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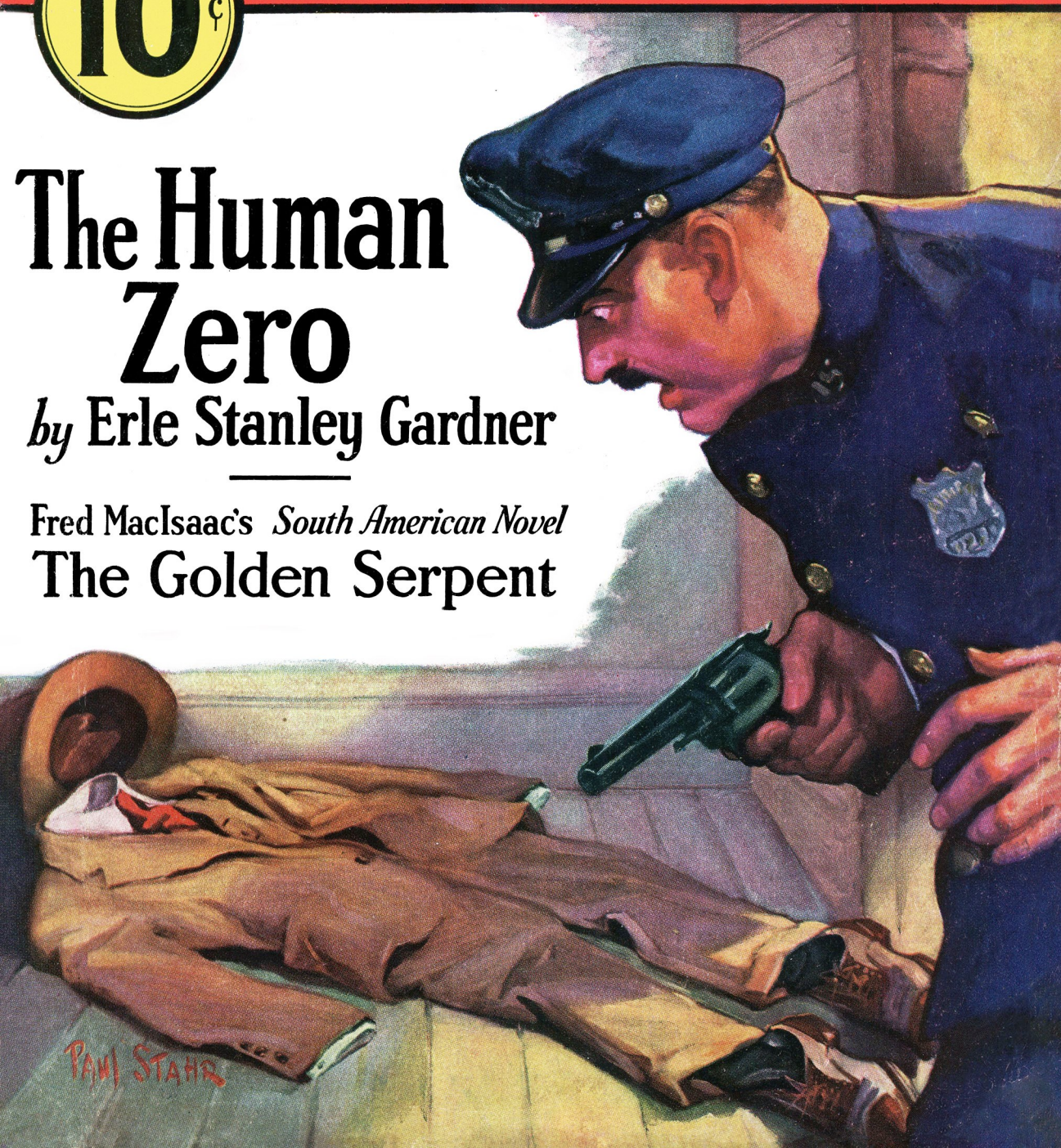


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# ARGOSY

VOLUME 226 CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 19, 1931 NUMBER 2

## NOVELETTES



## SERIALS



## SHORT STORIES



## OTHER FEATURES



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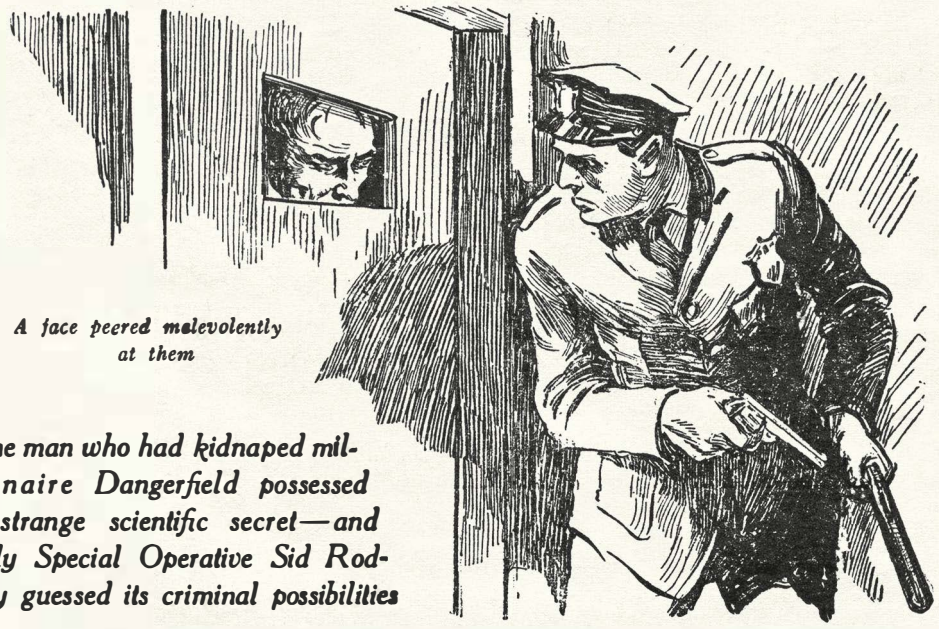
ARGOSY

VOLUME 226 SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1931 NUMBER 2

# The Human Zero



*A face peered malevolently at them*

*The man who had kidnaped millionaire Dangerfield possessed a strange scientific secret—and only Special Operative Sid Rodney guessed its criminal possibilities*

**By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER**

***Author of "Singing Sand," "Stamp of the Desert," etc.***

## *Novelette—Complete*

### CHAPTER I.

#### A MYSTERIOUS KIDNAPING.

BOB SANDS took the letter from the hands of the captain of police, read it, and pursed his lips in a whistle.

Four pairs of eyes studied the secretary of the kidnaped man as he read. Two pencils scribbled notes on pads of scratch paper, of the type used by newspaper reporters.

Bob Sands showed that he had been aroused from sleep, and had rushed to headquarters. His collar was soiled. His tie was awry. The eyes were still red from rubbing, and his chin was covered with the bristling stubble which awaited a razor.

" Good Heavens," he said, " the Old

Man was sure given a scare when he wrote that!"

Captain Harder noted the sleep-reddened eyes of the secretary.

"Then it's his writing?"

"Undoubtedly."

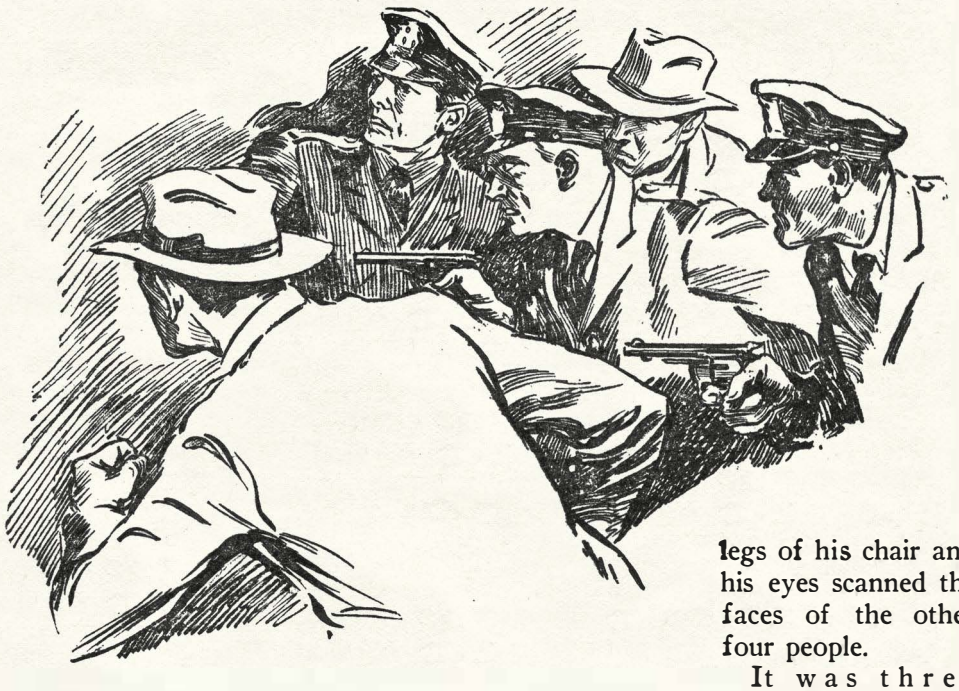
Ruby Orman, "sob-sister" writer of the *Clarion,* added to her penciled notes. "Tears streamed down the cheeks of the loyal secretary as he identified the writing as being that of the man by whom he was employed."

Charles Ealy, reporter for the more conservative *Star,* scribbled sketchy notes. "Sands summoned—Identifies writing as being that of P. H. Dangerfield—Dramatic scene enacted in office of Captain Harder at an early hour this morning—Letter, written by kidnaped millionaire, urges police to drop case and bank to pay the half million demanded in cash as ransom—Letter hints at a scientist as being the captor and mentions fate 'so horrible I shudder to contemplate it.'"

Sid Rodney, the other occupant of the room, wrote nothing. He didn't believe in making notes. And, since he was the star detective of a nationally known agency, he was free to do pretty much as he pleased.

Rodney didn't make detailed reports. He got results. He had seen them come and seen them go. Ordinary circumstances found him cool and unexcited. It took something in the nature of a calamity to arouse him.

Now he teetered back on the two



legs of his chair and his eyes scanned the faces of the other four people.

It was three o'clock in the morning. It was the second day following the mysterious abduction of P. H. Dangerfield, a millionaire member of the stock exchange. Demands had been made for a cool half million as ransom. The demands had been okayed by the millionaire, himself, but the bank refused to honor the request. Dangerfield had not over two hundred thousand in his account. The bank was willing to loan the balance, but only when it should be

absolutely satisfied that it was the wish of the millionaire, and that the police were powerless.

Rodney was employed by the bank as a special investigator. In addition, the bank had called in the police. The investigation had gone through all routine steps and arrived nowhere. Dangerfield had been at his house. He had vanished. There was no trace of him other than the demands of the kidnapers, and the penciled notations upon the bottom of those letters, purporting to be in the writing of the missing millionaire.

Then had come this last letter, completely written in pen and ink by Dangerfield, himself. It was a letter addressed directly to Captain Harder, who was assuming charge of the case, and implored him to let the bank pay over the money.

Captain Harder turned to Rodney.

"How will the bank take this?" he asked.

Rodney took a deep drag at his cigarette. He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, and, as he spoke, the smoke seeped out of the corners of his mouth, clothing the words in a smoky halo.

"Far as the newspapers are concerned," he said, "I have nothing to say. As a private tip, I have an idea the bank will regard this as sufficient authorization, and pay the money."

Captain Harder opened a drawer, took out photostatic copies of the other demands which had been received.

"They want five hundred thousand dollars in gold certificates, put in a suitcase, sent by the secretary of the kidnaped man, to the alley back of Quong Mow's place in Chinatown. It's to be deposited in an ash can that sits just in front of the back door of Quong Mow's place. Then Sands is to drive away.

"The condition is that the police must not try to shadow Sands or watch the barrel, that Sands must go alone, and that there must be no effort to trace the numbers of the bills. When that has been done, Dangerfield will go free. Otherwise he'll be murdered. The notes point out that, even if the money is deposited in the ash can, but the other conditions are violated, Dangerfield will die."

THERE was silence in the room when the captain finished speaking. All of those present knew the purport of those messages. The newspaper reporters had even gone so far as to photograph the ash can.

There was a knock at the door.

Captain Harder jerked it open.

The man who stood on the threshold of the room, surveying the occupants through clear, gray, emotionless eyes, was Arthur L. Soloman, the president of the bank.

He was freshly shaved, well dressed, cool, collected.

"I obeyed your summons, captain," he said in a dry, husky voice that was as devoid of moisture as a dead leaf scuttling across a cement sidewalk on the wings of a March wind.

Captain Harder grunted.

"*I* came without waiting to shave or change," said Sands, his voice showing a trace of contempt. "They said it was life or death."

The banker's fish-like eyes rested upon the flushed face of Bob Sands.

"I shaved," said Soloman. "I never go out in the morning without shaving. What is the trouble, captain?"

Harder handed over the letter.

The banker took a vacant chair, took spectacles from his pocket, rubbed the lenses with a handkerchief, held them to the light, breathed upon the lenses

and polished them again, then finally adjusted the spectacles and read the letter.

His face remained absolutely void of expression.

"Indeed," he said, when he had finished, but the tone showed no surprise.

"What we want to know," said Captain Harder, "is whether the bank feels it should honor that request, make a loan upon the strength of it and pay that ransom."

The banker put the tips of his fingers together and spoke coldly.

"One-half a million dollars is a very great deal of money. It is altogether too much to ask by way of ransom. It would, indeed, be a dangerous precedent for the more prominent business men of this community, were any such ransom to be paid."

Captain Harder sighed.

"We've been all over that before, Mr. Soloman. What I want to know is what do you want the police to do? If we're to try and find this man, we'd better keep busy. If we're going to sit back and let you ransom him, and then try and catch the kidnapers afterward, we don't want to get our wires crossed."

The banker's tone dripped sarcasm.

"Your efforts so far have seemed to be futile enough. The police system seems inadequate to cope with these criminals."

Captain Harder flushed. "We do the best we can with what we've got. Our salary allowances don't enable us to employ guys that have got the brains of bank presidents to pound our pavements."

Ruby Orman snickered.

The banker's face remained gray and impassive.

"Precisely," he said coldly.

"Nothin' personal," said Harder.

The banker turned to Sid Rodney.

"Has your firm anything to report, Mr. Rodney?"

RODNEY continued to sit back in his chair, his thumbs hooked into the arm holes of his vest, his cigarette hanging at a drooping angle.

"Nothin' that I know of," he said, smoke seeping from his lips with the words.

"Well?" asked Charles Ealy.

Captain Harder looked at the banker meaningly.

"Well?" he said.

Ruby Orman held her pencil poised over her paper.

"The *Clarion* readers will be *so* much interested in your answer, Mr. Soloman."

The banker's mouth tightened.

"The answer," he said, still speaking in the same husky voice, "is *no!*"

The reporters scribbled.

Bob Sands, secretary of the missing man, got to his feet. His manner was belligerent. He seemed to be controlling himself with an effort.

"You admit Mr. Dangerfield could sell enough securities within half an hour of the time he got back on the job to liquidate the entire amount!" he said accusingly.

The banker's nod was casual.

"I believe he could."

"And this letter is in his handwriting?"

"Yes. I would say it was."

"And he authorizes you to do anything that needs to be done, gives you his power of attorney and all that, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then why not trust his judgment in the matter and do what he says?"

The banker smiled, and the smile was cold, tight-lipped.

"Because the bank is under no obligations to do so. Mr. Dangerfield has a checking account of about two hundred thousand dollars. The bank would honor his check in that amount, provided our attorney could advise us that the information we have r e c e i v e d through the press and the police would not be tantamount to knowledge that such check was obtained by duress and menace.

"But as far as loaning any such additional sum to be paid as ransom, the bank does not care to encourage kidnapings by establishing any such precedent. The demand, gentlemen, is unreasonable."

"What," yelled Sands, "has the bank got to say about how much kidnapers demand?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Mr. Sands. Mr. Rodney, I trust your firm will uncover some clew which will be of value. The bank values Mr. Dangerfield's account very much. We are leaving no stone unturned to assist the police. But we cannot subscribe to the payment of such an unheard-of ransom."

"A human life is at stake!" yelled Sands.

The banker paused, his hand on the door.

"The safety of the business world is also at stake, gentlemen. Good morning!"

---

## CHAPTER II.

### WHO IS ALBERT CROME?

THE door slammed shut.

Captain Harder sighed.

Sid Rodney tossed away the stub of his cigarette, groped for a fresh one.

"Such is life," mused Charles Ealy.

"The dirty pirate!" snapped Sands. "He's made thousands off of the Dangerfield account. He doesn't care a fig what happens to Dangerfield. He's just afraid of establishing a precedent that will inspire other criminals."

Sid Rodney lit his fresh cigarette.

Ruby Orman's p e n c i l scribbled across the paper.

"Scene one of greatest consternation," she wrote. "Men glanced at each other in an ecstasy of futility. Sands gave the impression of fighting back tears. Even strong men may weep when the life of a friend is at stake. Police promise renewed activity . . ."

Bob Sands reached for his hat.

