off his saddle-horn. The horse and the upset buggy went past him, heading back for the main street of Tonto City in a cloud of dust.

"Oscar!" called Frijole. "Oscar, where are yuh? Oscar!"

There was no answer. Fearing the worst, Frijole dismounted. He could see enough to distinguish the dark figures on the ground; he stumbled over to them, just as one arose.

"Somethin' must have went wrong," said Frijole, and the next moment an iron-like fist hit him square in the nose, and Frijole's consciousness went out in a blaze of glory.

HE HAD no idea how long he had been unconscious, but he did have an idea that his nose was twice its usual size, and that a tooth was missing from his upper plate. All was quiet at the old adobe, not even a horse around there. Frijole was starting back for town when he heard men talking, coming toward him. Quietly he stepped into the brush and let them go past. Then he hurried toward town.

There was a light in the sheriff's office, but no one there; so Frijole went in and looked at himself in the mirror.

"My Gawd!" he groamed. Someone was standing in the doorway, and he turned to see Oscar Johnson, his face bleeding from several cuts, his shirt nearly torn from his back, and his leather chaps hanging in ribbons around his legs.

"Oh, hallo dere," said Oscar in sort of chirping voice.

"What happened to you, Oscar."

"Va'al," sighed Oscar, leaning against the doorway, "Ay storted to yerk Yulius from de boggy ven de damn t'ing opset, knock me down, and de belt of my chaps caught on a spring. Ay yust vars dragged all de vay back to de livery-stable. Ay am mess, Free-holey. Every yoint is bosted. What happened to your nose? You look like de shoriff."

"Julius hit me," replied Frijole. "That thun of a gun. That thun—thun—whath wrong with me? Oh, I gueth it muth be that tooth."

Frijole limped over to the doorway. Men were coming toward the office; so Frijole took Oscar by the sleeve and drew him through the connecting doorway and down beside the jail-cells. Henry and Judge came in.

"Damme, if I can figure it out, Henry," declared Judge. "That man is sure that the horse was roped. But why? Robbery could not have been the motive, because no robbery was committed."

"Possibly contemplated," said Henry. "The man says that after the horse and buggy incident a man, heavily armed, possibly masked, accosted him. He says that he knocked the man down. His fist really shows wear and tear. Concern over his wife caused him to ignore his victim, and he does not know where the man went."

"Very queer," remarked Judge. "Luckily neither man nor woman was injured. What was their names, Henry?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Albert Crawford. He is half owner of the Shoshone Chief Mine, and they were on their way to the mine. Well, I do not know of anything further we can do. Tommy Roper says that the buggy is badly smashed, but the horse is unhurt. I suppose we better go back to the hotel and talk with Mr. Crawford."

"At least assure him of our good intentions," added Judge.

They went out. Quietly Frijole led Oscar out to the front, and they went out into the night.

"I reckon we better find them horthes and go to the ranch," said the little cook with the swollen nose, "Thith ith awful, Othcar."

"Yah, su-ure," agreed Oscar painfully. "Love is awful, too, Free-holey."

"None for me," declared Frijole. "I'll take peath for mine."

But Oscar did not go out to the JHC. He cleaned up and rode to Scorpion Bend. Oscar felt that Julius had done him a dirty trick, in letting someone else take that horse and buggy. In Oscar's single-track mind we've no regrets for his mistake. The blame was on Julius Swensen, and he was going to teach Julius a lesson.

Henry could not find Oscar or Frijole, and deep in his mind was a suspicion that they were to blame for the smashing of that buggy. It sounded like something they might do. However, Henry had no idea just why they had done it.

"Tonto City," declared Judge, "is on the downgrade."

"True," agreed Henry. "Very true, sir."

"A damnable situation," said Judge. "Innocent people in a buggy."

"Six-shooters, masked men—a punch in the nose," mused Henry. "All very confusing. I wonder where Oscar and Frijole are."

"I believe, sir," said Judge soberly, "that you are getting warm."

IT was about nine o'clock next morning, when Henry received a telegram from Scorpion Bend, which read:

HORSE AND BUGGY STOLEN FROM ME LAST NIGHT AT SCORPION BEND. EQUIPAGE BELONGS TO LIVERY STABLE TONTO CITY. ADVISE IF IT HAS COME HOME. JOHN HARPER.

"By gad, sir!" exclaimed Judge. "They even steal from the prosecuting attorney! Tonto City is on the downgrade, with—"

"True, Judge!" exclaimed Henry. "With brake-blocks busted, et cetera, et cetera. No need to add the crazy driver. We shall interview Tommy Roper at once."

Henry read the telegram to the stuttering cowboy, who blew out his thin cheeks and nodded his head violently.

"The huh-huh-houh—"

"The horse and buggy came home?" queried Henry.

"Yuh-yuh-yeah!"

"At what time. If you do not know, merely shake the head?"

Tommy shook.

"This morning—early?"

Tommy nodded. "About su-su-su—"

"Six o'clock, eh? You were asleep. Nod or shake, Tommy."

Toomy nodded.

"Was both horse and buggy in good shape?"

Tommy nodded violently.

Henry wrote a telegram to John Harper, sent Judge to the little depot to file it, and went over to the Tonto Hotel, where he found Josephine in the dining-room, clearing off a table.

"Greetings, my dear." He smiled at her. "Did you have a nice time at Scorpion Bend last night?"

"Ay did not go," she replied. "Ay vould not go vit Oscar Yohnson, and Yulius vars too scared to take me."

"Frightened of Oscar's wrath, I presume."

"Sure. Ay am going to knock ha'al out of that big bully."

"Oscar?"

"You bat you. Yulius is yentleman."

"No doubt of that. But did Oscar go to Scorpion Bend?"

"Ay t'ink he did."

"Thank you very much, my dear—and good luck to your romance."

Oscar was in the office, when Henry came back, looking owl-eyed from lack of sleep, but with it all was a triumphant gleam.

"You enjoyed the dance at Scorpion Bend, I presume," said Henry.

"Ay alvays enyoy a dance," replied Oscar.

"I suppose you danced with Josephine."

"Ay did not. Ay did not even go to de dance-hall. She vars vit Yulius."

"As a matter of fact, Oscar, Josephine and Julius did not go to the dance."

"Huh?" Oscar stared his unbelief of that statement. "You say Yosephine did not go? Va'al, Ay don't—"

"By the way, Oscar, I got a telegram from Scorpion Bend this morning from John Harper, saying that someone stole his horse and buggy. It so happens that someone left the horse and buggy at our livery-stable about six o'clock this morning. Perchance, did you see anyone on the road, driving a single horse and buggy?"

"Yudas!" said Oscar quietly. "No, Ay didn't. Yohn Horper?"

"Yes, John Harper. I merely thought you might have seen the thief. By the way, what time did you arrive home, Oscar?"

"Orly. Oh, my gudness, Ay came home orly. It vars too dork to see."

"I see."

"Ay thought Yosephine and Yulius vars going."

"They didn't go. I believe that the stolen horse was the same one you usually rent."

"Yah, su-ure—de sorrel von. His name is Yoe."

"That is the one. By the way, Oscar, a Mr. and Mrs. Crawford hired a horse and buggy last evening and started for the Shoshone Chief Mine, but something or somebody upset their buggy out by the old adobe, tried to hold up the man and woman, but was frustrated. You haven't heard anything, have you?"

Oscar drew a deep breath.

"Frus—frus—what vars dat, Henry?"

"Frustrated."

"Who vars—and vat does it mean?"

"It means that the robber failed to rob them."

"Oh! Den everyt'ing is all right, eh?"

"Well, I suppose that is one way to look at it. Wasn't Frijole here with you last night?"

"Yah, su-ure, he vars here, but he vent home. He—he fell down on de sidewalk and hort his nose. Yeeminee, it vars all svelled oop."

Henry's mind flashed back to Crawford's statement that he had hit one of the bandits square in the face.

"Funny t'ings happen in Tonto," remarked Oscar. "Ve need more good people."

"That is exactly what Hell needs," replied Henry dryly.

CHAPTER VIII

ABOUT THAT GOLD . . .

KING COLT was curious to know more about the arrest and release of Old Juan, the *maguey*-cutter, but did not care to ask Henry Conroy. There was no question in his mind that there was a leak in his organization, but he was unable to figure out just where it was. Pancho Lopez had his own money invested in the deal; so there was no reason for him to have warned the Border Patrol. They had lost thousands in drugs; but there was no use crying about it.

He called La Mariposa into his office and asked her to sit down. She seemed uneasy, afraid of him; but he smiled at her and said:

"Are you happy here?"

"Why, yes, I like it all right," she replied. "Is—is anything wrong?"

"Wrong? Everything is just right, my dear. You bring a lot of trade to the Tonto."

King Colt leaned back in his chair, hooked his thumbs into the armholes of his vest, and smiled expansively at her.

"I am goin' to double yore salary," he told her. "Fifty dollars a week. No, don't thank me. You are worth more."

"I am glad," she said simply. "I—I really need the money, Mr. Colt."

"You need money? You have to—" he frowned slightly. "You help support a—a husband, maybe?"

"No, I have never been married. I help support my mother."

"Your mother? Oh, of course. Yuh see, I—I never figured—well, yuh see, I never thought that maybe you had a mother. 'Course you'd have one."

"Yes, of course." She nodded.

"This extra money might help her out?"

"Oh, very much, Mr. Colt. You are very kind to me."

"Your mother—she lives near here?"

"No, she lives in Chicago. She isn't very well. She needs an operation, but we can not afford it, not just now."

"That's too bad. Maybe I can help. You know—loan you money."

The girl shook her head quickly. "No, it would require too much."

King Colt nodded thoughtfully. "You have a father?"

"No," replied the girl seriously. "My father died when I was very young."

King Colt scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully, his hat tilted to shield his face.

"That's too bad," he said. "Yuh know," he turned to look at her, "you never did tell me yore right name and address. And I'd like to have yore mother's name and address, in case—well, yuh never know what might happen."

"I have thought of that." She nodded. "My name is June McLean, and my mother's name is Mrs. Alice McLean. The address is 716 Totter Avenue, Chicago, Illinois."

King Colt wrote out the name and address on a piece of paper, his hand shaking a little. June had not lied to him, and it was evident that she did not know he was her father.

"Please do not tell anyone my right name," she said. "I would rather have them know me as La Mariposa."

"Shucks, I won't tell anybody, Miss McLean."

LONG after June McLean left the office, King Colt pondered over what he was going to do. Finally he went out on the street and over to the bank. No one was there, except Steve McRae.

"I want one of them cashier checks for five thousand dollars," King said. "I've got more'n that much in here, I reckon."

"Certainly, Mr. Colt. To whom shall I draw the check?"

"Mrs. Alice McLean."

Wondering who Mrs. Alice McLean might be, Steve McRae made out the check and gave it to King Colt. King went out to the street, and there he met Henry Harrison Conroy.

"Sheriff," he said, "I wonder if you'll help me out in a little deal."

"I should be happy to be of assistance, sir," replied Henry.

"Well, it's like this, Sheriff. A long time ago I borrowed some money from a man. I reckon I wasn't very good pay. Anyway, I lost track of him, and today I heard that he had died years ago, leavin' a widder in bad circumstances. She's a pretty proud woman, and I'm kinda wonderin' if she'd accept the money—if she knowed I sent it. Yuh see," King Colt rubbed his neck violently, "if you'd kinda write a note, sayin' it was from—well, I dunno who. Mebbe you can fix it."

"Just step in the bank, where we may find a usable pen," suggested Henry. "I believe I know what you want done, Mr. Colt."

On the back of a deposit-slip, Henry wrote:

> ***Years ago I borrowed some money from your husband. I just learned your address; so here is the full amount, and thank you.***
>
> ***Pawnee Bill.***

King Colt chuckled over the note and nodded happily. "Pawnee Bill! That's fine. Sheriff, if I can ever do yuh a favor, jist ask it of me, will yuh?"

"It is of no moment, sir."

While writing the note, Henry had glimpsed the amount on that check. Five thousand dollars, and a note signed with a fictitious name. The act did not coincide with what he had heard of King Colt. Henry walked up to the post-office, where he found the old postmaster alone.

"King Colt is going to post a letter—possibly today," he told the old man. "I want the name and address on that letter."

"Official business, Sheriff?" queried the postmaster.

"Certainly."

"I'll watch for it," replied the postmaster.

But King Colt did not post the letter. He waited until the last moment and then gave it to the stage-driver to post at Scorpion Bend. Henry saw the stage-driver shove it inside his jacket, without even looking at the address, and drive away.

That afternoon Judge Van Treece came into the office, where Henry and Oscar were taking their daily siesta. Judge carried a copy of the latest Scorpion Bend *Weekly Clarion*, which he flung on Henry's desk.

"There, sir," he bellowed, "is the latest in hide-rippers! If my rheumatism were better, I'd go to Scorpion Bend and force that scavenger to eat his press. Damme, sir, I sicken of his blather!"

Henry sighed, opened the paper to the editorial page and read the following:

OPEN TO ALL CRIMINALS

In one day, at Tonto City, two men were brutally murdered and twenty-three thousand dollars stolen. One man was shot down, while the other was killed by a blow on the head, and thrown into a burning stable. This, friends, was all done in one day—and in daylight.

If the Sheriff of Tonto has done anything toward apprehending the murderers and recovering the money, he has kept his activities a deep, dark secret. A coroner's jury demanded the arrest of James Miller for the murder of Edward Clay, the stage-driver, and theft of 650 ounces of raw gold, but the sheriff did not make any move nntil James Miller was safely across the Border. With the evidence against James Miller, why did the sheriff allow Miller to leave Tonto City the night before the inquest? Was he trying to play one of his well-known jokes on the State of Arizona?

How much longer will the citizens of Wild Horse Valley tolerate the comedy team of Conroy, Van Treece and Johnson? A red-nosed juggler of rubber balls, a drunken disciple of Blackstone, and an ignorant horse-wrangler.

While they rehearse their daily act, criminals plot and execute their crimes, unhampered and unafraid. Gentlemen of Wild Horse Valley, it is time to ring down the curtain on this abominable travesty of law enforcement, and put in men who can give us a regime of efficiency in the sheriff's office. In the meantime, Wild Horse Valley is an open invitation to any and all criminals—deplorable as it may seem.

Henry looked up from the paper, a quizzical expression in his eyes.

"Does this irk you, Judge?" he asked quietly.

"The truth," replied Judge, "sometimes irks, sir."

"But in the main, the editorial is right, sir."

"I deny nothing," said Henry. "Our sins seem to have found us out, Judge. There is only one thing left for us to do."

"What is that?" queried Judge anxiously.

"Keep right on running the office—in our own dumb way."

"Until we are thrown out bodily, I suppose."

"I suppose that is the only way we will get out, Judge."

THUNDER and Lightning Mendoza rode into Tonto City, tied their horses in front of the general store and went across the street to the Tonto Saloon, where they sat down on the sidewalk together. They paid no attention to anyone, until Pancho Lopez, in all his sartorial elegance, but still bearing marks of King Colt's fist, came along.

"Meester Lopez," said Lightning, Pancho stopped and glared at the two peons, who were far beneath his station.

"You like see sometheeng?" queried Lightning. Pancho moved closer, his eyes curious. "See what?" he asked.

"Leetle closer," warned Lightning.

Curiosity overcame Pancho, who slid down beside them. Inside Lightning's cupped hands was an object that caused Pancho's eyes to snap wide. It was a cube of raw gold, on one side of which was stamped:

SHOSHONE CHIEF

Pancho's eyes swept the surroundings. No one was near, no one looking at them. He took it in his hands. Cupidity was in his eyes, as he gazed upon that little pound of pure gold.

"That ees gold, I theenk," said Lightning. Pancho drew a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe eet ees not pure," he said. "W'ere you get heem, eh?"

"Not for telling," interposed Thunder. "How much *dinero*, Pancho?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Pancho. "Maybe he ees wort' twenty dollar."

"You buy heem?" queried Lightning.

"Well, I tak' chance," replied Pancho. "You tell nobody, eh?"

Pancho paid twenty dollars for a chunk of gold worth about two hundred and forty dollars, knowing that it was, beyond a doubt, part of the loot from the stage robbery. Then the two delighted Mexicans, with money in their pockets, debated their next move.

"I know w'at ees the bes' theeng for doing," stated Lightning. "We weel put the money in the bank."

"That ees not wort' the paper I can write on," declared Thunder. "We buy two bottle tequila—pronto."

"Sure," sneered Lightning. "And w'en the headache ees over, we are bosted. We put half the money een the bank."

"That ees all right. How much ees half, Lightning?"

"How the hell do I know? Let the bank bost heem to halves."

Fifteen minutes later they came out of the bank, filled with their own importance, bearing a check-book, showing a deposit of ten dollars, and each of them jingling five dollars in silver. They went to the Tonto Saloon, where each of them purchased a quart of tequila, and then they went out behind the saloon, found a shady spot, where they began enjoying the fruits of their shrewd deal.

About an hour later Henry Harrison Conroy sauntered into the bank, merely on an unofficial visit. Howard McRae, greeted him pleasantly. Then he said:

"Your two Mexican boys seem to have acquired a saving habit."

Henry looked blankly at him. "You mean Thunder and Lightning?"

"Yes. I was not in here, but Steve told me that they came in with a twenty-dollar bill, deposited half of it to a joint account, and divided the other ten dollars between them."

"I rather admire them for that move," said Henry. "A half saved, you know. Well, well! I must compliment them."

Henry walked over to the Tonto Saloon, puzzled as to where these two Mexicans had acquired twenty dollars. Henry only paid them ten dollars a month apiece, which was more than their actual worth, and payday was three weeks ago. This suddenly acquired wealth was worth an investigation. A discreet inquiry brought the information that the two Mexicans had purchased two quarts of tequila and had left via the back doorway.

Pancho Lopez was at the bar and heard Henry's guarded inquiry. King Colt was out somewhere, and Pancho anxiously awaited his return. Henry went out behind the saloon, where he found Lightning and Thunder, curled up in the shade, sodden with tequila. He took the bank-book from Lightning's pocket, looked it over and put it in his own pocket. Then knowing that it would be hours before their recovery, he went back to the office.

PANCHO LOPEZ was as anxious as Henry, although he knew where the twenty dollars came from. At first, Pancho decided to try and get all that gold for himself, but then he realized it would be best to let King Colt in on the secret.

When King Colt came back to the Tonto, Pancho followed him into the office and placed the ingot of gold on the desk. King Colt looked it over, shifted his narrowed eyes and studied Pancho Lopez.

"Where did yuh get that?" he whispered. Leaning across the desk, his voice low, Pancho told him about buying it from the two Mexicans. King Colt smiled thoughtfully.

"So them two Mexicans killed Ed Clay and took that gold, eh? Well, it works out, Pancho. They discovered the body. Maybe they killed Old Hailstorm, too. Pancho, we're goin' to get *all* that money."

"Sure," smiled Pancho. "We buy 'em out, Keeng. Twenty dollar for each chonk, like that, eh?"

"Buy 'em out? You damn fool, we don't have to buy 'em out. We can scare it out of 'em. Where are they now?"

"Behin' the saloon—dronk."

"Keep an eye on 'em. When they sober up, bring 'em to me."

"The only theeng," said Pancho quietly, "ees that the damn sheriff mus' know sometheeng. He come and ask the bartender where ees them two. He try to find out how much money they have. Then he go and look at them. I watch from back weendow, and I see him take something from one man's pocket and look at it. Then he go 'way. W'at you theenk?"

"What was it he took?"

Pancho shrugged his shoulders. *"Quien sabe?"*

"When nobody is around, search 'em. Find what the sheriff looked at."

Pancho nodded and walked out. A glance through the window showed that the coast was clear; so he sauntered out behind the saloon, knelt down beside one of the Mexicans and began going through his pockets.

"If you should find anything—I would like to see what is," said a voice, and Pancho perked up to see Henry Harrison Conroy, leaning against the beer kegs.

Pancho got slowly to his feet, dusted off his knees.

"I really did not expect to find you picking pockets, Pancho," said Henry. "I believe that in the parlance of places like the Tonto, they call it 'rolling' the victim. Tck, tck, tck! And in daylight!"

"I was not peeking the pocket," Pancho managed to say.

"Pancho," said Henry, "if I were you I'd *stay* in Mexico. We do not need men around here, who would stoop to pick the pocket of a poor, drunken peon. I believe I shall speak to King Colt about it."

Pancho choked, turned on his heel and strode back into the saloon.

As a matter of fact, from behind a curtain in his office, King Colt has observed the tableau, and he was waiting for Pancho. He saw Henry arouse the two Mexicans, who staggered away with him, Pancho came in, burning with indignation.

"All right," said King Colt. "You got caught, eh?"

"Madre de Dios! That damn beeg-nose say I am peek-pocket!"

"Did you find anythin' in his pocket?"

"Notheeng."

"Uh-huh. I suppose that Lightnin' had another bar of gold, and that damn sheriff found it. No wonder he's guardin' 'em. Now, what'll we do?"

Pancho shrugged his shoulders and muttered, "Peek-pocket! Pancho Adolfo Alejo Bonifacio Guillermo Santiago Lopez—a peek-pocket!"

"And not a very good one, at that," added King Colt.

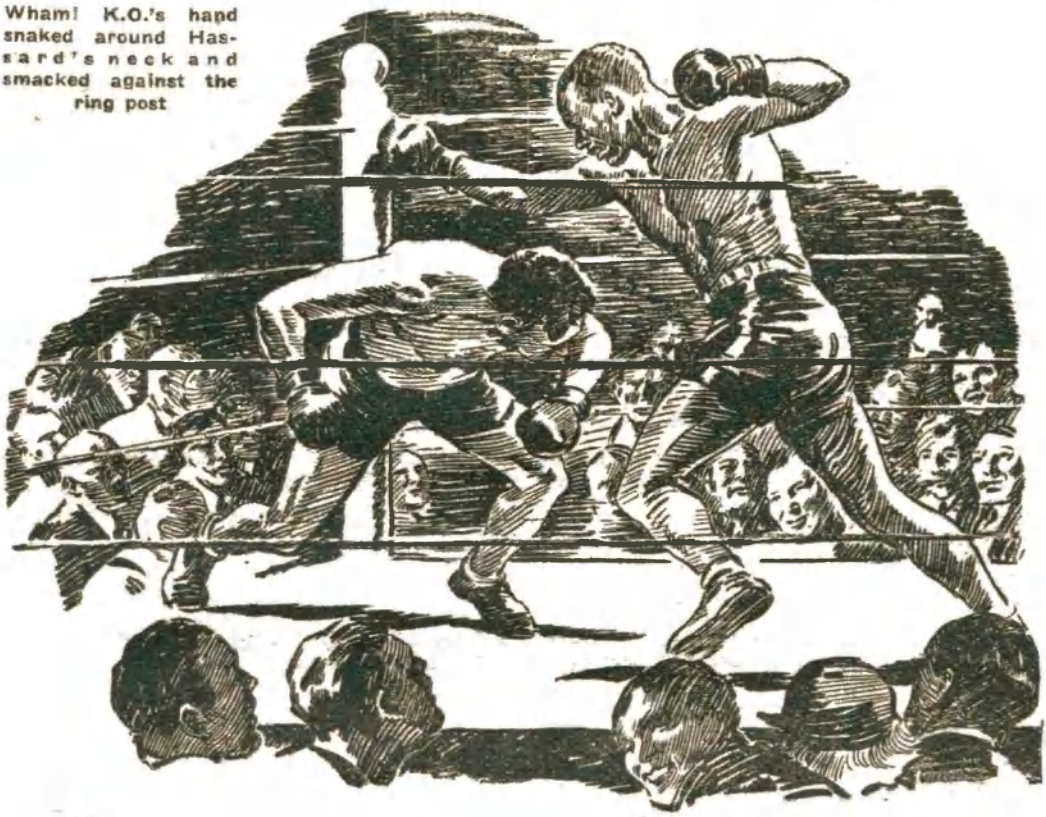
Pancho began rolling a cigarette with trembling fingers, while King Colt leaned on his desk, his brow furrowed with thought, his eyes centered on a sheet of white paper, where tiny particles of dust were gathering. More sifted down, as he watched the paper. Slowly his eyes shifted to a beam of sunlight, then upward to the ceiling, as though trying to make up his mind about what move to make.

"The sheriff took them two Mexicans away with him," said King Colt quietly. "Watch and see if they go home."

Pancho nodded and walked out, closing the door. King Colt ran a finger over the dusty paper, lighted a cigar and leaned back in his chair and looked again at the rough ceiling. There was only the bare, unpainted boards. Perhaps there was a bit wider crack between the boards near the center of the room, but it was not noticeable.

Finally he got to his feet and went into the saloon, where he leaned against the bar and drank several glasses of raw whisky. The bartender looked anxiously at him, because it was not like King Colt to drink so much whisky in such a short length of time.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Wham! K.O.'s hand snaked around Hassard's neck and smacked against the ring post

Sweet-Talkin' Man

K.O. was too old to fight but he claimed he was tough as an alligator—and even an alligator will battle when some no-account slicks him out of his supper

By EUSTACE COCKRELL

Author of "Gloves for the Governor," "Once a Hero," etc.

K. O. JONES stood first on one foot and then the other and his grin was sickly. Jack Fitzgerald said again, more sharply: "Come on, George, don't stand there grinnin' like an ape. Tell me what you came up here for."

"You sure hit the nail on the head, Mistuh Jack," K.O. Jones said enthusiastically. "Yes, suh, you sure hit the nail on the head."

Jack Fitzgerald brushed a fly exasperatedly off his bald head and looked at K.O. Jones. "George," he said evenly, "you've come clear up from Memphis to tell me somethin'. Now you might as well get along and tell it. Don't give me any more of this nail on the head business and stop scufflin' your feet."

"I was just agreein' with you, Mistuh Jack," K.O. said, all contrition. "I was just agreein' about me bein' an ape. Well," he amended, "maybe not *exactly* a ape. More like a monkey, maybe."

"Listen to me, George Washington Jones," Jack Fitzgerald said slowly, "I've known you for twenty years. I've known

you since I picked you up on the street shinin' shoes when you were sixteen years old and I knew you when you were the middleweight champion and I managed you all that time and I know you.

"You got somethin' on your mind, and you might as well tell me and get it over with."

"Mistuh Jack," K.O. Jones said desperately, not smiling now. "I'm busted."

Jack Fitzgerald got up from his desk in the little room behind his pool hall and he walked over and looked at a picture on the wall. The picture was of a lithe young Negro, gloved hands up, beautiful in fighting trunks. Jack Fitzgerald went back and sat down at his desk. "How much do you need?" he asked, finally.

"Mustuh Jack," K.O. Jones said softly, "you know I never come askin' no charity."

Jack Fitzgerald said quickly: "I know that. I thought maybe a little loan. To tide you over . . ." Something about K.O. Jones' expression stopped him.

"Mistuh Jack," he said, "when we parted company I had forty thousand dollars and I had me a good house and a good car. But I met with a sweet-talkin' man who said he was from Chattanooga who wanted to use my money for a little while and then give it back. He was gonna help the colored folks of Memphis and then give my money back."

"Why didn't you let me know about it, George?" Jack Fitzgerald asked. "You promised me you'd leave your money where it was unless you let me know."

"The man," K.O. said, "was in a terrible great luxury. He said that if'n he didn't get it right then and there pretty near that day, that he wouldn't be able to swing the deal."

Jack Fitzgerald thought sadly of this for a moment. "So you let him have it?"

"I let him have it, Mistuh Jack, after I had talked to my lawyer. He tole me to let him have it."

"Your lawyer was a crook?"

"He could follow a snake's track and never hurt his back," K.O. Jones said.

"Who was the one that got the money? Who was the sweet-talkin' one?"

"He didn't rightly tell me his real name I come to find later from Hoppy Hall, who runs a gambling parlor on the gay way, 'cause when I told Hoppy of the man he says his name wasn't Alvin Miller like'n he tole me but was known in the Big Town as Maxie Metaxa."

Jack Fitzgerald snorted. "You lived twelve years in Harlem, George," he said. "And you saw gamblers and gunmen and thugs every day of your life. You were a fighter in the big time. Didn't you learn anything?"

"You taken care of me in them days," K.O. Jones said logically. "An' except for four bits or a quarter on a policy number I had dreamt strong I never misbehaved myself to speak of."

"If you don't want any money," Jack Fitzgerald said, "What did you come to me . . ." he stopped then. "Uh-huh," he said.

K. O. JONES walked around the desk and he reached out and the fly that Jack Fitzgerald had slapped from his head and was now droning busily over the desk suddenly appeared wriggling between the brown right thumb and forefinger of K.O. Jones' right hand. "Fightin'," K.O. Jones said, "is the onliest trade I know. Please, Mistuh Jack."

Jack Fitzgerald walked over to the wall and pointed to a picture. "Who's that?" he asked.

K.O. Jones spelled out the name laboriously under the picture of the massive figure with the big left arm straight out in front of him. "James J. Jeffries," he said slowly. "The ole boilmaker."

Jack Fitzgerald pointed to another picture. K.O.'s face lit in immediate recognition. "Jack Johnson," he said. "Li'l Arthuh hisself."

"Jeffries tried to come back," Jack Fitzgerald said. "He fought himself into an air-pocket. He didn't have any one to whip. So he retired. When he came back he fought Johnson. It was pitiful. I don't want

you to look pitiful like that, George."

"I've heard you speak of the old days Mistuh Jack," K.O. Jones said slyly. "An' who do you think was the best middleweight of 'em all?"

Jack Fitzgerald looked at him a moment, puzzled. "You or Ketchel," he said finally.

"Uh-uh, Mistuh Jack. Not me nor even Mistuh Ketchel. Uh-uh. Say another one."

Jack Fitzgerald grinned. "Oh," he said. "Fitzsimmons. But he was a freak. He was big as Dempsey in his shoulders, he was a freak."

K.O. Jones gazed innocently at the ceiling. "How old was Mustuh Ruby Bob Fitzsimmons when he won the heavyweight championship from Mistuh Gentleman James J. Corbett?"

Jack Fitzgerald smiled. He didn't want to smile but he smiled anyway. "They say," he said, "he was thirty-eight years old."

"He was the light heavyweight champion, the middleweight champion and the heavyweight champion, at the same time and simul—at the same time when he was the age of forty years old, or so you've told me, Mistuh Jack."

Jack Fitzgerald grunted. "I told you he was a freak . . ."

"I'm pretty freaky myself," K.O. Jones said and he was grinning then, a happy grin. "Like an old crocodile. You know a crocodile ain't gettin' his growth good till he's two three hundred years old. I'm like an old crocodile."

"You may have something there," Jack Fitzgerald said. "They skin crocodiles. Their skin is very valuable." He picked up the phone on the desk in front of him. "Or maybe it's alligators," he said. He gave a number and talked briefly, then, to some one on the phone.