"I'll go crazy if I hang around here. Is there anything I can do?"

Captain Harder shook his head.

"We'll have this letter gone over by the handwriting department," he said.

Sands walked from the room.

"Good morning," he said wearily.

Charles Ealy turned to the captain.

"Nothing new, Harry?"

"Not a thing, other than that letter," said Captain Harder. "This is one case where we can't get a toe-hold to work on."

Charles Ealy nodded sympathetically.

"Anything for publication?" he asked.

"Yes," snapped Captain Harder. "You can state that I am working on a brand new lead, and that within the next twenty-four hours we feel certain we will have the criminals in custody. You may state that we already have a cordon of police guarding against an escape from the city, and that, momentarily, the dragnet is tightening . . . Oh, you folks know, say the usual thing that may put the fear of God into the kidnapers and make the public think

we aren't sitting here with our arms folded."

Charles Ealy scraped back his chair.

"Wait a minute," said Rodney, the cigarette in his mouth wabbling in a smoky zigzag as he talked. "I may have a hunch that's worth while. Will you give me a break on it, captain, if it's a lead?"

The police captain nodded wearily.

"Shoot," he said.

Rodney grinned at the two reporters.

"This stuff is off the record," he admonished. "You two can scoop it if anything comes of it. Right now it's on the q.t."

The reporters nodded.

They were there, in the first place, because the two papers were "in right" with the administration. And they kept in right with the police department by printing what the police were willing they should print, and by keeping that confidential which was given to them in confidence.

SID RODNEY went to the trouble of removing his cigarette from the corner of his mouth, sure sign of earnestness.

"I've got a funny angle on this thing. I didn't say anything before, because I think it's a whole lot more grave than many people think. I have a hunch we're doing business with a man who has a lot more sense than the average kidnaper. I have a hunch he's dangerous. And if t h e r e was any chance of the bank coming to the front, then letting us try to recover the money afterward, I wanted to play it that way.

"But the bank's out, so it's everything to gain and nothing to lose. Now here's the situation. I ran down every one I could find who might have a motive. One of the things the agency did, which the police also did, was to run down every one who might profit by the disappearance or death of P. H. Dangerfield.

"But one thing our agency did that the police didn't do, was to try and find out whether or not any person had been trying to interest Dangerfield in a business deal and been turned down.

"We found a dozen leads and ran 'em down. It happened I was to run down a list of three or four, and the fourth person on the list was a chap named Albert Crome. Ever hear of him?"

He paused.

Captain Harder shook his head.

Ruby Orman looked blank. Charles Ealy puckered his brows.

"You mean the s c i e n t i s t that claimed he had some sort of a radium method of disrupting ether waves and forming an etheric screen?"

Rodney nodded. "That's the chap."

"Sort of cuckoo, isn't he? He tried to peddle his invention to the government, but they never took any particular notice of him. Sent a man, I believe, and Crome claimed the man they sent didn't even know elemental physics."

Sid Rodney nodded again.

There was a rap at the door.

Captain Harder frowned, reached back a huge arm, twisted the knob, and opened the door a crack.

"I left orders . . ." He paused in mid-sentence as he saw the face of Bob Sands.

"Oh, come in, Sands. I left orders only five people could come in here, and then I didn't want to be disturbed . . . Lord, man, what's the matter? You look as though you'd seen a ghost!"

Sands nodded.

"Look what happened. I started for home. My roadster was parked out in front of headquarters. I got in and drove it out Claremont Street, and was just turning into Washington when another car came forging alongside of me.

"I thought it would go on past, but it kept crowding me over. Then I thought of all the talk I'd heard of gangsters, and I wondered if there was any chance I was going to be abducted, too.

"I slammed on the brakes. The other car pushed right in beside me. There was a man sitting next to the driver, sort of a foreign looking fellow, and he tossed something.

"I thought it was a bomb, and I yelled and put my hand over my eyes. The thing thudded right into the seat beside me. When I grabbed it to throw it out, I saw it was a leather sack, weighted, and that there was crumpled paper on the inside. I opened the sack and found—this!"

Dramatically he handed over the piece of typewritten paper.

"Read it aloud," begged Ealy.

"Take a look," invited Captain Harder, spreading the sheet of paper on the desk.

THEY clustered about in a compact group, read the contents of that single spaced sheet of typewriting.

SANDS:

You are a damned fool. The banker would have given in if you hadn't been so hostile. And the police bungled the affair, as they nearly always do. I've got a method of hearing and seeing what goes on in Captain Harder's office. I'm going to tell you folks right now that you didn't do Dangerfield any good. When I showed him on the screen what was taking place, and he heard your words, he was beside himself with rage.

You've got one more chance to reach that banker. If he doesn't pay the sum within twelve hours there won't be any more Dangerfield.

And the next time I kidnap a man and hold him for ransom I don't want so much powwow about it. Just to show you my power, I am going to abduct you, Sands, after I kill Dangerfield, and then I'm going to get Arthur Soloman, the banker. Both of you will be held for a fair ransom. Soloman's ransom will be seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. So he'd better get ready to pay.

This is the final and last warning.

X.

Captain Harder's eyes were wide.

"Good Lord, has that man got a dictograph running into this office?"

Sands made a helpless gesture with the palms of his hands. He was white, his teeth were chattering, and his knees seemed utterly devoid of strength.

"I don't know. He's a devil. He's always seemed to know just what was going on. And he surely must have known Dangerfield's habits from A to Z. I'm frightened."

Captain Harder walked to the door.

"Send in a couple of men to search this place for a dictograph," he said. Then he turned on his heel, gave a swing of his arm. "Come on in another room, you folks. We'll go into this thing."

The little group trooped into one of the other offices.

"All right, Rodney. You were mentioning a scientist. What of him?"

"I went to his office," said Rodney, "and tried to engage him in conversation. He wouldn't talk. I asked him what he knew about Dangerfield, and he all but frothed at the mouth. He said Dangerfield was a crook, a pirate, a robber. Then he slammed the door.

" But, here's the point. I got a peep at the inside of his office. There was a Royal portable in there, and these letters that were received demanding ransom were written on a Royal portable.

" It's not much of a lead, and it's one that the police will have to run down—now. If it's a matter of life and death, and working against time, then it's too big for our agency to handle. But my opinion is that Albert Crome was violently insane, at least upon the subject of Dangerfield."

The police captain whirled to Sands.

" What sort of a car were these men using?"

" You mean the men who tossed the letter?"

" Yes."

" I can't tell you. I know it's stupid of me, but I just got too rattled to notice. It was a big car, and it looked as though it might have been a Cadillac, or a Buick, or a Packard. It might even have been some other make. I was rattled."

The captain snorted.

" What do you know about Crome?"

Sands blinked.

" I know Mr. Dangerfield was negotiating for the purchase of some patent rights, or the financing of some formula or something, but that's about all. The deal fell through."

" Ever meet Crome?"

The secretary hesitated, knitted his brows.

" You'll have to let me think . . . Yes, yes, of course I did. I met him several times. Some of the negotiations were carried on through me."

" Impress you as being a little off?" asked Sid Rodney, drawling the question, his inevitable cigarette dangling loosely from the corner of his mouth as he talked.

" No. He impressed me as being a pretty wide awake sort of a chap, very much of a gentleman, with a high sense of honor."

CAPTAIN HARDER pressed a button.

" Take these letters. Have 'em photographed," he told the man who answered the buzzer. " Check the typewriting with the others. Then get me everything you can get on Albert Crome. I want to know what he's been doing with his time the last few days, who he associates with, who's seen him lately, where he lives, what he's doing with his work, everything about him.

" And if you can get a man into his offices and laboratory, I want a specimen of the typewriting that comes from the portable machine he's got—a Royal."

The man nodded, withdrew.

Captain Harder grinned at the little group.

" Well, we might go down to T-Bone Frank's and have a cup of coffee and some eats. Maybe we'll have something new when we get back."

Sands fidgeted.

" I don't want anything to eat."

" Well, you'd better wait a little while, Sands. You know that threat may mean nothing. Then again, it may mean a lot."

Sands nodded.

" Are you going to tell Soloman?"

" Yes. I'll give him a ring, I guess. Maybe I'd better do it before he gets home and to bed. Let's see, I've got his number here. I'll give him a buzz and break the glad tidings and then put a couple of the boys on guard in front of the place. It 'll make him think a little. Didn't like his attitude, myself . . . Oh, well!"

He gave the exchange operator the number, replaced the receiver, fished a cigar from his pocket and scraped a noisy match along the sole of his shoe.

Ruby Orman scribbled on her pad of paper: "In tense silence, these men waited grimly for the dawn."

Charles Ealy put a matter-of-fact question.

"Can we get these letters for the noon editions, Harry?"

"What's deadline?" asked the captain.

"We'd have to have them by eight o'clock in order to get the plates ready."

"I guess so. It ain't eight o'clock yet."

Ealy perked up his ears.

"You speak as though you had something up your sleeve," he said.

The officer nodded grimly.

"I have," he said.

The telephone rang. Captain Harder cupped his ear to the receiver.

"Funny," he said, "Soloman's residence says he's not home yet." Then: "Keep calling. Tell him I want to speak to him. It's important."

They went to the all-night restaurant, lingered over coffee and sandwiches. They were all nervous, with the exception of Sid Rodney. That individual seemed to be utterly relaxed, but it was the inactivity of a cat who is sprawled in the sun, keeping a lazy eye upon a fluttering bird, trying to locate the nest.

Charles Ealy watched Sid Rodney narrowly. Once he nodded, slowly.

They finished their meal, returned to headquarters.

"HEARD from Soloman?" asked Captain Harder.

Sergeant Green, at the desk, shook his head.

"They keep saying he hasn't returned. But we've unearthed some stuff about Crome from our department files. He wanted a permit to establish an experimenting station in a loft building down town. Had the lease on the place and was all ready to go ahead when he found out he had to have a permit to operate the sort of a place he wanted.

"He was turned down on the permit after it appeared that his experiments were likely to increase the fire hazard, and he was bitter about it."

Captain Harder grunted.

"That doesn't help much."

"Did he send in any typewritten letters?" asked Sid Rodney.

"Maybe. I'll look in the files. Most of those things would be in another file."

"Got the address of the loft building?"

"Yes—632 Grant Street. That's down near the wholesale district, a little side street."

Sid nodded.

"Yeah. I know. What say we take a run down there, captain?"

"Why? He was turned down on his permit. There's nothing there for us."

Rodney lit a fresh cigarette and resumed.

"The man's a scientist. He hates Dangerfield. He impresses me as being very much unbalanced. He's got a loft that isn't being used. Now *if* he should happen to be mixed up in the kidnaping, where would be a better place to keep a prisoner than in an unused loft building, that had been taken over and fitted up as an experimental laboratory?"

Captain Harder grinned.

"You win," he said. "Get me half a dozen of the boys out, sergeant. I'm going down there myself and give it a

once over. Better take along a bunch of keys."

"Do we go along?" asked Ealy, his eyes twinkling.

Captain Harder grinned.

"Certainly not," he said.

Sands took him seriously.

"I'm glad of that. I'm simply all in. I want to go and get some sleep, a bath and a shave."

Captain Harder looked sympathetic.

"I know, Sands. Ealy and I were kidding. But if you feel all in, go on home and get some sleep. We've got your number. We'll call you if there's anything there."

"How about an escort?" asked Rodney. "Those threats, you know..."

Sands vehemently shook his head.

"No. I don't want to advertise to the neighborhood that I'm afraid. I'll go on home and sleep. I'm safe for twelve hours yet, anyway. If you think there's any danger at the end of that time, I'll move into a hotel and you can give me a guard."

Captain Harder nodded.

"Okay."

## CHAPTER III.

### INTO THIN AIR.

THE two police cars slid smoothly to the curb before the loft building.

The first streaks of dawn were tingeing the buildings in the concrete cañon of loft buildings, wholesale houses and nondescript apartments.

Captain Harder jerked his thumb.

"This is the place. No use standin' on formality. Let's go up. He had the whole building leased. Looks vacant now."

The men moved across the echoing sidewalk in a compact group. There was the jingle of keys against the brass lock plate, and then the click of a bolt. The door opened. A flight of stairs, an automatic elevator, a small lobby, showed in the reddish light of early morning. There was a musty smell about the place.

"Take the elevator," said Captain Harder. "Then we won't have so much trouble...funny he leased the whole building in advance of a permit. This lease cost him money."

No one said anything. They opened the door of the elevator. Then they drew back with an exclamation.

"Look there!" said one of the men.

There was a stool in the elevator. Upon that stool was a tray, and upon the tray was some food, remnants of sandwiches, a cup of coffee, the sides stained where trickles of the liquid had slopped over the side of the cup.

Captain Harder smelled the cup, jabbed a finger into the crust of the sandwiches.

"Looks like it's less than twenty-four hours old," he said.

The men examined the tray.

Captain Harder snapped into swift activity. It was plainly apparent that the curiosity which had sent him down to the loft building for a "look around" merely because there were no other clews to run down, had given place to well-defined suspicion.

"Here, Bill. You take one of the boys with you and watch the steps. Frank, get out your gun and watch the fire escape. Go around the back way, through the alley. We'll keep quiet and give you three minutes to get stationed. Then we're going up.

"If you see any one, order him to stop. If he doesn't obey, shoot to kill. George, you go with Frank. The rest of us are going up in the elevator."

He took out his watch.

"Three minutes," he said.

The men snapped into action.

Captain Harder held a thumb nail upon the dial of his big watch, marking the time.

"Okay," he said, at length. "Let's go. You two birds on the stairs, make sure you don't get above the first floor without covering every inch of ground you pass. We don't want any one to duck out on us. If you hear any commotion, don't come unless I blow my whistle. Watch those stairs!"

HE closed the door of the elevator, jabbed the button marked by the figure "1."

The elevator creaked and swayed upward at a snail's pace, came to the first floor and stopped. Captain Harder propped the door open, emerged into a hallway, found himself facing two doors.

Both were unlocked. He opened first one, and then the other.

There were disclosed two empty lofts, littered with papers and rubbish. They were bare of furniture, untenanted. Even the closet doors were open, and they could see into the interiors of them.

"Nothing doing," said the officer. "Guess it's a false alarm, but we'll go on up."

They returned to the elevator, pressed the next button.

There were three floors, narrow, but deep.

The second floor was like the first as far as the doors were concerned. But as soon as Captain Harder opened the first door, it was at once apparent that the party was on a warm trail.

The place was fitted up with benches, with a few glass jars, test tubes, some rather complicated apparatus inclosed in a glass case. There were a few jars of chemicals, and there were some more trays with food remnants upon them.

"Somebody," said Captain Harder grimly, making sure his service revolver was loose in its holster, "is living here. Wonder what's in that room on the corner. Door looks solid enough."

He pushed his way forward through the litter on the floor, twisted the knob of the door.

"Locked," he said, "and feels solid as stone."

And, at that moment, sounding weak and faint, as though coming from a great distance, came a cry, seeping through the door from the room beyond, giving some inkling of the thickness of the door.

"Help, help, help! This is Paul Dangerfield. Help me! Help me!"

Captain Harder threw his weight against the door. As well have thrown his weight against the solid masonry of a wall.

"Hello," he called. "Are you safe, Dangerfield? This is the police!"

The men could hear the sound of frantic blows on the opposite side of the door.

"Thank God! Quick, get me out of here. Smash in the door. It's a foot thick. Get something to batter it down with!"

THE words were faint, muffled. The blows which sounded upon the other side of the door gave evidence of the thickness and strength of the portal.

Captain Harder turned to one of the men.

"How about keys?"

"I've got 'em, captain, but where do we put 'em?"

The officer stepped back to look at the door.

There was not a sign of a lock or keyhole in it. There was a massive knob, but nothing else to show that the door differed from the side of the wall, save the hairline which marked its borders.

"Smash it in! All together!"

They flung themselves against the door.

Their efforts were utterly unavailing.

"Hurry, hurry!" yelled the voice on the other side of the door. "He's going to... No, no! Don't. Oh! Go away! Don't touch that door. Oh... Oh... Not that!"

The voice rose to a piercing wail of terror, and then was silent. The squad pounded on the door, received no answer.

Captain Harder whirled to examine the loft.

"There's a bar over there. Let's get this door down."

He raised the whistle to his lips, blew a shrill blast. The two men who had been guarding the stairs came up on the run.

"Get this door down!" snapped the police captain, "and let's make it snappy."

They held a block of wood so that it formed a fulcrum for the bar, inserted the curved end, started to pry. The door was as solid as though it had been an integral part of the wall. Slowly, however, the men managed to get the bar inserted to a point where the leverage started to spring the bolts.

Yet it was a matter of minutes, during which time there was no sound whatever from that mysterious inner room.

At length the door swayed, creaked, pried unevenly, sprung closed as the men shifted their grips on the bar to get a fresh purchase.

"Now, then, boys!" said Captain Harder, perspiration streaming down from his forehead and into his eyes. "Let's go!"

They flung themselves into the work. The door tottered, creaked, slowly pried loose and then banged open.

The squad stared at a room built without windows. There was ventilation which came through a grating in the roof. This grating was barred with inch-thick iron bars. The air sucked out through one section, came blowing through another. The air seemed fresh enough, yet there was an odor in that room which was a stale stench of death. It was the peculiar, sickeningly sweet odor which hangs about a house which has been touched by death.

There was a table, a reclining chair, a carpet, a tray of food, a bed. The room gave evidences of having been lived in.

But it was vacant, so far as any living thing was concerned.

On the floor, near the door which had been forced, was a pile of clothing. The clothing was sprawled out as though it had covered the form of a man who had toppled backward to the door, stretched his full length upon the floor, and then been withdrawn from his garments.

CAPTAIN HARDER bent to an examination of the garments. There was a watch in the pocket which had stopped. The stopping of the watch was exactly five minutes before, at about the time the officers had begun pounding at the door.

There was a suit of silk underwear inside of the outer garments. The tie was neatly knotted about the empty collar. The sleeves of the shirt were down inside the sleeves of the coat. There were socks which nested down

inside the shoes, as though thrust there by some invisible foot.

There was no word spoken.

Those officers, reporters, detectives, hardened by years of experience, to behold the gruesome, stared speechlessly at that vacant bundle of clothing.

Charles Ealy was the one who broke the silence.

"Good Heavens! There's been a man in these clothes and he's been sucked out, like a bit of dirt being sucked up into a vacuum cleaner!"

Captain Harder regained control of himself with an effort. His skin was still damp with perspiration, but that perspiration had cooled until it presented an oily slime which accentuated the glistening pallor of his skin.

"It's a trap, boys. It's a damned clever trap, but it's just a trap. There couldn't have been..."

He didn't finish, for Ruby Orman, speaking in a hushed voice, pointed to one of the shoes.

"Try," she said, "just try fitting a sock into the toe of that shoe the way this one is fitted, and try doing it while the shoe's laced, or do it, and then lace the shoe afterward, and see where you get."

"Humph," said Ealy, "as far as that's concerned, try getting a necktie around the collar of a shirt and then fitting a coat and vest around the shirt."

Captain Harder cleared his throat and addressed them all.

"Now listen, you guys, you're actin' like a bunch of kids. Even supposing there was some one in this room, where could he have gone? There ain't any opening. He couldn't have slid through those bars in the ventilator."

Some of the detectives nodded sagely, but it remained for Rodney to ask the question which left them baffled.

"How," he asked, "was it possible to get the foot out of that laced shoe?"

Captain Harder turned away.

"Let's not get stampeded," he said.

He started to look around him.

"Cooked food's been brought in here at regular intervals...the man that was here was Dangerfield, all right. Those are his clothes. There's the mark of the tailor, and there's his gold-scrolled fountain pen. His watch has his initials on, even his check book is in the pocket.

"I tell you, boys, we're on the right track. This is the place Dangerfield's been kept, and it's that inventor who's at the bottom of the whole thing. We'll go knock his place over, and we'll probably find where Dangerfield is right now. He was spirited away from here, somehow.

"Those clothes were left here for a blind. Don't get stampeded. Here, feel the inside of the cloth. It's plumb cold, awfully cold. If anybody'd been inside those clothes within five minutes, the clothes'd be warm."

One of the officers nodded. His face gave an exhibition of sudden relief which was almost ludicrous. He grinned shamefacedly.

"By George, captain, that's so! Do you know, for a minute, this thing had me goofy. But you can see how cool the clothes are, and this watch is like a chunk of ice. It'd be warm if anybody had been inside those clothes."

"Who," asked Sid Rodney, "was it that was calling to us through the door?"

Captain Harder stepped to the door, dragged in the bar.

"I don't know. It may have been a trick of ventriloquism, or it may have been a sound that was projected through the ventilating system. But, anyhow, I'm going to find out. If

there's a secret entrance to this room, I'm going to find it if I have to rip off every board of the walls one at a time."

HE started with the bar, biting it into the tongue and groove which walled the sides of the room. Almost instantly the ripping bar disclosed the unique construction of that room.

It consisted of tongue and groove, back of which was a layer of thick insulation that looked like asbestos. Back of that was a layer of thick steel, and the steel seemed to be backed with concrete, so solid was it.

By examining the outside of the room, they were able to judge the depth of the walls. They seemed to be at least three feet thick. The room was a veritable sound-proof chamber.

Evidently the door was operated by some electro-magnetic control. There were thick bars which went from the interior of the door down into sockets built in the floor, steel faced, bedded in concrete.

Captain Harder whistled.

"Looks like there was no secret exit there. It must have been some sort of ventriloquism."

Sid Rodney grunted.

"Well, it wasn't ventriloquism that made the jars on that door. It was some one pounding and kicking on the other side. And, if you'll notice the toes of those shoes, you'll see where there are fragments of wood splinters, little flakes of paint, adhering to the soles right where they point out into the uppers.

"Now, then, if you'll take the trouble to look at the door, you'll find little marks in the wood which correspond to the marks on the toes of the shoes. In other words, whether those shoes were occupied or not, they were hammering against that door a few minutes ago."

Captain Harder shook his head impatiently.

"The trouble with all that reasoning is that it leads into impossibilities."

Sid Rodney stooped to the vest pocket, looked once more at the gold embossed fountain pen.

"Has any one tried this to see if it writes?" he asked.

"What difference would that make?" asked the police captain.

"He might have left us a message," said Sid.

He abstracted the pen, removed the cap, tried the end of the pen upon his thumb nail. Then he took a sheet of paper from his notebook, tried the pen again.

Captain Harder grunted.

"Listen, you guys, all this stuff isn't getting us anywhere. The facts are that Dangerfield was here. He ain't here now. Albert Crome has this place rented. He has a grudge against Dangerfield. It's an odds-on bet that we're going to get the whole fiendish scheme out of him—if we get there soon enough."

There was a mutter of affirmation from the officers, ever men who were more accustomed to rely upon direct action and swift accusation than upon the slower method of deduction.

"WAIT a minute," said Sid Rodney. His eyes were flaming with the fire of an inner excitement. He unscrewed the portion of the pen which contained the tip, from the barrel, drew out the long rubber tube which held the ink.

Captain Harder regarded him with interest, but with impatience.

"Just like any ordinary self-filling

pen the world over," said the police captain.

Sid Rodney made no comment. He took a knife from his pocket, slit open the rubber sac. A few sluggish drops of black liquid trickled slowly down his thumb, then he pulled out a jet black rod of solid material.

He was breathing rapidly now, and the men, attracted by the fierce earnestness of his manner, crowded about him.

"What is it?" asked one.

Rodney did not answer the question directly. He broke the thing in half, peered at the ends.

These ends glistened like some polished, black jewel which had been broken open. The light reflected from little tiny points, giving an odd appearance of sheen and luster.

Slowly a black stain spread along the palm of the detective's hand.

Sid Rodney set the long rod of black, broken into two pieces, down upon the tray of food.

"Is that ink?" demanded Harder.

"Yes."

"What makes it look so funny?"

"It's frozen."

"Frozen!"

"Yes."

"But how could ink be frozen in a room of this sort? The room isn't cold."

Sid Rodney shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not advancing any theories—yet. I'm simply remarking that it's frozen ink. You'll notice that the rubber covering and the air which was in the barrel of the pen acted as something of a thermal insulation. Therefore, it was slower to thaw out than some things."

Captain Harder stared at Rodney with a puckered forehead and puzzled eyes.

"What things do you mean?"

"The watch, for instance. You notice that it's started to run again."

"By George, it has!" said Charles Ealy. "It's started ticking right along just as though nothing had happened, but it's about six and a half or seven minutes slow."

Sid nodded silent affirmation.

Captain Harder snorted.

"You birds can run all the clews that you want to. I'm going to get a confession out of the bird that's responsible for this.

"Two of you stay here and see that no one comes in or goes out. Guard this place. Shoot to kill any one who disobeys your orders. This thing is serious, and there's murder at the bottom of it, or I miss my guess."

He whirled and stamped from the room, walking with that aggressive swing of the shoulders, that forward thrust of his sturdy legs, which betokened no good for the crack-brained scientist.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A MADMAN'S LABORATORY.

THEY hammered on the door.

After a matter of minutes there was an answer, a thin, cracked voice which echoed through the thick partitions of a door which seemed every bit as substantial as the door which Captain Harder had forced in order to enter that curious room where an empty suit of clothes had mocked him.

"Who is it?"

Captain Harder tried a subterfuge.

"Captain Harder, come to see about the purchase of an invention. I'm representing the War Department."

The man on the other side of that

door crackled into a cackling chuckle. "It's about time. Let's have a look at you."

Captain Harder nodded to the squad of grim-visaged men who were grouped just back of him.

"All ready, boys," he said.

They lowered their shoulders, ready to rush the door as soon as it should be opened.

But, to their surprise, there was a slight scraping noise, and a man's face peered malevolently at them from a rectangular slit in the door.

Captain Harder jerked back.

The face was only partially visible through the narrow peephole. But there was a section of wrinkled forehead, shaggy, unkempt eyebrows, the bridge of a bony nose, and two eyes.

The eyes compelled interest.

They were red rimmed. They seemed to be perpetually irritated, until the irritation had seeped into the brain itself. And they glittered with a feverish light of unwholesome cunning.

"Psh! The police!" said the voice, sounding startlingly clear through the opening of the door.

"Open in the name of the law!" snapped Captain Harder.

"Psh!" said the man again.

There was the faintest flicker of motion from behind the little peephole in the door, and a sudden coughing explosion. A little cloud of white smoke mushroomed slowly out from the corner of the opening.

The panel slid into place with the smooth efficiency of a well oiled piece of machinery.

Captain Harder jerked out his service revolver.

"All together, boys. Take that door down!"

He gathered himself, then coughed, flung up his hand to his eyes.

"Gas!" he yelled. "Look out!"

The warning came too late for most of the squad of officers who were grouped about that door. The tear gas, a new and deadly kind which seemed so volatile as to make it mix instantly with the atmosphere, spread through the corridor. Men were blinded, staggering about, groping their way, crashing into one another.

The panel in the door slid back again. The leering, malevolent features twisted into a hoarse laugh.

Captain Harder flung up his revolver and fired at the sound of that demoniac laughter.

The bullet thudded into the door.

The panel slid shut.

Sid Rodney had flung his arm about the waist of Ruby Orman at the first faint suggestion of mushrooming fumes.

"Back, back. It may be deadly!"

She fought against him.

"Let me go! I've got to cover this!"

But he swept her from her feet, flung her to his shoulder, sprinted down the hallways of the house. A servant gazed at them from a lower floor, scowling. Men were running, shouting questions at each other, stamping up and down stairs. The entire atmosphere of the house took on a peculiarly acrid odor.

SID RODNEY got the girl to an upper window on the windward side of the house. Fresh air was blowing in in a cooling stream.

"Did it get your eyes?"

"No. I'm going back."

Sid held her.

"Don't be foolish. There's going to be something doing around here, and you and I have got to have our eyes where they can see something."

She fought against him.

"Oh, I *hate* you! You're so domineering, so cocksure of yourself."

Abruptly, he let her go.

"If you feel that way," he said, "go ahead."

She jerked back and away. She looked at him with eyes that were flaming with emotion. Sid Rodney turned back toward the window. Her eyes softened in expression, but there was a flaming spot in each cheek.

"Why *will* you persist in treating me like a child?"

He made no effort to answer the question.

She turned back toward the end of the hallway, where the scientist had maintained his secret laboratory with the door that held the sliding panel.

Men were struggling blindly about that door. Others were wrapping their eyes in wet towels. Here and there a figure groped its way about the corridor, clutching at the sides of the banister at the head of the stairs, feeling of the edges of the walls.

Suddenly, the entire vision swam before her eyes, grew blurred. She felt something warm trickling down her cheek. Abruptly her vision left her. Her eyes streamed moisture.

"Sid!" she called. "Oh, Sid!"

He was at her side in an instant. She felt the strong tendons of his arm, the supporting bulk of his shoulder, and then she was swung toward the window where the fresh air streamed into the house.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Now it's got me."

"It probably won't bother you very long. You didn't get much of a dose of it. Hold your eyes open if you can, and face the breeze. They'll have the house cleared of the fumes in a few minutes."

There was the sound of a siren from the outer street, the clang of a gong.

"Firemen to clear the house," said Sid.

They stood there, shoulder to shoulder, cheek to cheek, letting the fresh morning breeze fan their faces. Out in the yard were hurrying shadows. Men came running to stations of vantage, carrying sawed-off shotguns. More cars sirened their way to the curb. Spectators gathered.

Electric fans were used to clear the corridor of the gas. Men were brought up carrying bars and jimmies. They attacked the door. Captain Harder's eyes were still disabled, as were the eyes of the others who had stood before that door.

Sid Rodney touched the girl's shoulder.

"They're getting ready to smash in the door. Can you see now?"

She nodded.

"I think they've got the hallway pretty well cleared of gas. Let's go and see what happens."

She patted his arm.

"Sid, you're just like a big brother—some one to take care of me, some one to scold; but I like you a lot."

"Just as you would a brother?" he asked.

"Just exactly."

"Thanks," he said, and the disappointment of his voice was lost in the sound of splintering wood as the door swung back on its hinges.

THEY stared into a great laboratory and experimenting room. It was a scene of havoc. Wreckage of bottles, equipment and apparatus was strewn about the room. It looked as though some one had taken an ax and ruthlessly smashed things right and left.

Here, too, was another room without windows. Such light as there was in the room was artificial. The ventilation came through grilles which were barred with heavy iron. It was a room upon which it was impossible to spy.

There was no trace of Albert Crome, the man whose malevolent face had been thrust through the aperture in the doorway.

The police crowded into the room.

Bottles of various acids had been smashed, and the pools upon the floor seethed and bubbled, gave forth acrid, throat-stinging fumes. In a cage by the door there were three white rats. These rats were scampering about, shrilling squeaky protests.

There was no other sign of life left in that room, save the hulking shoulders of the policemen who moved about in a dazed manner.

Captain Harder's voice bellowed instructions. He was blinded, but he was receiving reports from a detective who stood at his side and giving a rapid summary of conditions in the room.

" He's escaped some way. There's a secret passage out of this room. Get the guards about the place to establish a dead-line. Let no man through unless he has a pass signed by me. Those instructions are not to be varied or changed under any circumstances..."

A man approached the officer.

" You're wanted on the telephone, captain. I can plug in an extension here in the laboratory."

A servant, surly-faced, resentful, impassively placed a telephone extension in the hand of Captain Harder, plugged in the wires.

The blinded officer raised the receiver to his ear.

" Yeah?" he said.

There came a rasping series of raucous notes, then the shrill cackle of metallic laughter and the click which announced the party at the other end of the line had hung up.

Captain Harder started fiddling with the hook of the receiver in a frantic effort to get central.

" Hello, hello. This is Captain Harder. There was a call just came through to me on this line. Trace it. Try and locate it... What's that? No call? He said he was calling from a down town drug store... All right."

The captain hung up the receiver.

" Well, boys, I guess he's given us the slip. That was his voice, all right. He was calling from a down town drug store, he said. Told me to look in the northeast corner of the room and I'd find a secret passage leading down into his garage. Said he ran right out in his car without any trouble at all. He's laughing at us."

One of the men picked his way through the wreckage of the room to the northeast corner. The others shuffled forward. Broken glass crunched under the soles of their feet as they moved.

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## CHAPTER V.

### A FANTASTIC SECRET.

THE man who was bending over the wainscoting emitted a triumphant shout.

" Here it is!"

He gave a pull, and a section of the wall slid back, disclosing an oblong opening.

Captain Harder was cursing as a detective led him toward this oblong.

" I'm blinded...the outer guard let him slip through! What sort of boobs are we, anyhow? I thought I had this place guarded. Who was watching the outside? Herman, wasn't it? Get me

that guy. I've got things to say to him!"

Men went down the steep flight of stairs which led from that secret exit, and came to the garage. Here were several cars, neatly lined up, ready for instant use, also several vacant spaces where additional cars could be kept.

"Big enough!" grunted one of the men.

Sid Rodney had an idea.

"Look here, captain, it took time to smash up that laboratory."

Captain Harder was in no mood for theories.

"Not so much! What if it did?"

"Nothing. Only it took some little time. I don't believe a man could have looked out of the door, recognized the police, turned loose the tear gas, and then smashed up this laboratory and still have time enough to make his escape by automobile from the garage.

"I happened to be looking out of a window after that tear gas was released, and I saw your additional guards start to arrive..."

Captain Harder interrupted. He was bellowing like a bull.

"What a bunch of boobs we are!" he yelled at the men who had clustered around him in a circle. "He didn't get away at all. He stayed behind to smash up the laboratory! Then he sneaked out and telephoned me from some place in the house. No wonder central couldn't trace the call.

"Look around, you guys, for another exit from this laboratory. And keep those electric fans going. I don't trust this bird. He's likely to flood a lot of poison gas through that ventilating system of his... I'm commencing to get so I can see a little bit. Be all right in a few minutes, I hope."

The men scattered, examining the wainscoting.

"Here we are, captain!" called one of the men. "Take a look at this. Something here, right enough, but I can't just figure how it works... Wait a minute. That's it!"

Something clicked as the officer stepped back. A section of the wainscoting swung open, revealing a passage of about the height of a man crawling on all fours.

"Volunteers," said Captain Harder. "Damn these eyes! I'm going myself."