"Sit down," he said to K.O., holding the receiver of the phone down, "and look like a crocodile." Then he picked up the phone once more and put in a long distance call to Memphis.

And K.O. sat down.

WHEN Benjamin Bagadaccio came through the door from the Fitzgerald Billiard Parlor into the little office, he walked over to the desk, tossed his head slightly toward K.O. Jones sitting in a chair by the wall and let his eyebrows go up a fraction of an inch.

Jack Fitzgerald stood up. "This is Bagdad, George," he said. "Bagdad, this is K.O. Jones, my old fighter."

Benjamin Bagadaccio turned his five feet five and one hundred and ten pounds on his heel like an automaton, took K.O.'s extended hand limply and dropped it. He bowed slightly. He didn't say anything. K.O. Jones sat down.

Jack Fitzgerald went on genially: "George is just an ole crocodile, Bagdad." He paused. "Who's Maxie Metaxa?" he asked.

Bagdad's expression didn't change but he took one delicate, well'manicured hand from his beautiful jacket pocket and waved it across the desk once, thumb down.

Jack Fitzgerald picked a cigar carefully from the box on his desk, lit it and took a deep puff. He nodded his head, then slowly, "I see," he said. Then added. "Will he gamble?"

Bagdad spoke then for the first time. His voice was very soft. "No," he said. "He won't gamble."

"Will he bet?"

Bagdad took a cigarette out of his pocket like a magician and lit it. "He'll bet a poor widow woman," Bagdad said softly, "that the sheep won't kill the butcher." He took a drag from his cigarette and let the smoke come out his nose and mouth without propulsion as he finished, "If he gets odds."

Jack Fitzgerald turned to K.O. Jones. "How old are you, George?" he asked. "Honest?"

"I ain't right sure, Mistuh Jack, but I judge near thirty-two years old."

Jack Fitzgerald sighed heavily. "He was a pretty good welterweight then when he was eleven," he said to Bagdad with heavy sarcasm. "That's when I picked him up."

The phone rang then, and Jack Fitz-

gerald picked it up. "This'll be Memphis," he said.

He talked quite a long time on the phone and all the time Bagdad stood, not changing expression. K.O. Jones' face changed expression, each time he heard Jack Fitzgerald mention a name he knew. Almost all those names were distasteful in the extreme to K.O. Jones, fetching back to him memories of his house, now gone, and his fine long red car, idle in a garage with a large storage bill against it. Finally Jack Fitzgerald put down the phone.

"It's all legal, probably," he said to neither in particular. Then he turned his attention to Bagdad. "Maxie clipped George for forty Gs. All I saved for him in twelve years' fightin'."

Bagdad nodded.

"Down in Memphis," Jack Fitzgerald went on. "Very simple. Simple things for simple people." He paused again. "I can get together about twenty thousand dollars. I'd admire to have you with me in this thing, Bagdad, because it's gonna take a fine Italian hand."

"What?" Bagdad said.

Jack Fitzgerald looked up. "I'd like to get it back from him," he said. "And some for you, too."

"I don't have to have a cinch," Bagdad said then. "But I'm a gambler, too. I want a lot the best of it."

"All right," Jack Fitzgerald said. "All right. You come see me tomorrow mornin'. I'll be ready to talk to you then."

Bagdad turned and walked to the door. "Okay," he said, then paused, with the door open. "Sesame will win the fifth at Bowling Green today. Take a hundred for yourself but don't let in your friends."

"How can you be so sure, Mr. Bagadaccio?" Jack Fitzgerald said with genial sarcasm.

"Because," Bagdad said, and for a moment K.O. thought he was actually going to smile, "he ain't Sesame."

JACK FITZGERALD moved the desk a little and then he moved the chair a little so that it was in what light there was in the room behind his pool hall. "Sit down, George," he said and he snapped the scissors together experimentally.

K.O. sat down in the chair with trustful docility. "Bagdad," Jack Fitzgerald said, "he's got a sort of Indian look about him. Give him a high hair cut and a droopy mustache and we can bill him the Indian Terror and nobody knows no different."

Benjamin Bagadaccio moved a little to one side and contemplated K.O. Jones with a hard impersonal stare. "They've done it to horses," he said.

Jack Fitzgerald waved his borrowed tools. "He's got a pan like a Yaqui Indian if I ever seen one. I'll cut his hair and then let's give a look."

"He ain't a horse," Bagdad said logically.

"Hell's fire," Jack Fitzgerald said. "Lemme try my hand for once. I can make him a Yaqui Indian easy. Anyway, whatever we make him, we got to cut off his hair. He's gettin' gray as a badger."

K.O. Jones squirmed in the chair. "What you doin' to me, Mistuh Jack?" he asked. "I don't want to be no Wacky Indian. Can't you just get me a couple go's as K.O. Jones, ex-middleweight champion?"

"You want," Jack Fitzgerald said, heavy sarcasm weighing each word, "to fight semi-windups for five hunnert a go and have all the old-timers feelin' sorry for you?" Jack Fitzgerald snapped the scissors twice. "You're forty years old if you're a day, and I don't aim for you to get in there and disgrace yourself under your real name."

K.O. Jones moved his head slightly, dislodging the clippers. "I won't disgrace no one," he said. "I want to fight as K.O. Jones. We beat the best of 'em like that, Mistuh Jack."

"Hold still, George," Jack Fitzgerald said. And he warmed his clippers and ran confidently up the side of K.O.'s face.

K.O. Jones gave a low moan. "You done cut off my sideburn," he said.

Jack Fitzgerald gave no sign he heard. "This barberin' is a cinch," he said, and he gave his attention to the back of K.O.'s

head. "We'll get him a couple go's with tankers," he said to Bagdad, "and make him look bad but win. Then we'll throw him in there with some strong young kid he can beat and we'll take Mr. Metaxa like Grant took Richmond."

"You got it too high," Bagdad said. "Too high on this side. Lemme have the scissors for a minute. Maybe I can fix it."

Jack Fitzgerald handed Bagdad the scissors. "It's gonna take some doin' though," he admitted to himself. "Have you figured an angle?" he added to Bagdad.

"What I'm tryin' to do," Bagdad said, "is kind of feather it off. How come it comes out in scallops like that?"

Jack Fitzgerald looked up. "Whoa!" he yelled. "George, he's ruint you. Bagdad, lemme have those clippers. You got your side higher'n mine now by half an inch and it still looks boxed off."

Bagdad stepped back reluctantly. "I was thinkin'," he said, "about a guy around town I know. Named Willie Shoshone. He's a real Indian and he looks kind of like K.O. He was a pitchman. There's a lot of actor in him."

"An angle?" Jack Fitzgerald asked.

"Well," Bagdad said, "maybe we could get him to say he was one of K.O.'s tribe. Give him a flash roll to play around with and maybe they'd take him for a chump. Lot of them Indians down around Oklahoma got plenty dough from oil."

"How is he for honest?" Jack Fitzgerald said .

"He'd have to be watched," Bagdad said. "But I could do that." He took a cigarette quickly from his pocket and lit it. "Hold on, Jack," he said suddenly, "Look what you're doin' to this side."

Jack Fitzgerald stepped back. "It *is* a little higher'n yours," he said. "George could train out at your place, couldn't he?" he concluded.

"Jack," Bagdad said, "let me have those clippers. You got it now so high he's gonna look pretty funny." He took the clippers and worked delicately over K.O.'s right ear; far over it. "Yeah," he said. "He could train out to my place. Nobody is there except at night. And it's good and off the road."

"Well," Jack Fitzgerald said, "if we could get a coupla local kids that would keep their trap closed, we could have him train back here and only fly him east to fight. That oughta work all right, at least for two three fights." He surveyed K.O. speculatively. "Bagdad," he said. "You're way too high, way too high." He walked once around the chair where K.O. sat. Finally he stopped. "Work up some lather," he said to Bagdad, "we got to go whole hog now."

"Whole hog?" K.O. asked faintly. "What you mean, Mistuh Jack?"

"Bagdad has got your hair in such a shape," Jack Fitzgerald said sadly, "that we're gonna have to shave your head. But don't worry. That's what we want to do, fix you so nobody will know you."

"Oh, Lord," K.O. Jones said. "Oh, Lordy, Lordy."

"I'll drive him out to your place when I finish with him," Jack Fitzgerald said to Bagdad. "You get hold of that Indian you was talkin' about and bring him on out. We'll start K.O. right in this afternoon. He can do a little wood choppin' and road work before we need any sparrin' partners."

Bagdad looked at K.O. "You got him lookin' like a Turk, now," he said. "He looks like Yussuf Goulash himself. You wouldn't never know him."

K.O. gave a soft moan. "I could have got me a W.P.A. job," he said. "I surely could."

THERE is a restaurant in New York where men who would be discontented with six percent per annum on their investments are wont to loaf and eat. In fact, most of these men like something at even money that wins in the fourth round or something that pays six, two, and even and canters in many lengths ahead. It is a self-evident fact, to them, that this is better than even ten percent per annum.

Maxie Metaxa was an habitue of this

place, and even Benjamin Bagadaccio was not unknown there, having made trips to the city himself in his day.

There was considerable discussion among a number of these gentry one morning as to the relative merits of some steeds that would perform that afternoon at Belmont but when Willie Shoshone came in the door, all discussion ceased.

Willie walked to the bar and demanded whiskey. He demanded it in loud and perfectly understandable American. And finally after some discussion with the proprietor as to the laws applying to inns and restaurants in the Commonwealth, he got it.

Now his entrance and the argument created a quiet among the ones who had been discussing the horses because Willie's costume was sort of a cross between a burlesque comic's and a North Hollywood cowboy's and naturally took precedent in interest over a mere horse, even a shoo-in at eight to one.

But the interest in Willie that had been reasonably intense was downright ennui compared with the interest that was created when Willie fetched forth from his pocket the wherewithal to pay. Because the wherewithal consisted of something that looked like a large handful of very big bills. And it was.

"Haven't you anything smaller, sir?" the bartender asked, now deferential.

Willie looked at the bartender with a look that should have withered him and after some searching through the inside of his money, found a fifty. "Keep the change," he said. And turning on his heel, he departed.

Maxie Metaxa was the first one to say anything. Finally he got it out. "Gawd," he said.

Ten minutes later Bagdad burst into the restaurant. He waved to a couple of people he knew, but didn't stop. He rushed up to the bartender. "Has there been a crazy Indian in here?" he asked, not too loudly. "In a screwball getup?"

The bartender admitted that such a one had been gone only ten minutes.

Bagdad cursed and started out. Maxie Metaxa intercepted him.

"Hello, Bagdad," he said genially. "How're tricks?"

Bagdad stopped. "Lousy, Max," he said. "I'm ten minutes late for a fortune."

Maxie Metaxa kept his face blank. "How come?" he asked.

Bagdad looked around him. "That Indian," he said, "is the same tribe that has got an old has-been named Al Gator. This Al is supposed to be a fighter. He goes tonight at the Uptown A.C. against Bennie Smoot and that Indian is willin' to bet that he beats Bennie."

"Oh," Maxie said. "Where . . .?" But Bagdad was gone.

"I gotta find him," Bagdad yelled from the door. "I have gotta find him."

THE Uptown A.C. was packed. It hadn't been packed since Ruby Goldstein fought there, on his way up, but tonight it was packed. Word of mouth had done it. It was known that Maxie Metaxa had, in plain sight of many people bet sixty thousand dollars against Chief Willie Shoshone's forty thousand dollars that Bennie Smoot would go the distance. And that was what packed the Uptown A.C.

Willie Shoshone was at the ringside, and Bagdad was at the ringside. Maxie Metaxa was complacent. Willie Shoshone was drunk. His work done, he was relaxing. Willie was very drunk.

The semi-windup was over and the announcer was in the center of the ring. "There has," he said into the amplifier, "been a slight rearrangement of tonight's card. I know it will meet with your approval. In place of Bennie Smoot, popular young middleweight, who was injured only this afternoon in an automobile accident, we are substituting Joe Hassard, leading contender for the middleweight crown." And there went up a tremendous roar. It isn't often you see Joe Hassard for a dollar sixty-five tops and these people knew it.

Maxie Metaxa leaned forward before Bagdad had a chance to get around the ring and he asked Willie Shoshone in tones

both loud and clear: "Is the bet still on?"

And Willie Shoshone, drunk now, carried away with his role of wealthy plunger leaned back in his seat and said so everybody heard him, "Never heard of 'nyone name Hashard." Then in tones even more clarion he bellowed, "Let 'er ride. Let the bet ride."

Benjamin Bagadaccio stopped halfway around the ring where he was running and his face went perfectly white. Then slowly he started down the aisle, toward Al Gator's dressing room.

Maxie Metaxa leaned back. "That cost me two grand," he said to his companion, "but I figured if Rain-in-the-Puss was crazy he was clean crazy and now I don't take no chance at all."

It smelled like liniment and stale cigars and dried sweat in Al Gator's dressing room and after Bagdad had told his story, Jack Fitzgerald waited for almost a full minute before he spoke. Then when he spoke, he spoke to the brown figure lying on the rubbing table.

"George," he said slowly, "you're fightin' tonight against a guy that you would have trouble with the best day you ever saw. And George," he added, "if you don't stop him, we're all broke."

K.O. Jones rolled over. His shaved head made him look ludicrous. "I thought I was fightin' a young boy," he said, "that was a sucker for a right cross."

"There has," Jack Fitzgerald said slowly, "been a change. You're fightin' Joe Hassard, and you're fightin' him for the biggest purse you ever fought for. A cool hundred grand. And you got to stop him."

K.O. Jones puckered his forehead. "I'll try," he said.

K. O. JONES, alias Al Gator, came back to his corner at the end of the fourth round and he was breathing hard. "He's shifty," he said, "and he can hit, and I can't stop him when he boxes me and stays on that bicycle." K.O. Jones looked down his brown legs. "I can't atch him on these here legs like I once of could."

"George," Jack Fitzgerald said tensely for the hundredth time, "you've got to make him come to you."

"He's a Fancy Dan," K.O. Jones said. "He won't come in." The bell rang and K.O. Jones went out.

Joe Hassard danced in, stabbed two long lefts at K.O.'s shaven head and danced away. K.O. Jones followed him doggedly, slowly. Joe Hassard stabbed him with a long left and retreated half across the ring. K.O. shrugged his shoulders to the crowd and followed him.

When K.O. came back to his corner Jack Fitzgerald leaned over and said something to him. It was quite a long speech for Jack Fitzgerald and he could see that K.O. didn't quite understand. Desperately he said: "He's right down at the ringside. It's the sweet-talkin' man from Chattanooga. He's gonna break me and Mr. Bagdad, too."

K.O. Jones thought this over for a long moment, but the bell took him out before he could reply.

The sixth round was even duller. It was a fast, shifty boxer conservatively outpointing a tired old man. Al Gator was definitely slowing up and there was a frown creasing his forehead and he seemed preoccupied. When he went back to his corner he said: "Tell me that again, Mistuh Jack."

"It's an old trick," Jack Fitzgerald said. "but it may work. If it don't we'll all be broke. The sweet-talkin' man from Chattanooga will have all my money and all your money and all Mr. Bagdad's money."

Jack Fitzgerald added, trying to keep his voice calm: "You can do it, George. Crowd him to a corner and swing careful, but make it pop."

"He'll come to me then, won't he, Mistuh Jack?" K.O. Jones said trustingly.

And Jack Fitzgerald answered him: "Yes, George, he'll come to you, then."

K.O. Jones came out of his corner for the seventh round fast, and swinging. Joe Hassard danced away, behind a long left hand but all at once Joe Hassard found himself in a corner and he could see a

looping right, swung from the hips coming, and he ducked.

K. O. Jones' right hand swung around Joe Hassard's neck and you could hear it pop against the ring post in the forty cent seats. K.O. Jones backed away and his face was drawn and dirty looking. His right hand was pulled against his chest and his face was vaguely contorted with poorly concealed pain. He stalled through the seventh round but he never moved his right. And Joe Hassard came to him in the last moments of the seventh round and Joe Hassard was grinning as twice he left openings and the right cross didn't come.

Jack Fitzgerald kept his instructions low and calm as he talked between the rounds but the pride was in his voice: "Perfect," he said. "Perfect. He thinks your hand is broke. I never saw a better job of actin'. He'll come to you now and try to knock you out, and he ain't afraid of the right any more. But stall another round and then when he gives you that openin', let him have the Sunday punch."

K.O. Jones didn't answer his manager. He just sat there in his corner and his right hand wasn't back on the ropes but clutched to his side.

Twice in the eighth round K.O. started a right and both times he stopped the punch halfway to its target and it was evident to everyone that the right hand of Al Gator was useless.

Joe Hassard saw it, too. And Joe Hassard knew a knockout would look better on his record than a decision and so Joe Hassard, young and contemptuous, came in swinging.

Bagdad saw what happened. Bagdad saw it all. Jack Fitzgerald couldn't see it because K.O. Jones was boxing straight away from him and all he could see were the big muscles bunching under K.O. Jones' right shoulder blade as Joe Hassard came in to add another knockout to his record.

K.O. Jones swung his right.

Joe Hassard was coming in, fast, disregarding the right hand that K.O. Jones had broken on the ring post. Joe Hassard was finally setting this old man up to knock him out. This old man who had a funny lot of savvy in close but who had been clumsy enough to break his hand against a ring post.

And Joe Hassard caught that right right on the whiskers.

K.O. Jones walked over to the ropes and stood there, big tears he couldn't stop hurting his eyes, as he listened to the count. "Seven, eight, nine, aaannnddd *out!*"

"Mistuh Jack!" he said.

JACK FITZGERALD had him, then, around the shoulders and down at the ringside the stakeholder was paying off and a cop was in the ring and Maxie Metaxa was screaming something. But Bagdad was taking big rolls of bills from the man who had been game enough to hold the stakes and Bagdad had one hand under the front of his beautiful jacket as if he were reaching for something deep in his lower left vest pocket and Willie Shoshone was giving what he later said was his tribal battle cry. K.O. Jones was talking half to himself, half to Jack Fitzgerald. "I done all right," he said. "I done all right."

Jack Fitzgerald took out his knife then, knowing, and cut the glove from K.O. Jones' right hand.

K.O. Jones' right hand was blue under its black hide and there was a little blood oozing from a crease that ran from wrist to the joint of the thumb down to the *v* that thumb and fingers made.

"I ain't much of an actor," K.O. Jones said. "I really broke it on the post."

And Jack Fitzgerald, looking at the hand, said calmly: "The cartilage is gone and it will never heal. And you'll never play the banjo with that hand." And then his voice got a little low but K.O. Jones could hear it. Above the tumult in the ring and the tumult of all the voices. "But give me a break," Jack Fitzgerald said, "and let me shake it."

For every drinker of the kehft was in his own mind a king supreme

Seven Footprints to Satan

By A. MERRITT

JAMES KIRKHAM (who is telling the story) has had many weird adventures —but none so weird as his duel with the grotesque monster who calls himself Satan. Captured by Satan, Kirkham is forced to go through the ordeal of the steps. Of the seven footprints, Kirkham steps on two of the evil ones—which bind him to Satan for a year—and takes advantage of Satan's offer not to complete the climb, but to try again at the end of the year. If Kirkham had stepped on three of the evil steps, his life would have been at Satan's absolute command.

His first job for Satan is to filch a necklace from a museum; in carrying out this task, he sees three of Satan's horde gladly go to their deaths. They are drinkers of the drug *kehft*—an insidious potion which makes them prefer the world of illusion and even annihilation to their actual lives.

KIRKHAM determines to escape from Satan's power—and to rescue the girl, Eve Demerest, with whom he is in love and whom Satan has chosen to be the mother of his child. In this he is aided by Barker, a Limehouse thief whose life he once had saved. He is not so sure of Dr. Consardine, who seems to be Satan's right-hand man, nor of Cobham the chemist, both of whom he would like to help if he could.

Barker, because of his ingenuity as an electrician, is master of a few of Satan's mechanical secrets. He agrees to lead Kirkham to Eve's chamber. . . .

This story began in the Argosy for June 24

CHAPTER XIV

SLAVES OF SATAN

BARKER and I slipped out of the lift, and crossed what was apparently a ten-foot-wide corridor, black as a windowless dungeon. We passed, I conjectured, through its opposite wall, and along another passage of eighteen short paces. Here Barker paused, listening.

Then in front of me a hairline of faint light appeared. Slowly, ever so slowly, it widened. Barker's head became silhouetted against it. Cautiously he advanced, peering out. Then he nodded, reassuringly. He moved forward.

We were in a dimly lighted, narrow corridor. It was hardly wide enough for two men to walk side by side. It was lined and paved with some polished black stone, into which the light from some hidden source, seemed to sink and drown. We were at one end of it. The floor fell in a gradual ramp for a hundred yards or more, and there the way either ceased or curved, the light was so faint and the effect of the polished stone so confusing I could not tell which.

"Looks like a halley into 'ell, don't it?" muttered Harry. "Well, in a minute or two try to sye it ain't."

He set grimly forth down it, I at his heels. We came to the part that had perplexed me, and I saw that it was a curve, a sharp one. The curve was unlighted, its darkness relieved only by faint reflections from behind. I could not see its end. We moved on into the thickening gloom. The floor had become level.

Suddenly Barker halted, his mouth close to my ear.

"Lie down. Not a sound now when you look in. On your life! Don't 'ardly breathe!"

I looked through the crack. I felt a cold prickling along my spine and in the roots of my hair.

A little below me and not more than fifty feet away sat Satan. And he was opening the gates of his Black Paradise to the dying souls of the *kehft* slaves!

THE meaning of the scene struck clear with my first glimpse of it. Satan was leaning forward from a massive throne of heavy black stone cushioned in scarlet and standing on a low, broad dais. His robes were scarlet. At his side squatted the ape-faced monstrosity of an executioner, Sanchal. At his left hand stood two figures with veiled faces. One of them held a deep ewer, and the other a golden goblet.

At Satan's feet was a woman, rising from her knees. She was not old, fair-haired, and must have been once very beautiful. Her body, seen through the one white robe that was her only covering, was still so. Her wide eyes were fixed with a dreadful avidness upon another golden goblet in Satan's hand. Her mouth was half open, her lips drawn tight against her teeth. Her body quivered and strained as though she were about to leap upon him.

The executioner whirred the loop of his cord, and grinned. She strank back. Satan lifted the goblet high. His voice rolled out, sonorous and toneless.

"You, woman who was Greta von Bohnheim, who am I?"

She answered as tonelessly.

"You are Satan."

"And what am I, Satan?"

She replied:

"You are my god!"

I felt Barker shudder. Well, I was doing a little shivering myself. The infernal litany went on.

"You shall have no god but me!"

"I have no god but you, Satan!"

"What is it, woman, that is your desire?"

Her hands were clenched, and she drew them up to her heart. Her voice was tremulous, and so low that barely could I hear it.

"A man and a child who are dead!"

"Through me they shall live again for you! Drink!"

There was faint mockery in his voice, and derision in his eyes as he handed the goblet to the woman. She clutched it in both hands, and drained it. She bowed low, and walked away. She passed out of

the narrow range of my vision, stepping ever more firmly, face rapt, lips moving as though she talked with one unseen who walked beside her.

Again I felt the cold creep down my back. In what I had beheld there had been something diabolic, something that truly savored of the Prince of the Damned. It betrayed itself in Satan's cold arrogance and pride during the blasphemous litany. It was in his face, his glittering eyes, and in the poise of his huge body. Something truly of hell that possessed him, emanated from him, hovered around him. As though, as once before I have tried to describe it, as though he were a mechanism of flesh and blood in which a demon had housed itself.

My gaze followed the woman until I could see her no more. The chamber was immense. What I could see of it through the crack must have been less than a third of it. The walls were of rose marble, without hangings or ornamentation of any kind. There were pierced openings like the mouths of deep niches, over which silvery curtains fell. There was a great fountain that sent up tinkling jets of water out of a blood-red bowl. Couches of the rosy stone were scattered about. They were richly covered and on them lay, as though sleeping, men and women. There must have been dozens of these, for there were a score of them within my limited vision alone. I could not see the roof.

I thought that these curtained apertures might be cubicles or cells in which the slaves dwelt.

A gong sounded. The curtains were plucked aside. In each of the openings stood a slave, their eyes fastened upon Satan with a horrid eagerness. I shivered. It was like an eruption of the damned.

SATAN beckoned. A man stepped forward toward the dais. I took him for an American, a Westerner. He was tall and lanky, and in his gait something of the rocking habit of the range rider. His face was the hawklike type that the mountain country breeds, and curiously, it made the peculiar pallor and dilated eyes masklike and grotesque. His mouth was thin and bitter.

Like the woman, he prostrated himself before Satan. The veiled figure with the goblet held it out to the ewer bearer, who poured into it a green liquid. The cup bearer handed the goblet to Satan.

"Rise," he commanded. The suppliant sprang to his feet, burning gaze upon the cup. The unholy ritual began again.

"You, man who were Robert Tailler, who am I?"

"You are Satan!"

"And what am I, Satan?"

Again the blasphemous avowal—

"You are my god!"

"You shall have no god but me!"

"I have no god but you, Satan!"

"What is it, man, that you desire?"

The slave straightened, his voice lost its lifelessness. His face grew cruel as that of the executioner's own.

"To kill the man I hate—to find him—to ruin him—to kill him slowly in many ways!"

"As you killed him once—too swiftly," said Satan maliciously, and then, again tonelessly:

"Through me you shall find him whom you hate, and slay him! Drink!"

He drank and passed. Twice more I heard the clang of the summoning gong, and twice I watched the white faces of these doomed ones with their avid eyes appear through the silver curtains and disappear behind them. I heard one man ask for dominance over a kingdom of beasts. Another for a paradise of women.

And Satan promised, and gave them the green draft.

The *kehft!*

The subtle, devilish drug that gave to its drinkers the illusion of fulfilled desire. That turned the mind upon itself, to eat itself. And that by some hellish alchemy dissolved the very soul.

I stared on, fascinated, Eve forgotten. But if I had forgotten, Barker had not. The crack through which I was looking closed. He touched me, and we arose.

Soundlessly we slipped up the ramp through the dim, black passage.

I felt a bit sick.

It had been no nice picture, that of Satan wallowing in the worship of those slaves of his, dealing them out love and hate, dark power and lust, sardonically and impartially giving each what he or she most desired.

Illusions, yes. But more real than life to the drinkers when the drug had them.

But, God, their awakening!

And after that awakening the burning craving to escape reality! To return to that place of illusion to which the *kehft* was the only key!

No wonder that the three of the museum affair had gone to their deaths with such blind obedience!

And, if Satan was not what he pretended, very surely he was not disgracing that power whose name he had taken.

I had paid little attention to where we were going, blindly following Barker's lead.

"Well," he whispered suddenly. "Was I right? Wasn't it a halley into 'ell? What about Satan now, cap'n?"

I came back to myself with nerves jumping.

"A drug dealer," I answered him. "A dope den *à la* Ritz. That's all. I've seen opium joints in China that would make it look like a trench dugout. And the pipe hitters there would cut your throat for a pill just as quick as these would for Satan."

Neither of which assertions was at all true, but it gave me comfort to say them.

"Yes?" he said cynically. "Well, it's a good wye to think. I 'opes you keep on thinkin' that wye, cap'n."

I hoped that I might begin to think so.

"Soft along 'ere," he whispered. We were moving like ghosts in the darkness of a passage. I had an indistinct memory of having entered several lifts. Of even the probable location of my room I had not the slightest idea.

" 'Ere we are," he muttered, and stood for an instant listening. I thrust my hand into the pocket where I had slipped my wrist watch, that its illuminated dial might not betray us. I took a swift look. It was almost half past midnight.

Barker drew me forward. There was a faint scent in the air, a delicate fragrance.

Eve's!

We were in her room.

CHAPTER XV

THE HIDDEN HANDS

"BEAT her to it," I whispered incautiously. There was a rustle, as of some one sitting hastily up in bed.

"Who's there?" came Eve's voice softly. "I've got my finger on the alarm!"

"It's me—Jim," I answered, as softly as she, but mighty hastily.

"Jim!" A subdued light gleamed suddenly. "Where have you been? I've been worried to death about you!"

Eve was leaning forward from her pillows, brow eyes wide and luminous, silken mop of her hair a bit tousled. She looked like a wakeful little girl who had been exasperatedly pulling it. She was, also, the prettiest thing I had ever seen. Every time I looked at Eve she seemed prettier. I wondered when she was going to stop. She had on some sort of a lacy pink negligee. All the rest of my life, I knew, my heart would beat faster whenever I saw a lacy pink negligee, even when it was only in a shop window.

She slipped out of bed, ran straight to me, and kissed me. It was so pleasant that I entirely forgot everything else.

I became aware of a queer noise behind me. Harry was teetering from side to side, his hands clasped, his eyes half closed and moist, his face ecstatic, and he was crooning like an affectionate parrot. He *was* a sentimental burglar, Harry.

"If you want to say: 'Bless you, my children,' go ahead, Harry," Eve said, mischievously.

He blinked, snapped out of it, and grinned at her.

"Made me think of me an' Maggie," he said. "Just like when we was courtin'. Fair warmed my 'eart, it did."

"Well," I said, "I move that this meeting comes to order. We've got a lot of ground to cover, and not much time to do it. What's the chance of us being interrupted, Eve?"

"Hardly any," she murmured. "Frankly, everybody does as they like about having room parties. So everybody is extraordinarily discreet about visiting without an invitation. On the other hand, Jim, you're the one person it wouldn't do to have found here. Our aversion to each other has been so marked, darling, you know. Satan would be bound to hear about it. And the second he did—"

She didn't have to finish the sentence. I had a very clear idea of what Satan would do.

"It would be hard to explain Barker, too," she added.

"How about it, Harry?" I asked him. "Like to be any calls for you? Any awkward searching parties?"

"Not unless something big goes wrong," he said. "If they look for me in my room, I can say I was workin' somewhere else. Satan won't be 'untin' me, that's certain."

"Well," I said, "we'll have to take some chances. But we'll talk low and in the dark."

Eve stepped over, and put out the lamp. She drew aside the heavy curtains from one of the windows. A faint light filtered in from the moon hidden behind a hazy sky. Barker and I moved the chaise longue over to a shadowed corner. The three of us sat down upon it.

We talked. Not the slightest use of setting down a word of it. We got nowhere. A few schemes gleamed brightly for an instant, and then went glimmering like will-o'the-wisps. The spell of what I had beheld in Satan's unholy shrine was heavy on me, try as I would to throw it off. I had to fight a sense of futility.

We were three flies in a web of the Temple of the Footsteps. If we got out of one, it was only to find ourselves in another. But steadily Eve's warm, soft body pressing against mine, her courage, her trust in me that shone so sweetly from her brown eyes, armed me against the devastating sapping of my confidence. There was a way. There *must* be a way.