And he approached the passageway.

There was a stabbing burst of flame, the rattle of a machine gun, and a withering hail of bullets vomited from out of the passageway.

Captain Harder staggered backward, his right arm dangling at his side. The man who had been next to him dropped to the floor, and it needed no second glance to tell that the man was dead, even before he hit the floor.

The walls of the laboratory echoed to the crash of gunfire. Policemen, flinging themselves upon the floor, fired into the yawning darkness of that oblong hole in the wall. Here and there, riot guns belched their buckshot into the passageway.

There was the sound of the mocking laughter, another spurt of machine gun fire, then silence.

CAPTAIN HARDER had his coat off, was groping with his left hand for the location of the two bullet holes in his right arm and shoulder.

"Reckon I'm going to be an ambulance case, boys. Don't risk anything in there. Try gas."

The captain turned, groped for the door, staggered, fell. Blood spurted from the upper wound, which had evidently severed an artery.

Men grabbed him, carried him to the head of the stairs where ambulance men met them with a stretcher. Officers continued to keep up a fire upon the passageway. A man brought in a basket containing hand grenades and tear gas bombs. The pin was pulled from a tear gas bomb. The hissing of the escaping gas sounded plainly while the men on the floor held their fire.

The man who carried the gas bomb ran along the side of the wainscoting, flung the bomb into the opening. It hit with a thud, rolled over and over.

There was no sound emanating from the passageway, save the faint hiss of the gas.

"Give him a dose of it and see how he likes it," said one of the men.

As though to answer his question, from the very vicinity of the tear gas bomb, came a glittering succession of ruddy flashes, the rattle of a machine gun.

One of the men who was on the floor gave a convulsive leap, then quivered and was still. A hail of bullets splintered through the glass equipment which had been broken and scattered about. An officer tried to roll out of the way. The stream of bullets overtook him. He jumped, twitched, shivered, and the deadly stream passed on.

Sid Rodney grasped a hand grenade from the basket, pulled the pin, jumped to his feet.

The machine gun whirled in his direction.

"He's got a gas mask!" yelled one of the men who was crouched behind the shelter of an overturned bench.

Sid Rodney threw the grenade with all of the hurtling force of a professional baseball pitcher.

The missile hit squarely in the center of the opening, thudded against something that emitted a yell of pain.

The machine gun became silent, then stuttered into another burst of firing.

A livid sheet of orange flame seared its way out into the room. The whole side of the place seemed to lift, then settle. A deafening report ripped out the glass of windows in one side of the house. Plaster dust sprayed the air.

The oblong hole from which the machine gun had been coughing its message of death vanished into a tumbled mass of wreckage.

Men coughed from the acrid powder fumes, the irritating plaster dust.

"Believe that got him," said one of the men, rolling out from the shelter, holding a riot gun at ready as he rushed toward the tumbled mass of wreckage.

A human foot was protruding from between a couple of splintered two-by-fours. About it eddied wisps of smoke.

The officer was joined by others. Hands pulled the rafters and studs to one side. The body of a mangled man came sliding out.

From the blackness of that hole came the orange flicker of ruddy flame, the first faint cracklings of fire.

The mangled body had on what was left of a gas mask. The torso was torn by the force of the explosion. Parts of a machine gun were buried in the quivering flesh. But the features could be recognized.

Albert Crome, the crack-brained scientist, had gone to his doom.

MEN rushed up with fire-fighting apparatus. The flames were swiftly extinguished. The wreckage was cleared away. Men crawled into that little cubicle where the scientist had prepared a place of refuge.

It was a little room, steel-lined, fitted with a desk, a table and a cot. Also

there was a telephone extension in the room, and an electrical transformer, wires from which ran to a box-like affair, from the interior of which came a peculiar humming sound.

"Leave it alone until the bombing squad gets here. They'll know if it's some sort of an infernal machine. In the meantime let's get out of here."

The sergeant who gave the orders started pushing the men back.

Even as he spoke, there was a glow of ruddy red light from the interior of the box-like affair into which the electric wires ran.

"Better disconnect those wires," called one of the men.

The sergeant nodded, stepped forward, located the point of contact, reached to jerk one of the wires loose.

"Look out, don't short circuit 'em!"

Sid Rodney had crawled back out of the passage. The sergeant was tugging at the wires. They came loose, touched. There was a flash from the interior of the box-like machine, a humming, and then a burst of flame that died away and left a dense white smoke trailing out in sizzling clouds.

"You've short circuited the thing. That other wire must have been a ground and a button . . ."

But Sid Rodney was not listening.

His eyes happened to have been upon the cage of white rats as the voice called its warning. Those rats were scampering about the cage in the hysteria of panic.

Abruptly they ceased all motion, stood for a split fraction of a second as though they had been cast in porcelain. Then they shrank upon themselves.

Sid Rodney screamed a warning.

Men looked at him, followed the direction of his pointing forefinger, and saw an empty cage.

"What is it?" asked a detective.

Sid Rodney's face was white, the eyes bulging.

"The rats!"

"They got away. Somebody turned 'em loose, or the explosion knocked the cage around or blew a door open," said the officer. "Don't worry about them."

"No, no. I saw them melt and disappear. They just dissolved into the atmosphere."

The officer snickered.

"Don't bother yourself about rats," he said. "We've got work to do. Gotta find out what's going on here, and we've gotta locate Dangerfield."

He turned away.

Sid Rodney went over to the cage. He grasped the metal wires. They were so cold to his touch that the slight moisture on the tips of his fingers stuck to them.

He jerked one hand, and a bit of skin from the tips of his fingers pulled away.

He noticed a little pan of water which had been in the cage. It was filmed with ice. He touched the wires of the cage again. They were not so cold this time.

The film of ice was dissolving from the pan of water in the cage.

But there were no more white rats. They had disappeared, gone, utterly vanished.

SID RODNEY examined the cage. The door was tightly closed, held in place with a catch. There was no possible loophole of escape for those white rats. They had been caged, and the cage held them until, suddenly, they had gone into thin air.

There was a touch on his shoulder.

"What is it, Sid?"

Sid Rodney had to lick his dry lips before he dared to trust his voice.

"Look here, Ruby, did you ever hear of absolute zero?"

She looked at him with a puzzled frown, eyes that were dark with concern.

"Sid, are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, yes! I'm talking about things scientific. Did you ever hear of absolute zero?"

She nodded.

"Yes, of course. I remember we had it in school. It's the point at which there is absolutely no temperature. Negative two hundred and seventy-three degrees centigrade, isn't it? Seems to me I had to remember a lot of stuff about it at one time. But what has it got to do with what's been going on here?"

"A lot," said Sid Rodney. "Listen to this:

"Dangerfield disappears. He's located in a room. There's no such thing as escape from that room. Yet, before our eyes—or, rather, before our ears—he vanishes. His watch is stopped. The ink in his fountain pen is frozen. His clothes remain behind.

"All right, that's an item for us to remember.

"Then next come these white rats. I'm actually looking at them when they cease to move, dwindle in size and are gone, as though they'd been simply snuffed out of existence.

"Now you can see the ice film still on the water there. You can see what the wires of the cage did to my fingers. Of course, it happened so quickly that these things didn't get so awfully cold . . . but I've an idea we've seen a demonstration of absolute zero. And if we have, thank heavens, that dastardly criminal is dead!"

The girl looked at him, blinked her eyes, looked away, then back at him.

"Sid," she said, "you're talking nonsense. There's something wrong with you. You're upset."

"Nothing of the sort! Just because it's never been done, you think it can't be done. Suppose, twenty years ago, some one had led you into a room and showed you a modern radio. You'd have sworn it was a fake because the thing was simply impossible. As it was, your mind was prepared for the radio and what it would do. You accepted it gradually, until it became a part of your everyday life.

"Now, look at this thing scientifically.

"We know that heat is merely the result of internal molecular motion. The more heat, the more motion. Therefore, the more heat, the more volume. For instance, a piece of red-hot metal takes up more space than a piece of ice-cold metal. Heat expands. Cold contracts.

"Now, ever since these things began to be known, scientists have tried to determine what is known as *absolute* zero. It's the place at which all molecular motion would cease. Then we begin to wonder what would happen to matter at that temperature.

"It's certain that the molecules themselves are composed of atoms, the atoms of electrons, that the amount of actual solid in any given bit of matter is negligible if we could lump it all together. It's the motion of the atoms, electrons and molecules that gives what we see as substance.

"Now, we have only to stop that motion and matter would utterly disappear, as we are accustomed to see it."

THE girl was interested, but failed to grasp the full import of what Rodney was telling her.

"But when the body started to shrink it would generate a heat of its

own," she objected. "Push a gas into a smaller space and it gets hotter than it was. That temperature runs up fast. I remember having a man explain artificial refrigeration. He said . . ."

"Of course," interrupted Sid impatiently. "That's elemental. And no one has ever reached an absolute zero as yet. But suppose one did? And remember this, all living matter is composed of cells.

"Now, this man hasn't made inanimate matter disappear. But he seems to have worked out some method, perhaps by a radio wave or some etheric disturbance, by which certain specially prepared bodies vanish into thin air, leaving behind very low temperatures.

"Probably there is something in the very life force itself which combines with this ray to eliminate life, temperature, substance. Think of what that means!"

She sighed and shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Sid, but I just can't follow you. They'll find Dangerfield somewhere or other. Probably there was some secret passage in that room. The fact that there were two here indicates that there must be others in that room.

"You've been working on this thing until it's got you groggy. Go home and roll in for a few hours' sleep—please."

He grimly shook his head.

"I know I'm working on a live lead."

She moved away from him.

"Be good, Sid. I've got to telephone in a story to the rewrite, and I've got to write some sob-sister articles. They will be putting out extras. I think this is all that's going to develop here."

Sid Rodney watched her move away.

He shrugged his shoulders, turned his attention to the empty cage in which the white rats had been playing about.

His jaw was thrust forward, his lips clamped in a firm, straight line.

## CHAPTER VI.

### STILL THEY VANISH.

CAPTAIN HARDER lay on the hospital bed, his grizzled face drawn and gray. The skin seemed strangely milky and the eyes were tired. But the indomitable spirit of the man kept him driving forward.

Sid Rodney sat on the foot of the bed, smoking a cigarette.

Captain Harder had a telephone receiver strapped to his left ear. The line was connected directly with headquarters. Over it, he detailed such orders as he had to his men.

Betweentimes he talked with the detective.

The receiver rattled with metallic noises. Captain Harder ceased talking to listen to the message, grunted.

He turned to Sid Rodney.

"They've literally torn the interior out of that room where we found the empty clothes," he said. "There isn't the faintest sign of a passageway. There isn't any exit, not a one. It's solid steel, lined with asbestos, backed with concrete. Evidently a room for experiments... Oh, Lord, that shoulder feels cold!

"Hello, here's something else."

The telephone receiver again rattled forth a message.

Captain Harder's eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets.

"What?" he yelled.

The receiver continued to rattle forth words.

"Well, don't touch a thing. Take photographs. Get the finger-print men

to work on the case. Look at the watch and see if it stopped, and, if it did, find out what time it stopped."

He sighed, turned from the mouthpiece of the telephone to stare at Sid Rodney with eyes that held something akin to panic in them.

"They've found the clothes of Arthur Soloman, the banker!"

Sid Rodney frowned.

"The clothes?"

The officer sighed, nodded, weakly.

"Yes, the clothes."

"Where?"

"They were sitting at the steering wheel of Soloman's roadster. The car had skidded into the curb. The clothes are all filled out just as though there'd been a human occupant that had slipped out of them by melting into the thin air. The shoes are laced. One of the feet, or, rather, one of the empty shoes is on the brake pedal of the machine. The sleeves of the coat are hung over the wooden rim of the steering wheel. The collar's got a tie in it... Just the same as the way we found Dangerfield's clothes.

"One of the men found the roadster and reported. The squad that handled the Dangerfield case went out there on the jump..."

He broke off as the receiver started to rattle again.

He listened, frowned, grunted.

"Okay, go over everything with a fine-toothed comb," he said, and turned once more to Sid Rodney.

"The watch," he said, "had stopped, and didn't start running again until the officer took it out of the pocket and gave it just a little jar in so doing. The hands pointed to exactly thirteen minutes past ten o'clock."

"That," observed Rodney, "was more than two hours after Albert Crome had died, more than two hours after the disappearance of the white rats."

Captain Harder rolled his head from side to side on the propped-up pile of pillows.

"Forget those white rats, Rodney. You're just making a spectacular something that will frighten the public to death. God knows they're going to be panicky enough as it is. I'd feel different about the thing if I thought there was anything to it."

RODNEY nodded, got up from the bed.

"Well, captain, when they told me you were keeping your finger on the job, I decided to run in and tell you, so you'd know as much about it as I do. But I tell you I *saw* those white rats vanish."

The captain grinned.

"Seen 'em myself, Rodney, in a magician's show. I've seen a woman vanish, seen another one sawed in two. I've even seen pink elephants walking along the foot of the bed—but that was in the old days."

Sid Rodney matched his grin, patted the captain's foot beneath the spotless white of the hospital bedspread.

"Take care of yourself, old timer, and don't let this thing keep you from getting some sleep. You've lost some blood and you'll need it. Where were the banker's clothes found?"

"Out on Seventy-first and Boyle Streets."

"They leaving them there?"

"For the time being. I'm going to have the car finger-printed from hood to gas tank. And I'm having the boys form a line and close off the street. We're going to go all over the thing with a fine-toothed comb, looking for clews.

"If you want to run out there you'll

find Selby in charge. Tell him I said you were to have any of the news, and if you find out anything more, you'll tell me, won't you?"

"Sure, Cap. Sure."

"Okay. So long."

And Captain Harder heaved a tremulous sigh.

Sid Rodney walked rapidly down the corridor of the hospital, entered his car, drove at once to Seventy-first near where it intersected Boyle.

There was a curious crowd, being kept back by uniformed officers.

Sid showed his credentials, went through the lines, found Detective Sergeant Selby, and received all of the latest news.

"We kept trying to locate Soloman at his home. He came in, all right, and his wife told him we were trying to get him. He went to the telephone, presumably to call police headquarters, and the telephone rang just as he was reaching for the receiver.

"He said 'hello,' and then said a doubtful 'yes.' His wife heard that much of the conversation. Then she went into another room. After that she heard Soloman hang up the receiver, and walk into the hall where he reached for his hat and coat.

"He didn't tell her a word about where he was going. Just walked out, got in his car and drove away. She supposed he was coming to police headquarters."

Sid lit a cigarette.

"Find out who he called?"

"Can't seem to get a lead on it."

"Was he excited?"

"His wife thought he was mad at something. He slammed the door as he went out."

"These the clothes he was wearing?"

"Yes."

Sid Rodney nodded.

"Looks just like another of those things. Thanks, Selby. I'll be seeing you."

"Keep sober," said the police detective.

SID RODNEY drove to Arthur Soloman's residence.

Newspaper reporters, photographers and detectives were there before him. Mrs. Soloman was staring in dazed confusion, answering questions mechanically, posing for photographs.

She was a dried-out wisp of a woman, tired-eyed, docile with that docility which comes to one whose spirit has been completely crushed by the constant inhibitions imposed by a domineering mate.

Sid Rodney asked routine questions and received routine answers. He went through the formula of investigation, but there was a gnawing uneasiness in his mind. Some message seemed to be hammering at the borderline of his consciousness, as elusive as a dream, as important as a forgotten appointment.

Sid Rodney walked slightly to one side, tried to get away from the rattle of voices, the sputter of flash lights as various photographs were made.

So far there were only a few who appreciated the full significance of those vacant clothes, propped up behind the steering wheel of the empty automobile.

The telephone rang, rang with the insistent repetition of mechanical disinterest. Some one finally answered. There was a swirl of motion, a beckoning finger.

"Rodney, it's for you."

Vaguely wondering, Rodney placed the receiver to his ear. There was something he wanted to think about, something he wanted to do, and do at once. Yet it was evading his mind. The tele-

phone call was just another interruption which would prevent sufficient concentration to get the answer he sought.

"Hello!" he rasped, and his voice did not conceal his irritation.

It was Ruby Orman on the line, and at the first sound of her voice Sid snapped to attention.

He knew, suddenly, what was bothering him.

Ruby should have been present at the Soloman house, getting sob-sister stuff on the fatherless children, the dazed widow who was trying to carry on, hoping against hope.

"What is it, Ruby?"

Her words rattled swiftly over the wire, sounded as a barrage of machine gunfire.

"Listen, Sid; get this straight, because I think it's important. I'm not over there at Soloman's because I'm running down something that I think is a hot lead. I want you to tell me something, and it may be frightfully important. What would a powder, rubbed in the hair, have to do with the disappearance, if it was the sort of disappearance you meant?"

Sid Rodney grunted and registered irritation.

"What are you doing, Ruby—kidding me?"

"No, no. Tell me. It's a matter of life and death."

"I don't know, Ruby. Why?"

"Because I happen to know that Soloman had a little powder dusted on his hair. It was just a flick of the wrist that put it there. I didn't think much of it at the time. It looked like a cigarette ash, but I noticed that it seemed to irritate him, and he kept scratching at his head. Did you notice?"

"No," snapped Sid, interested. "What makes you think it had anything to do with what happened afterward?"

"Because I got to investigating about that powder, and wondering, and I casually mentioned the theory you had, and I felt a prickling in my scalp, and then I knew that some of that same powder had been put in my hair. I wonder if . . ."

Sid Rodney was at instant attention.

"Where are you now?"

"Over in my apartment. I've got an appointment. It's important. You can't come over. If it's what I think it is, the mystery is going to be solved. You're right. It's absolute zero, and—My God, Sid, it's getting cold . . ."

And there was nothing further, nothing save the faint sounds of something thump-thump-thumping—the receiver, dangling from the cord, thumping against the wall.

RODNEY didn't stop for his hat. He left the room on the run. A newspaper reporter saw him, called to him, ran to follow. Sid didn't stop. He vaulted into his car, and his foot was pressing the starter before he had grabbed the wheel.

He floor-boarded the throttle, and skidded at the corner with the car lurching far over against the springs, the tires shrieking a protest.

He drove like a crazy man, getting to the apartment where Ruby Orman spent the time when she was not sob-sistering for her newspaper. He knew he could beat the elevator up the three flights of stairs, and took them two at a time.

The door of the apartment was closed. Sid banged his fist upon it in a peremptory knock and then rattled the knob.

"Oh, Ruby!" he called softly.

A canary was singing in the apartment. Aside from that, there was no faintest suggestion of sound.

Sid turned the knob, pushed his shoulder against the door. It was unlocked. He walked into the apartment. The canary perked its head upon one side, chirped a welcome, then fluttered nervously to the other side of the cage.

Sid strode through the little sitting room to the dining room and kitchenette. The telephone was fastened to the wall here.

But the receiver was not dangling. It had been neatly replaced on its hook. But there was a pile of garments just below the telephone which made Sid stagger against the wall for a brief second before he dared to examine them.

He knew that skirt, that businesslike jacket, knew the sash, the shoes . . . He stepped forward.

They were Ruby's clothes, all right, lying there in a crumpled heap on the floor.

And at the sight Sid Rodney went berserk.

He flung himself from room to room, ripping open closet doors. For a wild moment he fought back his desire to smash things, tear clothes, rip doors from hinges.

Then he got a grip on himself, sank into a chair at the table, lit a cigarette with trembling hand. He must think.

Soloman had had something put in his hair, a powder which irritated . . . Ruby had seen that powder flicked there—a casual gesture, probably, like a cigarette ash. The powder had irritated . . . Ruby had told some one person something of Rodney's theory. Powder had been applied to her hair. . . . She had known of it . . . She had telephoned . . . She had an appointment . . . And it had become cold . . . Then the clothes at the foot of the telephone . . .

And the chair in which Sid Rodney had been sitting was flung back upon its shivering legs as he leaped from the table—flung back by the violence of the motion with which he had gone into action.

He gained the door in three strides, took the stairs on the run, climbed into his automobile and drove like some mythical dust jinni scurrying forward on the crest of a March wind.

He whizzed through street intersections, disregarded alike traffic laws and arterial stops, swung down a wide street given over to exclusive residences, and came to a stop before a large house constructed along the conventional lines of English architecture.

He jumped from the machine, ran rapidly up the steps, held his finger against the doorbell.

A MAN in livery came to the door, regarded him with grave yet passive disapproval.

"This is the residence of P. H. Dangerfield?"

"Yes."

"His secretary, Mr. Sands, is here?"

"Yes."

"I want to see him," said Sid, and started to walk into the door.

The servant's impassive face changed expression by not so much as a flicker, but he moved his broad bulk in such a manner as to stand between the detective and the stairs.

"If you'll pardon me, sir, the library to the left is the reception room. If you will give me your name and wait there I'll tell Mr. Sands that you are here. Then, *if* he wishes to see you, you will be notified."

There was a very perceptible emphasis upon the word "if."

Sid Rodney glanced over the man's shoulder at the stairs.

"He's upstairs, I take it?"

"Yes, sir, in the office, sir."

Sid Rodney started up.

The servant moved with swiftness, once more blocking the way.

"I beg your pardon, sir!"

His eyes were hard, his voice firm.

Sid Rodney shook his head impatiently, as a fighter shakes the perspiration out of his eyes, as a charging bull shakes aside some minor obstruction.

"To hell with that stuff! I haven't got time!"

And Sid Rodney pushed the servant to one side.

The man made a futile grab at Sid's coat.

"Not so fast . . ."

Sid didn't even look back. "Faster, then!" he said, with a cold grin.

The arm flashed around and down. The liveried servant spun, clutched at the cloth, missed, and went backward down the few steps to the landing.

Rodney was halfway up the stairs by the time the servant had scrambled over to hands and knees.

"Oh, Sands!" called Rodney.

There was no answer.

Rodney grunted, tried a door—a bedroom; another door—a bath; another door—the office.

It seemed vacant. A desk, a swivel chair, a leather-covered couch, several sectional bookcases, some luxuriously comfortable chairs, a filing case or two. . .and Sid Rodney jumped back with a startled exclamation.

A suit of clothes was spread out on the couch.

He ran toward it.

It was the checkered suit Sands had been wearing at the time of the interview at police headquarters. It was quite empty, was arranged after the manner of a suit spread out upon the couch in the same position a man would have assumed had he been resting.

Rodney bent over it.

There was no necktie around the collar of the shirt. The sleeves of the shirt were in the coat. The vest was buttoned over the shirt. The shoes were on the floor by the side of the couch, arranged as though they had been taken off by some man about to lie down.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### A FIEND IS UNMASKED.

SID RODNEY went through the pockets with swift fingers. He found a typewritten note upon a bit of folded paper. It bore his name and he opened and read it with staring eyes.

> Sid Rodney, Ruby Orman and Bob Sands, each one to be visited by the mysterious agency which has removed the others. This is no demand for money. This is a sentence of death.

Sid Rodney put the paper in his own pocket, took the watch from the suit, checked the time with the time of his own watch. They were identical as far as the position of the hands was concerned.

Sid Rodney replaced the watch, started through the rest of the pockets, found a cigarette case, an automatic lighter, a knife, fountain pen and pencil, a ring of keys, a wallet.

He opened the wallet.

It was crammed with bills, bills of large denomination. There were some papers as well, a letter in feminine handwriting, evidently written by an

old friend, a railroad folder, a prospectus of an Oriental tour.

There was another object, an oblong of yellow paper, printed upon, with blanks left for data and signature. It was backed with carbon compound so as to enable a duplicate impression to be made, and written upon with pencil.

Sid studied it.

It was an express receipt for the shipment of a crate of machinery from George Huntley to Samuel Grove at 6372 Milpas Street. The address of the sender was given as 753 Washington Boulevard.

Sid puckered his forehead.

No. 753 Washington Boulevard was the address of Albert Crome.

Sid opened the cigarette case. Rather a peculiar odor struck his nostrils. There was a tobacco odor, also another odor, a peculiar, nostril-puckering odor.

He broke open one of the cigarettes.

So far as he could determine, the tobacco was of the ordinary variety, although there was a peculiar smell to it.

The lighter functioned perfectly. The fountain pen gave no hint of having been out of condition. Yet the clothes were as empty as an empty meal sack.

Sid Rodney walked to the door.

He found himself staring into the black muzzle of a huge revolver.

"Stand back, sir. I'm sorry, sir, but there have been strange goings on here, sir, and you'll get your hands up, or, by the Lord, sir, I shall let you have it, right where you're thickest, sir."

It was the grim-faced servant, his eyes like steel, his mouth stretched across his face in a taut line of razor-thin determination.

Sid laughed.

"Forget it. I'm in a hurry, and..."

"When I count three, sir, I shall shoot..."

There was a leather cushion upon one of the chairs. Sid sat down upon that leather cushion, abruptly.

"Oh, come, let's be reasonable."

"Get your hands up."

"Shucks, what harm can I do. I haven't got a gun, and I only came here to see if I couldn't..."

"One...two..."

RODNEY raised his weight, flung himself to one side, reached around, grasped the leather cushion and flung it. He did it all in one sweeping, scrambling motion.

The gun roared for the first time as he flung himself to one side. It roared the second time as the spinning cushion hurtled through the air.

Sid was conscious of the mushrooming of the cushion, the scattering of hair, the blowing of bits of leather. The cushion smacked squarely upon the end of the gun, blocking the third shot. Before there could have been a fourth, Sid had gone forward, tackling low. The servant crashed to the floor.

It was no time for etiquette, the hunting of neutral corners, or any niceties of sportsmanship. The stomach of the servant showed for a moment, below the rim of the leather cushion, and Sid's fist was planted with nice precision and a degree of force which was sufficiently adequate, right in the middle of that stomach.

The man doubled, gasped, strangled for air.

Sid Rodney took the gun from the nerveless fingers, scaled it down the hall where it could do no harm, and made for the front door. He went out on the run.

Once in his car, he started for the address which had been given on the

receipt of the express company as the destination of the parcel of machinery, Samuel Grove at 6372 Milpas Street. It was a slender clew, yet it was the only one that Sid possessed.

He made the journey at the same breakneck speed that had characterized his other trips. The car skidded to the curb in front of a rather sedate looking house which was in a section of the city where exclusive residences had slowly given way to cleaning establishments, tailor shops, small industries, cheap boarding houses.

Sid ran up the steps, tried the bell.

There was no response. He turned the knob of the door. It was locked. He started to turn away when his ears caught the light flutter of running steps upon an upper floor.

The steps were as swiftly agile as those of a fleeing rabbit. There followed, after a brief interval, the sound of pounding feet, a smothered scream, then silence.

Sid rang the bell again.

Again there was no answer.

There was a window to one side of the door. Sid tried to raise it, and found that it was unlocked. The sash slid up, and Sid clambered over the sill, dropped to the floor of a cheaply furnished living room.

He could hear the drone of voices from the upper floor, and he walked to the door, jerked it open, started up the stairs. Some instinct made him proceed cautiously, yet the stairs creaked under the weight of his feet.

He was halfway up the stairs when the talking ceased.

Once more he heard the sounds of a brief struggle, a struggle that was terminated almost as soon as it had begun. Such a struggle might come from a cat that has caught a mouse, lets it almost get away, then swoops down upon it with arched back and needle-pointed claws.

THEN there was a man's voice, and he could hear the words:

"Just a little of the powder on your hair, my sweet, and it will be almost painless... You know too much, you and your friend. But it 'll all be over now. I knew he would be suspecting me, so I left my clothes where they'd fool him. And I came and got you.

"You washed that first powder out of your hair, didn't you, sweet? But this time you won't do it. Yes, my sweet, I knew Crome was mad. But I played on his madness to make him do the things I wanted done. And then, when he had become quite mad, I stole one of his machines.

"He killed Dangerfield for me, and that death covered up my own short accounts. I killed the banker because he was such a cold-blooded fish... Cold-blooded, that's good."

There was a chuckle, rasping, mirthless, the sound of scraping objects upon the floor, as though some one tried to struggle ineffectively. Then the voice again.

"I left a note in my clothes, warning of the deaths of you, of myself, and of that paragon of virtue, Sid Rodney, who gave you the idea in the first place. Later on, I'll start shaking down the millionaires, but no one will suspect me. They'll think I'm dead.

"It's painless. Just the first chill, then death. Then the cells dissolve, shrink into a smaller and smaller space, and then disappear. I didn't get too much of it from Crome, just enough to know generally how it works. It's sort of an etheric wave, like radio and X-ray, and the living cells are the only ones that respond

so far. When you've rubbed this powder into the hair . . ."

Sid Rodney had been slowly advancing. A slight shadow of his progress moved along the baseboard of the hall.

"What's that?" snapped the voice, losing its gloating monotone, crisply aggressive.

Sid Rodney stepped boldly up the last of the stairs, into the upper corridor.

A man was coming toward him. It was Sands.

"Hello, Sands," he said. "What's the trouble here?"

Sands was quick to take advantage of the lead offered. His right hand dropped to the concealment of his hip, but he smiled affably.

"Well, well, if it isn't my friend Sid Rodney, the detective! Tell me, Rodney, have you got anything new? If you haven't, I have. Look here. I want you to see something . . ."

And he jumped forward.

But Rodney was prepared. In place of being caught off guard and balance, he pivoted on the balls of his feet and snapped home a swift right.

The blow jarred Sands back. The revolver which he had been whipping from his pocket shot from his hand in a glittering arc and whirled to the floor.

Rodney sprang forward.

The staggering man flung up his hands, lashed out a vicious kick. Then, as he got his senses cleared from the effects of the blow, he whirled and ran down the hall, dashed into a room and closed the door.

Rodney heard the click of the bolt as the lock was turned.

"Ruby!" he called. "Ruby!"

She ran toward him, attired in flowing garments of colored silk, her hair streaming, eyes glistening.

"Quick!" she shouted. "Is there any of that powder in your hair? Do you feel an itching of the scalp?"

He shook his head.

"Tell me what's happened."

"Get him first," she said.

SID RODNEY picked up the revolver which he had knocked from the hand of the man he hunted, advanced toward the door.

"Keep clear!" yelled Sands from behind that door.

Rodney stepped forward.

"Surrender, or I'll start shooting through the door!" he threatened.

There was a mocking laugh, and something in that laugh warned Rodney; for he leaped back, just as the panels of the door splintered under a hail of lead which came crashing from the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun.

"I'm calling the police!" shouted Ruby Orman.

Sid saw that she was at a telephone, placing a call.

Then he heard a humming noise from behind the door where Sands had barricaded himself. It was a high, buzzing note, such as is made by a high-frequency current meeting with resistance.

"Quick, Ruby! Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, and came to him. "I've called the police."

"What is it?" he asked.

"Just what you thought—absolute zero. Crome perfected the process by which any form of cell life could be made receptive to a certain peculiar etheric current. But there had to be a certain chemical affinity first.

"He achieved this by putting a powder in the hair of his victims. The powder irritated the scalp, but it did something to the nerve ends which made them receptive to the current.

" I mentioned your theory to Sands. At the time I didn't know about the powder. But I had noticed that when the banker was talking with Captain Harder, Sands had flipped some ashes from the end of his cigarette so that they had lit on the hair on the back of Soloman's head, and that Soloman had started to rub at his head shortly afterward as though he had been irritated by an itching of the scalp.

" Then Sands made the same gesture while he was talking with me. He left. I felt an itching, and wondered. So I washed my head thoroughly. Then I thought I would leave my clothes where Sands could find them, make him think he'd eliminated me. I was not certain my suspicions were correct, but I was willing to take a chance. I called you to tell you, and then I felt a most awful chill. It started at the roots of my hair and seemed to drain the very warmth right out of my nerves.

" I guess the washing hadn't removed all of that powder, just enough to keep me from being killed. I became unconscious. When I came to, I was in Sands's car. I suppose he had dropped in to make certain his machine had done the work.

" You know the rest . . . But how did you know where to look for me?"

RODNEY shook his head dubiously.

" I guess my brains must have been dead, or I'd have known long before. You see, the man who wrote the letters seemed to know everything that had taken place in Captain Harder's office when we were called in to identify that last letter from Dangerfield.

" Yet there was no dictograph found there. It might have been something connected with television, or, more likely, it might have been because some one who was there was the one who was writing those letters.

" If the story Sands had told had been true, the man who was writing the letters had listened in on what was going on in the captain's office, had written the warning note, had known just where Sands was going to be in his automobile, and had tossed it in.

" That was pretty improbable. It was much more likely that Sands had slipped out long enough to have written the letter and then brought it in with that wild story about men crowding him to the curb.

" Then, again, Sands carefully managed to sneak away when Harder raided that loft building. He really did it to notify the crazy scientist that the hiding place had been discovered.

" Even before you telephoned, I should have known Sands was in with the scientist. Afterward, it was, of course, apparent. You had seen some powder placed in Soloman's hair. That meant it must have been done when you were present. That narrowed the list of suspects to those who were also present.

" There were literally dozens of clews pointing to Sands. He was naturally sore at the banker for not coming through with the money. If they'd received it, they'd have killed Dangerfield anyhow. And Sands was to deliver that money. Simple enough for him to have pretended to drop the package into the receptacle, and simply gone on . . ."

A siren wailed.

There was a pound of surging feet on the stairs, blue-coated figures swarming over the place.

" He's behind that door, boys," said Rodney, " and he's armed."

" No use getting killed, men," said

the officer in charge. "Shoot the door down."

Guns boomed into action. The lock twisted. The wood splintered and shattered. The door quivered, then slowly swung open as the wood was literally torn away from the lock.

Guns at ready, the men moved into the room.

They found a machine, very similar to the machine which had been found in the laboratory of the scientist. It had been riddled with gunfire.

They found an empty suit of clothes.

Rodney identified them as being the clothes Sands had worn when he last saw the man. The clothes were empty, and were cold to the touch. Around the collar, where there had been a little moisture, there was a rim of frost.

There was no outlet from the room, no chance for escape.

Ruby looked at Sid Rodney, nodded.

"He's gone," she said.

Rodney took her hand.

"Anyhow, sister, I got here in time."

She smiled at him.

"Gee, Sid, let's tie a can to that brother-and-sister stuff. I thought I had to fight love to make a career, but when I heard your steps on the stairs, just when I'd given up hope . . ."