MORE than an hour had passed, and we had found not a single clue to it. And Barker had been growing fidgety, nervously abstracted.

"What's the matter, Harry?" I asked him at last.

"I'm huneasy, sir," he said. "I don't know why. But I 'ave a feelin' somethin's wrong somewhere."

It struck me as funny.

"You're devilish well right there is," I couldn't help chuckling. "It's what we've been giving all this time trying to right."

"No," he said soberly. "I'm bl—I'm hunusually huneasy. An' I'm never that wye hunless somethin's bl—'orrible wrong. Cap'n, I think we'd better call it a night, an' get back."

I hesitated.

As I say, we had got nowhere. At any moment one of us might get a flash that would open up a way out. Truth was, of course, I didn't want to leave Eve. But there was no denying the little man's distress. And if he should go and not be able to return—well, then I would be in a pretty fix. I hadn't the slightest idea of where my room was, or how to get to it.

"We've decided a lot of things *won't* do," said Eve. "It sounds silly, I know, but it really is some progress. The day may bring new ideas. We'll meet again tonight."

"All right," I said. "We'll go, Harry."

By the involuntary breath of relief he drew, I realized how troubled he was. Eve slipped to the windows, and let drop the curtains. The room resumed its original darkness. I felt her hand touch mine, and then her arms were around my neck.

"It's going to seem a long, long time till tonight, Jim, darling," whispered Eve.

" 'Urry!" came Harry's whisper. " 'Urry up, cap'n!"

I cautiously began to make my way toward where he stood by the wall.

"Gord!" I heard him gasp.

The word was thick with terror. I leaped forward.

The ray of a flash light struck Barker full in the face. A hand shot out with the quickness of a snake, and caught his throat. I saw his face distorted with agony as his own two hands flew up to break that merciless grip.

The light struck me in the eyes, dazzling me. I ducked, and dived in. Before I could touch whoever it was that held it, the flash dropped to the rug and Barker's body hit me like a bag of sand hurled by an elephant. I staggered back with a grunt. The lights in the room flashed up.

Just in front of me, menacing me with his automatic, stood Consardine!

And Consardine's eyes were cold and deadly. There was death in them. They flashed from me to Eve. His face softened, as though with relief from some fear. Swiftly it gave way to bewilderment, incredulity. It grew hard and deadly again. The muzzle of the gun pointing at me never wavered. At my feet Harry gasped, and staggered up dizzily. I put an arm out and steadied him.

"What are these men doing here, Eve?"

Consardine's voice was still and flat, as though he were holding himself in check by enormous effort. I had read the thought behind those swiftly changing expressions. First that we had crept into Eve's room for some sinister purpose. Then—suspicion of Eve herself.

I must wipe that out. Keep Eve out of it. Play on Consardine's first card. I answered him before she could speak.

"You're rather impetuous, Consardine," I said in a voice as hard as his own. "But your gun makes that safe, I suppose, when you let loose on an unarmed man. I was restless, and decided to go back to the bridge game. I got lost in your cursed rabbit warren. I ran across this man here who told me that he was working around the place. I asked him to guide me back to my room. By some damned irony, he managed to make the mistake of all mistakes of getting me into Miss Demerest's. Believe me, I was quite as anxious to get away as she was for me to go. Miss Demerest, I think you will confirm what I say."

I turned to her. It was an open lead, and it sounded plausible enough. Consardine paid no attention to me whatever.

"I asked you, Eve, what men are doing here?" he repeated.

Eve looked at him steadily for a moment, and then walked over and stood beside me.

"Dr. Consardine," she said, "Mr. Kirkham is lying like a gentleman, to save me. The truth is that I asked him to come and see me. And I asked Barker to guide him to me. Both of them are entirely innocent of anything except courteously doing as I asked. The whole responsibility is mine."

THE veins suddenly stood out on Consardine's temples, and the gun in his hand wavered. His face flushed. The cold fury had given way to hot anger. He might be just as dangerous, but I had a flash that Eve knew what she was doing, that her instinct had been truer than mine.

"So!" said Consardine thickly. "You thought you could make a fool out of me! Dupe me! I don't enjoy being fooled. How long have you two known each other?"

"We never set eyes on each other until you brought us together," said Eve.

"And why did you send for him?"

"To get me away from Satan," answered Eve steadily. "What else?"

He regarded her with smoldering eyes.

"And why did you think he could do that?" he asked her.

"Because I love him! And because he loves me!" said Eve quietly.

He stared at us. Then abruptly all anger fled, his eyes softened.

"Good God!" said Consardine. "You babes in the wood!"

Eve put her hand out to him. He took it, patting it gently. He looked us over carefully again as though we were some new and puzzling specimens. He turned out all the lights except the shaded one beside Eve's bed, strode over to the window, and peeped out the curtains. He came back to us.

"Let's talk over this," he said. "Barker, I'm sorry I choked you. Kirkham, I'm sorry I bowled you over. I'm sorry, too, that I misjudged you. And glad I did. Eve, I wasn't spying on you from out there. You were on my mind. You have been, child, for some time. I could see how restless and disturbed you were at the game. I thought—it was something else.

"You were on my mind, I say. I thought that perhaps you had not gone to bed. And that a talk with me, who am more than old enough to be your father, might help. There were—some things I had to say. I stood out there for minutes, hesitating. I thought you might be crying. And just as I was about to do it, it opened and I heard Barker curse. Then the rest happened. That's all."

I gave him my hand. Barker grinned widely, and saluted.

"Had I better be goin', sir?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Consardine. "Kirkham, how long have you known Barker?"

"'E syved my life, 'e did," broke in Harry. "'E pulled me out o' 'ell. An' while we're all tellin' the truth, Dr. Consardine, I'll sye I'm fair sot on doin' the syme by 'im an' 'is young lydy."

I gave Consardine a brief account of my experience with Barker. He nodded approvingly.

"First," he said, "it will be well to clarify the situation by stating my own position. I am Satan's servant. I am bound by a certain oath to him. I took that oath with open eyes, fully realizing all that it entailed. I came to him voluntarily, not like you, Kirkham. I recognize that your oath was under duress, and that therefore you are entitled to act in ways that I am not. I do not break my voluntary oath nor my word. Besides that, I am convinced that if I did I would not live long. I have a foolish partiality for living.

"I could cheat Satan of his pleasure in my torture, but—I do not believe in any existence beyond the grave, and I find life at times, vastly interesting. Furthermore, I have certain standards of living, appetites, desires, and likings which my contract with Satan insures of satisfaction. Away from him they certainly would not be satisfied. Also I was an outlaw when I came to him. Outlaw I am, but hunted outlaw I would be without his protection. First and last—there is my oath.

"Let it be understood, then, that any assistance that I can promise you will be largely negative. It will consist of warning you of pitfalls to avoid, and of closing my eyes and ears to what I may see or hear. Like this affair tonight, for instance."

"It is all we could ask, sir," I said. "And a great deal more than I had any right to expect."

"And now I say to you, Kirkham," he went on, "that I think you have little chance to win against Satan. I think that the road you have picked has death at its end. I tell you so because I know you have courage, and you should be told what is in my mind. And I say it before you, Eve, because you, too, have courage. And you must consider, child, whether you should allow your lover to take this almost certain risk of death, or whether you should do—something else."

I LOOKED into Eve's face. Her mouth was quivering, and her eyes were tortured. "What—what is the something else, Dr. Consardine?" she whispered.

"Become Mme. Satan, I suppose!" I answered for him. "Not while I'm alive."

"That," he acquiesced quietly, "of course. But it is not what I had in mind—" He hesitated, shot a glance at Harry and quickly switched to another thought, or back, rather, to his old one.

"Understand," he said, "I want you to win, Kirkham. In any way that does not break my oath to Satan, or threaten my prejudice for remaining alive, I will help you. At the least—I will keep hands off. But realize this—I am Satan's servant. If he orders me to take you, I shall take you. If he orders me to kill you, I shall—kill you."

"If Jim dies, I die. If you kill him, you kill me," said Eve tranquilly. She meant

it. He knew she meant it, and he winced.

"Nevertheless, child, I would do it," he told her. And *I* knew *he* meant that. So did Eve.

"You—you started to—you were about to speak of another way—" she faltered.

"I do not want you to tell me your plans, Kirkham," he interrupted her, quickly. "Only this. Do any of them involve your trying to kill Satan?"

I hesitated. It was a dangerous question to answer. After all, Consardine had warned me he could be trusted only so far. What did he consider the limits of his oath?

"I perceive they do," he had interpreted my silence. "Well, it is the one thing you must not attempt. It is the one thing that is impossible. You may think you can kill him while you and he are alone. Kirkham, I tell you Satan is never alone. Always there are guards hidden about—in the walls, in secret places. Before you could fire, they would have you winged.

"And there is Satan's abnormal quickness of mind. He would perceive your thought before it could be transformed into action. If you tried it while others were about they would have you down before you could fire a second shot—assuming that you managed to get in a first one. And Satan has an unhuman vitality. I do not believe one bullet or two could kill him any more than they could an elephant. The real point is, however, that you would never get the chance."

Well, Consardine did not know everything—that was clear. With that stone in the wall of the slaves' hall up half an inch instead of a quarter, and a rifle poking through the crack, I would not have given much for Satan's survival. Assuming, of course, that basically he was human.

"Furthermore," he went on, almost as in answer to my thought, "suppose you did perform what I believe the impossible. Kill him. Still there could be no escape for you. Better to be slain at once. There is not a place on earth where you could hide from the vengeance of his people. For it is not only by fear that Satan rules. Far from it.

"As he has told you, he pays his servants well. His continuance means ease, luxury, safety, power—most of the things of life for which man commonly strives—to more people than you can imagine. Satan has his splendid side as well as his dark one. And his people are scattered over all the globe. Many of them are more highly placed than you, as yet, can dream. Is it not so, Eve?"

"It is so," she said.

"Satan's throne does not rest upon the backs of cringing slaves," he said. "As always, he has his princes and his legions. To sum up. I do not believe you can kill him. If you try and fail, you die—horribly. And Eve is not saved. If you did kill him, you die as inevitably. Eve would be saved from him—yes. But will she have her freedom at such a price?"

"No! No!" cried Eve, and stood in front of me, arms outstretched, despair in her face.

"Consardine," I said abruptly. "Why does Satan hide his hands when the climbers go up the steps?"

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

"I've seen him on the black throne three times," I said. "Twice with Cartright, once with myself. He pulls the lever, and then he hides his hands under the robe. What does he do with them, Consardine?"

"Are you hinting that the steps are a crooked game? That's absurd, Kirkham!" His voice was amused, but I saw his strong hands clench.

"I'm hinting nothing," I answered. "I—wonder. You must have seen many go up those steps. Have you ever seen Satan's hands in the open while they were mounting? Think back, Consardine."

HE WAS silent. I could see him marshaling in his memory those he had beheld beckoned by the shining footsteps. And his face had whitened.

"I—can't tell," he said at last. "I didn't notice. But—I don't think so."

He jumped to his feet.

"Nonsense!" he said. "Even so—it means nothing!"

I was shooting in the dark. No, not quite. I was giving substance to that shadowy thought, that nebulous suspicion I had feared to bring out before Barker.

"No," I said. "Do you believe, then, that Satan with all his genius for details, his setting-up of the cards, his discounting of every chance—do you believe that Satan would leave any door open through which one could come and rule him? Has crown and scepter ever been won?"

"Yes," he replied disconcertingly. "Unfortunately for the doubt with which nearly you netted me, Kirkham, they have. I have been with Satan eight years. Three times I have seen the steps conquered!"

That was like a slap in the face. For the moment it silenced me. Not so Eve.

"What became of them?" she asked.

"Well," he looked at her uneasily, "one of them wanted something—something rather peculiar. He died of it in six months."

"Yes," drawled Eve. "So he died of it. What about the others?"

"One of them died in an airplane accident between London and Paris," he said. "She was on her way to—what she wanted. Not even Satan could have helped that. Everybody was burned."

"Rather unlucky, weren't they?" asked Eve innocently. "Both of them. But the third?"

"I don't know," said Consardine half angrily. "I suppose he's all right. He went to Asia. I've never heard of him since then. He wanted a sort of a hidden little pocket kingdom where he could do as he pleased. Satan gave it to him."

"Two dead, and one—disappeared," mused Eve. "But don't you think that you ought to have heard something about that third one, Dr. Consardine? Couldn't you find out what became of him? Maybe—maybe, he died, too, like the others."

"As Eve says, two of them didn't last long," I said. "The third is doubtful. If you were in Satan's place, Consardine, wouldn't it occur to you that it was advisable to keep up hope in the aspirants by showing them now and then that it could be done? It would to me. And, still assuming that we thought like Satan, wouldn't we hand-pick our successful climbers? I would. But I wouldn't pick the kind that would be likely to live long, would you? Or if they were well and hearty, a little accident might be arranged. Like that Croydon air bus you've mentioned, for instance."

"Gorblyme!" gasped Harry. "The swine! That wouldn't be 'ard to do. An' I'll bet *'e* done it!"

"What does Satan do with his hands when he hides them under his robe?" I repeated.

"And what became of that third winner?" murmured Eve.

On Consardine's forehead little beads of sweat stood out. He was trembling.

"See here, Consardine," I said. "You told us you didn't like being a dupe. You didn't like being fooled. Suppose Satan has been making a colossal mock of you—and the others. What happens?"

I saw the effort with which he mastered himself. It frightened me a bit. After all, I hadn't the slightest evidence to back up what I had been hinting. And if Consardine thought that I was deliberately deceiving him—

But I wasn't. The doubts I had raised were entirely legitimate. Satan *did* hide his hands. The bad after-luck of the step conquerors had been something that Consardine had known, not us.

"Barker," he turned to Harry, "have you ever looked over the mechanism that Satan tells us controls the choice of the Shining footsteps? Answer me! Is it what he says it is?"

BARKER wrung his hands, looking first at him and then at Eve and me, piteously. He swallowed once or twice.

"Answer me!" ordered Consardine.

"Gord 'elp me, cap'n," Harry turned to me desperately. "I never wanted to lie so 'ard in my life. I want to sye I 'aven't seen it. Or that it don't work them bloody prints. But Gord 'elp me, Miss Demerest, I *'ave* looked it over. An' it does work 'em, Dr. Consardine, just as *'e* says it does!"

Well, that was that. It knocked, apparently, my theories clear through the vanishing point. For a moment I had hoped that the little man would be diplomatic. Say, at least, that he didn't know. But I could not deny him the right to tell the truth—if he felt like it.

"That's all right, Harry," I said cheerfully. "What we're looking for is the truth. And what you say settles everything, I suppose."

"I'd like to 'ave lied, cap'n," he half-whimpered. "But, 'ell, I couldn't."

Consardine, I suddenly noticed, was behaving rather oddly. He did not seem at all like one whose faith in Satan had been impregnably reënforced. He seemed, indeed, more disturbed than ever.

"Barker," he said, "you'd better go now. I will see Captain Kirkham back to his room."

Harry slid over to one of the walls. He bowed to us miserably. A panel opened, and he was gone. Consardine turned to us.

"Now, Eve," he said, "I'll tell you what brought me here tonight. I told you that you'd been on my mind. So you have. Damnably. I wanted to save you from Satan. I had a way to suggest. I stole the idea from Shakespeare. You remember the stratagem by which the honest friar schemed to get Juliet to her Romeo? And cheat their respective warring families? Their Satan, in a sense."

"The draft that would make her appear to be dead," whispered Eve.

"Exactly," nodded Consardine. "It was something like that which I was about to propose to you. To treat you, from my medical knowledge, in such a way that the health and beauty and spirit which make you so desirable to Satan would fade—temporarily. To put you in such condition as obviously to make impossible, at least in the near future, his personal plans for you. And to keep you in that condition until he had found a substitute for his paternal impulses—or something else happened.

"There was a risk to it, certainly. Great risk to you, Eve. The waiting might be too long—I might not be able to restore to you what I have taken from you. Yet you might have preferred that risk to the certainty of—Satan's arms. I was going to let you decide."

"*Was* going to?" repeated Eve breathlessly. "Of course I'll take the risk. Oh, Dr. Consardine—it seems like the way out!"

"Does it?" he asked, grimly. "I think not—now. The original scheme from which I stole my idea came to grief, you remember, because of Romeo. Well, I was reckoning without Romeo. I didn't know there was one."

"I—I don't quite—get that," said Eve.

"Child," he took her hands, "are you willing to give up your lover? Never see him, never meet him, never communicate with him. Not for weeks or months, but for years? Kill your love for him, or live on, starving upon memories?"

"No," answered Eve directly, and shook her curly head.

"And even if you persuaded her to, Consardine, what do you think I would be doing?" The bare suggestion stirred in me resentment and stubborn anger. "Fold my hands and turn my eyes heavenward and meekly murmur: 'Thy will be done!' Not me!"

"I'm persuading no one, Kirkham," he replied quietly. "I'm only pointing out that it's the only way the thing could be done. If I did to Eve what I have described, what would happen? Treatment here for a time, of course, so Satan could see her failing. Then her removal somewhere, for other doctors to look after her.

"Her symptoms could not be feigned. The medical fraternity is not wholly represented by me in Satan's entourage. He has some highly placed specialists among his dependents. And if he has not, he could call them in. And would, unless at the very outset he was persuaded that her condition would inevitably mean a faulty maternity, weakness in offspring. Forgive me, child, for talking so plainly, but it's no time to be beating around the bush.

"The specialists I could take care of. Hoodwink. I could have been a very

great—" He hesitated, and sighed—"well, no matter. But Satan has set his will on you, Eve. He will not lightly give up his purpose. If it were only as a woman that he desired you, it would not be so difficult. But you are more than that to him, far more. You are to be the bearer of his child. Not upon my word alone, much as he trusts my judgment, would he relinquish you as unfit. He would have to be convinced beyond all doubt—and therein lies the danger to you and possibly—death."

HE PAUSED, looked pityingly into her troubled eyes. "Too great a risk," I said. "I'll try my way first, Consardine."

"Enter Romeo," he smiled faintly. "You'll have to, Kirkham. You've made the other impossible. You think that life would be worthless without Eve, I take it?"

"I don't think it, I know it," I answered.

"And you feel the same way about—Jim?"

"Yes," she said softly. "But—to save his life—"

"It wouldn't," said Consardine. "I know men and women. No matter what you made up your mind to do, Eve, he would be working and planning to get you away. Nor are you exactly the kind to sit down, as he expresses it, with meekly folded hands. He would be trapped, sooner or later. It might very likely follow that the trick would be discovered. Then I would have to give up my foolish prejudice for living. I won't take the chance of that.

"But, assume that you do escape. Together. You would be two hares running around the world with the hounds constantly at your heels. Satan's hounds, always on the move. Always with his threat hanging over you. Would such a life be worth living? There might be a child. Be sure that Satan's vengeance would not spare it. I repeat—would such a life be worth living?"

"No," I said; and Eve drew a deep breath and shook her head.

"What can we do?" she whispered.

Consardine strode once across the room and back. He stood before me, and I saw that again the veins in his forehead were standing out like cords, and that his gray eyes were hard and cold as steel. He tapped me thrice on the breast with his fist.

"Find out what Satan does with his hands when he hides them!" he said. He turned from us, plainly not trusting himself to speak further.

Eve was staring at him, wondering even as I at the intensity of the rage that was shaking him.

"Come, Kirkham." He had mastered himself. He ran his fingers through Eve's bob, ruffling it caressingly.

"Babes in the wood," he repeated. He walked to the panel slowly, considerately.

"Tonight," I whispered to Eve.

Her arms were around my neck, her lips pressed to mine.

"Jim—dear!" she whispered, and let me go.

I looked back as I passed through the opening. She was standing as I had left her, hands stretched out to me, eyes wide and wistful. She was like a lonely little child afraid to go to bed. I felt a deeper twinge at my heart—a strengthening of resolve. The panel closed.

In silence I followed Consardine as he led me to my room. He entered with me and stood for a moment staring at me somberly. Quite suddenly I felt dog-tired.

"I hope you sleep better tonight than I shall," said Consardine abruptly.

He was gone. I was too tired to wonder what he had meant by that. I managed to get out of my clothes, and was asleep before I could draw the bed covers over me.

CHAPTER XVI

SATAN OUTLINES A VENTURE

THE ringing of the telephone aroused me. I reached out for it, only half awake, not in the least realizing where I was. Consardine's voice brought me out of my lethargy like a bucket of water.

"Hello, Kirkham," he said. "Don't want to spoil your beauty sleep, but how about having breakfast with me and then taking

a canter? We've some excellent horses, and the morning's too nice to be wasted."

"Fine," I answered. "I'll be down in ten minutes. How will I find you?"

"Ring for Thomas. I'll be waiting." He hung up.

The sun was streaming through the windows. I looked at my watch. It was close to eleven. I had slept soundly about seven hours. I rang for Thomas.

Sleep, a plunge, and the brilliant sunshine that sent the shadow of Satan far below the rim of the world. Whistling, I hoped half guiltily that Eve felt as fit. The valet brought me out what Barker would have called a "real tysty ridin' rig." He convoyed me to a sunny, Old World, lovely room looking out on a broad green terrace. There were a dozen or so nice-looking people breakfasting at small tables. Some of them I had met the night before.

Over in the corner I saw Consardine. I joined him. We had an extremely pleasant meal, at least I did. Consardine did not seem to have a care on earth. His talk had a subtly sardonic flavor that I found most stimulating. So far as the conversation was concerned, our encounter in Eve's room might never have been. He made no slightest reference to it; nor, following his lead, did I.

We went from there to the stables. He took a powerful black gelding that whinnied to him as he entered. I mounted a trim roan. We rode at a brisk canter along bridle paths that wound through thick woods of scrub pine and oak. Now and then we met a guard who stood at attention and saluted Consardine as we passed by.

It was a silent ride.

We came abruptly out of the woods. Consardine reined in. We were upon the cleared top of a low hillock. Below us and a hundred yards away sparkled the waters of the Sound.

Perhaps a quarter mile out lay a perfect beauty of a yacht. She was about two hundred feet long and not more than thirty in beam. Seagoing and serviceable, and built for speed as well. Her paint and brass shone dazzling white and golden.

"The *Cherub,*" said Consardine dryly. "She's Satan's. He named her that because she looks so spotless and innocent. There is a more descriptive word for her, however, but not a polite one. She can do her forty knots an hour, by the way."

My gaze dropped from the yacht to a strong landing that thrust out from the shore. A little fleet of launches and speed boats were clustered near it. I caught a glimpse of an old-fashioned rambling house nestled among the trees near the water's edge.

My eyes followed the curve of the shore. A few hundred feet from the pier was a pile of great rocks, huge bowlders dropped by the glacier that once covered the island. I started, and looked more closely.

Upon one of them stood Satan, black-cloaked, arms folded, staring out at the gleaming yacht. I touched Consardine's arm.

"Look!" I whispered. "Sat—" I stopped. The rock was bare. I had turned my eyes from it for the barest fraction of a second. Yet in that time Satan had disappeared.

"What did you see?" asked Consardine.

"Satan," I said. "He was standing on that pile of rocks. Where could he have gone?"

"He has a hole here," he answered indifferently. "A tunnel that runs from the big house to the shore."

HE SWUNG around to the woods. I followed. We rode along for a quarter of an hour more. We came out into a small meadow through which ran a brook. He dismounted and dropped the reins over the black's neck.

"I want to talk to you," he said to me.

I gave the roan its freedom, and sat down beside Consardine.

"Kirkham, you've set my world rocking under my feet," he said curtly. "You've put the black doubt in me. Of the few things that I would have staked my life on, the first was that Satan's gamble of the seven footprints was a straight one. And now—I would not."

"You don't accept Barker's testimony, then?" I asked.

"Talk straight, Kirkham," he warned coldly. "Your implication was that Satan manipulated the telltale steps from the Black Throne. With his hidden hands. If so, he has the cunning to do it in a way that Barker, going over the other mechanism, would never suspect. You know that. Talk straight, I tell you."

"The thought that Barker might be wrong occurred to me, Consardine," I said. "I preferred to let it occur to you without my suggesting it. I had said enough."

"Too much—or not enough," he said. "You have put the doubt in me. Well, you've got to rid me of it."

"Just what do you mean by that?" I asked him.

"I mean," he said, "that you must find out the truth. Give me back my faith in Satan, or change my doubt into certainty."

"And if I do the latter—" I began eagerly.

"You will have struck a greater blow at him than any with knife or bullet. You will be no longer alone in your fight. That I promise you."

His voice was thick, and the handle of his riding crop snapped in the sudden clenching of his strong hand.

"Consardine," I said bluntly, "why should the possibility of Satan's play being crooked move you so? You are closest to him here, I gather. His service, so you say, brings you all that you desire. And you tell me he is the shield between you and the law. What difference, then, does it make to you whether his gamble of the seven footprints is on the level or isn't?"

He caught my shoulder, and I winced at the crushing grip.

"Because," he answered, "I am under Satan's sentence of death!"

"You!" I exclaimed incredulously.

"For eight years," he said, "that threat has been over me. For eight years he has tormented me, as the mood swayed him. Now with hint of the imminent carrying out of that sentence; now with half promise of its wiping out and another trial at the steps. Kirkham, I am no coward—yet death fills me with horror. If I knew it to be inevitable, I would face it calmly. But I believe it to be eternal blackness, oblivion, extinction. There is something in me that recoils from that, something that shrinks from it with a deadly terror, with loathing. Kirkham, I love life.

"Yet if the gamble was straight, he was within his rights. But if it was not straight—then all those eight years he has played with me, made a mock of me, laughed at me. And, still laughing, would have watched me go to whatever death he had decreed, unresisting, since I would have believed that by my oath I was so bound.

"And that, Kirkham, is not to be endured. Not by me!

"Nor is that all. I have watched many men and women take the steps, risking all on Satan's word. And I have seen some of them go to death, as calmly as I would have done, their honor, like mine, rooted in dishonor. And others go broken and willing. Like Cartright. While Satan laughed. And there are more who live like me on Satan's sufferance. And all this on a cast of loaded dice. If so, then I tell you, Kirkham, it is not a thing to be borne! Nor shall it be borne!"

He plucked at his collar, gasping, as though it choked him.

"God!" he whispered. "To pay him back for that! If it is true—I would face death—singing—but I must know if it is true."

I WAITED until he had regained control. "Help me find out whether it is or not," I said. "It may well turn out to be an impossible job for me—alone."

He shook his head.

"You have Barker to help you," he replied.

"I don't want to run him into any more risks." I would cover up the little man as much as I could. "There's a certain amount of prowling involved, Consardine. We might run across somebody not so well disposed as you. But the three of us ought to be able to settle matters one way or the other quickly."

"No," he said stubbornly. "Why should I? It is up to you, Kirkham. It is you who have raised the doubt. It is you who must resolve it. One way or the other. After all, your suspicions are based upon the vaguest evidence. A triviality, and two, or it may be three, perfectly explicable happenings. The chances that you are wrong are enormously greater than those that you are right. Why should I risk my life upon them?

"I have already gone far. I have promised you neutrality, and somewhat more. I will go no further. Take Barker. I promise neither to see nor hear you should I meet you in your—wanderings. But at this time I will not invite certain death by joining you in them. I have been reasonably content. If you are wrong, I shall still be. If you are right—ah, then, I repeat, you will be no longer alone.

"In the meantime—Michael Consardine holds fast to his place in the sun."

He chirruped to the black gelding, and mounted it. There was no use in further argument, that was plain. We rode away, through the woods, and after a while turned back to the château.

I left him at the stable, and went to my rooms to change. There was a note pinned to my pillow. It was from Satan. A casual sort of message. He hoped that I was enjoying myself as I deserved, and would see me about nine o'clock that evening.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. The more I thought over Consardine's talk, the more I sympathized with his viewpoint. Also, oddly enough, the higher rose my spirits. I sat down to dinner in a pleasantly reckless state of mine.

Consardine was at the head of the board as on the previous night. I had Cobham for companion. I saw Eve toward the far end. She ignored me. It was difficult for me to do the same toward her.

Cobham had been drinking. For some reason he seemed to feel a certain responsibility for me. He paid no attention to any one else, nor would he let me. He was vastly interesting, but as the time wore on I began to feel a profound distaste for Cobham. He was expounding his theories of life as a mere electro-chemical reaction. He made it clear that neither the individual nor the mass meant anything to him in terms of what is commonly called humanity. He was appallingly callous about it.

He seemed to have no more feeling about men and women than he would have about his test tubes. Rather less, I fancied. In fact, that was what men and women appeared to him to be, just a lot of animated test tubes with minute curiosity-provoking differences in their contents. And he saw no reason why they should not be broken, or emptied or the contents changed in the way of experimentation. He sketched a few rather awful experiments with gases upon the *kehft* slaves. At least I hoped that the unfortunate subjects had been the slaves. He did not say so.

Listening, I was convinced that of the two Satan might be the more human. Cobham kept on drinking steadily. The only effect of the liquor was to make him more coldly, inhumanly scientific.

"You've got too much sentiment in your ferment, Kirkham," he said. "You probably think that life is sacred, to use the cant word, not to be destroyed unless by dire necessity. Bosh! It is no more sacred than the current I turn on or off at will from my lamps, nor the ferments in my tubes that I end at will. Whenever did nature give a damn about the individual? Neutralize the weakening ingredient in you, Kirkham, and you might become a great man. I can do it for you, if you will let me."

I promised to think it over.

AT EIGHT thirty Satan appeared. I had been wondering where I was to see him. Consardine yielded his place, and Satan beckoned me to sit at his left hand.

"To my new follower, James Kirkham," he raised his glass. "I am much pleased with him."

They drank to me, standing. I saw Eve pointedly set down her glass untouched. So, as she had meant him to do, did Satan.

At eight forty-five, as though at some

signal, the company began to drift out of the room. In a few minutes there remained only Satan, Cobham, and myself. It rather surprised me to see Consardine leave. Servants cleared the table, and at a nod from Satan withdrew.

"There is a ship," he began abruptly, "that sails from Havre within three days. She is the *Astarte,* a slow boat. She carries some things of superlative beauty which I feel it time for me to claim. There is a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, another by Romney. There is an ewer of rock crystal, and twelve rock crystal cups, marvelously engraved and set with great cabochon sapphires and rubies.

"They were made, it may be, in ancient Crete for Queen Pasiphaë. At least they are immemorially old. And to them an unknown genius gave his best. They were long hidden in the Kremlin. The Bolsheviki have sold them. There is a necklace of emeralds upon each of which is graven one of the metamorphoses of Ovid. There is nothing like it in the world."

He paused, then bent his head toward me.

"I must have them, James Kirkham. You and Cobham shall get them for me."

I bowed, awaiting further enlightenment. Cobham, I noticed, had not drunk anything since Satan's entrance. He did not show at all what he had drunk. He sat silent, eyes upon the glass with which his fingers played; cynical, a faint smile upon his full lips. Yet I felt that he was watching me covertly, as though awaiting something. Whatever Satan was about to tell me. I suspected that he had already gone over it with him.

"I have selected you as leader," Satan went on, "not only because the task may demand the exercise of unusual resourcefulness, but also that close obedience to orders which you have proved to me you can exercise. I am merely outlining the venture tonight so you may be turning it over in your mind. You will receive your detailed instructions before you sail."

Sail? That meant leave Eve! I moved restlessly. I suppose my discomfiture showed in my face. At any rate, he sensed it.

"Yes," he said. "The transfer will not be made on land after the *Astarte* arrives. I prefer to make it on the high seas. You are to engage in what the prejudiced would call piracy, James Kirkham. Ah, well, it is a romantic calling."

He eyed me, faint malice in the sparkling gaze.

"And you have your romantic side," he purred. "I admire it. For I, too, have mine. Therefore I envy you, somewhat, this venture."

"And I am grateful," I smiled, meeting his scrutiny squarely. But the palms of my hands had grown suddenly moist.

"The *Astarte,*" he continued, "will take the southern route. There is little likelihood of her encountering any serious storms at this time of year in those latitudes. On the day she sails, you and Cobham will set out in my yacht which I perceived you admiring today.

"Besides her crew, the yacht will carry a dozen of my drinkers of the *kehft.* They will be for use in emergency. But it is my hope that none such may arise. The *Cherub,* is it not a lovely name?—the *Cherub* will leave ostensibly for a coastwise voyage. On the first day out, the night rather, the *Cherub* will cease to be her angelic self—yes, I assure you there were girl cherubs as well as boy ones.

"She will be cunningly changed to the semblance of the *Sea Wolf,* the yacht of an eminently respectable financier which at that moment will be logging along its unsuspecting way to Havana. This also in case of emergency. And, of course, the name of the *Sea Wolf* will replace that of the *Cherub* wherever the name is noticeable.

"You will circle the *Astarte* two days later at a designated section, keeping out of sight, of course. Her speed is fifteen knots, yours forty. You will be able therefore to stop her, remove what I desire, and get back here—again the innocent, spotless *Cherub*—at least two days before she can arrive in port."

MY HEART, which had been growing steadily heavy, lightened. Satan intended no mischief to the ship then, or to its crew. Else he would not speak of her return. Cobham gave a short bark, like a suppressed laugh. The cynicism of his smile had deepened. Satan's blue stare rested upon him for an instant. Cobham moved uneasily.

"You have planned, of course, sir," I said, "how we are to stop the *Astarte*."

"Naturally," he answered. "I am coming to that. At this time of year, this boat would not carry more than a hundred persons. Some of the passengers she does carry will be my people. But besides that, I have arranged it so that there will be even fewer than usual. A number of staterooms have been reserved for a tourists' club. But, oddly, just before the *Astarte* is to sail, these reservations will be canceled.

"There will have been an unavoidable change of plans. The generous representative of the club will waive all claims upon the reservation money, and the line will be guaranteed indemnity. The *Astarte*, because of the anxiety of the owners of the objects I intend to acquire, will not delay her sailing. I think there will be not more than thirty passengers, of whom ten, at least, will be of my following.

"Very well, James Kirkham. We come now to the night of your adventure. All that afternoon you have been following the *Astarte* at a distance of ten miles. It is a moonless night. At nine o'clock there is a concert going on in the salon. The few passengers are a happy little family party. They are probably all there. So are some of the officers. You have put out your lights and have steamed up to within four miles.

"There will be a signal from the *Astarte* which you will answer. At the moment of that signal, two men assigned to that task will hurl a few bombs into the engine room of the *Astarte*. The bombs will be filled with a certain gas, the invention of Mr. Cobham. Immediately thereafter the occupants of the engine room will take no further interest in their work A third man of mine will slip into the engineroom and bring the boat to a standstill."

He paused, scrutinizing me; I felt upon me again the covert glance of Cobham. By some miracle I managed to keep from my face the horror I felt as I inquired:

"Well, that wipes out the engineroom crew. Then what?"

For many moments Satan did not answer me. His brilliant eyes searched me. I drove from my mind the swift picture that had come into it of men choking and writhing on the floor of the *Astarte's* engineroom. I bore his gaze, frowning as though puzzled. Whether he had found what he had been hunting, I do not know, but suddenly its disconcerting intensity diminished.

"Oh, fie, James Kirkham!" he said unctuously. "It is not necessary to kill. The gas I refer to is not lethal; it is a sleep gas. Its effect is practically instantaneous. At least, it acts within five seconds. But it is harmless. Six hours, and its breathers awaken without even a headache. How bloodthirsty he thinks us, Cobham!"

Something warned me to hide my relief, even as I had hidden my dread.

"We still have the officers and the crew," I said indifferently. "What happens to them? Frankly, in all you have outlined, Satan, I seem to be nothing but an onlooker—a messenger boy."

"The venture at this point passes into your hands," he answered. "You will by this time have drawn up beside the *Astarte*, and will board her with Cobham and a sufficent force to take charge. Conditions may now arise which I can foresee, but must trust to your ingenuity and courage to meet. There will be much confusion on board the *Astarte*.

"You must see to it that no boats are launched, and that no one escapes from her. Before you board, the captain, and a mate or two, may have suffered some slight accident. Nothing serious, no, no; merely disabling. Then again, they may not. You may have their resistance to overcome. Without bloodshed, if you can. But with or without—it must be overcome. Then weather conditions may complicate matters. I think

you will not find it too tame, James Kirkham."

NOR did I. I had an uncanny feeling that Satan was not presenting me with the full picture.

"In your final instructions you will find definite information as to the location of what you are to bring me," he said. "The objects are in a strong safe in a steel storeroom. So precious are the jewels that only the captain will know the combination of the safe. You need waste no time trying to persuade him to tell it to you. There will be with you an expert to whom the safe will have no mysteries.

"After you have recovered the things for me, you will cut loose from the *Astarte* and make all speed home, taking off from her before starting certain of my people on board her who would find it embarrassing to remain. That is all."

I considered for a moment. What he meant was that some of his agents on the *Astarte* would be questioned, and might be recognized for what they were. Well, how about us on the *Cherub?*

"Have you considered the probability of someone on the *Astarte* identifying us later, sir?" I began.

"You will all be masked, of course," he interrupted smoothly.

Cobham moved suddenly, impatiently.

"The wireless," I suggested. "I suppose that will be disabled before the engine room attack?"

"It will not be necessary," he answered. "The yacht carries extraordinarily strong batteries. At the moment of the signal the *Astarte's* radio will be blanketed, her waves strangled. There will be no message from her that can break through the barrier the operator of the *Cherub* will interpose."

I sat for a moment in thought. Everything seemed to be plain. And yet—I felt a cold unease, a boding depression. There was something else, something deadly sinister hiding behind Satan's smooth phrases.

"I trust you were satisfied with the rewards of your necklace venture," he broke the current of my thoughts. "The rewards of this one will be proportionately greater, naturally. The invitation to join me cut your vacation rather short. What would you say to taking, after the affair, a six months' trip? You shall go wherever you please, and as you please, and do as you please. At my expense, of course. You may also spend what you please, let me add."

"Thank you, sir," I said, "but I feel no need of a vacation. And frankly, I find my contacts with you infinitely more interesting than anything I could hope to experience away from you."

His face was inscrutable as ever, but I felt that I had pleased him.

"Well," he said, "we shall see. Only continue as you have begun, James Kirkham, and you shall have no cause to complain of my generosity."

He arose. I stood up politely, Cobham cautiously.

Satan for a moment considered me.

"How are you spending the evening?" he asked me.

"Cobham spoke of us joining the bridge game," I answered; "but if you have any other desire—"

Cobham had done nothing of the sort. He had said so much, however, that I hoped he might take it for granted that he had. I particularly did not want to be separated from Cobham just then. If Satan had thought, as I half feared, of asking either of us to accompany him, he changed his mind.

He nodded and walked toward the wall.

"It would be a good idea"—he turned beside the open panel—"to look over the *Cherub* tomorrow. Familiarize yourself with her. Goodnight."

Cobham sat silently for a good minute, staring at the point where Satan had disappeared.

"That was decent of you, Kirkham," he said at last, slowly. "I don't know how you guessed it, but I couldn't have stood much more of Satan tonight. Damned decent!"

He stretched out a hand to the brandy. I grinned—Cobham had remembered, then,

and was aware of my maneuver. He poured his goblet half full of the liquor and drank it neat.

"Damned decent," he repeated, and I saw the brandy take hold of him swiftly. "Have a drink with me."

I poured myself a small one. Again he half filled his glass and tossed it off.

"A damned shame," he muttered, "treating you like a child. Why should you be coddled? Lied to? Kirkham, *you* deserve the truth!"

SO! IT was coming, was it? That hidden, sinister something I had sensed was getting ready to crawl from Cobham's lips.

"Have a drink with me," I said, and tipped the demanter. "Who's treating me like a child?"

He glared at me drunkenly.

"You think that gas is going to put that engineroom crew to sleep, eh?" he chuckled. "Nice little lullaby for poor, tired sailors? Sweet little chemical sl-slumber song composh-composed by Pa Satan and M-Ma Cobham? Well, Kirkham, it's going to put 'em to sh-sleep. Forever!"

Forever! I felt the rush of tiny particles of ice in my veins. But now was no time for any hysterical outburst. What else was there? I poured myself another brandy and drank it composedly.

"Well, what of it?" I asked. "A long sleep or a short one—what does it matter?"

"What's it matter—what's it matter?" He stared at me, then brought his fist down with a thump on the table. "By God, I was right! Told Satan you had the guts! Told him needn't—needn't tamper with the form-florm-formula with you. Have a drink with me."

I drank with him. He laughed.

"Masks!" he said. "You wanted masks so people on *Astarte* couldn't rec-rec-ognize you later. Later! Ha, ha—later! That's good, that is. Hell, man, there's not going to be any later for them."

The room swam around me. What was Cobham saying now?

"Not exactly accurate. Say—twenty minutes later. Twenty minutes later—*bonk!* goes nice bomb. Gentlemanly bomb. Quiet, dignified, but strong. *Bonk!*—out goes bottom of the *Astarte*. No boats. *Kehft* drinkers have tended to them. *Astarte* sunk without trace! *Bonk!* Swooosh! Bubbles! Finish!"

He became drunkenly plaintive.

"Don't—don't believe fooled old Kirkham for a minute. Don't believe he thought Satan would run rish-risk anybody on *Astarte* running across one of us. Anybody telling police about wicked pirates holding 'em up in mid-ocean. To hell with the witnesses; that's Satan's motto! Make it 'nother unfathomed mish-mystery of the ocean. That's best way. That's Satan's way."

"I'm damned glad to hear it," I said. "It was the one thing I was uneasy about—"

The drunkenness dropped from Cobham like a cast-off cloak. His face became white and pinched. The glass fell from his hand. Out of a darkened corner of the room walked Satan!

CHAPTER XVII

THE MIRRORED CELL

IT WAS a crisis, and a bad one. There was no doubt about that. A time for quick thinking, if ever there was one. I cared nothing about what happened to Cobham. That callous devil could have been whisked to hell without my turning a hair. But I myself was in the gravest danger of sharing his fate. If Satan thought that I had deliberately drawn his confidences, he would waste no time asking for explanations. The fact that I had not accepted his word would in itself call for my punishment.

Worst of all, I had caught him lying to me. He might decide that would render me useless to him thereafter. But that was secondary. The paramount thing was that it made him, as the Chinese say, "lose face." If his ancestry was what Barker believed, that was the one unforgivable af-

front. Whether it was or was not, I know that Satan's infernal intellect was clothed with as infernal a pride. And that pride had been wounded.

My only chance for escape lay in healing the wound before Satan knew that I had perceived it. I jumped to my feet and walked toward him.

"Well," I laughed, "have I passed the test?"

INSTANTLY he caught it. Whether, at the moment, he believed me as naïve as my question implied, I could not know. Still, after all, why not? It was exactly the kind of trap, or rather experiment, he had been teaching me to expect him to conceive.

Nor did I know how long he had been listening. Had he intentionally left Cobham and me together to see what would happen? And heard all? Probably. If so, there had been no single word I had spoken upon which his suspicion could feed. At any rate, to follow my lead was the only way he could maintain his pride, save his face. He followed it.

"Cobham," he said, "you were right."

He turned to me.

"Tell me, James Kirkham, when did you first suspect that you were under test? I am curious to know exactly how keen that perception of yours is."

He waved to me to be seated, and dropped into his own chair. I kept my eyes steadily averted from Cobham.

"The first thing that puzzled me, Satan," I said, "was your attitude toward the *Astarte*. It would certainly not have been mine. That dead men tell no tales, is a safe and sane old rule. I would have followed your instructions—but," I added boldly, "I would not have approved of them."

His eyes never left me as I spoke. I felt his will beating against mine like a hammer, endeavoring to strike out the truth.

"When did your suspicion become certainty?" he asked.

"At the moment you appeared here."

Suddenly I let some of my anger find vent.

"I'll stand for no more such experiments upon me, Satan," I cried, with a cold fury that had none of its roots in the matter in hand, but was real enough nevertheless. "Either I am to be trusted wholly, or I am not to be trusted at all. If you do trust me and I fail you—well, you have the remedy in your hands and I am ready to pay the penalty. But I'll not be the subject of any more laboratory experiments, like a child in a psychological clinic. By God, I won't!"

I thought that I had won. Not only won, but that I had leaped into higher regard than Satan had ever held me. If those gem-hard eyes could be said to soften, they did.

"I agree, James Kirkham," he said quietly. "Yet I am glad that I put you to this test. Since it has fully revealed to me what dependence I can place upon you."

"I made my decision. I gave my word," I said a little stiffly. "As long as you play fair with me, I obey your orders, Satan. Let that be understood, and you will find no more loyal servant."

"It is understood, James Kirkham," he answered.

I venture to look at Cobham. He had regained some of his color. He was watching me queerly.

"Cobham," I laughed, "you could be as good an actor as you are a chemist."

"Cobham—has been—very valuable to me," said Satan. "And never more than tonight."

I saw a deep shudder shake Cobham. I feigned to observe nothing. Satan arose.

"Come with me, Cobham," he said. "There are matters we must discuss. And you—" He looked at me.

"I'll turn in," I said. "I know the way."

He strode across the room, Cobham following. Once he turned and shot me a strange glance. There was gratitude in it—and there was deadly terror.

I walked over to the panel that was the beginning of the road to my room.

"James Kirkham." I turned, and saw Satan standing by the opposite wall. His bulk almost hid Cobham, now in front of him.

"Sir?" I answered.

"James Kirkham," he said, "I was never better pleased with you than I am now. Goodnight."

"I am glad, sir," I replied. "Goodnight."

The panel behind him clicked open. I pressed upon a hidden spring, the wall parted. Before me was the tiny elevator. I entered it. Satan and Cobham were passing through the other wall.

I caught a glimpse of two of the *kehft* slaves, cords in hands, gliding to Cobham's side.

As the panel closed, I thought I saw them pinion his arms!

AND now I was in my rooms. Eve would be expecting me, but I had no desire to make further excursion that night. That Satan had taken my bait, I was reasonably sure. But Cobham was in for punishment—how severe I could not tell. The emphasis Satan had put upon that "has been" in speaking of his usefulness was ominous. Cobham had caught the threat. And there had been that swift vision of the slaves closing in on him. I would be on Satan's mind, whatever he believed. It was possible that he might summon me; might even come to me.

It was best to stay where I was. Barker would be along sooner or later. I would send him with a message to Eve.

I turned out all the lights except a dim one in the living room, undressed, and turned in. I lay there, smoking. I felt more than a little sick, and filled with a hot, helpless rage. The affair of the *Astarte* would have been bad enough even as Satan had outlined it. Cobham's revelations made it hideous. I would go on with it, of course. There was nothing else to do. If I refused, it would be the end both for Eve and myself. And some one else would take my place. Cobham, in fact, had made it imperative that I should go.

I must find some means of averting that ruthless destruction of the treasure ship. Obviously, the chances were that would mean the end for me also. But it had to be done. I knew that if I stood aside and let those helpless people go down, I could never more live at peace with myself. I knew that Eve would feel the same about it.

What I hoped most desperately was that we could find the way to break Satan's webs before the time came for my sailing.

Suddenly I was aware that some one was in the outer room. I slipped noiselessly out of bed and to the curtains. It was Barker.

I beckoned to him.

"Careful, Harry," I whispered. "Come in here, and keep those ears of yours wide open. Things have been happening."

Briefly I sketched the developments of the day, from my conversation with Consardine to Cobham's drunken disclosures and his sinister shepherding by Satan. I could feel the little man shiver at that.

"Gord!" he muttered. "Cobham's a proper devil, but I'm sorry for 'im. Satan, *'e'll* see 'e don't do no more talkin'. We got to work quick, cap'n."

"I've an unbreakable hunch that my work is to stay right in this room," I told him. "And if you don't think that is going to be the hardest kind of work, with Miss Demerest expecting me, you're wrong."

"No," he said, "you're right, sir. An' I've got to get hout quick as my be. 'Ere's what I come to tell you. I hacted like a bloody dummy last night when you 'inted about Satan an' when 'e 'id 'is 'ands. Fair took me off my feet you did, just like Consardine. I 'adn't been away from you five minutes before I saw 'ow it could be done. 'Ell, I saw a dozen wyes it could be done."

"Right," I whispered, "but cut out the explanations. How are we going to find out if he does it?"

"That's what 'as been rackin' my brains all dye," he answered. " 'Ow to get in the temple an' look over the black throne. The gold one sinks down an' under, but the black one's built in. An' there's two of the *kehft* slaves watchin' it in there hevery hour of the dye an' night. Four hours shifts they got, an' you can bloody well wyger *'e* picks proper plucked uns for that duty."

"No trouble gettin' in; ther's 'arf a dozen trick entrances back of them thrones. Ten minutes, an' we'd know what was what. But 'ow the bloody 'ell to get them ten minutes? No good shootin' the pasty-faced blighters. That'd bring 'em all down on us. No good killin' 'em nohow. The minute they found 'em, Satan'd know what the gyme was."

He was silent for a moment.

"Cripes!" he said at last. "If we could only get some bloomin' hangel to drop down an' 'old a glass of the *kheft* under their noses! They'd follow it like a 'ungry lion would a bone! An' see nothin' else!"

I CAUGHT his shoulders, heart thumping. "By God, Harry! You've hit it!" My voice was shaking. "Do you know where he keeps that hell brew? Can you get at it?"

"Sure I know," he said. "An' there ain't none better at my trade than me, cap'n, as I told you. I'd sye I could get it. But then what?"

"We'll be the angel," I told him. "It works quick, I know that. How long does it keep them under?"

"I don't know," he answered. "Some longer, some shorter. We'd 'ave our ten minutes though, an' a lot to spare—

"Cripes!" he chuckled. "What a gyme! If they wake up before the relief comes, they ain't likely to say nothin'. An' if they don't, they ain't likely to get a chance to say nothin'. An' if they do get a chance either way, who the 'ell would believe 'em?"

"Get the stuff," I said. "Try to get it tomorrow. And now play safe. Get out of here. If you can manage it, tell Miss Demerest not to look for me tonight. Tell her not to worry. But take no chances. Harry, you're a wonder. If you were a girl I'd kiss you. Scoot!"

Again he chuckled; another moment and I knew he had gone.

I went into the other room and put out the dim light. For the first time since I had fallen into Satan's hands I felt free of that damnable depression, oppression rather, which had shadowed me. It was as though a door had begun to open. A door of escape.

I slept soundly. I awakened once in the night from a dream that Satan was standing over me, watching me. Whether it was all a dream, I do not know. Perhaps he had really entered to resolve some lingering doubt. If so my sleep must have reassured him, for it was that of one who had not a care on his mind. I lost no time worrying about it; in another moment I was asleep again.

The next day passed quickly enough. I was up early. As I was dressing, the phone rang. It was Consardine. He said that Satan wished me to go out to the yacht after I had breakfasted. He, Consardine, would accompany me.

There had been no change of plans then. I was still cast for my piratical rôle.

When I entered the breakfast room, Consardine was waiting for me. We ate together. I was itching with curiosity about Cobham. But I asked no questions, nor did Consardine speak of him. We walked down to the boat landing, talking of this and that. Tacitly, neither of us made any reference to the conversation of the previous day. It must have been uppermost in his mind, as it was in mine. Yet, after all, there was nothing more to say. He had made his position sufficiently plain.

A cutter was waiting for us, and took us out to the *Cherub*. The yacht was as beautiful inside as out. The captain was a squat, thick-set, broad-shouldered Newfoundlander. He was introduced to me as Captain Morrisy. It may or may not have been the name his parents gave him. Probably not. He was a genial pirate. A hundred years back, and he would have been floating the Jolly Roger. The first mate was a clean-cut, saturnine chap with the hall-mark of Annapolis. The crew were as hard-boiled looking a lot as any the marine corps ever produced.

The discipline was military and perfect. It reached its apotheosis in the engine room. The engines, specially designed, oil-burning Diesels, were marvels. So inter-

ested was I that lunch time came around before I realized it. I had not been mistaken about Morrisy. He told us tales of smuggling and gun and rum-running in which he had been active before he had signed with Satan. Born a hundred years too late for the Black Flag, he had done his best with the material at hand. He was a pirate, but I liked him.

When we got back to the château, I found a summons from Satan. With many misgivings I obeyed it. The misgivings were all wrong. I spent two of the most fascinating hours I had ever known. I was guided to that part of the great house which was Satan's own intimate domain.

I cannot begin to describe what I saw there, nor the atmosphere of those dozen or more chambers large and small, wherein that dark, strange soul took its delight. Each of them was a temple in which the mysterious indefinable and eternal spirit that humanity calls beauty, and has always worshiped and sought to capture, had become incarnate—a living thing.

And Satan was different. He was transformed—gentle, no mockery either in word or look. He talked only of the treasures about us. It came to me that he loved beauty even more than he did power; that he considered power only as a means toward beauty. And that evil though he was, he knew beauty better than any one alive.

WHEN I left him, his spell upon me was strong. I had to fight against the conviction that what I had beheld justified him as to any means he had taken to get it: that the true criminal was he who would try to thwart him. Absurd as it may seem, I felt myself hideously guilty in the plans I was harboring. It was with difficulty that I held myself back from confessing them, throwing myself on his mercy, swearing myself to him. I think that only the thought of Eve kept me from doing so.

That was, perhaps, his object. But I had to tell myself so, over and over again after I had left him, to banish the loathing I felt about going on against him. If this seems deplorable weakness, I can only say that he who thinks so would not if he had been subject to that same sorcery, and had listened to Satan preaching in the heart of the miracle he had fashioned.

If it was a trap, I escaped it. But to this day—I do not know whether in the greater sense Satan was not right.

The company at dinner helped me to throw off the obsession. A brisk bridge game afterward did more. It was close to midnight when I returned to my rooms. I had not seen Eve all day. Consardine had mentioned, casually, as we were going in to dinner, that she had gone to town, and probably would not return that night. I took it as a hint that it would be useless for me to venture to her room.

I dropped off to sleep, hoping for Barker. He did not come.

There were some truly charming people at the breakfast table next morning. Among them an Australian major, a soldierly and engaging scoundrel. We went riding together, following a different road than that which I had covered with Consardine. At one point it ran parallel to the driveway. A smart little roadster hummed by, headed for the château. Eve was driving it. She waved. The Australian took the greeting to himself, remarking that there went a damned nice girl. Everything seemed suddenly brighter. It meant that I would see her that night.

After we had stabled the horses, I hung about the pleasant terrace. Maybe I would get another glimpse of Eve, maybe even a whispered word. About four o'clock Consardine appeared.

Consardine seemed ill at ease. We had a drink or two, and talked of this and that, but it was plain that something was on his mind. I waited for him to speak, not without a certain apprehension. At last he sighed, and shook his great shoulders.

"Well," he said, "unpleasant medicine gets no sweeter while we hesitate over taking it. Come along with me, Kirkham. Satan's orders."

I remembered vividly his declaration that if his master commanded him, he

would unhesitantly take me prisoner. I felt a distinct shock.

"Does that mean that I am under arrest?" I asked quietly.

"Not at all," he answered. "There is nothing—some one—Satan wishes you to see. Do not ask me his purpose. I do not know it. I might guess, but—ask me no questions. Let us go."

I went with him, wondering. When he finally stopped we were, I thought, in one of the towers, certainly we had gone far above the ground floor. We were in a small, bare room. More a crypt, in fact, than a room. One of its walls was slightly curved, the bulge toward us. Consardine walked over to this wall, and beckoned me beside him. He touched a hidden spring. An aperture about a foot square, like a small window, opened at the level of my eyes.

The place into which I peered was filled with a curiously clear and palely purplish light. It was distinctly unpleasant. I became aware of a thin, droning sound, faint but continuous, upon one note. I was not enough of a musician to place the note, but it was quite as high as that made by the rapid vibration of a bee's wings. That, too, was unpleasant. Light and droning, with a concentration-shattering quality.

AT FIRST glance I thought that I was looking into a circular place in which were a crowd of men, all facing a common center. Then I realized that this could not be so, since all the men were in exactly the same attitude, crouching upon one knee. There seemed to be thousands of these crouching men, line after line of them, one behind the other, growing smaller and smaller and vanishing off into immense distances.

I looked to right and to left. There were the kneeling men, but now in profile. I raised my eyes to the ceiling of the place. And there they appeared to hang, heads downward.

I stared again at those facing me. It was strange how the purplish light and the droning clouded one's thought.

Then I realized abruptly that all those thousands of faces were—the same.

And that each was the face of Cobham.

They were the face of Cobham, drawn and distorted, reflected over and over again from scores of mirrors with which the place was lined. The circular walls were faceted with mirrors and so was the globed ceiling, and all these mirrors curved down to a circular mirrored slab about seven feet in diameter which was their focus.

Upon this slab knelt Cobham, glaring at the countless reflections of himself, reflected with sharpest accuracy by that clear and evil purplish light.

As I looked, he jumped to his feet and began to wave his arms crazily. Like regiments of automatons, the reflections leaped with him, waving. He turned, and they wheeled as one man in diminishing rank upon rank. He threw himself down upon his face, and I knew that unless his eyes were closed his face still stared up at him, buoyed, it must have seemed, upon the backs of the thousands reflected upon the slab from the mirrors in the ceiling. And I knew that no man could keep his eyes closed long in that room, that he must open them, to look and look again.

I shrank back, trembling. This thing was hellish. It was mind-destroying. There could be no sleep. The drone rasped along the nerves and would not permit it. The light was sleep killing, too, keying up, stretching the tense nerves to the breaking point. And the mimicking hosts of reflections slowly, inexorably, led the mind into the paths of madness.

"For God's sake—for God's sake—" I turned to Consardine half incoherent, white-lipped. "I've seen, Consardine—a bullet would be mercy—"

"Thrust in your head," he said, coldly. "You must see yourself in the mirrors, and Cobham must see you. It is Satan's order."

I tried to struggle away. He gripped my neck and forced my head forward.

The wall at this point was only a couple of inches thick. Held helpless, my head was now beyond that wall. Cobham had

staggered to his feet. I saw my face leap out in the mirrors. He saw it, too. His eyes moved from one reflection to another, striving to find the real.

"Kirkham!" he howled. "Kirkham! Get me out!"

Consardine drew me back. He snapped the opening shut.

"You devil! You cold-blooded devil!" I sobbed, and threw myself upon him.

He caught my arms. He held me as easily as though I had been a child, while I kicked and writhed in futile attempt to break the grip. And at last my fury spent itself. Still sobbing, I went limp.

"There, there, lad," he said gently. "I am not responsible for what you've seen. I told you it was unpleasant medicine. But Satan ordered it, and I must obey. Come with me. Back to your rooms."

I followed him, all resistance for the moment gone from me. It was not any affection for Cobham that had so stirred me. He had probably watched others in the mirrored cell from that same window. If the necessity had arisen, I would have shot Cobham down without the slightest feeling about it.

BUT this torture of the many mirrored cell, with its sleep slaying light and sound, its slow killing, in utter aloneness, of a man's mind—there was something about that, something not to be put in words, that shook me to the soul.

"How long will he—last?" I put the question to Consardine as we passed into my rooms.

"It is hard to say," he answered gently again. "He will come out of that room without memory. He will not know his name, nor what he has been, nor anything that he had ever learned. He will know nothing of all these hereafter—ever. Like an animal, he will know when he is hungry and thirsty, cold or warm. That is all. He will forget from minute to minute. He will live only in each moment. And when that moment goes it will be forgotten. Mindless, soulless—empty. I have known men to come to it in a week, others have resisted for three. Never longer."

I shivered

"I'll not go down for dinner, Consardine," I said.

"I would if I were you," he said gravely. "It will be wiser. You cannot help Cobham. After all, it is Satan's right. Like me, Cobham had taken the steps and lost. He lived at Satan's will. And Satan will be watching you. He will want to know how you have taken it. Pull yourself together, Kirkham. Come down, and be gay. I shall tell him that you were only interested in his exhibition. What, lad! Will you let him know what he has made you feel? Where is your pride?

"And to do so would be dangerous—for any plans you may have for the future."

"Stay with me till it's time to go, Consardine," I said. "Can you?"

"I intended to," he answered, "if you asked me. And I think both of us can stand putting ourselves outside of an extra sized drink."

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I poured. The glass in my hand shook and spilled.

"I'll never want to look in one again," I told him.

"The thing comes from Tibet," mused Consardine. "Or at least so Satan told me. It is a device of the lamas. They call it the 'Soul Slayer.' A good name."

He poured me another drink.