"Can you make a report on what happened?" asked the sergeant, speaking over his shoulder, his head bent over the cold clothes on the floor.

There was no answer.

"I'm talkin' to *you*," called the sergeant.

Sid Rodney answered in muffled tones.

"Not right now," he said. "I'm busy."

THE END.

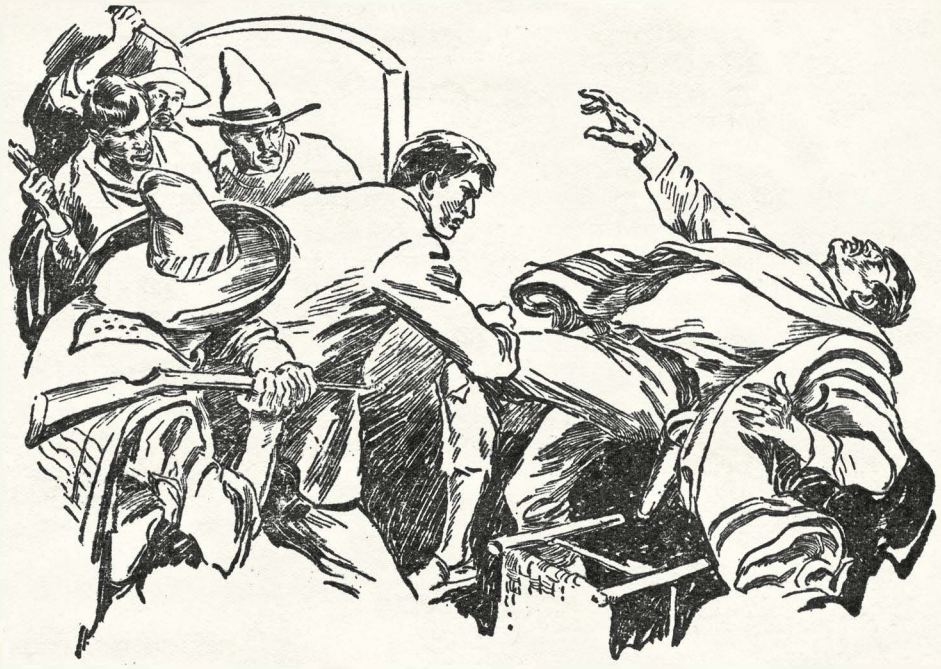
## *Where Armor's Worn*

ARMOR—the real thing, some of it worn by the Crusaders centuries ago—protects the warriors of several tribes in the Sudan. Added to this are genuine Damascus blades of ancient workmanship, patterned after the two-handed swords used by the Christian knights and men-at-arms who sought to wrest the Holy Land from the grasp of the Mohammedans. The armor takes the form of long coats of chain mail, and the helmet, sometimes worn beneath a turban, is a vizorless affair of steel.

Chain armor is also worn by warriors in several sections of India and jousts take place on festal occasions much as they did in medieval Europe. Practically all Indian armor is of ancient manufacture, but a portion of that which finds its way into the Sudan is made in Birmingham, England, which enjoys a profitable trade in articles desired by dwellers in the outposts and the hinterland.

Perhaps the strangest armor is that turned out by the clever craftsmen among the Moro tribes of Mindanao. It consists of flat strips of horn taken from the *carabao* or water buffalo. These are linked together with steel chains, and will withstand a tremendous blow from a cutting weapon.

*Charles Adams.*



*The natives closed in on Pat*

# The Golden Serpent

***In a New York night club Pat Carney met the serpent whose trail pointed to perilous adventure in South America***

**By FRED MacISAAC**

***Author of "The King Who Came Back," "Pirate of Wall Street," etc.***

## CHAPTER I.

### HAUNTED BY A FACE.

MR. PATRICK PAUL CARNEY, referred to by his classmates and intimates as "Rin Tin Tin," was sitting in a New York institution known as the Florida Night Club, with Mary March. He was not in love with Mary March, which was foolish of him because she was a very winsome young blonde who liked him a lot.

He was a big young man, wholesome, rugged, and rendered picturesque by the fantastic coincidence of curling red hair and black eyes. His nose was snub and his chin was exaggerated. By no stretch of imagination could he be thought to resemble the Hound of Hollywood, but the nickname was not based upon a similarity of appearance.

When Pat Carney had turned up at Yale, a green but not diffident freshman, he was found to be the son of one Patrick Carney who owned a lot of tin mines in Bolivia, and the bright minds of the class of 1926 began by calling him "Tin" Carney, then "Tin

Can" Carney, and eventually settled upon "Rin Tin Tin," which name had stuck to him.

Mary March called him "Rin Tin."

"Rin Tin," she said, "I like it here. It's stimulating."

Carney grinned. His grin was Irish and intriguing.

"Make the most of it," he replied. "There won't be any more."

Her round blue eyes grew rounder.

"Why?" she demanded.

"No more tin. I was notified today that the mines are played out and have closed down for good."

She looked concerned—disappointed, rather.

"Oh, Rin—are you broke?"

"Not quite, but my expectations are very much modified."

"Heigh-ho!" she sighed. "Every time I meet a millionaire I could learn to love, something happens to his expectations."

Suddenly she giggled.

"If you are giving me the razz—" he began angrily.

"No, no, I'm laughing at what's just come in. Look around. Did you ever hear of such a mustache—and imagine his getting the thing through the customs!"

Carney swung about in his chair and observed that four persons had been seated at a table to his rear. Facing him was the individual whose hirsute decoration had distracted Mary's attention.

Pat saw a very fat, elderly man whose round head was completely shaved, who had a pair of tiny brown eyes buried deep beneath a cavernous brow, whose nose was a dot, but who possessed a mustache that people would have paid money to glimpse. It was snow-white, thick, and projected at least five inches on either side of his face. It did not taper, it was not waxed; it was luxuriant and of the thickness of a shaving brush. It did not droop or falter, and it looked as though it would have carried on for another foot if its owner had not clipped it off in its prime.

The brown eyes met the black eyes of Pat Carney, and seemed to light for a moment in recognition. Then that spark died; and the man said something to a girl beside him. Pat was sure he had never seen the man before.

"Evidently that brush is the result of years of tender care," he said.

"Did you notice the girl?"

"Daren't look. The bozo suggests coffee and pistols at 5 A.M."

"I'll tell you about her. She's dark. She has the most mysterious eyes and her profile is positively queer. She's as much of a freak as he is... Oh, she's going to dance with one of the other men! She's fascinating, really, and repelling—a savage in a Worth gown."

"Wouldn't you like to dance?" he asked eagerly.

MARY rose good-naturedly and they moved out upon the floor, which was already crowded. Renova's celebrated band was playing a Cuban rumba, colorful, weirdly barbaric.

They made two or three turns and Carney encountered the girl. She hit him like a bolt of lightning, and he missed a step.

"You must have seen her," murmured Mary.

She was tall. From beneath a low, broad brow the color of old ivory, the mysterious eyes met his insolently. They were amazingly long and narrow and the pupils were jade flecked with particles of gold. The nose was thin

and patrician and very slightly aquiline. The face was an oval which was almost a triangle, for the cheek bones were high and the chin tended to point. The mouth was very small, but the lips full and ripe and unpainted.

He observed that her high-arched eyebrows actually met above her delicate nose and that her lashes were very long and blue-black.

Her profile was bizarre. The slight curve of her nose, the pursing of the tiny mouth and the trifling recession of the chin gave it a striking beauty. It suggested the Mongol, with the great masses of jet-black hair piled high on her head. She reminded him of a portrait of an old Egyptian queen he had seen in the museum of Cairo.

She wore a black satin gown cut low in back, and the shoulders were so beautiful as to be intoxicating. She was sinuously graceful, but the feet in black satin slippers were astonishingly small.

"Snap out of it, Rin Tin Tin!" said Mary tartly.

But Pat was not listening. The next time he encountered the young enchantress, her green eyes looked into his black ones, the soft crimson lips parted and there was a fleeting vision of small, even, incredibly white teeth. She had smiled.

"Thank you for nothing," said Mary as they resumed their seats. "Completely bowled you over, didn't she?"

"Don't be silly," he mumbled.

"There is a dangerous woman," she asserted. "Cold, mean, vicious, mercenary and I'm sure she has a dagger in her stocking."

"Says you!" he scoffed. "All the vicious women of history were blondes, Miss March."

"A sleek female spider," she said bitterly. "Some Spanish adventuress with a trace of Moorish blood... Good heavens, old Mustachio is kicking about the cover charge!"

It was true. The person with the magnificent mustache had discovered that there was a five-dollar cover charge, and was arguing about it with the *maître d'hôtel*.

"It is of no consequence," said a female voice of deep, soft, warm and haunting quality. "Since I am paying, let us be tranquil."

"What did she say?" asked Mary.

Her question caused Pat to realize that the strange girl had spoken in the Spanish tongue, and speaking it himself as well as he spoke English, he had not realized the fact. And he recognized by her failure to lisp that she was South American rather than Iberian.

"Nevertheless," replied Mustaches, "I shall not permit you to be robbed. We shall go."

"As you please," the young woman said resignedly.

Pat had an insane impulse to rush over and offer to pay the cover charge, but he resisted it because he was familiar with Spanish punctilio. It would mean pistols and coffee.

"I asked you a question, I believe," said Mary.

"They were talking Spanish," he said. "The young lady is paying the freight and wishes to remain, but the old man is Scotch and insists upon going."

There was a commotion at the next table as the party rose. The girl was passing him. He caught a whiff of a faint but delicious and unknown perfume, and then their two table companions passed while Don Mustachio brought up the rear.

The other two men were conven-

tional Spanish types, slim, sleek and dark. They followed the girl to the exit.

Suddenly she turned, said something, and glided back toward Pat. No, she had forgotten something and was returning to her table. As she passed, Pat gazed up at her forlornly. Her lip muscles twitched, but she did not smile.

A second later she returned, and brushed against him. For a fraction of a second, her right side touched his left arm as she evaded a waiter bearing a tray.

"Pardon, *señor,*" she said softly, and then she was gone.

"That was done deliberately," Mary March pointed out. "Are you going to leave me flat and follow her?"

"My dear Mary," he said with unpleasant candor, "as we are pals and not lovers, I don't mind telling you that I would follow her to the end of the earth. But having been born in a Spanish country, I know better than to rush after her. I'm going to find her, though."

"Rin Tin Tin," she replied, "you are an idiot . . . Now go on about your Bolivian tin mines. What happened to them?"

"My father was under the impression when he died that they would be profitable for a hundred years. He has been dead ten years and they are played out. I have nothing left but the difference between their earnings in the last ten years and my allowance."

"But I thought you had millions."

He laughed ruefully. "So did I. The mines were supposed to be worth a couple of millions. In father's time they earned a hundred and fifty thousand a year. For four or five years the returns have been dwindling. Well, I'm twenty-six and hale and hearty."

"I'm sorry," she said simply, "and I'm tired. Let's go home."

HALF an hour later, Pat Carney let himself into his own apartment, which was only a few blocks from the Park Avenue roost of Mary March, and threw himself into a big chair to think things out.

He could not get that mysterious girl out of his mind. She was South American. Well, he had lots of South American contacts in New York. Somebody could arrange an introduction.

He rose and began to pace the room, and he thrust his hands into the side pockets of his dinner jacket. His left hand touched something hard and curiously shaped in the pocket. Casually he drew it forth.

He held in his hand a gold object. He stared at it unbelieving. He was looking upon a gold pin two inches long, which was shaped like a coiled serpent. Just back of the head of the serpent spread two graceful moth-like wings of exquisite gold filigree work, and there were tiny red stones for the serpent's eyes.

Now, how had that thing got into his pocket? He hadn't seen it for years. It ought to be in a jewel case which had belonged to his mother and which was deposited in a vault at the Guarantee Trust Company.

Pat didn't believe that there was another piece like it in North America. The thing was an antique of Bolivian Indian manufacture in the age when the Bolivian Indians had been expert carvers in gold. His dead mother had been a Bolivian, and she had owned a lot of weird jewelry.

It must have been the girl. She wanted to see him again. She had dropped it in his pocket. But how could she know that it would have any sig-

nificance for him, and where had she secured the winged serpent of the Aymara Indians?

Why, it meant that she, also, was a Bolivian. Did she know that he was the owner of the Chalitas Mines?

Carney, whose father had married a beautiful Spanish girl in La Paz thirty years ago, had been born in the Bolivian capital and had left there with his parents for New York at the age of six. He had inherited his father's Celtic features and from his lovely mother had received only her fine black eyes.

Aware that some day he might have to return to Bolivia, he had kept up his Spanish and was as familiar with Spanish literature as he was with English. He knew the guile of the lovely daughters of Iberia. Cloistered, guarded, jealously secluded, they were daring and ingenious in affairs of the heart.

It must be that the clever girl of the restaurant had seen that Pat Carney was enchanted by her, and she had taken this manner of informing him that she was not indifferent. Of course! She would discover the loss of her winged serpent when she reached her hotel. It would immediately occur to her escort to advertise for the trinket. Pat would read the advertisement, and hasten to return the pin. She would be so grateful that she would insist upon giving him tea. It would be perfectly proper. Everybody in Bolivia knew Pat Carney the elder, who had married a daughter of one of their finest families.

Pat went to bed as drunk as though he had imbibed large quantities of heady wine. At seven he was up and had sent for the morning newspapers. Of course the advertisement wasn't in them. Papers had gone to press before she and her friends had left the night club. He must wait until to-morrow, and the waiting would be intolerable.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE WORST.

At ten o'clock the secretary of Roger Martin, trustee of the Carney estate, called the amorous young man upon the phone.

"Mr. Martin would like to see you as soon as possible," she said. "Can you come right down?"

"I guess so."

Avoiding interviews with his trustee had been one of the chief objects in the life of Pat Carney, as Mr. Martin took his job seriously and desired to exercise a censorship over the private life of his charge. Roger Martin had no tolerance of the foibles of youth. He preached, and he threatened.

Pat had received, the previous day, a letter from his trustee which stated that the mines had closed down and requested him to come in immediately and settle his affairs.

About eleven thirty he presented himself before the small, spare, querulous and dyspeptic Roger Martin, who greeted him with unwonted friendliness.

"Well, my boy," he said sympathetically, "these are hard times."

"Just tell me how much money I've got, please," requested Pat.

"Of course. When your father died he supposed that he had left you a large fortune, and he wished me to act as your trustee until you were thirty, unless in my judgment you were qualified at an earlier age to take over your estate.

"It was his opinion that the Chalitas Mines were inexhaustible. Up to a couple of years ago I could have sold

them for a million if his will had permitted it. Well, there came the world depression—"

"Let's skip that part," suggested Pat hopefully.

"Profits from tin were heavily cut into, of course. In accordance with your father's will, I have been paying you twenty-five thousand a year and originally had been adding the balance of your income to your capital. However, for several years past there have been heavy drains upon the surplus for the improvement of the mines; purchases of new machinery, that sort of thing; and for two years they have been running at a heavy loss. I have sent to Bolivia drafts for nearly half a million dollars in the past three years. Well, upon the urgent advice of Superintendent Blossom, I have ordered the mines shut down and the employees dismissed."

"Why didn't you sell the mines when they began to run at a loss?"

Martin frowned angrily. "Are you so stupid? Exhausted mines are not to be sold at any price."

"Have I any money left?" asked Pat Carney anxiously.

"You have about fifty thousand dollars. I hesitate to turn over to you so large a sum of money. You'll squander it in a single year."

"No, indeed," said Pat. "I promise you I won't."

"H'mp! I should like to wind up the trusteeship. I'll have papers drawn up, get your signature and take a chance. I have done my full duty."

PAT rose and walked to the window as he spoke, and turned upon him at the last phrase.

"Mr. Martin," he said crisply, "I believe you are an honest man and a friend of my father's. However, you received a property worth three or four millions of dollars ten years ago, and under your management it has depreciated so that it is not worth a cent."

"Do you presume to criticize me?" cried Martin. "I was forbidden by the will to sell out."

"What have you done to save the property?"

"I have drawn upon the surplus every time the men on the ground asked for money for improvements."

"But have you been down there? How do you know what has been going on?"

"Randolph Blossom was the man placed in charge of the mines by your father, who had the highest opinion of him. Remember that Bolivia is the most remote and inaccessible spot on the globe, with the possible exception of Tibet. And I couldn't go myself. I have too many interests."

"How do you know we can't get anything for the mines?"

"Because I have recently offered them to a German syndicate which wished to buy them two years ago. Their representative was here the other day. He told me that they are not interested."

"Oh, I suppose you're right. I own the mines, now. You're turning them over to me, since there is no danger that they will make a wastrel of me."

"The mines are yours and fifty thousand dollars cash," replied Martin.

"I'll be in to-morrow to sign the papers," said Pat. "How does one get to Bolivia?"

"You're not going to be idiot enough to waste your money going down to Bolivia? What do you know about mining?"

"Nothing. I might spend a few hundreds to see a property worth four

millions ten years ago and not worth ten cents to-day. However, I don't suppose I'll leave New York."

"Invest your money at five per cent and get yourself a job. Cut loose from your vicious acquaintances—"

"Good morning, good morning, good morning!" said Pat hastily, and made for the exit.