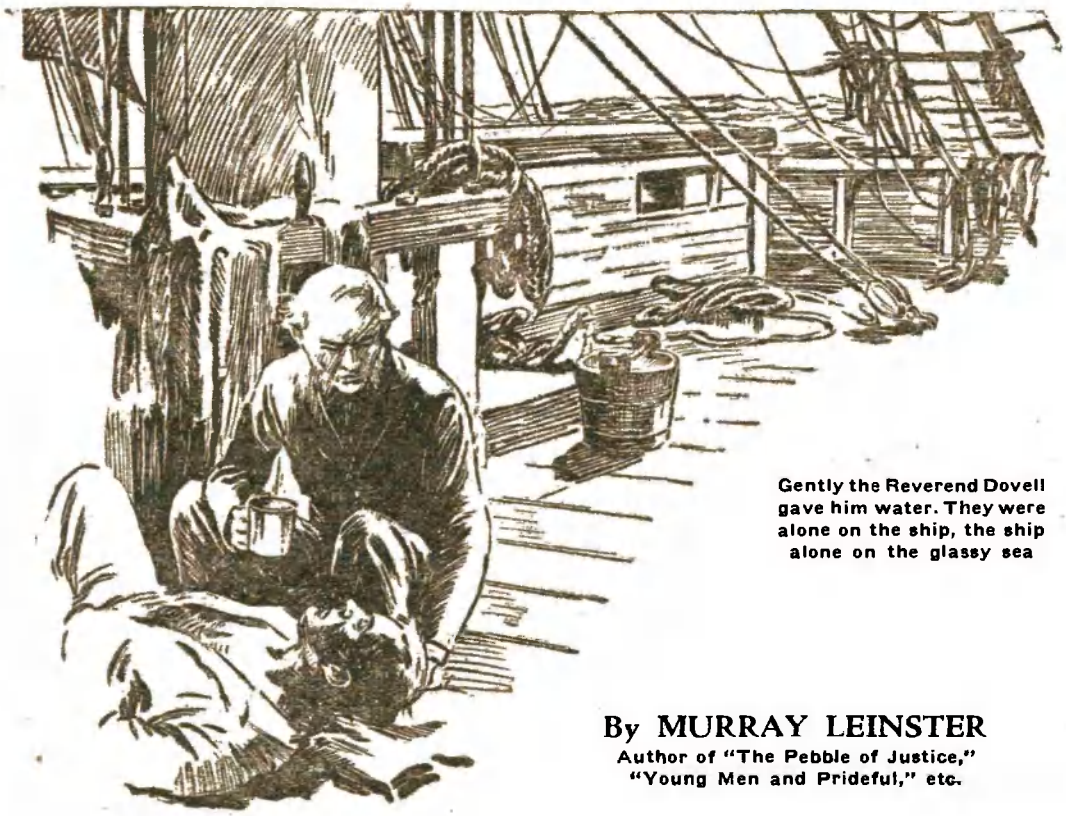
"Enough of that," he said briskly. "You must get it from your mind. Should Satan be at dinner—thank him for a new experience."

Satan was not at dinner. I hoped that he would receive a report, as no doubt he did, of my behavior. I was gay enough to satisfy Consardine. I drank gayly, and often.

Eve was there. I caught her glancing at me, puzzled, now and then.

If she had known how little of real gayety there was in my heart, how much of black despair, she would have been more puzzled still.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



Gently the Reverend Dovell gave him water. They were alone on the ship, the ship alone on the glassy sea

By MURRAY LEINSTER
Author of "The Pebble of Justice," "Young Men and Prideful," etc.

Plague Ship

Small men grow great, sometimes, in moments of crisis. And the little missionary didn't know how great he was until he had to conquer the whole Pacific

THIS is a story of plague ship, to be sure, but also it is a story of the world, the flesh, and the Devil. The *Lorelei* served as the world. Beecham was the flesh. At first, anyhow. It is hard to say where the Reverend Adam Dovell fits in, but the devil was in Sydney, for which port the *Lorelei* was bound. He doesn't matter in the story—the Devil, that is—save that the Reverend Adam Dovell was traveling halfway around the world by the cheapest possible route to wrestle with him spiritually. The cheapest way happened to be as a sort of skipper's guest on board the *Lorelei*.

The Reverend Adam Dovell was small and dried-up, with soft blue eyes and sparse gray whiskers. He seemed perpetually to be afraid that he was in the way, and as a superannuated leader of prayer meetings he seemed much less than likely to be important either to Beecham or the *Lorelei*. But he was.

The *Lorelei* docked in Honolulu, where Beecham visited the resorts of sailors and the Reverend Adam Dovell attended prayer meeting. Then she started off down the long slant toward the Southern Cross, with Sydney at the end of it. And while she sailed, the world and the flesh and

the Reverend Adam Dovell all came to have need of each other.

The Devil was in Sydney. He came later.

IT WAS night, and moonlight, and the seas were dark save for star-speckles on their tips. The *Lorelei* went swinging easily across the waters, moving smoothly and as surely as a young girl moves. Her full-spread canvas looked like milk, just faintly blue, yet infinitely white. Under her forefoot swirling stuff surged up and then dropped downward and surged up again. Swells, foaming as her bows cut them.

She went on as if exultantly. There was pride in the clean lift of her bowsprit. There was power in the smooth roundedness of every sail. Above all, there was grace in her gentle swaying as she went down the long slant from Hawaii. For days, now, with the southeast trade for a fair wind, no hand had touched a rope or stay. This was what the *Lorelei* was built for, and her head seemed to be among the stars.

So much for the ship, moving proudly in a fair orbit.

On her deck, though, there was no such zest of living. The planking shone white, cross-barred by the shadows of her rigging and the sails. There was a man at the wheel with a faint glow from the binnacle-light upon his breast. His face, above it, looked strained and gaunt. Forward, the watch officially below stayed above-deck instead. There was tenseness even in their resting poses.

A rat crawled from somewhere, weak and staggering. It moved into clear moonlight and cowered there. It looked dizzy and half blind. It bumped into something and staggered crazily away again, flung off-balance by the swaying of the ship.

A voice grown suddenly thin said tautly:

"There's one!"

A man swung his foot and kicked hysterically. He seemed to shrink with more than squeamishness, though, when his foot touched the rat. It screamed and seemed to crunch, but it flew up above the ship's rail and was seen no more.

Bitter words came from the shadow of the jib.

"We got 'em from that dam'd Jap schooner that lay alongside in Honolulu!"

Someone else said hopelessly:

"If it'd be only the rats an' the skipper, now. . . "

An authoritative voice called grimly, astern. Men went aft. They descended into the cabin. They came up again, bearing something long and wrapped in sail-cloth. They carried it to the rail and stood there. The Reverend Adam Dovell rather awkwardly took his place. Other men gathered, dwarfing him. They stood hatless for a space, while the Reverend Adam Dovell spoke confidentially and almost apologetically toward the empty sea and sky. Then there was a splash. The men dispersed, moving jerkily. The Reverend Adam Dovell went hesitantly below. Swells went sweeping by.

Somebody cried through chattering teeth, pointing:

"There's another one!"

A man went cursing toward the pointed-out thing. Another rat, dazed and helpless. He heaved it over with a belaying-pin under its body. He flung the belaying pin after it.

Then, from the forecastle hatchway, there came an odd scraping sound. A scratching, thumping sound. Men turned, quivering. Every man stared at the hatch in something near to superstitious fright.

Out of the black hole came a hand, groping blindly.

It found a hold and clung to it weakly. Another hand followed. Both hung fast for a long time, as if their owners were very weary. Then they strained. A head came into view. A neck. A hairy, tattooed chest. Laboriously, that head and chest thrust over the threshold of the hatchway. They rested there. Then the rest of the body came crawling slowly out onto the moonlit deck.

It was Beecham, sick and dizzy.

A WEAK voice came from him, wavering on his hands and knees. It tried to be a swaggering voice, but Beecham's throat was parched. He managed only a thin, croaking snarl.

"Well?" snarled the ghost of his voice, "who's goin' to heave me over? I got it now!"

The men on the deck broke, as suddenly as if released from bonds. They slept in the forecastle, all of them—the forecastle from which Beecham had just come with death upon him and death creeping after him to clutch at all the rest. The nerves of these men had been frayed for days. They had just seen their skipper go overside. Now Beecham, swaying, croaking thickly of horror—

They broke. They milled in panting tumult for seconds, each man knowing what was in every other man's thought. Beecham croaked at them again, profanely.

They fled, from him and fear and danger all at once. They raced aft in a disorderly, fear-crazed horde. Their running feet pounded on the deck. A voice shouted angrily at them. They bellowed it down, beside themselves with panic that had been pent up too long.

There was the abrupt flame of a firearm, with a cry to answer it. But a roar answered the cry, and a struggle and a splash followed the roar. Then there were poundings and the splintering of wood, and then the steady movements of the *Lorelei* altered. From the eager movement of the long slant down from Hawaii, her head swung upwind. Great spreading dents appeared in her moonlit sails. Her bow continued to turn.

She came head to wind and there were monstrous shudderings and rattlings aloft. She lost way. There was no longer foam at her forefoot.

Then there sounded the creaking of unoiled blocks. Boats hit the water alongside her. Oarblades flashed wetly. They pulled away and away.

The *Lorelei* fell off. Her sails filled again. But her wheel had been lashed for greater security in abandoning her. She surged forward, slowly, and found her helm and the wind and her sails so adjusted, the one to the other, that she lay almost but not quite hove to.

She had looked eager and graceful and exultant in the moonlight. Now she looked fretted and uncertain. Twice in succession she went aback, with her canvas making an indignant, protesting racket. Then she seemed to find a just medium.

She headed daintily upwind, lifting cleanly to the swells. She looked like a lady's horse, much too tightly curbed, curvetting spiritedly to show its willingness and its grace.

On deck, Beecham made other sardonic croakings. He seemed dazed and dizzy and past all help, but he snarled truculently. Twice his strength failed him and he sank to the deck. But when he could crawl he did so, and he croaked ironies from a parched throat.

He flung insults at the emptiness about him. "Lost y'nerve, huh? Won't touch me? Show me th' rail an' I'll go over! Or put a rope aroun' me! I ain't scared!"

There came soft, diffident footsteps on the deck. The footsteps of the Reverend Adam Dovell. Beecham snarled at him blindly—and collapsed.

Overhead, the *Lorelei's* canvas and spars made uncertain noises. The *Lorelei* fenced delicately with the trade wind which would drive her astern. With no hand to guide her, she tripped daintily nearer and nearer the wind's eye, and sometimes fell off, and sometimes regrettably was taken aback. She lost ground, then, but gallantly resumed her effort immediately after.

On her deck Beecham lay in a half-comatose state. In the hours between that time and dawn—while the *Lorelei* struggled fretfully against the trade wind—there were times when he babbled thickly. There were times when he beat his head weakly on the deck, as if to still by violence the anguish within it. But mostly, it seemed, the hours were filled with a raging thirst which the Reverend Adam Dovell

strove unskilfully and clumsily to allay.

WHEN the sun rose, Beecham was still alive. Not much alive, but not dead yet, either. He opened bleared eyes, and his throat tried to emit a groan, and he stopped it. Then there was a pause while he summoned strength.

He croaked a thick, scornful, savage inquiry as to why they didn't heave him over, when they'd heaved over rats with the plague. He had it. Pains in the groin and near the armpit, and a head that was sheer anguish. He said fiercely that there was no doubt. He had the plague.

But there was no answer. Sails slatted overhead. The motion of the *Lorelei* changed, and wavered, and then it grew steady again.

He lay still. He heard no voices, no movement anywhere. He did hear the rhythmic sound of swells against the bow. There was a sound which was a *Boom!* compounded with a sustained *Sh-sh-sh-sh!* Then there was another sound exactly like it.

The *Lorelei* still headed upwind. Something loose knocked irregularly against something else. That was all.

He listened for a long time. His head was agony. Thirst grew on him. He made a little moaning sound to himself.

On the instant there came tap-tapping footsteps on the swaying deck. A little, apologetic exclamation. Beecham fought to get truculence—scorn—into his expression.

Water poured into his mouth. He swallowed greedily. Its source wabbled. The water splashed on his face. It got into his nose and strangled him. He coughed weakly, and again there were helpless apologies. And he cursed in a racked whisper because this unknown man babbled, instead of pouring water. But more water came. Beecham drank. Abruptly, he ceased to remember.

THE same thing happened again and again. For hours. For days. Beecham was at no time fully conscious. Only rarely was he completely insensible. He lay on the deck because his weight was more than the Reverend Adam Dovell could handle. That first day, his fever rose and rose. He babbled absurdities.

Sometimes he fought, but the blows of his delirium were merely feeble pawings. Always he was thirsty, and always the Reverend Adam Dovell gave him water. The little man was almost as helpless as Beecham was, but from another cause entirely.

All his life had been spent absorbed in things of the spirit. He was totally unequipped to cope with an emergency which did not respond to resignation and to prayer. And soon he was horribly hungry, without the least idea of how to break out or prepare food with the unfamiliar equipment of the galley.

All this first and second day, nothing happened save that Beecham babbled, and thirsted and was given water. The *Lorelei* backed and filled, and daintily combatted the attempt of the trade-wind to drive her backward. She did lose ground. She did go back.

But not far, nor very fast.

Beecham went backward farther and much more rapidly. He had been a strong man. A very strong man. Abruptly, it seemed, he was utterly without strength. The Reverend Adam Dovell had been a puny specimen by comparison, but now—also by comparison—he was infinitely strong. He came often to Beecham, whom he could not move, and clumsily fed him water. His soft blue eyes were puzzled and querilous, now.

On the first day his belly grew empty. On the second he found sea-biscuit, and gnawed upon them ineffectually. Until he thought of soaking them in water to soften them, he remained practically foodless. Even then they were not appetizing. When he found drowned weevils in a soggy mess of which he had already eaten the greater part, he was nauseated.

But he kept Beecham supplied with water. It was a repulsive task, but he did not shirk it. It was all that he could do. His ineffectiveness was not because of

any inner lack, but because up to now he had been absorbed in other matters than practical and physical things. He knew that the *Lorelei's* helm was untended, and he thought it meant danger, but he could not imagine standing to it himself.

He prayed apologetically, and gave Beecham water, and left other and more practical matters to the supernal forces to which he had devoted his life.

It did not even occur to him to do anything about the rats, though of course he knew that they were responsible for the plague. There were very many rats below, and they were well enough fed. Better than the little man, and of course vastly better nourished than Beecham. He fed on his own substance only while the plague assailed him.

But the rats scurried about below-decks, and squealed and fought and gnawed—and of course died, too—in a complete absorption in their own affairs, while all unnoticed there passed through the fabric of the ship the sound of the *Lorelei's* battle with the trade wind. That sound was a rythmically repeated noise which was a *Boom!* compounded with a lasting *Sh-sh-sh-sh!* It was the swells rushing against the *Lorelei's* bow.

AN AEON passed. In nights and days it was a matter of seventy-two hours, or maybe ninety-six. In terms of racking thirst and suffering, of chaotic deliriums and pain-wrenched stupor, it was no less than an eternity.

But ultimately Beecham came back to fuller consciousness. He was still alive. The sun was shining and the waves were ultramarine in color and the *Lorelei* still kept up her finicky, persistent maneuvering. It was, if you like, a miracle that she kept it up so long. But the wind did not vary half a point in twenty-four hours, and the trim and helm of the *Lorelei* had found a very neat adjustment. It was not unduly strange. That Beecham should live was less strange still. No plague takes its victims cent-per-cent. Not even the deadliest.

He was, by now, almost a skeleton. In three days or four the plague had made him, who was not handsome to begin with, almost a caricature of a man. His eyes were deep-sunk. His muscles were wasted. But on this first morning of regained consciousness he somehow managed to turn himself over on his face.

He had had his fill of water for three days and nights. It was what had kept him alive, of course. But now it was not enough.

After the tremendous feat of turning himself over, he rested. He remembered crawling from the forecastle and his collapse upon the deck. He remembered his snarling defiance of the universe. But he knew nothing distinctly after that. Only a confusion of dreams and agony.

Somebody had fed him water. But he heard nobody about now. He thought vaguely that perhaps everybody on the ship had died of the plague, but somebody before dying had poured water into his gaping, thirsty mouth.

He began to crawl toward the galley. He was possessed by a ravening hunger. In the galley was food. He could not plan to reach it. He had only hope. He crawled.

Sometimes he moved six feet before it was necessary to stop and rest. Sometimes he could move only three. But presently, putting the occasional inclinations of the deck to use, he made a magnificent spurt of eight feet without pausing.

Then he was in the shadow of the galley. The door hung wide. Men had dragged foodstuffs hastily from its store-bins, as others had broken into the store-room itself. There were probably a double-handful of potatoes on the floor, trodden underfoot. They had been dropped in the haste of the sailors to be gone.

Beecham, on the floor, clutched at one of them. He was exhausted, so he chose first the half of a potato that had been crushed by someone's heel. It was black and bruised, but it was soft. He got bits of it into his mouth. Slowly—because he was so weak that he had to rest even from chewing—he got that small amount of

nourishment into his belly. Then he slept, across the threshold.

He waked to find someone tugging at him. Hands turned his body over. Beecham snarled instinctively, though weakly, even before he opened his eyes. Then he looked dizzily up into the soft blue eyes and upon the sparse gray whiskers of the Reverend Adam Dovell. The querulous helplessness of the little preacher's expression was more marked than it had been, but at the moment it was blanked out by wonder.

"How—how did you get here?" he asked, marveling. "I thought—you were too weak to move!"

"Weak, hell!" croaked Beecham hoarsely. "Where's everybody? Are you an' me the only ones livin'?"

"I don't know," said the Reverend Adam Dovell helplessly. "They went away in boats, very suddenly. I heard a commotion, and when I came on deck I—I seemed to be alone. Later on I found you, and you seemed to be very sick. I gave you water—"

"The dirty—" Beecham croaked blasphemously, referring to the missing crew. "Say! Gimme some more water!"

The Reverend Adam Dovell obeyed. He was clumsy about it, as always. But Beecham, at that moment, envied him bitterly the having of strength to walk upon his own legs and get his own water. He gulped the drink and said ravenously:

"How about some grub?"

"I'm afraid," said the little preacher apologetically, "that I don't know how to prepare—"

Beecham swore strangely and wonderfully, in a cracked hoarse whisper. He swallowed a slop of sea-biscuit soaked in water as it was fed to him by spoonfuls.

"What' you' done about the ship?" he demanded, presently.

"Nothing," said the Reverend Adam Dovell unhappily. He added meekly. "I know nothing about the sailing of a ship."

Beecham snarled furiously, from the deck from which he was too weak to rise, and from which the little man could not lift him.

"It seems to me," said the small preacher apologetically, "that it is necessary for us both—for me as well as for you—to prepare ourselves for whatever God may design for us. So I would like—"

Beecham flew into a passion his wasted frame could by no means support. He swore hoarsely—and went abruptly to sleep from weakness and exhaustion and a newly filled belly.

HE WOKE to find his incongruous shipmate standing diffidently by him with a tin cup and a spoon in his hand. There was a pillow under Beecham's head. But there was raging thirst in his throat and a gnawing hunger in his innards. The little preacher clumsily eased both—the thirst with water which Beecham gulped avidly, the hunger with another horrible mess of biscuit soaked in water.

"It's not very good," said the Reverend Adam Dovell wryly, "but I—I am rather useless, I'm afraid."

Beecham said pungent things, scathing things, while he wolfed the successive spoonfuls of sickly pap. He was weak and he was helpless, who had always been brutally strong. And therefore—lest he seem a weakling—he raked his vocabulary for biting, derisive phrases to apply to the small, apologetic figure which fed him. There was another reason for his verbal truculence, too. He envied the man who could stand on his feet and move about and work his arms and legs at pleasure. He, Beecham, could do none of those things. So he swore virulently between spoonfuls of the pasty mess as he was fed.

"I've been worried," said the little preacher anxiously. "Sooner or later there is bound to come a storm. When it does, this ship cannot survive with none to manage it. So I would like very much to —to speak to you concerning eternal things—"

Beecham regarded his benefactor with a malicious satisfaction.

"Meanin', get ready to die," he croaked. "Like hell! I ain't through livin' yet! Look here! We' drivin' westward, farther off our

course an' into a mess o' reefs an' islands an' Gawd knows what. So, y'see that rope there? Cast it off!"

His hand shook with weakness as he pointed. The Reverend Adam Dovell went hesitantly in the direction Beecham indicated. He fumbled, and Beecham made mewing, disgusted noises. Presently the little preacher managed to find the right rope. Under Beecham's croaked, profane orders, he managed to cast it off.

Instantly it leaped from his hands. A thunderous roar sounded aloft, while the rope poured skyward with terrific speed. The Reverend Adam Dovell looked aghast at the tumult he had caused.

Beecham grinned weakly at him. He looked rather like a death's-head.

"That's right," he croaked. "Now get over there an' cast off that one, too. Stan' off from the coils when y'cast off, though. That last rope near got you by the leg. Go on, now. No shirkin', else I'll—"

DESPITE his weakness, Beecham gloried in the giving of orders with all the artifice of invective and threat that a bucko mate would have used—and this to a gentleman of the cloth, a preacher, whose fingers were all thumbs.

To Beecham, the other's obedience seemed the result of fear. He could not conceive of meekness. But to the preacher, even Beecham's swearing seemed suddenly an indication of a spirit that he could not imagine.

After all, prayer and resignation are but parts of the proper functioning of a man. But the Reverend Adam Dovell had concentrated exclusively upon them. He now saw something admirable, if obscure, in Beecham's exactly opposite behavior. He could not conceive of Beecham's envy of muscles that functioned and arms and legs that moved.

So divers things happened on the *Lorelei*. From a distance she had been beautiful. She was still beautiful. She sailed up against the wind as if close-hauled, and came closer and closer, and sometimes fell off again. But always she tried with feminine persistency to accomplish the impossible. Once in a long time she actually did sail up into the wind's eye, and of course was taken aback. Her sails fluttered, with *thuttering* noises, and presently she fell away again and immediately tried once more to sail on a course that could not be sailed.

But there came a change in her appearance. A sail crumpled and came down with a rush. It was not stowed or furled. It merely came down and hung in huge untidy folds. The *Lorelei* yawed crazily. Her motion became erratic. She made wide, eccentric swoopings.

Later, another sail crumpled to a heap of dead cloth. A long time later, still another. Toward sunset a fourth sail dropped abruptly. Her jibs and topsails remained distended. Oddly enough, the balance of sails and wind and helm was once more nearly restored. Again she headed almost straight into the wind.

About an hour after sunset, the *Lorelei* emitted a strange, metallic, screaming noise from a windlass. It did not last long. Perhaps fifteen seconds. Perhaps twenty.

Afterward, in the moonlight, it would have taken keen eyes to see any further change in her appearance or her trim. But the difference was there. One of her bow anchors was no longer in place. Its lashings cut through and the windlass-pawl levered loose, the bow anchor now swung free a hundred and fifty fathoms down.

In the darkness the Reverend Adam Dovell, very weary, fed Beecham dreadful pap with a spoon. And he said urgently:

"You promised that if I did all these things you would listen to me, and your soul is of greater importance—"

But Beecham did not answer. He did not even open his mouth for the spoon. He was asleep, worn out. And the Reverend Adam Dovell stood up and sighed and went—stumbling a little from fatigue—back up to the bunk it had never occured to him to abandon.

The moon shone on and the swells surged and soughed beside the *Lorelei*. She

looked crippled, now, with her sails in great untidy folds upon her deck. She seemed hampered and limping and unsure.

She still strove to hold her place upon the waters, but it was with the uneasy, nervous motion of a hobbled horse. Beneath the glaring tropic moon her appearance was pathetic.

BEECHAM was wakened by a strange sensation. The *Lorelei's* motion was not free. It had caught on coral trunks and heads a hundred fathoms down, but far too brittle to hold it. Presently it tore free, and caught again, and then *Lorelei* came sharply around. She faced the wind directly. She pounded heavily for a moment, and there was a sliding sensation and a slight jar. Then her whole motion changed. She began to ride up and down with a new frequency, head to the tradewind. She was riding to anchor, though her still-spread canvas eased the strain.

Beecham heard rats scurrying below. He heard creakings and strainings. But he made sure the anchor held.

He went back to sleep.

When morning came he was able, by the little preacher's help, to look over the rail. There was a patch of sand, awash, on which the surf broke languidly. It would be covered at high water.

By the color of the sea Beecham could tell that the *Lorelei* had floated stern-first over a bank of coral still submerged, and now lay at anchor in what would some day be a lagoon. There was as yet no island; merely a sandbank awash, with shoal water extending to the northeast in an irregular curve.

For three days the *Lorelei* pitched gently and rolled lightly at this anchorage. On these three days Beecham took to himself the authority of a sultan and a dictator rolled into one, with traces of a bucko mate added. He railed fiercely at the Reverend Adam Dovell.

"It has pleased God," said the little preacher gently, "to spare your body. It is now my duty to persuade you to think of your spirit."

"You mean," snarled Beecham weakly —but shrewdly—"you still thinkin' about dyin'. Thinkin' of a gale. A'right! If one comes, we' finished!"

"And we should be prepared," said the Reverend Adam Dovell. He added humbly: "I myself am not prepared as I should be, but in helping you—"

"To hell with that!" snarled Beecham. "We' goin' to get prepared to live! How about some grub? An' then you hunt in that locker an' bring up those blocks. . . ."

And the preacher meekly scurried about on biddings of the flesh.

The food was better, now. Beecham, swearing at his companion's helplessness, sent him to break into the cabin stores. There was condensed milk for the skipper's coffee. Thinned with water and generously laced with whisky, it gave Beecham fictitious strength to drive the little preacher while some real strength flowed into him.

And the Reverend Adam Dovell cut his fingers mangling open tin cans, but he fared better, too, though he worked harder than ever before in his life. He shed his clerical coat while he trotted ever more urgently upon the myriad errands Beecham found for him. Having let down the driving sails of the ship, Beecham now seemed resolved that they should some day be raised again. He ate and drank and drove his companion fiercely.

A giant spider web of ropes developed, each strand of which had been contrived by Beecham and clumsily and ineptly strung by the little preacher. The little man's appearance changed remarkably, in these days. His shirt vanished, torn to shreds in the unaccustomed physical effort to which Beecham drove him. He lost his hat overboard. He worked hard. Very hard. His skin became reddened, and his hands blistered and roughened and began to form calloused spots. He came to eat as hungrily as Beecham himself, though he never omitted a devout grace before beginning on the contents of one of the tin cans he never learned to open neatly.

Sometimes he fell asleep while eating.

THEN there came a day when Beecham staggered precariously to his feet. The Reverend Adam Dovell watched him, rocking on his feet with fatigue. He had labored long and arduously, that day.

"Go on an' sleep," said Beecham impolitely. "I'm on my feet now. I'll do what needs to be done. Go on!"

"I think," said the little man, blinking with weariness but gently insistent, "that you should offer thanks—"

Beecham growled and went shakily aft. The Reverend Adam Dovell tried to offer thanks himself on Beecham's behalf, but went to sleep in the middle of it.

Later on he woke up, strangling. Beecham was lying on the deck. There was a poisonous taint in the air. The reek of burning sulphur. The little preacher got up and tried to drag Beecham forward, where the air was cleaner.

"I burned sulphur," growled Beecham, "t' get rid o' the rats. Had to anchor an' get rid o' them before we went into port. They carry plague. The whole dam' ship's fumigatin' now, though. No dam' quarantine officer'll think he has to sink or burn her, now."

He leaned heavily on the little preacher as they made their way to the bow, upwind.

"You should have had me help you," said the Reverend Adam Dovell, panting. "I'm clumsy, but—"

"Y'needed sleep," growled Beecham. Then, lest he seem to have conceded anything to humanity, he added, "I wouldn't trust y'with matches, anyways." And he added again, "Besides, I needed to anchor till I got strong enough t'steer. You'd tear the sticks outa her in a blow."

But all this was confusing and not disparaging enough. So he glared at the Reverend Adam Dovell and snorted scornfully.

THE cable parted while they slept, worn through by scraping on the coral bank. Beecham seemed unsurprised and satisfied when he woke and found it out. The *Lorelei* again fenced delicately with the trade-wind. Her jibs and topsails nearly balanced with her helm, and kept her heading into the wind. Beecham woke his companion and the two of them set to work.

The spider-web of ropes came into play. They were contrived of multiplying blocks which would enable even the puny strength of Beecham to be of some use.

The relative brawn of the Reverend Adam Dovell produced marvels. In a mere matter of hours he had one of the *Lorelei's* four dropped sails almost half raised again.

On the second day after the parting of the cable, that sail was almost taut. But Beecham helped a little, too, by taking a turn of the rope around some handy object while the little man breathed himself.

Two days later another sail drew. In fact, just ten days from her anchoring, the *Lorelei* was under full sail once more. She sailed persistently up into the wind. She looked feminine and fretted and eager.

She could move proudly again, the swirling stuff surging once more under her forefoot. And her crew was ready.

Beecham was a good deal stronger, now. There was no flesh on his bones. Far from it! But he walked on two feet. He no longer crawled. Often and often he rested, of course. The heavy work had been done by the Reverend Adam Dovell, now a sun-peeling wisp of a man in disreputable garments and with horny, calloused hands. His skin was reddened down to his waist because his upper garments were too far gone to shield him from the sun. His sparse gray whiskers were straggled and unkempt, but his air was no longer either diffident or apologetic.

He was able to grin!

On this tenth morning, Beecham took his place at the wheel. He had contrived blocks and pulleys to multiply his strength if needed. Then he cast off the lashings some unknown hand had put on the wheel to keep the *Lorelei* hove to while she was abandoned.

Her head paid off. Eagerly, she forged ahead.

THERE was a steamer half a mile away. She'd stopped, and her funnel emitted a thick black smoke. Her small boat drew near, bobbing up and down. Beecham watched it, his face working itself back to its normal expression of derisive scorn. He slipped the stay-loops over the spokes of the wheel and went to the stern-rail. There was a natty young merchant-marine officer in the stern-sheets of the boat. A man with spectacles, in solemn black, sat beside him.

"Ahoy there, the *Lorelei!*"

"Ahoy an' be damned to you," said Beecham derisively. "What's on your mind?"

He was lean and cadaverous and he wabbled on his feet. The Reverend Adam Dovell leaned against the deckhouse, unashamed though he was lobster-red from sunburn and his clothing would have been a disgrace to the lowliest of penitents, much less a leader of the pious. The mouth of the young merchant-marine officer dropped open.

He said:

"Why—er—you're the *Lorelei,* aren't you? The plague ship?"

"Plague ship, hell!" said Beecham. "We're sulphured from stem to stern. We're fumigated. Come aboard, if y'like."

"Your boats were picked up, with half the men in them dead. You'll want a doctor, I suppose. And the Reverend, here—"

Beecham roared disgusted profanity at him.

"To hell with that stuff! What we want's a position an' a course! We' headed for Sydney! Give us a course an—"

From there on, his speech was lurid. The spectacled man in black protestingly raised his hand:

"I'll come on board if you've any sick," he said earnestly. "But the Reverend Adam Dovell was left on the ship when she was abandoned by most of the crew. Can you tell me anything of his fate?"

Beecham jerked a thumb at his companion. The lobster-red little man came to the rail and said mildly:

"I'm very well, thank you. I believe we two will be able to sail this ship to Sydney. If you'll ask for a—a course to be given us—"

Merchant-marine officer and man in solemn black stared at him. The Reverend Adam Dovell went on clearly:

"If you'll do that, we'll carry on. My partner and I are quite capable of handling any situation we're likely to run into."

The boat went amazedly back to the steamer. Presently the steamer ran by, upwind, and a speaking-trumpet shouted down a course. Beecham bellowed an acknowledment. He put over the wheel. It was made easier by the *Lorelei's* own eagerness to be gone. Foam formed under her forefoot. She went trippingly, exultantly over the waters, with pride in the lift of her bowsprit and power in the roundedness of her sails. The steamer slowly dwindled astern.