LOST, in or near the Florida Night Club, on November 4, a small gold pin fashioned like a winged serpent. Of no intrinsic value, but an heirloom. Fifty dollars reward. Apply at Room 571, Ritz Hotel, after 11 A.M.

CARNEY discovered the advertisement at 7 A.M. on the morning after his interview with his virtuous trustee, and it seemed to him that the hours to eleven were the longest he had ever endured. At eleven he was at the desk of the Ritz and telling the clerk he had come in answer to the advertisement.

"Go right up," said the clerk. "I'll have the operator announce you."

With a galloping heart Pat knocked upon the door of 571.

"Come in," said a male voice gutturally.

Pushing open the door eagerly, he entered and his heart sank. There was nobody in the room save the man with the ramrod mustache. The old gentleman fastened a monocle in his right eye and inspected him with dawning recognition.

"Ah!" he exclaimed in English which savored more of Germany than Spain. "I remember you. You were sitting near us at the Florida night before last." If he knew who Pat was, he was not going to say so.

Pat nodded and produced the winged serpent.

"I picked it up off the floor beside my table."

"Very good. Let me see it."

He examined it carefully. "That is it," he stated. "You realize that I am very liberal, since there is not fifty dollars' worth of gold in it."

"I don't want the reward, sir. I am gratified to return it."

The old man pulled at his left mustache. "You are generous, sir, and a gentleman. Well, good morning."

"I wish to return it to the lady who lost it," said Pat firmly.

"Eh?" He scowled. "It was I who advertised, my friend."

"But not you who lost it. Since I ask no reward, may I not see the owner?"

"I am her—uncle. I act for her. It is enough."

Pat deftly withdrew the winged serpent from his hands.

"It is not enough. I see the young lady, or I carry this away with me."

The old man leaned back in his chair. His eyes narrowed and he smiled maliciously.

"I regret that it is impossible," he replied. "The *señorita* is now on the high seas."

Pat's dismay was so obvious that Mustaches grinned more broadly.

"A cablegram requires her elsewhere," he said. "Fortunately a ship sailed last night. Otherwise she would be pleased to thank you in person."

"Will you give me her name and address, please?"

"Certainly not. That would be very irregular."

"Does she live in La Paz?"

Pat observed that a flood of red color came up from the man's neck, spread rapidly over his cheeks and forehead and tinted his shaved skull.

"And what makes you think she would go to La Paz?" he demanded.

"Because of the winged serpent,

sir," replied Carney earnestly. "You will be surprised to learn that I have one exactly like it."

"That is not possible, my friend," said the mustached one coolly.

"It belonged to my mother. If you are from La Paz you will have heard my name. Perhaps you know my father. He was Patrick Carney of the Chalitas Mines."

"Ah!" sighed the man. "Patrick Carney. No, I did never hear of him."

Pat looked at him and knew he lied.

"May I ask where is your home, sir?" he said.

"My home? I live in Buenos Aires."

Another lie.

"And does the *señorita* also live there?"

The old man rose, drew himself up and frowned.

"You may take away with you that gold bauble," he said, "but I shall answer no more questions. Good morning, sir."

"Take your confounded winged serpent," replied Pat angrily. "Good morning."

PAT took the elevator down to the lobby and beckoned to the captain of the bellboys and led him into a corner where he displayed a five-dollar bill.

"Do you know the name of the old man in 571?" he asked. "He has a big white mustache."

The boy nodded. "That's Señor Ramon Schultz."

"And he has a very pretty dark young lady with him?"

"He had. She left last night. Put her and the old woman in a cab myself."

Pat felt faint. "Where—where did she go?"

"Panama Pacific pier. Left on the Pennsylvania for Panama."

Then it was true.

"Do you know her name?"

"Sure. Señorita Rosita Montajo. Read it on her steamship tags."

Rosita. Rosita Montajo. And she was actually on her way to South America. At the Isthmus she would take ship for Peru and go up to La Paz over the Arica Railroad, assuming that she was a Bolivian and bound for the capital.

Well?

He plunged into a telephone booth, looked up the number of the Panama Pacific Line and fired questions at the information clerk. No, he could not catch the steamer at Havana even by train to Miami. And the Pennsylvania made connections at Panama with a Grace Line boat for the west coast of South America. It was six days to the Isthmus, seven days to Arica, and sixteen hours by train to La Paz. The trains over the Arica Railroad went only twice a week.

Pat Carney hung up and left the booth disconsolately. Even if he could overtake the Pennsylvania, he didn't have money enough to make the trip.

Ah, but to-morrow! To-morrow he would come into fifty thousand dollars. And he had an excuse to go to La Paz. He had the Chalitas Mines, worth on the open market about a quarter of a dollar.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE COCA EATERS.

ARICA, and the railroad to La Paz. Up, up over sublime piles of rock and brown dirt. Desert at the ocean's edge. Vast mountains upon which nothing has ever grown since

the world began. Not a solitary sage bush. Nothing whatever until one begins to grow mad and the strange depression comes which is the beginning of *sirroche* or mountain sickness.

A Pullman sleeping car ran to La Paz, and several coaches and some freight cars. Nobody in the Pullman except Pat Carney and a young Englishman and a woman laden with cameras and binoculars.

Pat didn't care. He had learned at Arica that the Señorita Rosita Montajo and the Señora Carlotta Montajo, presumably her mother, had taken the train ten days previously. He had started three days after the Pennsylvania and lost seven days more, but he didn't think they could conceal themselves from him in La Paz. He was confident that Rosita didn't want to.

Through the windows seeped age-old dust, for never has a drop of rain fallen upon these desolate mountains. The dust got into his nostrils and down his throat and in his eyes. Imagine a desert too dry for cactus and without a single oasis. He began to revise his opinion of the Spanish Conquistadors. Brutal they might have been, but they were brave beyond modern comprehension. A small party of them had started south from Cuzco and made their way through these totally bare and waterless mountains, a thousand miles down into Chile, where they were finally besieged and destroyed by the fierce Chilean Indians.

"I say!" said a high-pitched English voice. He looked up and saw the Englishman, a shy smile upon his plain but not unattractive face. "You seem to be alone, and I presume you are as bored as we are. It's a devilish poor expedient, but would you like to take a hand at three-handed bridge?"

"I'll be delighted."

"You're American, eh?"

"Rather obvious, isn't it?"

"We thought so until we heard you talking Spanish to the conductor."

Pat rose and accompanied him forward to be introduced to the sister.

"My name is Patrick Carney," he stated.

"I'm Reginald Barton, and this is my sister, Madge."

The girl offered a frank hand.

"We've been very curious about you," she stated. "Saw you in the railroad station, you know. You weren't on the steamer from Valparaiso."

"Came down from Panama," he informed them.

"Well, let's cut the cards," proposed the brother.

The English girl was sweet, Pat decided. She was almost as tall as her brother, but her figure was good and she had a bright and friendly smile. Her nose was a bit too prominent, but her blue eyes were really beautiful and she had authentic yellow hair.

THEY set about the unscientific but exciting business of gambling upon the contents of the dummy, and for an hour conversation was exclusively about bridge. Finally the girl tossed down her cards.

"This isn't really amusing," she declared. "Let's talk. Are you a tourist, Mr. Carney, like ourselves?"

"Come, now, sis," Barton protested. "I'm not exactly a tourist. I have a mission, you know."

She laughed gayly. "And such a mission! Tell him about it, Reggie."

Barton's blue eyes lighted with a fanatical gleam.

"Are you familiar with Bolivia, Mr. Carney?" he asked. "Are you aware that practically the whole nation has the coca habit? Coca, you know, con-

tains an alkaloid from which cocaine is extracted. They chew the coca leaves as you Americans chew tobacco."

"My dear Mr. Barton, I never met a man who chewed tobacco, though I've heard that some Americans do."

"You will find that in Bolivia all the Indians, most of the half-breeds and some of the whites chew coca," said Barton, "from morning until night. It is responsible for their lack of ambition. Cocaine is fifty times more terrible a drug than nicotine."

"How do you propose to put a stop to it?" asked Pat curiously.

"Oh, he doesn't," the sister said, smiling broadly. "Reggie will prepare a paper to be read before the League of Nations . . . I'm much more interested in the prehistoric ruins on the Islands of the Sun and Moon on Lake Titicaca."

"Madge thinks only of archeology," asserted the brother. "What is your hobby, Mr. Carney?"

"I'm interested in some tin mines."

"Indeed! The depression has hit tin pretty hard. I met a chap in Valparaiso who is coming up later to pick up a remarkable tin property which has been offered him for a tenth of its value. What mine did he say it was, Madge?"

"He wouldn't be apt to say, would he?"

"Yes, he did. We got a bit squiffed in the bar of the Victoria. It was the Las Cha—Cha— Blessed if I can remember."

"Not Las Chalitas?" asked Pat tensely.

"By Jove, that's it! I say, I hope I haven't been indiscreet. You're not after the same mines?"

"I happen to own them. What is this man's name?"

"Really, I don't remember," replied Barton stiffly.

"In for a penny, in for a pound!" jeered Madge. "His name was Geoffry Foster, Mr. Carney. I didn't like the man much."

"Speaking of drinks," remarked Barton, "a brandy and soda would not be so awful, eh?"

"I would like one very much," said Pat quietly.

Inwardly he was shaking with excitement. In ten or twelve hours he would be in La Paz, yet not until this moment had it occurred to him that there were the slightest prospects of realizing anything from his mines.

So an Englishman from Valparaiso was coming up to pick up the Carney properties for a tenth of their value! From whom did he expect to purchase them?

Of course, it was likely that this good-natured fool of a Britisher was mistaken. He had not been sure of the name. But Pat's hopes were rising.

After all, it would have been a simple matter to deceive Martin, who accepted reports of the officials in Bolivia without question, because it was too much trouble to question them.

"So you are a mining engineer?" remarked Miss Barton. "I wish that Reggie had some useful occupation."

"Always pulling my leg," said Barton good-naturedly. "I've done a bit of hunting in my time, old chap. Brought down a tiger or two, and I've some interesting elephant tusks at my place in Surrey."

"For that matter, I'm a good shot with rifle or revolver myself," the girl boasted. "I suppose you shoot, Mr. Carney?"

"I've served at reserve officers' training camps and learned to use gun

and pistol, but I can't claim to be much of a marksman . . . We're certainly climbing now."

He pointed outside. The train was making use of a cog rail and was going up a mountainside at a startling angle and at a speed not exceeding four miles an hour.

" A little of this sort of scenery goes a long way," he added.

" My head is aching frightfully," remarked Miss Barton.

" I told you to expect mountain sickness," her brother answered unsympathetically. " I'm never affected myself. I'd like a snooze, though."

Carney took the hint, finished his drink and returned to his own section, where he occupied himself during the waning light in gazing at the desolation without. He had crossed the great American desert which, compared to this spectacle, was a marvel of fertility.

He looked at his time-table. Already they were up twelve thousand feet and there was a ringing in his ears and a congestion in his chest. Two thousand feet more to reach the great plateau of Bolivia. There, at least, would be some vegetation to vary the ghastly monotony.

Hours passed and daylight still lingered. It was mid-November, which is late spring in Bolivia. At last they emerged upon the plateau, flat as a pancake with a yellowish green and scanty fuzz on the desert. The train began to make speed. It wouldn't be long before he reached the end of his quest. He was conscious of feeling very sluggish, and he dozed for a long time.

BRAKES. The train was slowing up. It came to a stop upon the open desert. No sign of habitation. Pat pushed up his window and looked out, and saw only a water tank.

And then, apparently out of the ground, came a man on a mule followed by a second and a third. They were emerging from a deep ravine a hundred yards from the track. In all a dozen curious-looking individuals bobbed up out of the ravine and bore down upon the express.

As they approached they spread out, and Carney observed that they carried long-barreled guns. From the passenger coaches behind came shouts of apprehension, and several passengers who had got out hastened to climb back into the cars. Carney discreetly drew in his head and dropped the window.

Two shots rang out, echoing strangely on the desert air. Barton sprang to life, reached for a pigskin bag and produced two revolvers, one of which he handed to his sister.

" Bandits, Carney!" he shouted. " Prepare to repel boarders, what?"

" Don't be a fool," Pat responded. " There are a dozen of them. Miss Barton, put down that gun."

" I'll keep it handy, thanks," she replied coolly. " Aren't you going to defend yourself?"

" I'm unarmed, which is probably just as well."

Two men drew up beside the Pullman car and gazed at it with impassive faces.

" Aymara Indians!" Barton exclaimed. " Coca eaters and hard-fighting rascals."

" We are about to be robbed," said Carney, much interested. " I have only drafts and travelers' checks, which won't do them much good. For heaven's sake conceal that gun, Barton!"

Reluctantly the Englishman put his revolver in his pocket, and at that instant the door of the car opened and a grotesque but sinister individual presented himself with his rifle ready.

He was a tall man with jet-black hair and black eyes and an olive-yellow skin. His head was large, his neck short and thick, his mouth enormous and his lips like sausages. He wore a poncho, which is a blanket with a hole cut in the middle through which the head is thrust. He wore black narrow breeches which stopped at the calves of his legs, no stockings and his bare feet were thrust into rawhide sandals.

"*Señores* and *señora*," he said in thick tones, but in tolerable Spanish, "I have captured this train, but I am not a robber. Which of you is Señor Carney?"

Recovering quickly from his astonishment at hearing his name on the lips of an Indian bandit, Pat stepped forward.

"I am Señor Carney," he said boldly. "What do you want of me?"

The man bowed like a grandee.

"*Señor*, merely the pleasure of your company."

"What's he saying?" demanded Barton.

"It seems his business is with me. Watch your step." To the Indian Pat said: "I do not understand why you wish my company, *señor*. I am bound for La Paz and I should be obliged if you would permit the train to continue."

The thick lips parted and showed very white but uneven teeth.

"The train may continue when you have departed, *señor*," he answered. "You will come with me."

"And suppose I refuse?"

The Indian approached him and extended a bare, muscular and very dirty arm.

"You will be dragged from the train, your feet will be tied together and I shall draw you along the ground as fast as my mule can gallop, *señor*."

The small beady eyes glittered as he visualized the satisfaction of dragging a white man along the ground and Pat, who had as much nerve as the average, shivered.

"And if I go with you without protest?"

"Then *señor*, all honor will be bestowed by us. You will be my guest."

PAT'S impulse was to throw himself upon the Indian, but the man undoubtedly would shoot and the ruffians without who had driven their mules close to the car windows would be overjoyed at the opportunity to pepper the Pullman car.

"For some reason they want me to go with them. They know my name," he said to Barton. "Don't start anything. One shot will mean the death of all of us. I don't think any harm will come to me."

"Don't go! The man is horrible! If he is an Indian he'll torture you!" cried Madge shrilly.

"Barton, please take care of my bags," said Pat quietly. "At your service, *señor*."

"Reggie, don't let him go," pleaded the girl.

"It's all right, Miss Barton. At your service, *señor*."

"I'll have the whole Bolivian Army after you in the morning," promised Barton. "For heaven's sake, old man, be careful!"

At the door Pat grinned back frostily.

"I'll take as good care of myself as I am allowed," he promised.

Grunting with satisfaction, the Indian was at his heels as he swung off the train. He snarled an order at one of his mounted followers, who swung off his mule sullenly and made signs to Carney to mount. There was no saddle

and he boarded the animal with difficulty. Immediately the bandits withdrew, minus order, toward the ravine. The train whistle blew, and before Pat's mule had descended into the ravine he saw the express pull out.

Not the slightest effort was made by the train crew to interfere with the abduction. Apparently they supposed they had escaped easily with the kidnaping of one first-class passenger.

It was necessary to descend the ravine in single file, and Pat rode in the middle of the procession, prey to alarm and bewilderment.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE HIDDEN VILLAGE.

WHILE he was not much better informed regarding the geography of this land than the average North American, Carney was aware that the vast Altaplana of Bolivia was rent by innumerable fissures of enormous depth, and that the city of La Paz lay at the bottom of one of them.

He was aware that the Cordillera Range splits, when it leaves Peru, into two parallel ranges a hundred to a hundred and fifty miles apart, between which lies a plateau four or five hundred miles long of which almost nothing is known, except along the roads and railroads. Most of the fissures have never been explored by the indolent white ruling class of Bolivia.

The path descended rapidly and the light quickly failed, but the natives moved along steadily and swiftly as though they could see in the dark. No word was spoken after the start. A few attempts to engage the man ahead and behind him in conversation drew no responses.

Half an hour of discomfort upon the back of the unsaddled mule, prey to growing apprehension, and then they began to climb. The rocky walls fell away. They were again upon the surface of the plateau, which was lighted by the bright stars of the high altitudes. It was bitterly cold, and Pat had neglected to bring his overcoat.

The mules were traveling faster, and he had more and more difficulty keeping his seat, though he was an excellent horseman. By the stars he knew that their general direction was east, which was not in the least consoling.

Hours passed, and upon the horizon gleamed a pin-point of light which appeared to have been seen by the mules. Without orders they broke into a gallop.

By and by they drew near to the light, which proved to be a dung fire around which were visible human shadows. As the mounted party reached it, men were extinguishing the fire and the leader of the mule riders turned abruptly to the right and began to descend a gentle slope.