"A hell of a note!" said Beecham, sourly. "I bet that guy figured you were goin' to duck out on me."

"I didn't," said the Reverend Adam Dovell. "I wouldn't."

"I know," conceded Beecham. He scowled at the far horizon. "You got right much to you for a little man. Y'better sail with me nex' voyage. Anyways, when we get to Sydney I'm goin' to take you places an' show you things. You taught me somethin' about muscle. You got more'n I'd ha' believed."

The Reverend Adam Dovell said humbly:

"Thank you. You taught me something too, about the spirit. I—I knew something of resignation and of submission and of prayer, before. Now I know something of struggle and defiance and—and courage. It—is going to be a great help to me in my work in Sydney."

Beecham grunted.

"Yeah?" Then he said generously: "I bet when you get to Sydney you plain give the Devil hell! I'm goin' to come an' listen to you sometime!"

Like moths to a flame

a polyglot crew of humans drifted into a once deserted ghost town. The magnetic will-o'-the-wisp that drew them was a fortune in jewelry. Snatched from a beautiful woman years before, it was supposedly hidden, by a man now dead, in that wraith-like, barren village. ***Who would find it? In which ramshackle house would it be found? Would it bring happiness or disaster to the finder?*** The stirring tale of this baffling treasure hunt is forcefully told in

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There in the wreckage she found him, his face ghastly in the light of the flares

By
BURTON W
PEABODY

Red Light—Green Light

The *Twilight Flyer* was equipped with every safety device known to railroading. She couldn't be wrecked. But she was, and here's the behind-the-headlines story of how it happened

AS THE *Twilight Flyer* rolled out of the Eastern Terminal that summer dusk, rumbling luxuriously over smooth steel rails and bearing its precious freight of six hundred human souls, it must have seemed beyond the bounds of reason that any shadow of disaster could lie ahead.

The railroad — the Northeastern — boasted itself one of the country's best; despite the financial illness of the troubled 'Thirties its equipment had been fully modernized, brought up to date.

Smooth-moving electric engines hauled the half-million-dollar trains out of the busy Terminal; steam Goliaths with automatic halting devices and elaborate controls waited to be coupled on at the Carrolton yards thirty miles west; along the right of way semaphores, signal lights, mechanical robots of unerring precision guarded the hurtling expresses as they rocketed day and night over the shimmering quadruple tracks of the system.

If an engineer dropped dead in his seat, if a signal circuit failed, if any other conceivable breakdown occurred, there was still, presumably, no peril. In such contingencies track inductors, the strangest robots of all, operating uncannily when everything else went dead, would still guard the flying expresses, letting them

run so long as the way ahead was clear but bringing to a swift, sure halt any train which an engineer failed to control in a zone of danger.

Humanly, scientifically, mechanically, it appeared virtually impossible for a major accident to occur.

Yet it did. . . .

ON THE night in question—the night of a certain holiday-crowded July third—word came that the *Twilight Flyer,* two hours out of the Terminal and thundering now through the misty, moon-drenched Canandaigua Valley, had hurled itself headlong into the rear of the *Midland Express,* instantly converting its own locomotive and two cars of the other train into twisted steel, with death, terror and screaming humanity as a somber accompaniment.

How could it happen? Why?

That was the question which troubled the appalled officials. Reams of testimony were taken on the subject—by the coroner's inquest, by the Public Service Commission, by the railroad officials themselves. Eventually the evidence was reduced to a criminal indictment and, on the railroad's part, a set of stern, stiff regulations for the future, to the end that the accident, almost impossible of occurrence though it was, might never by any possibility be repeated.

The whole episode, though recent, is already of the past—forgotten in the swift rush of time and later events. There are some though, among the living, who cannot—who never will—forget. And one among the dead who would never have forgotten had he lived. Four persons—a father, a lover, another lover, a weeping, contrite girl—were the unintentional participants in the chain of emotions, passions, acts and errors which caused the tragedy of that summer night.

For what happened that night was this:

ALONG about the time that the *Flyer,* still under electric power, was trundling over the last of the switches and crossovers leading from the terminal, Engineer Tim O'Neill, out of Carrolton Village, was just finishing his supper. Bluff, gray-haired Tim O'Neill in a few minutes now would be going down to the yard to take command of the big Goliath which would draw the train; just now, though, his thoughts were far from railroading.

He looked across the table with a frown.

"Where's Maizie, Kate? What's keeping the child?"

"I don't know. Working late, maybe."

"Not the night before a holiday she wouldn't be. Not in an office like where she is."

"Maybe shopping then."

Tim gave his wife a quick glance. "You're trying to ease my mind, Kate. And your own as well. Inside of you you're thinking the same thing I am."

"What are you thinking?"

"That she's run off again, over to the city or some place, with the new boy friend."

"You mean the Venable fellow?"

"The same! The sheik. The lady-killer. Handsome Regin-awld!"

"I don't like him, Tim."

"And did I say I like him?" Tim rose from the table, throwing down his napkin with disgust. "I've been checking up on him, over in town. He's a city playboy, Venable is. He's been divorced. He runs around. He's got a flock of lady-friends. His family's got money all right—maybe too much for their own good—and the boy throws it around like water. They ain't the kind for Maizie—him and his crowd."

Tim crossed to the window, staring moodily out. The scene was an old, familiar one. The broad valley; the railroad yard. Long lines of cars in the distance, standing in parallel rows or gliding slowly past each other like smooth steel serpents. Black forms of locomotives shunting to and fro, decked with rising plumes of white. The soft, faraway thunder of escaping steam came to Tim's ears across the quiet dusk, accompanied by the brassy melody of air-driven engine bells—a continual faint clanging.

All his life Tim O'Neill had known this, loved it.

With a feeling he could not put into words he turned back to Kate.

"Why can't she stick to her own? Why can't she be decent to Matthew? There's a lad for you—Matthew. The best man I ever had with me in my cab. He'll go places on the road, Matthew will. He's crazy about her too—and I thought she was about him till this new fashionplate tumbled in the way."

"I've talked to her about it, Tim, but it don't do no good. She's that defiant age. She says she's out of school now and working, and you and me can't live her life for her."

"Neither we can, Kate. But we got a right to guide her. We got a right to swing a caution signal for her when things look wrong and give her a green light when she's going straight. We got a right to do that.

"Well, I got to be going." Tim reached for his hat. "We'll have a talk with her, when I get in from the run. Meantime don't worry. She's a good girl at heart; she'll turn out all right."

Tim O'Neill would have been distinctly surprised, could he have seen his daughter at that moment.

THE turret-topped coupe, built like a gray naval destroyer and about as long, had swerved in under the firs and pines beside the long building with the soft-lit windows and the neon sign.

Inside, rose-shaded lights glowed dimly over the white-clothed tables and an orchestra played hauntingly. Maizie and her fashionplate found themselves a table in a secluded corner. The place was the Tiger Rose Tavern, on the Canandaigua Parkway. Seventy miles from the city, forty beyond Carrolton. It had been fast driving.

"What'll you have, Maizie?"

"I'm not hungry, Rej. I'm too excited."

"A drink will fix you."

"I'm still dizzy from the ones we had in town."

"Dizzy? You couldn't be. Two-three Tom Collinses couldn't make you dizzy. It's like drinking lemonade."

"They didn't feel like lemonade."

"Well, another one won't hurt you. Hey, you with the pencil and the pad. Take a letter. Take a letter to the bartender. Tell him mix us a couple. Plenty of ice—and for Pete's sake put in some gin."

He beamed across at Maizie. Maizie regarded him with troubled, uncertain blue eyes.

"You sure it's going to be all right, Rej? About finding the justice and all?"

"You mean and get the little white paper?"

"That's the first thing, Rej. That little white paper declaring us man and wife."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. We'll find a justice all right. I'll take care of everything, honey. Leave it to me."

"I feel kind of scared, Rej."

"There's nothing to be scared of."

"I mean running away like this."

"That's nothing to be scared of. You sent your old man the telegram, didn't you?"

"I sent it, yes. Not to the house though. To the yard. I didn't want Mom to see it."

"That's all the better. He won't get it till train-time. Gives him all the less time to start something."

"What you mean—start something?"

"You're a minor, aren't you? Infant in the eyes of the law. He might give it to the police—send out a general alarm or something."

"Could they stop us?"

Venable laughed. "Yeah—maybe—if they tried hard enough. But I'll fool 'em. I know those hick cops. Money talks, and it's going to talk plenty tonight where we're going."

"Where're we going?"

"Honeymoon land, darling!"

Maizie smiled; but almost at once her face clouded again. "I feel so uneasy. Like I'm doing wrong or something. When I think of Daddy and Mom and Matt and everybody—"

Venable took her hand across the table. "Listen, sweetheart. You told me in town

you weren't going to talk about that any more."

"But I keep thinking about it. I'm supposed to be practically engaged to him."

"Engaged?" Venable laughed again. "What's an engagement? I know plenty of girls engaged five-six times and broken 'em all."

She looked at him forlornly. "He doesn't deserve it. Not a person as nice as Matt. He's been more than a brother to me ever since I was a little girl—"

"Honey darling—listen to me!" Venable caught her hand tightly in both of his. "You got to think of yourself, too—what you deserve, what I deserve. You don't get anything in this world by being good; you get what you want by taking it. You told me in town you wanted to get away from it all. You don't want to go back to it, do you? Give up all we've planned—all the wonderful things? Give everything up and go back to it—back to the engines and cinders and grease and dirt and railroad spikes?"

Maizie drew her hand away and rested her forehead heavily on her palms.

"Oh, I don't know what I want. I feel so queer and muddled. I feel like crying. I must be drunk or something."

"You're not drunk, darling. Only excited. You'll feel better in a minute. Looky—here comes our drinks now. See?—just like I told you. Lemonade. Even got a hunk o' lemon on top. Take a sip, darling, and you'll feel better."

She took a sip and looked at him dubiously. "Oh, I don't know what I ought to do. Sometimes I get so sick of it all. It seems to me like all I've ever seen in my whole life is engines—cars. All I've ever smelled is oil and smoke. And now I'm a steno in a railroad office. Sometimes I feel like I don't want to ever, ever see a locomotive again."

"You won't honey. We'll ride on airplanes. And steamboats. Reggie'll buy you a steamboat. A great big yacht. Reggie'll buy Maizie anything she wants if she'll only smile and be nice. There—that's better. You look sweet, honey. You're my dream girl." He lifted his glass. "Come on—let's finish 'em up and get on the floor. They're swinging it, the orchestra is. Let's get going. Hey, you with the pad. Take another letter. Same as before. All right, Maizie—let's go! Let's step!"

They stepped.

Melody. Music. Drums. Rhythm. *When It's Swingtime in the Springtime.*

"Only it isn't springtime, Maizie. It's summer. Almost Fourth of July. Going to be a great big Fourth of July honeymoon for Maizie and me."

A Fourth of July honeymoon for Maizie and her man. A great big Fourth of July honeymoon—starting in the Tiger Rose Tavern, on the Canandaigua Parkway.

"IT'S a beautiful night," said Tim.

"Yes, a beautiful night." Matt, vigorous and pleasant, swung his huge young bulk to the engineer's side of the cab, glancing back along the train and over the noisy Carrolton yards where they stood. "Moonlight an' everything. A grand night for a run."

They had just coupled onto the *Flyer;* brake, airline and engine control tests had been completed; everything was in perfect order; they were ready to go.

They were on a heavy holiday schedule tonight—trains coming through on a tight three-minute headway, and the yard about them was a continuous bedlam—bells, puffing engines, gliding cars. Ahead, on their own track—the outside westbound track—the caution signal still blazed yellow where the last section of the *Midland* had just gone through.

Tim waited, hand on throttle, for the light to clear and for the conductor's signal to come over the airline. Matt, back at his post, adjusted the automatic stoker and screeching injector, deftly holding steam pressure just below the blow-off point, ready for the start.

"Telegram, Mr. O'Neill! Telegram!"

A boy, slightly breathless with running, was climbing up the engine's steel ladder.

O'Neill reached down for the message

with a suddenly constricting heart. Was this about Maizie? Had something happened to her?

He ripped it open with uneasy fingers—saw with relief that it was signed with Maizie's name—and then with a renewed, clutching constriction he read the brief, disjointed phrases:

LEAVING TONIGHT REGGIE MARRYING FORGIVE ME LOVE

He sat staring numbly at the words. It was his daughter, his child, who had written this. His child—running away with that no-good! And the way she had written it! Not even ten clear words. She had said it in seven. It didn't sound like her—not like Maizie in her right mind—to write like that. Leaving *with* Reggie, he supposed she meant. And *marrying forgive me*—what did that mean? A priest? A decent Christian marriage? Or was this some altogether unhallowed, godless affair? Tim felt himself growing cold inside.

"What is it, sir? Has something happened?"

He was aware of Matt's big young figure standing solicitously over him. Matt, the man who loved her—the man she had seemed to love—and was forsaking.

He held the message out to him painfully. "It's news none too good, lad. Steel yourself. Steel yourself and read it."

Matt read it and stood as if transfixed, his feet apart on the engine's steel deck, his corded hands gripping the yellow sheet.

"The hyena!" he muttered. "The lousy rat! He's got her hypnotized or doped or something!"

"That's what I'm thinking."

"You got to stop 'em!" Matt exploded. "You got to do something!"

"What can we do? There ain't time."

"You can stop 'em! You can get the police out! Where'd that boy go—that messenger!"

Matt dove for the head of the ladder, peering out. As he did so the signal went. Two shrill, small blasts on the cab's air-whistle. The starting signal.

Mechanically Tim cracked open the throttle. The train began to move.

Matt was instantly beside him. "You got to stop 'em, man!"

"I'll stop 'em," Tim said, "so help me God!"

"But when? Where?"

"At the next stop. At Franklin City."

"That's two hours off! You're giving 'em half the night to get away!"

"Steady, lad! We got a job to do. The trains must run."

For an instant Matt stood staring down at him, then as if in a dream he turned away. With a glance at the valves and dials he crossed the deck and dropped into his seat on the firing side, peering at the signal lights ahead as the strict engine ritual demanded.

"Green!" he called.

"Green!" Tim repeated.

They were picking up speed now; around them the wind was commencing to hum. Switch and yard lights went by—red, green, purple; the yard limit lights; the last lights of Carrolton; and presently they were boring into darkness—the darkness of the long, rising Canandaigua Valley, under the faint and silvery glow of the rising moon low in the east behind them.

THE playboy unclutched his arms from the girl and led her back to their table for the fourth time. The Tiger Rose had proved pleasant, too pleasant to leave in a hurry. They had already sent several letters to the bartender, and the replies had come.

Fresh replies, enticingly tall and frosted, stood on the table as they swayed into their seats.

Maizie looked across at her escort and giggled.

"You look so funny, Rej. You got four eyes and two noses. Your face keeps jumping around. If you felt like I feel you couldn't drive a car."

Her escort looked at her speculatively over the rim of his glass. He set down the glass and took her hand.

"Listen, sweetheart. This is a pretty swell joint. How about staying here?"

"What you mean—staying?"

"We're going to be man and wife, aren't we? This is a pretty swell joint."

Maizie giggled again, trying to focus her eyes. "How about that little white paper—declaring us man and wife?"

"We'll get the little white paper, honey. What's the difference? We're going to be man and wife. We'll get it in the morning."

"Oh—" She drew a sharp breath, clutching at the table-edge. "Rej—you're terrible!"

"It's nice to be terrible, honey. You don't know how nice."

She half struggled to her feet. "Oh. I got to go! I got to get out of here! I got to go—"

"Hush, darling! Sit quiet a minute. Listen! You're not in any condition to go. What you need is rest—sleep. I'll get you a room here. A room all by yourself."

"No—no!" She staggered up, passing her hand wildly across her eyes. "I got to go! I don't know what I'm doing! Take me from here. Take me—"

"I'll take you, honey! I'll take you—" He careened around beside her, steadying her. "'S all right, honey. Everything's going to be all right! We'll get going. We'll find a justice like we planned. Come on—let's get going."

He motioned to the waiter, paid the bill. Together they wavered toward the door.

"I feel like the wreck of the Hesperus."

"You look sweet, honey darling."

She was soft and helpless against him; in the dim-lit vestibule he caught her arm tighter and they lurched together in a flaming, drunken kiss.

"Honey! Sweetheart! My wife!"

"No! No, Rej— No! We got to go! We got to get—"

"All right, darling! We'll get it. Come on! Let's go!"

In the parking space he pushed her into the car, climbed in himself. He stepped on the starter; the motor came to life with a whispering roar; and in another moment the big gray destroyer had swerved out onto the parkway and was heading giddily west along the endless ribbon of concrete.

OUT of the darkness beside the humming rails, summer mists were commencing to creep. Gossamer veils across the moonlit fields; a vague, silvery glow in the engine's headlight beam, obscuring the distances.

"Can you see it yet, Matt?"

"Not yet I can't."

"Well, watch for it. I can't see so very good here."

Matt dropped into his seat on the firing side. Almost at once he called sharply—

"There it is! And it's yellow!"

"Yellow!" called Tim at almost the same instant.

The color meant that the train ahead was less than three miles away—just three signal blocks away—since a running train always leaves a trail of one red and two successive yellows behind it.

It also meant delay—on this troubled night, of all nights. Tim knew that it was permissible to run through the yellows, but only with the train well under control. Running through, though, required a special technique—because when a signal shows yellow or red the electric track inductor beneath it is dead, and a dead inductor automatically halts the train. To offset this, there was, in each engine cab, a so-called forestalling device; and by setting the forestalling lever it was possible to nullify the action of the inductor for a few seconds—long enough for the train to pass.

Tim forestalled, first shutting off the throttle and easing on the brakes, getting the train under control.

"We're crowding the *Midland* close," Matt called.

"Yeah, we're running thick as subway trains tonight. This stuff's slowed them down out ahead."

They continued on cautiously at half speed. The next semaphore was yellow; so was the next, and so was the one after that. Always ahead was the thin, moonlit mist, occasionally illumined to a blinding glow as the headlight of an approaching eastbound train loomed out of the west—a glow that for a moment suffused the

earth, vanishing instantly into strange darkness as the train crashed by.

Matt moved restlessly from his seat to his valves and dials, back to his seat again.

"The way we're going we'll never get to Franklin City at all!"

Tim did not answer. There was a gnawing perturbation in his heart which he scarcely dared let himself feel or think about.

Suddenly he called eagerly—

"It's changed, Matt! It's green!"

"Green!" said Matt quickly.

Tim jerked the throttle wide. Maybe they would be getting to Franklin City on time after all, or nearly on time. The big Goliath surged ahead. The speed indicator crept swiftly up. Fifty—sixty—seventy—

The train was a roaring rocket once more, hurtling with its five-hundred ton weight into the night and moonlit mist.

WESTWARD, along the Canandaigua Parkway, the silver gossamer had penetrated too. A magical glow lay over everything—luminous haze among the hills—floating silver lakes across the fields and valleys.

Venable, at the wheel of the rushing car, looked out at the scene romantically.

"Wonderful night. Wonderful, beautiful honeymoon night," he declaimed ecstatically.

Maizie, beside him, did not answer. He looked at her to see if she was still the same. Yes, she was still the same—curled up awkwardly on the seat as she had been from the time they left the Tiger Rose. Sleeping the sleep of the dead. Or of the drunk.

Her protector shrugged cheerfully. "Can't marry girl asleep," he told himself. "No use finding justice with girl asleep." He considered the situation a moment. "Got to have honeymoon anyway. She wouldn't want to miss honeymoon. Find justice later on if she wants."

He knew the place for it: an ideal hideaway.

In a few minutes now—just a few miles ahead—the Canandaigua Parkway would become a state road. A state road that continued westward, paralleling the railroad tracks, with a branch a little farther on that forked south through rolling, descending hills to cross the tracks at Ibsenville.

And south of Ibsenville, along that same branch, was the place he knew: a secluded inn. A place where money talked and the people did not. Yes; an ideal place for him and his honeymoon girl.

Venable retarded with a violent pressure of brakes where the parkway ended, slued drunkenly past warning reflectors and direction signs, and stepped on the gas again as the dancing headlights pricked into a vista of rolling countryside and uneven black-top road.

A few minutes here and he retarded once more, cutting sharply left. The south branch. The branch to Ibsenville.

Now the road ran gently downward amid woods, fields and descending hills, all faintly bathed in mist. Soon scattered lights appeared; houses drifted past, set back darkly from the road. They were coming into the little town.

Scarcely retarding, the gray destroyer swept onward, down the main street. Stores flashed past; parked cars; townspeople. Several hilarious youngsters threw firecrackers. Venable laughed and kept on going.

All at once, at the foot of the street, a gate loomed through the mist. A wooden gate, diagonal-striped, extending across the road. A red lantern waved wildly. A gong was ringing.

With all his drunken strength Venable stepped on the brakes, trying to stop. The heavy destroyer slid with squealing tires along the black-top, still lunging onward, and came to a halt at last against the gate, its radiator pressed against the yielding boards, its headlights glaring through.

Out of the east, at that instant, came the crescendo wail of a locomotive whistle, and from the left a train whipped past on the nearest track—a clatter of wheels and whizzing cars scarcely three feet in front of them. It passed with the whistle still tooting, the engineer staring down.

Maizie jerked madly upright at the commotion. "My God, Rej!"

" 'S all right, darling. 'S all right! I stopped, didn't I?"

"I'll say you stopped!"

She stared after the departing train, groggy yet queerly wide-awake. She had seen the engineer's face staring down—it was one she did not know; nor had she recognized the train. But within her, subconscious instincts were stirring—lifelong memories and perceptions. She was hazily aware of some peculiar, irregular thing occurring.

The train was swinging around a right hand curve; and on the curve was a yellow semaphore. She saw the light change from yellow to red at the train went by, and the next instant came the grind of brakes.

"That's queer," she said in a dreamy tone. "He's stopping."

"Maybe there's a station there."

"No, there isn't any station. It's an emergency stop. Because look— See that!"

THE last car had halted just beyond the semaphore, and from the rear platform a flagman with a red lantern had dropped to the ground. He came running back around the curve with something in his arms, approaching the crossing where they sat.

A few yards from them, at the edge of the crossing where the track straightened out, he stopped abruptly, jabbing flares vertically into the ties, strapping torpedoes around the rails.

"Now what's that palooka doing!" Venable exclaimed. "Jeep, look at him! Celebrating the Fourth! Yes, sir. Skyrockets! And toy pistol-caps on the track. Bounce the engineers in their seats when the trains go by. That's right, big boy! Point 'em up! Shoot 'em at the sky. He's a crazy brakeman—"

"Hush, Rej—hush!"

Maizie was peering intently out, listening.

The old gateman was calling to the flagman:

"What happened? What d'ya stop for?"

"Dunno," the flagman said. "Guess the engineer forgot to forestall."

"Well, I wouldn't blame him none, the way that guy come slam-bangin' into the gate. What train you runnin'?"

"*Midland. Midland*, third section," the flagman called as he turned and ran back to his train.

Maizie turned to Venable accusingly. The thing she had hazily sensed was only too vividly clear now.

"Oh, Rej!" she cried. "You made him stop! The engineer was looking back at us when he went through the yellow light and you made him forget to forestall!"

"Forestall!" Rej chortled. "You mean foreclose! You mean he forgot to foreclose his mortgage. Why doesn't the boob go? What's he standing there for?"

"Can't you understand, Rej? The train stopped automatically because the engineer failed to forestall through the yellow light. When it stops it can't start again till the fireman climbs to the ground and resets the halting device. That's why the flagman has to set up flares."

"Funny kind of a railroad," Rej laughed.

"Not as funny as you think, Rej! It's a pretty serious thing to stop a train!"

"All right, if it's serious we'll get out of here. Got to get going anyway. Hey, you with the whiskers—put that gate up! The train's gone past. Put it up!"

"Can't," the gateman said. "Can't lift the gate till the bell stops ringing."

"Well, disconnect the bell. That'll make it stop. I'm going through!"

"Rej—stop!" Maizie shrieked.

But Venable was already in gear. He backed, then charged, swerving rightward onto the crossing, past the gate's free end.

Drunkenly, he swerved too far. The wheels dropped off the edge of the road planking; the car bounced and veered sharply into the track, striking down the flares.

" 'Sake! Why don't they pave the road! How they expect you to cross if they don't pave it?"

"Rej, get off! Back up! The bell's still ringing! There's a train coming somewhere! There're four tracks ahead of you! Back up—get off!"

"I'll get off, baby, don't worry! I'll back up. Just wait till I cut this wheel. I got on here and I can get off all right. Train isn't going to hit us, honey. . . ."

FOUR miles east, while this was happening, the *Twilight Flyer* was eating the rails. Coming at seventy miles an hour, making up time. For the last dozen signal blocks the lights had been green—or else had turned green before the train reached them. There had been no slowing down.

Now there was another yellow. Tim called it. Matt repeated it.

"It'll likely clear before we reach it."

"I hope it does! We've been delayed enough tonight already."

But this time it did not clear. Tim hurriedly jammed on the brakes at the last minute, at the same time forestalling. He looked at the speed indicator and realized with a shock that he had gone through the yellow light at fifty miles an hour. He was allowed thirty.

He cut the speed down and coasted ahead, watching for the next semaphore. It appeared presently, far ahead in the thin mist. Yellow again.

The train was still coasting. Tim's mind was coasting too. Thinking of Maizie; worrying. He glanced at the speed indicator again and frowned. A litle while ago he had been overrunning. Now he was down to twenty-eight. He wasn't holding his speed at all tonight. He cracked open the throttle a little, and felt the forward surge of the engine.

Ibsenville was ahead now. Ibsenville with its right-hand curve, and on the curve the next semaphore—hidden at this distance not only by the mist but by the curve itself and by the hills of the town.

Suddenly, far ahead on the long, straight tangent, Tim saw a queer sight—one that for the moment made him forget his worries, his bad driving and everything else. A pencil of light, as from an automobile's headlights, was cutting faintly leftward across the mist, and it seemed to come from his own track. It looked as if a car had somehow gotten onto the track at the well-guarded crossing and had stalled there.

Instantly alert, he yanked at the whistle, just as Matt gave a warning shout. At the whistle's blast the car appeared suddenly to move—sliding quickly backward—rightward—off the line of the railroad tracks. It bounced and veered wildly as it went, its headlights jiggling and swinging across the mist in a great, brightening arc, blazing suddenly fully into Tim's eyes as the car jerked to a halt just off the tracks.

FROM around the right-hand curve beyond, at that moment, burst the headlight of an approaching eastbound train, adding its fierce intensity to the car's glare. Tim found himself suddenly plunging forward into a curtain of mist as bright as day; a blinding, dazzling luminosity that filled the whole scene before him.

He heard Matt yelling:

"Where's that car! Did he get off all right?"

"Yes—he's off! He's clear!"

With a swishing roar of successive cars the eastbound train shot by, carrying half the light with it, and the next second Tim's locomotive swept past the glaring headlights of the car. Instantly all the light was gone, blotted into a strange, vast darkness—a darkness deepened by the swirling, low-lying smoke and vapors of the vanished eastbound train.

Out of the darkness came cries and shouts, and in the split second of passing the crossing Tim's squinting, half-blinded eyes saw a red lantern waving—a gateman frantically yelling; he saw the car, too—big, gray, familiar—and from the car's window a girl leaning—pointing and shouting—and the girl, he realized, was Maizie—his child!

He stared back, trying to see and hear; but the voices were lost in the roar and clatter of his train, and the last he saw of the scene was Maizie's wildly pointing hand.

Under him torpedoes were suddenly blasting; before him, as he whirled about, loomed a phantasmagoria of horror. A blur of smoke and darkness—and through it the lurid red eye of a semaphore blazing at danger, the twin red lights of a halted train, a flagman's desperately swinging lantern by the track.

In a frenzied, dreadful nightmare, Tim slammed on the air and reversed the driving wheels, his eyes flashed to the speed indicator. He had thought he was going thirty. He was going forty-five.

Helplessly, with irresistible force and weight, the five-hundred-ton train plowed on. . . .

A GIRL'S scream pierced the night. Maizie's scream. She beheld her father's train with grinding, spark-rimmed wheels and wailing whistle hurling itself like a monster of destruction straight into the halted *Midland Express*.

Thunders of a shattering universe filled the air; a titanic crumpling of metal; an enormous splintering of glass. And then the horror of human shrieks, cries for help. And the fantastic, awful roar of released steam, bursting through broken flues.

She heard herself still screaming— "It's my father! Oh, my God—my God—"

Venable grabbed her arm roughly. "Shut up, Maizie! Shut up!"

"It's my father! It's my father's train! Oh, I've got to get out! Let me out—"

"Stay with it, baby! We've got to get away from here!"

"No, you don't, mister!" a gruff voice rasped. A burly town policeman had leaped to the running-board. "You sit right where you are! You're under arrest."

Venable glared at him. "What you mean, arrest? You can't hold me, you hick cop! You don't know who I am. I didn't do anything. I just got stuck here."

"I'll say you're stuck!" The officer, with a club in his hand, tightened his grip on the side of the car. He pointed with the club. "Drive up there now—if you're not too drunk. We'll see if there's anything we can do to help."

Honking cars were already converging magically from all directions, turning into the narrow lane and bumpy fields beside the right of way. Venable followed the procession, over the rough ground.

Ahead, in the mist and darkness, the beams of halted cars shone like searchlights upon a scene of terror. Two coaches lay zigzag across the rails and in the ditch; and entangled with them, partly beyond them, was the overturned locomotive of the *Twilight Flyer*.

Hundreds of people had piled off the trains, and doctors and volunteer rescue squads were already at work, hurrying, bustling about, in the checkered light.

Maizie stared with horrified eyes upon the scene, only half aware of what was going on around her as Venable swung into position by the other machines. As he stopped his car, another officer hurried up, addressing the man on the runningboard.

"That them, Joe?"

"Yeah—that's them, chief."

"Well, hold the guy. Sling the bracelets on him. We want him. The railroad bulls want him. We've got enough criminal negligence counts on him to put him away for a long, long rest. It's his doing—all of this." He jerked his head, briefly, toward the tracks. He spoke again, his voice lowering, softening. "I'll take the girl. Better come with me, miss. They want you in a hurry down below. Your father's hurt. . . ."

She went with him, stumbling, unseeing, through the checkered light.

DOWN where the engine had gouged a grave for itself, one of the rescue parties was at work. The officer made way for her through the crowd of spectators.

"He's dying," she heard someone say.

They had gotten him out of the cab. Scalded, injured, cut, he lay wrapped in a blanket, with heavy emergency swathings of gauze about his head and upper body. A doctor was working over him. A priest had arrived. Standing over him, gazing solemnly down, was a towering, heavily bandaged figure—Matt.

She dropped hysterically to her knees.

"Daddy—Daddy—"

His closed eyes opened, looking up at her with a strange, glazed calmness as if he were already beyond all pain.

"It's all right, daughter," he said in a queer, steady monotone. "It's all right. I went through a red light. I'm going out. It's better so."

"No, Daddy—no—no—" Racked and choking, she flung her arms about him, pressing her face to his. "It wasn't your fault, Daddy. I'm the one to blame—I'm the one to blame—"

"It's all right," he said again in the same strange monotone. "It's all right. It's clear lights ahead now. I'm going out—" His voice died away, then came again, not quite so steadily; she had to strain her ears to catch the failing words— "May it be clear lights for you, too, daughter—for your mother and you—and Matt—always—"

"Daddy—" she quavered.

"Better take her," the priest said softly; and she felt herself lifted by powerful, gentle hands. Matt's arms were about her, and with her closed eyes blinded with tears she rested her head against him. Denim, grease, the sounds of the railroad—even chaos, tragedy, death; this was where she belonged.

About them the hushed voices of the doctors, the murmur of the priest in the last ritual, and the sounds of the night of rescue went on.

LOOKING AHEAD!

THE RINGER

He couldn't add three and five—but he could block a drop-kick. He didn't know a verb from a test-tube—but he could tear off a beautiful end-run. He talked in a hillbilly drawl, and he got through his classes by the grace of an indulgent faculty—that didn't dare flunk him. He was a heel and hero—a ringer; and he paid his tuition in forward passes. Beginning a sensational first novel of the amateur sports racket, by

CHARLES RICE McDOWELL

SHARK MASTER

On that South Seas island one man was lord over life and death. The natives called him He-Whom-the-Sharks-Obey because the sea-tigers served him faithfully, and in their jaws his enemies died terribly. . . . Until at last the sharks themselves rebelled. A vivid novelet by

RALPH R. PERRY

VOLCANO

It is Carnival Week in Martinique, and the streets are gay with music and laughter. And the only man who has heard Mont Pelée awake ominously from her long sleep, knows that slippered feet are dancing on the edge of destruction. An exciting novelet by

ROBERT CARSE

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JULY 22

By

WALTER

RIPPERGER

The Man From Madrid

CHAPTER XXV

MR. NIBBS TAKES A HAND

FRITZ ZIMMERMAN, his thick lips slightly apart, stood staring at Hilda. Don Graham lay unconscious at his feet. Over to one side McLaughlin, his body bent forward, was muttering.

Hilda came further into the room. Her eyes were still bright. She was still smiling with her lips only.

After a long time, Zimmerman said: "Where did you—where did you come from?"

"Your man, Lester, let me in," Hilda said. "I tried to phone you earlier in the evening but couldn't get you." She wasn't looking at Zimmerman now. Her eyes were on Don Graham lying on the carpet, motionless. An odd note crept into her voice. "Is he—is he dead?"

Zimmerman, standing immobile, like a great stone figure, his china blue eyes wide, vacant, said:

"No. Just knocked out." Suddenly he stirred himself. He went to the door, yanked it open, and roared, "Lester! Come here, Lester!"

Lester came in a minute later. Zimmerman, standing in the middle of the room, his eyes frozen, said: "Come here, Lester, come closer. There's something I have to tell you."

Lester took a few steps.

"A little closer," Zimmerman said, his booming voice incredibly soft.

Lester advanced to within a few feet of Zimmerman. Zimmerman shifted his gun from his right to his left hand. He struck Lester squarely in the mouth with his huge fist. Lester's head snapped back. His stomach made an arch curving towards Zimmerman. Zimmerman sank his fist into Lester's stomach. The man gagged, writhed. Instinctively he put up his hand as though to ward off further blows.

Zimmerman had no intention of striking him again. From his breast pocket he took a silk handkerchief and dusted off his knuckles.

"That's so you'll remember not to let anyone in to see me after this without announcing him first," Zimmerman said. He said it pleasantly, as though it were of no importance whatever.

Lester, with one hand on his stomach, managed to say: "Yes, sir." His face was

The first installment of this six-part serial, herein concluded, was printed in the Argosy for June 10

a pasty white. He touched his split lip with tender fingers, looked at the blood and again said, "Yes, sir."

"You *are* more like your old self," Hilda said. Her smile was enigmatic. Her eyes were very brilliant. "For days I've been thinking that this Don Graham had you frightened to death, just as he had everyone else."

Zimmerman looked at her doubtfully. He turned back to Lester.

"Get me some rope," he said, "or a couple of neckties—anything. I want him tied up." With his foot he indicated Graham.

Lester licked the cut on his lip with the tip of his tongue. "Yes, sir. We have some clothesline in the basement. Will that be all right?"

Zimmerman nodded irritably.

Lester went out.

ZIMMERMAN, his face a blank, kept looking at Hilda. He made no reference to Don Graham, to what she must have seen. He made no reference to McLaughlin who sat there mumbling. Once McLaughlin tried to stand up but fell back into his chair.

Hilda said, "Is Pat drunk?"

"What did you want to phone me about?" Zimmerman demanded, a hard note in his voice. "What did you come here for?"

"You said something about going away, Fritz," she said softly. "You and I. I had to make sure."

"Sure of what?"

"Sure of you," Hilda said. "There's a difference between going away and *running* away."

Little creases formed above the bridge of Zimmerman's nose.

"You don't quite understand me, do you? Eddie was never a very forceful character," she went on to explain. "I don't want to make another mistake. This time I want someone who is strong, someone with real courage." She paused for brief seconds, then: "It sounds a little cold-blooded, doesn't it?"

Zimmerman still had McLaughlin's revolver in his hand. Now he stuck his finger through the trigger guard and started twirling the gun slowly.

Don Graham stirred faintly. His eyes remained closed.

"What are you going to do with him?" Hilda asked.

Zimmerman, on a sullen note, said: "What do you care? Or is he the strong man that you're looking for?"

Hilda smiled. "There was a time when I though so," she admitted. "A few days ago I had a feeling you were afraid of him, that you didn't have the courage to stand up and fight him; that you were resorting to petty intrigues and little schemes to try to get the better of him . . . like that business that happened in court.

"I suppose I sound cruel. You probably like your women soft and pliant but I'm not that way. I can't help it, Fritz. I'm the sort who wouldn't let anything—*anything* stand in the way of something she wanted." She looked away. Her voice hushed. "You killed Eddie, didn't you?" she said. "You killed him so you could have me."

Zimmerman sucked in his breath and made a great hissing noise. "You're made for me, Hilda," he said.

He stepped toward her, then stopped. Lester was coming in with a length of clothesline.

"Tie his hands and feet," Zimmerman directed. "He tried to attack Mr. McLaughlin. I had to knock him out."

Lester nodded. His eyes told nothing of what he felt. He had wiped the blood off his face. He kneeled down and deftly lashed Don Graham's ankles together. He cut short the extra rope with a jack-knife, folded Don Graham's limp arms on his chest, then tied his wrists. He stood up when he finished.

"Shall I—shall I notify the police, sir?"

"You can't," Zimmerman said, "the phone's out of order. And you can't go out. He brought a gang with him. They're outside, waiting. I lost my temper, Lester, not because you let Mrs. Meechling in,

but because you might have admitted any one of those hoodlums."

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know."

"It's really my fault—" Hilda began.

"It doesn't matter," Zimmerman said. "Here give me a hand. Let's get him out from under our feet."

He stooped and put his hands under Don Graham's arms. Lester took the feet. Between them they carried him to the couch.

"Make us some coffee," Zimmerman said. "You'd like some, wouldn't you, Hilda?"

Hilda nodded, her eyes bright and alert. For the second time she looked at McLaughlin.

"What's the matter with Pat?" she wanted to know. "Sick?"

"Yes," Zimmerman said, "sick. So sick he'll never be well again." His face clouded. "Some pals of your friend, Graham, got hold of him—did things to him. I don't know exactly what. They promised to do the same to me. Did you have any trouble getting into the house?"

Hilda gazed at him without comprehension. "Why should I?"

Zimmerman explained. Then he frowned. "I wonder if you're going to have difficulty getting out. If you can walk out just like that, your coming here was providential. You can go to a telephone—they've cut mine—and phone a man named Nibbs. You can tell him that Zimmerman says everything will be fixed up to suit him and that I'll see him first thing in the morning. Tell him I give in."

Hilda's eyes widened. "I don't understand," she said. "Who is Nibbs? What has he got to do with—with us, Fritz?"

SHE shot a fleeting glance towards the couch. Don Graham was stirring. His eyes were open. He raised his head a little, first to look at his bound wrists, then at Hilda. Hilda turned her back.

"You must tell me just what we're going to do," Hilda said. "I want to help. For instance, what are we going to do with Graham?"

"I'll take care of Graham," Zimmerman said. "Don't you worry."

"But how? He's dangerous. I must know, Fritz—so that I won't have to worry."

Zimmerman chuckled. "You won't have to worry." He stopped twirling McLaughlin's gun and put it back in his pocket. He found a piece of peanut brittle and ate that.

"What are you going to do to him, darling?"

Zimmerman stopped crunching. His eyes filled with suspicion. "What do you care what happens to him?"

She took swift strides. The next instant her arms were about Zimmerman.

"It's just you. You're so reckless sometimes. You don't stop to consider what the consequences will be."

Zimmerman grinned. He would have kissed her but she nestled her head against his chest, and then stepped away. Don Graham's eyes were far back in his head. He kept working at his bonds.

"Well, if it interests you, I'm going to shoot him . . . in self-defense. I can't do it now because I've got no telephone. I probably couldn't get out to notify the police, and in order to make it look right they've got to be notified the moment it happens."

Hilda's eyes were level and inscrutable. "I see," she said slowly.

Zimmerman had a feeling she considered the plan risky, and said again: "Don't you worry. I'll make it look real."

"I'm sure you will," she said quickly. "I know you will, Fritz."

There was a soft thump. Don Graham had worked his feet off the couch and managed to sit up.

Zimmerman turned and looked at him. There was nothing in Zimmerman's eyes but content. Everything was going to work out fine now. To be sure, he'd have to give this Nibbs a substantial share of the treasure, but things might have been worse, especially considering the blunder he had made with José's watch. He had been too smart there.

However, with Don Graham out of

the way, that wasn't so serious. Don was the only one who actually knew that José hadn't possessed a watch. To be sure, he had told Nibbs, but Nibbs would never be in a position to swear, of his own knowledge, that José hadn't owned a watch, and anyway he was going to make a deal with Nibbs.

McLaughlin, his voice thick, asked for a drink.

Zimmerman gave him brandy. He might have to give a thought to McLaughlin too. If McLaughlin recovered and found the treasure gone and Zimmerman gone, he might prove difficult. Perhaps Mr. Nibbs could do something with McLaughlin.

Lester came in with the coffee. Zimmerman served Hilda, then himself. "Perhaps he'd like some," Hilda said, indicating Don Graham.

"What difference does it make whether or not he'd like some?" Zimmerman said testily. "What do you keep stewing about him for?"

Hilda shrugged.

"If he's going to die, a cup of coffee won't hurt him," she said smiling.

AGAIN she cast one swift glance in Don's direction. Graham was sitting there, his eyes dark and hot, contempt in every line of his face. He was saying nothing. He didn't want to attract any attention. Silently, fiercely, he was tugging on his bonds, trying to free his hands. So far he hadn't succeeded in loosening the ropes even a fraction of an inch.

Lester went out.

Zimmerman told Hilda to sit down. He told her what the situation was, exactly what had happened to McLaughlin, to Gabriel and José, and how Mr. Nibbs was connected with the situation.

Hilda listened intently. When he had finished, she said:

"And you killed Eddie, killed him for my sake, because you love me so!" Her lips were parted. There was a flush high up on her cheekbones.

Zimmerman shook his head slowly, almost regretfully. Too bad he couldn't take credit for that too, seeing that she seemed to think that that's what he ought to have done. What a woman!

"To be honest, Hilda, I don't know who killed Eddie. He either fell down the hoist well or somebody pushed him. It wouldn't surprise me if our friend on the couch there had done it." Zimmerman looked thoughtful. "Maybe one of Nibbs' men did it, sneaked into the warehouse." He stopped. He had just remembered something.

He rose heavily and walked over to where Don Graham sat. A picture of Vera Higgins standing in front of the mirror, talking to herself, had come back to him. "What did you find out from Vera?" he demanded.

The unexpectedness of the question startled Don Graham into saying: "Vera?"

"Yes, Vera Higgins, my secretary."

Don Graham, his mouth crooked, said: "I'm beginning to think you're crazy. What would I get out of her? I never spoke to her in my life."

Zimmerman glowered at him. He had a feeling that Graham was telling the truth.

Zimmerman turned back to Hilda. She was standing studying him.

"What time," she said, "is the execution going to take place—I mean when are you going to have to kill him in self-defense?" Her eyes were very bright. She held herself coolly and easily. "I was thinking," she said, "that it might not be a bad idea if there was an eye-witness, somebody you could trust—me, for instance. Just in case the police ask awkward questions. I wouldn't trust Lester too much, after what you did to him tonight."

Zimmerman frowned. "Maybe you're right," he said.

He was going to say something else, but harsh, grim laughter from the couch broke in on him.

"Afraid you're going to miss the killing?" Don Graham said to Hilda. "Afraid you won't be here to see him kill me?"

She half turned so as to face him more fully. "Very much afraid," she said.

Zimmerman sucked in his breath. His eyes were gleaming with admiration.

For seconds, a tense stillness followed Hilda's remark.

SUDDENLY Zimmerman stiffened. He had detected the faint tinkle of the doorbell. For a moment he stood rooted to the spot, then he strode swiftly into the hall to intercept Lester.

"Wait," Zimmerman said.

What could anyone want at this hour of the night?

The bell tinkled again. "Put the chain on," he said to Lester. He stood there behind Lester, his hands in his pockets on the two guns he had.

Lester went to the door. He put the knob of the chain into the slot then opened the door as far as the chain would permit—some six inches. There was just one man there, someone Lester had never seen before.

"I should like to see Mr. Zimmerman," the visitor said in a high, strident voice. "Tell him it's Mr. Nibbs."

Lester started to say, "Just a minute." Zimmerman pushed him aside.

"How many of you are there?", Zimmerman said, his voice rough and husky.

"It's only me—Mr. Nibbs," the man at the door said. "I thought you might have heard of me by now, and would like to see me."

Seconds went by, then Zimmerman retreated a few steps.

"If there's anyone with you, it'll be just too bad," he said, "because I'm going to shoot first and ask questions afterward. Open the door, Lester, then stand aside."

Lester unhooked the chain and opened the door.

Mr. Nibbs came in, alone.

CHAPTER XXVI

STALEMATE

ZIMMERMAN backed into the living room. He kept his hands in his pockets. Mr. Nibbs followed him. Zimmerman kicked the door shut. Mr. Nibbs looked about. His eyes fell on McLaughlin. McLaughlin's chair was so placed that his back was towards Mr. Nibbs. Mr. Nibbs saw Don Graham, and a peculiar expression came into his good eye. Then he shifted his glance to Hilda, and finally back to Zimmerman.

"Who is the lady?" Mr. Nibbs asked bluntly.

Zimmerman's china-blue eyes were frozen pinpoints.

"One of my associates," he said, "Mrs. Meechling, a partner in our firm." He waited.

Without haste, Mr. Nibbs walked around so that he could have a good look at McLaughlin. McLaughlin looked up from the floor. Indescribable terror twisted his face.

"No! No!" he shrieked, "Please, no!"

Zimmerman's fat lips moved, but he said nothing. He only stood there watchful, his hands in his pockets. He saw McLaughlin try to raise his arms as though to shut out the sight of Mr. Nibbs. McLaughlin managed to raise his right arm, but not his left.

Mr. Nibbs smiled that hellish smile, stepped away from McLaughlin and came back to Zimmerman. When he spoke, there was something of disdain and reproach in his voice.

"I thought you were a better man that you are," he said.

Zimmerman had to clear his throat twice before he could speak. "What are you talking about?" he demanded gruffly.

"Him," said Mr. Nibbs, jerking his head in Don Graham's direction. "He should be dead by now."

Zimmerman wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Why?" he said.

"I obviously misjudged you," Mr. Nibbs said with disgust. "From what I heard of you I realized that you weren't very intelligent, but I thought you acted with decision. After the way you killed Gabriel and the Spaniard, I believed you wouldn't hesitate a minute. I thought you'd do for

me something that is extremely distasteful to one of my sensitive temperament."

"What?" Zimmerman said. He was breathing softly and quickly.

"I don't like bloodshed," said Mr. Nibbs. "I invariably leave that to others." A hissing note crept into his voice. "Why is he still alive? He must have told you about me. You must have realized that he'd only be in the way." With each phrase he kept jerking his head in Graham's direction. "It must have struck you that you *had* to get rid of him and try to make some proposition that would interest me."

The pin points that were Zimmerman's eyes vanished. His eyes widened; his face took on that genial expression that he held when he was most dangerous.

He laughed, without mirth. "Of course that crossed my mind, but I see no reason why I shouldn't handle things my own way."

Mr. Nibbs made a faintly snarling noise. He turned to Hilda. "Send her away," he snapped.

Hilda took in his weird, narrow face, the glass eye that didn't match his good one. There was something fascinating about Mr. Nibbs—the way he held his sparse frame, his unbelievable assurance, the penetrating malevolence of his expression.

She smiled at Mr. Nibbs. "You give such fascinating parties, Fritz," she said, without glancing at Zimmerman. "Such interesting guests."

FRITZ ZIMMERMAN chuckled. Hilda's attitude was exactly what he wanted. He had from the very beginning determined to present a bold front to Mr. Nibbs. Only in that way could he hope to drive any sort of a bargain.

"I want her here," he said to Mr. Nibbs. "She's interested in what we're going to do—you and I."

"I see," said Mr. Nibbs. He hooked over a chair with his foot and sat down. "What she thinks," he continued acidly, "isn't going to matter . . . any more than what you think."

Zimmerman's face glistened with geniality. He pushed a chair towards Hilda; he himself sat down.

"Now let's put our cards on the table," he said. He threw a glance in Graham's direction. He saw Don Graham struggling savagely with the rope about his wrists, and chuckled; then he turned back to Mr. Nibbs. "What's your proposition?" he rumbled, throwing all the good nature that he could into his voice.

"You've got the treasure," Mr. Nibbs said, "a treasure that's worth approximately five million dollars. You can take twenty percent of it and I'll take the rest."

Zimmerman's hands were still in his pocket. He beamed at Mr. Nibbs.

"You're wanted for murder, Zimmerman. You faked an alibi with a watch. One telephone call to the police and you're done for."

The expression in Zimmerman's face didn't change. "That wouldn't get you the treasure."

He started to say something else but an unexpected interruption caused him to stop. Don Graham on the couch was straining forward. There was a twisted smile on his lips.

"Don't give up, Zimmerman," Graham said. "I might do something for you. For instance, I might say that that *was* José's watch—that he did have a watch—that I'd seen it many times."

Zimmerman stared at him. He scratched his chin and looked thoughtful.

Mr. Nibbs cackled. "Not a bad move," he said amiably. "Brother Graham has an idea he can set us against each other. Now if he could think of something that would set me against you—" Mr. Nibbs eyed Graham with a certain amount of appreciation.

Don laughed without amusement. "You might like to know," he said to Mr. Nibbs, "that there's not five million left. He's used most of it, spent it—gambling. If as much as a couple of million remains, I'll be surprised."

Mr. Nibbs' narrow face seemed to grow narrower. His mouth took on a knifelike

edge. He turned his head sideways so that his one good eye could take in all of Zimmerman.

"Is that true?"

Zimmerman grinned. "What I did with that treasure before you muscled in, Nibbs," he said, "is my own business."

"I see, I see," Mr. Nibbs said softly. "That makes it awkward—very awkward." Mr. Nibbs' face took on the sheen of old glass. Zimmerman thought that Mr. Nibbs' face would crack if he spoke. "That is going to leave you very little—practically nothing."

Zimmerman said: "That's what you think. I know about your private army of hooligans who've been following me around. They're out in front now. I know you wrecked McLaughlin . . . But I'm not scared."

Mr. Nibbs' glass eye shone wide and round, but his other eye was narrow.

Hilda rose. "Do you mind if I get myself some more coffee?"

ZIMMERMAN nodded absently. Right now he didn't care what she or anyone else did, except Mr. Nibbs. He and Mr. Nibbs were engaged in a titanic struggle. Zimmerman didn't expect to win, but he was determined to get an even break.

"So what have you got?" he said to Mr. Nibbs as Hilda went out. "Nothing," he declared emphatically. "Nothing but me. You've got a bunch of punks and gunmen. Where'll they be when I get in touch with the police? Where will you be when I tell the police about McLaughlin? McLaughlin recognized you. In a couple of days he'll be himself enough to talk, and then where will you be?"

Mr. Nibbs for seconds worried his lower lip with sharp yellow teeth. "I don't know where *I'll* be, but if you try anything like that, I know where *you'll* be. You'll be dead. I have a man who'd shoot you down in open court if you tried to testify against me. But it won't come to that. I've got a score of men who'll put you out like a light before you ever get near a court. That's what I've got!"

Hilda came back. She didn't bring any coffee with her but she had Lester's jackknife. She went straight up to where Don Graham sat and before anyone realized what she was doing, she had severed the ropes that held Don Graham's wrists.

Zimmerman half rose in his chair. "What are you doing?" he roared.

Hilda gave the knife to Don Graham and he cut the ropes about his ankles. "He won't be of much help to you, Fritz," she said coolly, "with his hands and feet tied. You may need help . . . against Mr. Nibbs."

Zimmerman glowered at her, baffled. Then he settled back in his chair. There were two guns in his pockets and if Graham made a wrong move, he could stop him in his tracks . . . and incidentally, he could do the same to Mr. Nibbs.

Don flexed his arms and stretched his legs. He made no attempt to get up. His dark, somber eyes were on Hilda, watching her uncertainly.

For a time there was a queer electric silence, pushing against the walls of the overcharged room. Zimmerman said:

"All right, I'll admit it. You've got a bunch of cutthroats that could and would snuff me out. But I've got something too. *I've got the treasure!* And I've got something else . . ." Without haste he drew out his two guns. "I've got you!"

That glasslike expression in Mr. Nibbs' face seemed to harden. His whole body appeared to be encased in an unshatterable stillness.

"In a sense that is true," he conceded. He pulled out a fat, gold watch. "It's midnight," he said, "and my men are outside. If I'm not out of here in fifteen minutes, they're coming in."

Zimmerman heaved a deep sigh. "Maybe it's a standoff. What's your proposition?"

"Seventy-five percent for me," Mr. Nibbs said with assurance, and twenty-five percent for you."

Fritz Zimmerman shook his massive head. "Fifty-fifty . . . that's the best I'll do. And it's up to you to see that McLaughlin doesn't talk, while I see that

Graham doesn't." Zimmerman was grinning. He clinked the guns together suggestively.

"I've got a lot of people to take care of," Mr. Nibbs said.

"It makes no difference," Zimmerman declared firmly. "You and your gang have got me, but I've got you . . . and the treasure. Fifty-fifty."

They glared at each other, tense, speculatively, appraisingly.

A laugh fell between them—a soft, but somehow joyous laugh. It came from Hilda.

Mr. Nibbs turned his head sharply sideways so that his good eye rested full upon her. Zimmerman turned his head around so that he, too, could see her squarely.

Hilda, smiling, said:

"You've got each other . . . but *I've* got the treasure."

CHAPTER XXVII

HOSTAGE

THERE was no sound but Zimmerman's heavy breathing. The air in the room seemed to pulse and pound in heavy waves. Mr. Nibbs, Zimmerman, Hilda and Graham sat motionless. To Don, that simple, calm statement of Hilda's, "You've got each other . . . but *I've* got the treasure" had come with the effect of an explosion.

It reminded him of the war—a munition dump being blown up and the shattering stillness that followed. He sat down looking wonderingly at Hilda. Then to add to the unreality of it all, there was McLaughlin in a chair at the far side, hunched over, his eyes on the floor like some disintegrated, nonexistent thing.

After a long time, Zimmerman, in a scarcely audible tone said: "What did you say?"

"She said she had the treasure," Mr. Nibbs said with ear-splitting shrillness.

Zimmerman licked his fat lips. A faraway, thoughtful expression came into his china-blue eyes.

"So you've been playing your own game, Hilda," he said. "That's bad," he went on after a time, "very bad . . . for you."

Mr. Nibbs cackled. His good eye twinkled in solitary wickedness. "Is she telling the truth?"

"How did you get it?" Zimmerman barked.

"My lawyer," Hilda said, "he filed Eddie's will showing that I was his sole heir, and got a court order entitling me to open the vault. It was very simple. I emptied the vault this morning. I never saw so much gold, so many bracelets, watch chains, chalices, all sorts of things—jewelry set with diamonds, sapphires and rubies."

"Were's the stuff now?" Zimmerman demanded tonelessly. His face was livid.

"It's safe," Hilda said.

"But you're not," Zimmerman said through his teeth. He half leveled his automatic. "Where is it?"

Don sprang to his feet. He didn't know what he was going to do. But somehow he felt impelled to limp over and stand beside Hilda. She looked up at him, her eyes warm, friendly.

"If you shoot," Hilda said, "Mr. Nibbs won't like it, because you see, then neither of you will get any of the treasure. Mr. Nibbs has his heart set on the treasure."

Mr. Nibbs said sharply: "Put that gun down, Zimmerman!"

"You're in no spot to give orders," Zimmerman roared.

"Perhaps not," Mr. Nibbs said equably, "but don't forget my boys are outside, which reminds me—" He looked at his watch. "The fifteen minutes are almost up. I'd better go to the door and tell them to wait a little longer. This is hardly a time when we would want any interruption."

He started to rise, but Zimmerman said:

"Stay where you are. You're not walking out of here, not now."

Mr. Nibbs shrugged thin shoulders. He ran a thumb and forefinger along a crease in his black trousers and said: "Suit yourself. My men won't bother me. If you've any idea that I'm going to run away before this is settled, you're very, very stupid."

Zimmerman looked undecided. "All right," he said unwillingly, "go on."

Mr. Nibbs went out. While he was gone, Zimmerman glared at Hilda. "So you made a fool of me," he declared. He couldn't seem to get over it.

MR. NIBBS came back—alone. "Now let's see," he said, "the intricacies of the situation have increased. I've got you, Zimmerman, and as you say, in a sense, you've got me. You could shoot me. And she—she's got the treasure." His eye took in Don Graham. "Perhaps you have something too," he said sarcastically.

Don Graham looked at Hilda. He saw her lips move. He thought he saw her form words, a sentence that he couldn't believe. He must be mistaken. He thought her lips were saying, "You've got me."

Mr. Nibbs was looking at Hilda now with all the malign power of which his one eye was capable.

"There are worse things than dying," he hissed. "If you don't think so, look at McLaughlin there—look at McLaughlin."

At the mention of his name, McLaughlin lifted his head and turned slowly to where the others were. For a moment he looked dully at them, then his head dropped down again.

Some of the color ebbed painfully from Hilda's face, but she showed no trace of fear. "You want the treasure, don't you?" she asked lightly.

Almost in unison Zimmerman and Mr. Nibbs said they did.

"All right. You can have it . . . all of it . . . on my terms."

Hilda stood up. She moved closer to Graham. Mr. Nibbs and Zimmerman waited, but for the moment Hilda said nothing.

"What's your proposition?" Zimmerman growled.

"An ultimatum," Mr. Nibbs said. "A very fine word, 'ultimatum'. There's something definite about it. It invites complete surrender. We are prepared to surrender—my friend, Zimmerman and I—for the treasure."

Hilda glanced at Don, then away. She clasped her hands as if she were trying to keep them from trembling. In a small, still voice, she said:

"What women do is often unpredictable. But one thing is sure . . . there is no limit to the things they'll do for the man they love. It's strange that someone like me"—she kept her eyes fixed on a distant corner of the room—"should fall in love with a man she's only seen a few times. It's even more curious when you stop to consider that the man himself hardly knows that I exist. But that's the way it is; nothing can change it—"

"What is this? What is this?" Zimmerman bellowed.

"I came here tonight, Fritz, just as you suspected, to trick you into admitting that you had killed Gabriel and Meechling. I came because in that way I thought I could make it safe for the man I love. I took the treasure because it meant so much to him. I wanted to save him and the treasure, both. I didn't know about Mr. Nibbs then. It's impossible—I can see that now—to save the treasure, but I can save him. I'm going to save him. I'm not going to let you kill him, Fritz. If he's hurt, no one will ever see that treasure again!"

For the first time she looked squarely at Zimmerman and then at Mr. Nibbs, and they could see that she meant it. Zimmerman's eyes filled with rage.

THE color in Hilda's face deepened, her eyes took on a darker shade, but her voice, if anything, was more steady. "I'm in love with Don Graham," she declared. "I love him more than I can tell you."

Don Graham's hand moved as though he was about to stop her, but he did nothing.

Reddish blotches showed on Zimmerman's face. "All right, you're in love with him. So what? Who cares? We don't give a damn who you love. Go ahead, love him, love him! A half hour ago you had your arms around me, and now you make speeches." Zimmerman was beside himself

with fury, jealousy and thwarted passion. With each word he gesticulated wildly with the guns in his hands.

Mr. Nibbs rose and confronted him. Mr. Nibbs' voice was icy. "Shut up," Mr. Nibbs said, with astonishing simplicity.

Hilda threw a quick, harried glance in Graham's direction, then turned away. His face was white, drawn; his dark eyes nothing but smudges in his head.

"I want to make this terribly clear to you," Hilda went on as though there had been no interruption. She was again looking off into space. "So you'll understand and appreciate my offer. I want you to know that I love so much that you can trust me. I want you to know that I'm going to live up to my part of the bargain if you'll live up to yours. I'm going to turn that treasure over to you in exchange for what is most precious to me in life. Until I can arrange to let you have it I am going to leave with you a hostage—Don Graham."

CHAPTER XXVIII

SATAN'S STOCKHOLDERS

TWO minutes went by and no one said a word. Zimmerman's mouth was working as though he were chewing on something bitter. Mr. Nibbs sat like a cold statue. Don Graham turned slowly until his eyes found his cane lying on the floor. He went over, picked it up, came back and stood beside Hilda, leaning with both hands on the cane. Mr. Nibbs and Zimmerman paid no attention to him. They were too absorbed. At last Mr. Nibbs said:

"I don't like women but I must concede, madam, that you've acted with extraordinary decision and have exhibited remarkable ingenuity. We are to give you Brother Graham and you give us the treasure. Just how is this exchange to be effected?"

Zimmerman could contain himself no longer. Her simple but fervent declaration that she was in love with Don Graham had driven him to the verge of madness. He wanted Hilda. Nothing else mattered. Not even the treasure.

"To hell with that proposition," he roared. "You're not leaving Don Graham with us as a hostage. We've already got Don Graham and we've got you."

"But we haven't got the treasure," Mr. Nibbs broke in with chill finality. "How is the exchange to be effected?" he asked Hilda again.

"I'll leave that to you," Hilda said.

Her poise, her calm assurance, brought more admiration into Mr. Nibbs' eye. He rose and started to pace the floor with quick, short strides.

Zimmerman glared and for one wild moment he considered shooting Nibbs down in his tracks; then killing Don Graham. But what good would that do? That wouldn't get him Hilda and it wouldn't get him out of his difficulties. And there'd still be Mr. Nibbs' men to contend with, those men outside, who presently would break in. Nibbs had assured him of that. And Nibbs' words had carried conviction.

Mr. Nibbs stopped his pacing of a sudden. "I've got it!" he said. "Bugs Bindler."

Zimmerman eyed him darkly. "Who's Bugs Bindler?"

"The little man," said Mr. Nibbs, "whom I've already mentioned to you—the little man who coughs and doesn't care whether he lives or dies. Everything can be arranged through Bugs Bindler. He is the ideal go-between. And that reminds me—I must go out and reassure my men again so they won't be getting worried about me." Without waiting for a comment, Mr. Nibbs hastened out.

Zimmerman stepped over to the side table and poured himself a stiff drink.

While he was doing that, Don Graham whispered insistently to Hilda: "What happens to me doesn't matter," he said. "I don't know why you should try to save me. I know you didn't mean what you said—but thanks anyhow. If you want to do me a favor, when they let you go, turn that treasure over to the Spanish Embassy. I want that more than anything in the

world now. Forget about me. Turn it over to the Spanish Embassy and tell them Don Graham and José sent it—that it's the last thing they could do to help the refugees of Spain."

"Is that what you want most of all?" she asked. There was a touch of sadness in her eyes.

Zimmerman was coming back.

"Sometimes," Don Graham whispered fiercely, as if afraid his voice were going to break, "a man can't have what he wants."

Zimmerman stepped roughly between them. He bored with his eyes into Hilda, trying to read her innermost thoughts. He still had a hope—a wild hope that she hadn't meant what she had said about Don Graham, that she was only trying to trick Nibbs to save the treasure for herself and for him. Before Zimmerman could say anything, Mr. Nibbs came in again, but this time he was not alone.

THERE were five others with him—Pudgy Myers, short and squat, his flat face expressionless; and Jones, along with Runner Smith and Hands, and last of all came Bugs Bindler. Bugs' pinched face seemed smaller than ever, his bony frame more frail. Silently they ranged themselves about the room, the only sound an occasional cough from Bugs.

Zimmerman darted glances right and left. His face was blotchy red. "What is this? What is this?"

Before Mr. Nibbs could answer, there came a hoarse shriek of terror. McLaughlin had caught sight of Hands. McLaughlin, with a supreme effort, was struggling out of his chair, shaking in every limb. He was backing away, walking like a half-open jackknife, retreating to the windows where he collapsed, whimpering.

None of Mr. Nibbs' men gave him even a glance. They just stood about loosely but motionless, and again that picture rose up before Don Graham of dead bats, clinging to rafters, not knowing they were dead.

"What do you mean by bringing these men in here?" Zimmerman roared.

"They thought they'd like to come in," Mr. Nibbs said with thin humor. "I'll admid the scene is a bit macabre." He allowed his narrow head to pivot on his scrawny neck, taking in his men, taking in Don Graham, Hilda, and Zimmerman.

Zimmerman experienced sudden fear but he was no coward, and he was dangerous when cornered. He was cornered now and he knew it. His face slowly took on that genial look. He grinned.

"All right," he said, "it's your party." He took two quick strides, astonishingly lithe for a man of his bulk. Then he was directly in front of Mr. Nibbs and his guns were pointing at Mr. Nibbs' heart.

"If they're not out of here," Zimmerman said without raising his voice, "by the time I count three, you're dead. One—" That was as far as he got.

Don Graham, too, had moved. His hand had slid down to the ferrule of that heavy loaded cane and the crook came crashing down on Zimmerman's head. It was a terrific blow, would have split a thinner skull than Zimmerman's wide open. As it was, it sufficed to send Zimmerman reeling, crashing to the floor.

Runner Smith and Jones were beside him instantly. They took Zimmerman's guns away from him. Then they went back to their places.

Mr. Nibbs' one good eye filled with malignity and some approval.

"An excellent and timely blow. What made you do it?"

Graham gave him a wintry smile. "You're a brute with brains," he said, "and he's a brute without brains. Of the two I'd rather deal with you."

Mr. Nibbs nodded. "I had misjudged you," he said sententiously. "You have far more intelligence than I gave you credit for." He looked down at Zimmerman.

Zimmerman's huge body was rolling from side to side. He was groaning. "Get up," Mr. Nibbs said. "There are things to discuss."

Zimmerman managed to get to his feet. He was blinking his eyes, staring stupidly at his empty hands, not quite certain as

to what had happened to him. The back of his head felt damp. He touched it gingerly with his fingers. His fingers came away red. His eyes fell on Graham and he knew. The hate that welled up in Zimmerman's eyes was beyond description. He felt weak and dizzy. He staggered over to a chair and sat down, but he kept looking at Graham.

DON GRAHAM was smiling, that same humorless, wintry smile, but there was something odd in his dark eyes that were now hot and tense. "The whole thing is hopeless," Don Graham was saying to Mr. Nibbs, "as long as Zimmerman is in the picture."

Mr. Nibbs was all attention.

"Go on," he said.

"You don't care whether I live or die," Don Graham continued softly. "All you want is the treasure. So Mrs. Meechling can make a deal with you. But it's different with Zimmerman. He has other interests—interests that wouldn't permit him to see me live." Don Graham looked at Hilda.

Mr. Nibbs looked at her, then said: "I see what you mean. In fact I was aware of it before you brought it up. It's a nice point."

"Besides," said Don Graham, even more softly, "why should you divide the treasure with anyone?"

Zimmerman let out a roar. He sprang to his feet toward Don Graham. He didn't get very far. Those men of Mr. Nibbs', despite their apparent lifelessness, were amazingly quick. Jones and Runner Smith were on top of him before he had taken a step. With apparently no effort at all, they bounced Zimmerman back into his chair. He sat there panting, his face a greenish-gray, the sweat trickling down.

"Don't you see what he's trying to do?" he said to Mr. Nibbs. "He's trying to make it look—"

"He's only pointing out," Mr. Nibbs said conversationally, "that the situation ought to be simplified. With you out of the way, things would be so much easier."

"Listen," Zimmerman said hoarsely, "you can't do that. You and I are in this together. You can't—you can't kill me—you can't murder me in cold blood—we're—we're partners—"

"We *were* partners," Mr. Nibbs corrected him pointedly. "We were partners as long as you had something—the treasure. But now you haven't got the treasure. What sense is there in being partners with a man who has nothing?"

"You can't do it. You can't kill me—"

"I can if I want to," said Mr. Nibbs, with ghastly cheerfulness.

CHAPTER XXIX

RUNOUT POWDER

ZIMMERMAN was trapped and he knew it. Death confronted him. It saluted him mockingly from faces of Mr. Nibbs' men. It grinned at him from Mr. Nibbs' one good eye. Oddly enough, Zimmerman knew that it had been there all along.

In Mr. Nibbs' place he would have done the same thing. He was no use to Mr. Nibbs now; he was only in the way. In the course of his turbulent life, Zimmerman had faced many dangers, had taken incredible chances and managed to escape by sheer boldness from many a desperate situation, but it is doubtful if he had ever risen to a greater height than the one to which he mounted now.

Slowly the expression in his face changed. The certainty of death, went out of it. Instead there came into it that genial, guileless look that was Zimmerman at his best.

"You think you've got Zimmerman in a bad way, but you're wrong, Nibbs. Zimmerman always has an ace in the hole."

Mr. Nibbs eyed him doubtfully. Runner Smith and Hands and the others didn't move. They only turned their heads enough so that Zimmerman was within the focus of their eyes.

Zimmerman rose. He stretched his arms, then yawned.

Mr. Nibbs and his men tensed imperceptibly, but they held their places.

"Now I want to tell you something," Zimmerman said, "something that will be a surprise to you—all of you." His great face exuded geniality. "And I don't want any interruptions," he said, "not from you or from outside either, for that matter." He walked over to the door, turned the key in the lock and calmly dropped it in his pocket.

That worried nobody. They were six to one and could take the key away from Zimmerman at any time.

"Anybody got a cigarette?" Zimmerman asked. "I don't often smoke but I feel like a cigarette now."

Hands looked at Mr. Nibbs who shrugged, keeping his wary eye riveted on Zimmerman. Hands held a pack of cigarettes out toward Zimmerman. The latter took one and asked for matches. Hands gave him a package.

Zimmerman looked about the room to where McLaughlin, on the floor, cowered beside one of the windows.

"We've got to get McLaughlin in on this," Zimmerman said. "He can confirm what I tell you, that is, if he's able to." He walked over to the window, bent down and spoke softly to McLaughlin.

The cigarette hung from the corner of Zimmerman's mouth but he hadn't lit it yet. McLaughlin muttered something that no one could understand. Zimmerman straightened up. He was still genial, his eyes still guileless, but he looked a little helpless.

"You better come and talk to him," he said to Mr. Nibbs. "You—you do things to him. It might loosen his tongue. It's important to you, Nibbs. You'll realize soon how important." Zimmerman's thick lips were shaped into a stony smile.

NIBBS hesitated before he walked toward the windows. Zimmerman was standing with his back to one of them. He lit his cigarette, just as Mr. Nibbs came up to him. For a moment, Zimmerman eyed the flame of the match pensively. The hand holding the match dropped to his side. He didn't extinguish the match, just held it there. The flame came in contact with one of the flimsy curtains that covered the windows. The curtain burst into flames.

Like some great animal, Zimmerman leaped, his huge arms closed about Mr. Nibbs. He spun the frailer, much smaller man around so that he had him in front of him, holding him by his arms, shielding his own body behind Mr. Nibbs. For seconds Mr. Nibbs' men, Don Graham and Hilda stood petrified.

Runner Smith yanked out a gun.

"Shoot! Shoot!" Zimmerman screamed in frenzied glee.

Behind him the flames were leaping higher, spreading from the flimsy curtains to the heavy draperies, spreading across the intervening space from the first window to the next.

"Shoot, damn you!" Zimmerman screamed, holding Nibbs tighter and tighter.

The men hesitated. Zimmerman presented a small, uncertain target with Nibbs clasped to his breast. Bugs Bindler started forward.

"Keep back!" Zimmerman screamed. "If one of you comes near me, I'll wrap Nibbs up in those." He jerked his head backward to indicate the flaming curtains that now had begun to set the woodwork on fire.

It was an incredible scene—something out of Dante's *Inferno*. Zimmerman, huge, a fiend out of Hell, standing there, a backdrop of fire behind him, and at his feet McLaughlin, cowering, whimpering, too terrified to move; and in front of him Mr. Nibbs, squirming, trying to free himself, shrilling vain orders to his men.

"You're gonna burn! You're gonna burn —all of you!" Zimmerman screamed in unholy delight.

"The door!" Pudgy Myers shouted. "Break down the door!" He had a gun in his hand too. He was dancing from side to side, looking for an opening, a chance to risk a shot at Zimmerman without hitting Mr. Nibbs. He fired at Zimmerman's feet and missed.

Together, Jones and Runner Smith

hurled themselves at the door. The house was old, well built, and the door was of solid oak. It was like throwing oneself against a stone wall.

The room was filling with smoke, the hungry, avid flames were licking along the walls, along the moldings, along the baseboards. At the far end where Zimmerman and Nibbs were locked, the carpet had caught fire. Again and again, now in a panic, Jones and Runner Smith hurled themselves at the door, without result. Helplessly they turned and looked at Pudgy Myers. The windows presented their only means of escape. There was nothing to do but to rush Zimmerman.

"Shoot the lock out, you fools!" Mr. Nibbs screamed. "Shoot the lock!" His face distorted, shone yellow and crimson in the flames as he struggled in Zimmerman's arms.

Runner Smith fired two shots into the keyhole, then yanked savagely at the knob. The door didn't give. He turned back, his teeth bare. To hell with Nibbs, to hell with everybody! He fired at Nibbs, hoping to hit Zimmerman.

Zimmerman roared laughter above the crackling flames.

Mr. Nibbs' men gathered into a frantic huddle. Bugs Bindler coughed, trying to clear his smoke-filled lungs.

"We've got to rush him! It's our only chance! The guy's crazy! Nibbs' gone anyway."

THEY turned, fiercely determined; they hesitated for a moment. During that moment it happened! With superhuman strength Zimmerman lifted Mr. Nibbs into the air. For a split second he stood there like a demented colossus, then he hurled Nibbs into their midst.

Simultaneously, at least so it seemed, he threw himself through the window. There was the sound of breaking wood and shattered glass; a rush of air fanned the flames to a greater height.

It was only a drop of some ten feet from the window to the ground. Zimmerman landed safely enough with the exception of a twisted ankle. There were cuts on his hands and on his face, but he didn't notice that. His hair was singed and he didn't know about that either. A little flame was licking the shoulder of his sleeve and he beat that out. Despite the lateness of the hour, a crowd had already gathered outside. Zimmerman straightened up, took the three steps that led from the area on the sidewalk.

"Fire!" he shrieked, "Fire! Where's an alarm box?"

"The alarm's been turned in," somebody said.

Lester, disheveled, bewildered, and clad in pajamas, was just coming out of the front door. Behind him were Zimmerman's other two servants, terrified.

Zimmerman didn't even see them. He fought his way through the crowd. Nobody followed him. It looked like too good a fire.

From Broadway came the sound of a siren. Zimmerman ran in the opposite direction, sucking in the cold night air greedily. He hailed a passing cab. The driver eyed him doubtfully.

"Ten dollars to get me down to South Street, right below Wall, in fiften minutes."

"What's coming off, mister?"

"I've been in an accident," Zimmerman chattered. "I've got to get to South Street. Twenty dollars!"

"You got twenty dollars?"

Zimmerman thrust bills into his hand, opened the door of the cab and climbed in. The cab turned and shot downtown. Behind him, Zimmerman could hear the muttering mob, the oncoming fire engines, and police cars.

Zimmerman sank back in the cab, exhausted. The strain had been terrific. He was breathing hard, his mouth sagged, but there was triumph in his eyes. He'd gotten the better of them—all of them! Old Zimmerman was still old Zimmerman, and in a few minutes he'd be safe on board the *Astra,* with no Nibbs to murder him, no police to fear. He had lost the treasure, but he would have lost that anyway. And Hilda . . . well, there were other Hildas.

They were already at the end of the highway, going east on Canal Street, and his driver seemed to have a genius for escaping lights. If he would only go faster. They turned South on Broadway.

There was no traffic. At Wall Street, they turned east again. At the foot of Wall Zimmerman rapped on the glass. The cab came to a stop.

Zimmerman climbed out. His ankle hurt but he paid no attention. He tossed the driver another bill, then waved him on. Diagonally across the street he could see the *Astra,* docked, riding gently. He almost ran to the pier. Ten or fifteen yards away he could see the gangplank. It was down. He was safe.

From somewhere out of the shadows, two men came.

"Just a minute, mister," one of the men said. "You're Zimmerman, ain't you?"

Fritz Zimmerman tried to speak and found the words stuck in his throat.

Light from an electric torch held by the second man stabbed his face.

"It's him, all right," the second man said. "Come along, mister."

"What—what is this?" Zimmerman managed at last. He stared wildly up at the decks of the *Astra,* looking for help. The decks were deserted, dark and silent.

"You're wanted," the first man said, "wanted for murder, Zimmerman."

There was the faint noise of clinking metal. The light of the torch fell on something shiny and then Zimmerman felt cold steel about his wrists.

CHAPTER XXX

PONDER TIES THE KNOT

SLOWLY, painfully, Mr. Nibbs got to his feet. The bullet that Runner Smith had fired, hoping to hit Zimmerman, had caught Mr. Nibbs in the side. He held his hand over the bleeding place and stood there swaying, his good eye as glassy as the other. The front of the room where the windows were, was now like the inside of a blazing furnace. Hands was crouching; next to him stood Jones, both bent on taking the chance that Zimmerman had taken. Hands started, then stopped. He couldn't bring himself to do it. The flames had mounted. He hadn't the courage to leap into them. Pudgy Myers yelled.

"I hear fire engines! Maybe they'll be in time." Then he stopped, gasping.

Don Graham who, through it all, had been standing at the far end of the room, motionless, as if in a trance, unaware of the fact that he had his arm about Hilda, heard Hilda say in a small, choked voice:

"I don't think they'll be in time. It's—" it's been nice knowing you, Don Graham." She slipped from under his arm and sank to the ground.

With an effort Don Graham roused himself from his lethargy. He made for the door. Runner Smith and Jones were again there, again hammering desperately at the lock with their guns.

"Get away!" Don Graham roared.

Either they didn't hear him or else they deliberately paid no attention to him. But then something happened that startled them all into a momentary silence. High and weird, Mr. Nibbs' voice rang out:

Rock of Ages. cleft for me
Let me hide myself in thee.

It was as though he was completely unaware of what was going on around him.

Don Graham pushed Runner and Jones away from the door, then he swung his cane, that heavy loaded bludgeon of a cane—again and again. His lungs filled with smoke, each blow threatened to be the last. He mustn't give up. He could almost feel the lock giving. One more—and one more sufficed.

He yanked the door open. He had no intention of going out, but even if he had, he would have had no chance. Like wild beasts, Hands, Pudgy Myers, Jones and Runner Smith knocked him down in their wild rush to escape. They trampled over his prostrate body as they pushed out.

Dizzy, half-blinded with smoke, Don Graham got to his knees and crawled along the floor until he found Hilda. Somehow with a strength that was beyond him, he

managed to pick her up and stagger toward the door. He got through, got halfway down the hall where he could see the front door open. There seemed so many men there . . . firemen, he thought . . . and a great deal of shouting . . . another step . . . and then he collapsed.

WHEN Don Graham awoke, he found himself in a room with bare walls. He was flat on his back, in bed. The room was cool and white. Don Graham stirred and found his shoulder hurt. He looked down and saw that it was bandaged. He had no idea where he was. He moved his head slowly. There was someone sitting in a chair not far from his bed—Hilda.

"What's been going on?" Don Graham said, a crooked smile on his lips.

Hilda moved her chair closer.

"You got yourself hurt trying to drag a lady out of a burning house," she said somberly, "and you swallowed too much smoke. They took you to a hospital and I hear that you were a bad patient, so they had to give you something to make you sleep. So now it's almost noon."

For a time Don Graham stared up at the ceiling. "And are you all right?" he asked finally.

"Yes," she said, "there wasn't much the matter with me. You'll be all right too. You've got a broken collar bone, but that's nothing for a man like you."

"That won't take long to heal. Then I can go back—"

"Go back?"

He nodded without looking at her.

"I've got to go back. The war is over. But they'll need me over there." There's work to be done. People to be helped."

"Yes, I suppose you've got to go," she said, her voice empty.

She was about to say something else, but the door opened and Sergeant Ponder, with his derby and his never-absent cigar butt, came in. For a time he stood at the foot of the bed, reproach in his round, lackluster eyes. Then:

"Tch, tch. Son, you've been an awful nuisance. If you'd only opened up just a little, things would have been much easier for me. Feeling all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"I suppose you thought you were smart," C. O. Ponder said with pretended indignation, "not telling me that this little Spanish friend of yours, José, never had a watch, and that the engraving on the inside of the watch was phony."

"How did you find out?" Don Graham asked without much interest.

"Well, I oughtn't to tell you," C. O. Ponder said grudgingly, "seeing that you wouldn't tell me a thing, but I suppose if I don't tell you everything that's happened, you'll go nosing around and get yourself into more trouble. To begin from the beginning, I never saw so many crazy people mixed up in one case as in this one, and that includes you, too. I knew right away of course that you hadn't killed Meechling. That was an obvious plant.

"If you had killed him by chucking him down the hoist, you wouldn't have bothered to lug him upstairs again and pack him in that case and stick a bayonet in him. And even if you had been crazy enough to do all that, and your passport had fallen out of your pocket by accident, the chances are your wallet would have fallen out too.

"And anyway, your passport would have fallen on top of Meechling's body; it wouldn't have been underneath it, where we found it. Besides, there were no fingerprints on your passport, which showed that somebody had put it in that case deliberately. Whoever had done that had to wipe off his own fingerprints, and naturally yours went too. I was pretty sure who that guy was because—you remember I kept your wallet?— I kept it because it had Zimmerman's fingerprints on it besides yours. That gave me the idea that Zimmerman had handled both your passport and your wallet.

"When he first told me he'd found your wallet on the floor of your office and put it back in your coat, he was telling the truth. He found the passport too and kept that figuring it might come in handy some

way—maybe get you into trouble with the immigration authorities. So the chances were that Zimmerman was responsible for framing you. That still didn't prove that he killed Meechling.

"As a matter of fact, he didn't. Zimmerman discovered Meechling's body in the basement and thought he'd fallen by accident. He saw a chance to get rid of you for a while and hoisted the body up to the fifth floor where he fixed up that business with the bayonet and the passport. I don't take much credit for finding out who killed Meechling."

"Who did kill him?" Don Graham asked.

C. O. Ponder looked at Hilda.

"You don't mind these gory details, ma'm, do you?"

Hilda shook her head.

"A girl named Vera Higgins did it. She was in love with Zimmerman. So much in love that she was a little bit out of her head, I guess. She was going through the building the evening that Meechling was killed, looking for Zimmerman, and there in the fifth loft she found Meechling. Meechling was talking to himself out loud." Again C. O. Ponder stopped. He looked embarrassed.

"You're sure, ma'm— Maybe I'd better come back some other time."

"I should like to hear it," Hilda said.

"WELL, Mr. Meechling was standing there talking out loud. He was saying something like this: 'It's gone, Mr. Graham. Most of it's gone. It wasn't my fault. I'll tell you how it happened if you promise not to harm me—I'll tell you . . .' The way Vera figured it, and I think she's right, was that Mr. Meechling was going to turn Zimmerman over to you—tell you that most of that treasure was gone.

"Meechling was afraid of you and he was rehearsing his speech, waiting for you to come up to the loft so he could make his peace with you. Vera, scared to death for fear of what would happen to Zimmerman if the others found out he'd swiped most of the treasure, lost her head—poor kid.

"Meechling was standing close to the hoist. He paid no particular attention to Vera when she came up to him. All she had to do was to give him a quick shove and down he went. You'd think somebody would hear the noise of a fall like that and come a-running. But nobody pays any attention to noises of that kind in a warehouse."

"Did Vera Higgins tell you this?" Don Graham asked.

"She did," C. O. Ponder said. Once more he looked uncomfortably at Hilda. "There's something I'd like to ask you, ma'm," he said. "You tipped me off, telling me that maybe Vera might talk. I just would like to know, did you deliberately put on an act, I mean—maybe this is none of my business—but I just would like to know, did you set out to make her jealous on purpose?"

"What happened to Zimmerman?" Hilda asked evenly.

"Tch-tch," said C. O. Ponder mournfully. "Nobody ever tells me anything. Well, anyway Vera thought Zimmerman was throwing her over, so she was going to kill herself. And then she thought that was selfish, poor kid; she thought she ought to clear Zimmerman of Meechling's death, and she came to me and told me how it had happened.

"She tried to take the blame for killing Gabriel and Jose too, but she wasn't so good at that because she couldn't fill in the details." The sergeant's eyes grew more vacuous. "You know," he said, "if I didn't have the goods on Zimmerman, I'd frame him just for throwing that kid down.

"Now about that watch. I knew right off the bat that the engraving was a phoney. I could see the watch was old but the engraving was brand new. So I put the boys to work and they found the engraver, and he gave them a description of Zimmerman.

"He talked free enough until they brought him down to see me and then when he found out that it was a murder charge he closed up like a clam. It took

me until midnight to get a written statement out of him. I decided to go down to see Zimmerman right then and there and lock him up. By the time I got there, there was a fire—and no Zimmerman."

"Then Zimmeran got away," Don Graham said. He half rose then sank back.

"Oh, no," C. O. Ponder said. "Even a dumb cop like me finds out things. I found out about that little tramp steamer that belongs to Zimmerman's company. I found out that they were keeping steam up day and night, so I figured that Zimmerman was going to use it to make a getaway.

"So last night, when there was no Zimmerman, and his man Lester told me he had seen his boss climb into a cab, I guessed where he was going. So I called up the Old-Slip police station which is just about two blocks away from where that steamer was anchored and they sent a couple of men there. It was pretty close.

"Those two men didn't get there more than a minute before Zimmerman did. They brought him to the station and after I told him all I had been telling you and some other things, Zimmerman confessed.

"He was pretty much all in, didn't seem to care what happened to him. In fact all he wanted was for me to get a man named Nibbs." Sergeant Ponder paused long enough to favor Don Graham with a reproachful stare. "We won't go into this Nibbs business, you and I. Anyway, we found Nibbs dead in Zimmerman's house, along with a little fellow and somebody else. I think it's McLaughlin. They're checking on that."

The sergeant let his cigar butt travel from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Now if there's anything else, son, that you think you've got to straighten out in this town for the benfit of Spain, I wish you'd let me know now, so that I can call out the reserves."

"No," said Don Graham solemnly, "there's nothing else. I'm going back to Spain."

The sergeant had had a very complete confession from Zimmerman, so now he looked a little lugubriously from Don Graham to Hilda, then back to Don Graham.

"Maybe it's best," he said, "at least it will probably be best for the police department. Good luck to you. Goodbye, ma'm."

With that he was gone.

For minutes Don Graham said nothing, then:

"I've got to go back, Hilda."

"You could send the treasure back," she said. "You could turn it over to the Spanish Embassy." Her voice was leaden.

"No, I've got to go back myself, too. I know it sounds sentimental and stupid, but I've got to go back on account of José. I let José down and I've got to make it up to him."

"Yes," she said, "I suppose so." Absently she looked about for her hat.

A nurse came in with a tray—a cheerful, apple-cheeked little woman in crisp white linen.

"I thought you'd like some breakfast," she said, "and perhaps want the paper too. Men always want their paper with their breakfast." She put the tray down and helped Don Graham into a sitting position.

Hilda was saying: "Goodbye, Don Graham."

He saw her move toward the door.

"Hilda—Hilda, wait." She looked back at him and saw with a shock of surprise that for the first time there was no bitterness in his eyes. "Hilda—it won't be forever—I'll be coming back . . . some day. . . ."

She moved back into the room. "You're asking me to wait for you?" He nodded; his face was anxious. "I won't do that, Don. But if you want me, I could go with you. I could help you, Don. I was just—afraid that you wouldn't want a woman like me. . . ."

Her face grew rich with color as she saw his arms stretch out for her. She murmured his name in a kind of wonder, and went quickly toward the bed. The apple-cheeked nurse, still holding the tray, stood there beaming.

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

YOU may remember that a while ago one correspondent accused us, rather violently, of serving up "escapist fiction." He described the present editorial administration as "shilly-shallying" and demanded heatedly to know when we are going to come down out of that ivory tower and Face the Facts.

This week a gentleman comes to our defense. He comes militantly and yet with such an impressive display of abstract theory that the controversy begins to sound more like something out of the Journal of Esthetic Criteria than the usual Argonotes dog-fight.

ROBBERT UTRATIL

In the May 27 issue you Argonoted a letter from one J. H. Calderman, and having a more than casual interest I'd like to toss a few words at him (or her) in return.

In the letter, this Calderman betrays a typical trend of thought that needs no comment from me. That I take exception to its use in application to ARGOSY, I'll try to make completely apparent to him.

First, he punditically prates of intelligent men and women desiring more of the realities of life in their ARGOSY stories.

In bemoaning this absence of reality, he is guilty of a gross lack of imagination. He doesn't seem to realize that there can be reality of thought as well as of action. In fact, some authorities believe that thought is the only reality. Nevertheless, ARGOSY, to my taste, has always presented a pleasant supply of both active and passive actuality. And if more of the active brand of reality is wanted, there are always the newspapers.

And, in the matter of fiction and news, it is patently essential that each must remain as separate and distinct branches of the literary art: One to serve primarily as useful entertainment, the other as useful instruction. An affinity between the two, but never a meeting. If it were otherwise, fiction would no longer be fiction.

By deduction, it seems evident that this particular Calderman cannot recognize fictional reality unless there are copious incidents of conniving, bomb-throwing and head-chopping.

Secondly, we come to Calderman's claim that the day of escapist-fiction is gone. What a fool! Doesn't he realize that as long as we humans have something to look forward to, some improvement to strive for, some happiness to seek, there will always be escapist-fiction.

Since fiction is the invention of the imagination, whenever we raise our thoughts from everyday existence, and contemplate the beautification and improvement of the world around us, we create escapist-fiction—"escapist" because we have elevated our thoughts from the commonplace. And even if, by some unforeseen chance, such fiction could possibly disappear from the printed page, it would never abandon the minds of thinking people—Not if there is to be mental, physical and spiritual progress.

And, in conclusion, I say, long may ARGOSY wave from the corner newsstand.

NEW YORK CITY

INTELLIGENCE DEPARTMENT. According to Elmer Birnblower, our Hollywood spy, that plump and bumbling terror of the West—Henry Harrison Conroy, whose latest exploits are chronicled in the serial beginning in this issue—is soon to gallop into the movies, sponsored by MGM. . . .

Futhermore, at the moment MGM and Warner Brothers are offering large, competitive prices for the privilege of filming the Hornblower trilogy. . . . And speaking of that gallant British seaman, another of our spies reports that the editors of two large-sized weekly fiction slicks, priced at a nickel (we wouldn't think of embarrassing them by naming names), kick themselves once a week for letting *us* introduce Hornblower to the American public.

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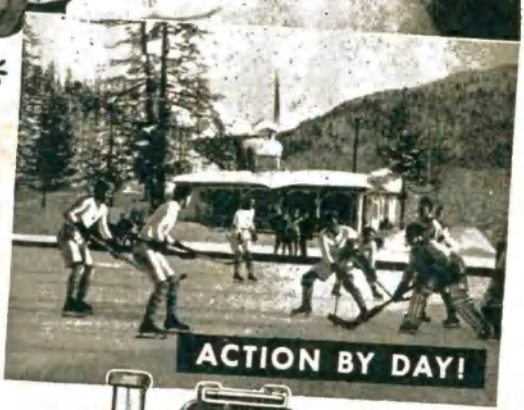

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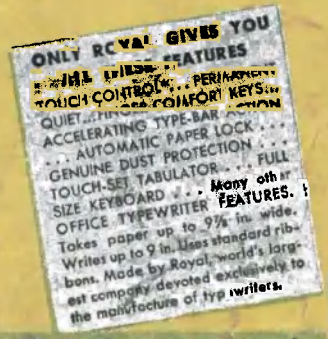

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