Ahead were visible a number of twinkling lights. Though he was dubious of his treatment there, Pat hoped it was their destination, and such it proved to be. They rode into an Aymara village which consisted of a dozen mud huts of the most miserable description with holes for windows, and a hole in each roof to permit smoke to escape.

From the huts rushed forth a horde of women and children, the females appearing incredibly fat, because they were wearing a dozen petticoats. These crowded around the dismounting bandits, emitting shrill yips and showering the men with questions in the native tongue.

The leader disposed of one ugly, hor-

ribly dirty woman, who was probably his wife and who was pestering him, by swinging at her with clenched fist and knocking her flat, after which he said in Spanish to his prisoner:

"*Señor,* you will be so obliging as to dismount."

Shaking with cold, Carney slid off his mule and found his legs so weak he had to grasp the animal's mane for support. This was regarded as terror by the women, who immediately formed a ring around him, extended claws toward him and uttered threats which would have been more terrifying if he had been able to understand them. However, he gathered that he was unpopular.

"In there, *señor,*" said the chief, who was pointing to one of the huts.

Pat broke through the cordon of women, not without receiving a few scratches, and entered a noisome one-room house absolutely without furnishings, unless a pile of vile-smelling straw in one corner could be called furniture. In a niche in the wall rested a small kerosene lamp, the chimney of which was blackened by smoke and which gave forth a very feeble light.

The chief entered behind him, followed by two men.

"PLEASE inform me," requested the prisoner, "why I am here and what you propose to do with me?"

"You are not wanted in Bolivia," the man replied. "Take off your clothes. You are not going to need them."

Carney clenched his fists.

"Damned if I do!" he shouted.

The bandit snapped a command and his followers made to tear Pat's coat from his back.

*Wham!*

A big right freckled fist collided with an Indian's chin and floored him. Pat whirled to meet the second, knocked a knife from his claw and sent him to join the other, and then turned upon the chief. But that individual discreetly had withdrawn to the door, where he was lustily shouting for assistance, and in a second the room was filling with savage brutes armed with knives and ancient pistols.

"Yield, *señor,*" commanded the chief. "Yield or die now instead of later."

"Oh, I yield," he said sullenly. "Here."

He stripped off his coat and tossed it at the head bandit, who caught it deftly, pulled off his poncho and donned it with every evidence of satisfaction.

"The breeches," he commanded.

"No!" bellowed Pat.

His legs were knocked from under him by a man who had crept up behind, and he lay at the bottom of a pile like the man with the ball in a football game. He did not lie inert, however, but struck out with fists and feet until he had been choked into submission, and then he suffered one garment after another to be dragged from him until he was naked as the day he was born.

The head savage spattered forth orders which caused his followers to deliver to him the clothing of the unfortunate young man, after which rude hands pushed him out of the hut into the biting cold of the night. The mob of women set up derisive shouts and closed in upon him, but his captors kicked them away and drove Pat ahead of them for a distance of a hundred yards, where they came to a stop.

A man joined them carrying a spade, which he thrust into the hands of the naked American.

"You will dig here, *señor,*" he said in Spanish.

The procedure was incomprehensible to Carney, but exercise might militate against the chill of the Altaplana. He began to dig with feverish activity and to the approval of several men with rifles who stationed themselves as sentinels.

WHILE he bent his energies to making the dirt fly he became aware of a chant which was lifting in the village. There was something familiar about it; it was ecclesiastical in character. It drew nearer. He saw the populace approaching two by two, and in the lead was a man carrying a tall crucifix while others bore torches.

The meaning came upon him suddenly as he caught Latin words. The Aymaras are supposed to be devout Catholics; they were singing the "Miserere."

"Have mercy upon a soul about to wing its way toward heaven."

The spade dropped from his hand as he realized that he was digging his own grave.

"Dig," commanded a savage gruffly.

Pat's answer was to swing the spade and bring it down on the rascal's head.

Immediately they set upon him. Two men grasped his arms. There was a swish and a rawhide lash struck him upon the bare back. Again, again. He felt the blood streaming from his wounds and they burned like fire.

"Dig," came the harsh command, and again the spade was thrust in his hand.

The procession had arrived and formed a wide circle round the doomed man. The dreadful chant continued, sustained by several weird pipes and something with metal strings.

These vicious degenerate brutes were murdering him to the rites of the Christian religion.

The Arica Express would be arriving about now at La Paz. If the railroad people persuaded the authorities to send out a rescue party, what prospects had they of finding this village in a depression in the vast, unexplored plain and invisible at a few hundred yards in daylight?

When finally the soldiers came, he would be lying in a grave indistinguishable from the ground about it and the savages would blandly deny ever having entertained him.

He dug. He dug as slowly as possible. His back was burning from the welts caused by the whip. The sweat was now pouring from his forehead, and no longer did he feel the cold. The trench was two feet deep and six feet long. How deep were the graves of the Aymaras?

"*Basta* — enough!" shouted some one.

The Indian with the crucifix, grotesque in sacerdotal robes, was advancing.

With a bellow of rage and despair Pat Carney rushed toward him, the spade lifted on high.

*Crash!* Something descended upon his head, and mercifully his consciousness departed. He felt himself being lifted, being laid in the grave, and then complete oblivion.

## CHAPTER V.

### PRINCE OF INDIANS.

FEELING horrible, Pat Carney opened his eyes. He was lying in a hut on a pile of straw, not in a cold grave. An oil lamp lighted the room dimly and he discerned the bandit

chief standing beside him, a look of anxiety upon his hideous face.

"*Señor!*" he exclaimed. "Thank the Blessed Virgin you have recovered!"

"No thanks to you," snarled Carney. "What horrible farce was that? Or do you wish to bury me while fully conscious?"

To his astonishment the ruffian knelt beside him, and lifting Pat's right hand pressed his ugly mouth upon it servilely.

He tore the hand away and pushed the fellow, who fell over backward, but rose to betray no resentment.

"You are right to be angry, *señor,*" he said with what he trusted to be a propitiating smile. "*Señor,* your humble servitor."

Pat stared at him, incredulous.

"Is that so?" he demanded. "Then give me my clothes, you damned scoundrel!"

"With great pleasure. Can you rise? May I assist you?"

Pat managed to get to his feet and became aware of hideous pains in his back.

"We have with us a Callaguaya who will heal your wounds so that in a few hours you will not feel them, *señor,*" said the brigand effusively. "I shall send for him."

He strode to the door and bellowed an order into the night. In a moment there entered a strange-looking creature. The Callaguaya was an old man with wrinkled face and iron-gray hair hanging below his shoulders. He wore long blue breeches ornamented with fringe, a long narrow poncho striped in orange and white like an awning, and carried upon his shoulder a large bag of leather.

He bowed and the chief said something in Aymara, of which Pat caught the Spanish words "el Principe." The Prince.

Immediately the medicine man threw himself upon his face and began to crawl toward the perplexed American. Mumbling apologies and promises, he swung his bag to the floor, squatted over it, opened it, and drew forth a bottle containing some yellow liquid.

He rose, apologized again, and began to rub Pat's back with moistened hands.

Carney began to remember things. As a small boy he had seen Callaguayas upon the streets of La Paz. They were members of a small tribe of the North who were supposed to have an amazing knowledge of botany, and like the ancient Greek physicians, handed down from father to son knowledge of herbs and potions of extraordinary healing powers. Alone or in pairs, they wander all over Central South America, and the other natives believe they have supernatural powers.

However, the Callaguaya did not explain the astonishing change in the attitude of the bandit chief toward Pat. Had the affair been merely a test of his courage? Was it some ancient ceremony of which he had been the victim? Had they seriously intended to bury him alive? He was unable to believe that they had not.

The chieftain watched the doctor's operations solicitously, rubbing his hands like an American clothing store merchant, and smiling ingratiatingly.

"I assure you, Señor Carney," he declared, "that in an hour you will feel no pain."

"Come through with my clothes," demanded Pat sharply. He would credit this better when he was dressed.

Eagerly the bandit proffered shirt and drawers, stockings, shoes, trousers,

waistcoat and jacket, which Pat donned with growing satisfaction.

"My people come to implore your forgiveness. They will play for you, they will dance for you," declared the chief. "Listen. Music."

The native orchestra had begun a serenade. Their music was weird but not unpleasant, and they were playing, with queer harmonies, an old Spanish *cachucha* which was familiar to the American.

"Be so gracious as to show yourself, *señor,*" pleaded the chieftain.

Carney shrugged his shoulders and allowed himself to be led from the hut. The scene had fantastically changed. A score of long torches stuck into the ground gave a flickering yellow illumination and revealed a motley throng lined up opposite the door of the house.

From them came forth fourteen male Indians wearing petticoats of white cotton cloth. Each wore a hat with long feathers, giving it the shape of an umbrella; each had a tambourine at his waist; and, while he danced, accompanied himself upon a wind instrument composed of four groups of reeds fastened together in contact and arranged in two separate divisions.

From this primitive mouth organ came forth credible musical notes. While a savage instrument, it was capable of playing a civilized melody.

The ability of the savages to gyrate and kick their feet without losing breath would have entertained Carney at another time, but his apprehensions were far from being allayed.

HALF an hour passed, and the dance ended. The natives during this time exhibited perfect good will toward the prisoner. Efforts of several women to embrace him were happily thwarted by the chief, who stood by his side.

"And now, *señor,* we shall serve you of our best. Alas, we have no wine, but we have liquor made from barley, and we have roast potatoes and choice cuts of mule."

Pat shuddered. "If you wish to please me, *señor,*" he replied, "send me on my way to La Paz immediately."

"In the morning we shall escort you as far on your way as it is safe."

Pat became aware that he was very hungry. He might make a meal of potatoes and the barley liquor, which was probably a degenerate form of whisky.

"In that case, let me have food," he proposed.

The chief shouted something to a woman, who bobbed her head energetically.

"It will be ready for you very soon," he promised. "Be pleased to reënter my wretched abode."

They entered, and the chief drew from a pouch the wallet, letters and silver taken from the pockets of Carney's wearing apparel.

"Never expected to see these again," Pat muttered as he disposed of them.

The man thrust his hand inside his shirt and drew forth something in his closed fist.

"And now, *señor,*" he said impressively, "the token."

He opened his hand and disclosed a small gold object shaped like a coiled serpent with tiny red stones for eyes, and wings of gold filigree.

"Until my dying day," he declared, "I shall rejoice that I discovered it in time."

Carney's eyes opened very wide as he gazed at the little winged serpent which he had taken from his vault because he wished to show it to Rosita

in La Paz and laugh with her at the coincidence of her slipping in his pocket a trinket of which he had an exact duplicate.

"Why?" he ejaculated.

"Because had I slain a bearer of the token, I would have been compelled to kill myself, my wife, and my children."

Then Pat had been saved by the winged serpent. The thing had some amazing significance among these savages. But for the whim which caused him to carry it in his breast pocket and not in his luggage, he would have been buried alive to the strains of the "Miserere" by these savages.

He opened his mouth to ask a question, and closed it again. Whatever was the meaning and power of the winged serpent, it would not do for him to appear ignorant of it. A sight of the gold ornament had been sufficient to turn bloodthirsty beasts into fawning sycophants. It elevated him to princely rank and made him a guest whom they delighted to honor.

"It is of the greatest importance that I proceed at once to La Paz," he declared. "We shall start immediately after eating. How long will it take to ride to the capital?"

"Several days, *señor,* but we would not dare to approach La Paz. Because I am a patriot, I am proscribed." He drew himself up proudly. "And for days there will be no train upon the Arica road, so I cannot take you there. We shall ride east to Sicasica, which is on the railroad of the south and from which you will get a train to-morrow at noon."

Pat noticed with amusement that this Aymara Indian talked like a railroad information bureau.

"How long will it take us to reach Sicasica, then?"

"We must ride all night, *señor.* I go to give orders."

A MOMENT after his departure from the hut, two women entered, carrying a huge tray with steaming dishes upon it and laid it upon the floor. Pat, no longer in fear of his life, inspected them curiously.

Their thick horselike hair was cut off at the shoulders and stank of oil and dirt. They wore coarse woolen shirts, once white, over which were thrown mantles of blanket material striped in bright colors and pinned by a sort of spoon of copper. Their hips were absurdly broad because of the multitude of petticoats. As they drew near to him, he shrank from a disagreeable odor. Their faces were ugly, but they appeared to be young.

Upon the tray was what appeared to be beef, but which he knew to be mule meat, wedges of fat pork and boiled mutton. There was a gourd from which they poured into a tin cup a brown liquid with a familiar odor. He tasted it and found it not unlike the corn whisky of the American South. Chilled as he was by the raw dampness of the plateau, he quaffed it gratefully and proceeded to make a meal of the mutton, pork and small baked potatoes. As he ate, his spirits rose and he determined upon a method of extracting information from the brigand chief.

The fellow did not enter to share the meal, probably considering himself unworthy, and Pat appreciated that though it did not change his determination. In a quarter of an hour his hunger and thirst were satisfied and he rose from his haunches in an exceedingly cheerful mood. Going to the door he shouted lustily and immediately the chief put in an appearance.

"Enter," he commanded and stepped back. As the Indian entered the room Carney, with the greatest enthusiasm, drove his right fist with all his force against the big nose of the Aymara, who went over backward and stretched his length upon the dirt floor. From that position he lifted appealing hands.

"A thousand pardons, lord," he whined. "Was not the feast adequate?"

"That is for interfering with a bearer of the token," said Pat sternly.

The man uttered a howl. "It is not punishment enough," he declared. He crawled across the room, picked up from a corner a small whip, crept on his knees to the American and presented it to him.

"Beat me with this, *señor*," he suggested. "I deserve it."

Pat hesitated, realized that force appealed to the savage more than anything else, grasped the whip and laid it lustily upon the man's back once or twice. The brigand cringed and accepted his punishment meekly. With a laugh Pat tossed the instrument of torture across the room.

"Get up," he commanded. "Why did you take me from the train?"

"*Señor*, I did not know. I was told you were a dog of an Americano who was not desired in La Paz. I was paid fifty pieces of silver."

"And who paid you silver?"

"One who shall not live to see more than seven mornings. Think not of him, *señor*. I shall settle your affair with him."

"His name?" shouted Carney.

"Señor Pedro Quecheta, who owns the great ranch near La Paz."

"Does he know that I have the token?" asked Carney eagerly.

"He must. The accursed Spaniard wished you slain for that reason."

Pat doubted it very much. More likely Pedro Quecheta's animosity was due to unwillingness to have the owner of the Chalitas Mines turn up in Bolivia just now. It had something to do with the Englishman in Valparaiso who was coming up to purchase them at a tenth of their value. And he didn't want these savages to assassinate his personal enemy. He would enjoy attending to Don Pedro himself. "I forbid you to kill this man," he declared. "I shall take care of him."

The bandit bowed. "It shall be as the *señor* says."

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## CHAPTER VI.

### PAT ARRIVES.

THE train from the south was speeding over the great plateau. The landscape was hardly less mournful than the trip through the Andes, for at fourteen thousand feet few things will grow, and save for a species of oats and a poor quality of potatoes, nothing was produced upon the plain but grass hardly fit for sheep.

To Carney, looking out the window of a day coach, it seemed as though the events of the past night were figments of a dream. There was no pain from his back. The Callaguaya's remedy had been magical in its effect. He was lame from an all-night ride upon a mule, but there were no other ill effects from his experience. He had profited from it, for he knew the name of an enemy. He had learned that the queer little winged serpent was a token of amazing potency among the Aymara Indians and he was pondering over the cryptic utterance of Copec Talmak, the chief of the band among whom he had fallen.

"To the day, *señor*," the man had

said in parting, "when Titicaca overwhelms La Paz."

"To the day," he had responded.

He didn't know what the gibberish meant. Lake Titicaca's southern extremity is fifty or sixty miles from La Paz. He wondered about it now. Did the Indians have a prophecy of some sort? Did they expect that some day the lake would engulf the capital of Bolivia, where resided the whites who had conquered and enslaved the Aymaras? And had the prophecy anything to do with the token of the winged serpent?

The conductor passed through the train and informed him that they would be in La Paz in half an hour, but there was no evidence of the existence of a big city as yet, nor was there as the train continued for mile after mile.

And then the train ran over the rim of a vast crater. Far below, thousands of feet it seemed, was a compact mass of red-tiled roofs and church spires, surrounded by detached villas in green patches, and beyond a wide extent of farms and forest.

The train was creeping down a steep incline, bringing the weary traveler to the promised land. Actually La Paz lies thirteen hundred feet below the level of the plateau and at the base of a vast amphitheater. Sheltered from the bitter winds of the Altaplana, despite the fact that it is still more than twelve thousand feet above sea level, it is possible to grow in the crater most of the crops of the temperate zone and to produce a large part of what a city requires.

BUT Pat was very thoughtful as the train picked its way down the face of the precipice. Lake Titicaca, a vast body of water one hundred and fifty miles long and forty or fifty miles wide with a depth of from two hundred to nine hundred feet, lies only sixty miles away. If, by some convolution of nature not impossible in a volcanic country, a fissure opened from the lake toward La Paz, the great inland sea would pour into this crater from a height eight times that of Niagara and obliterate what there is of civilized humanity in Bolivia.

And that this would happen was the diabolical prayer of the Aymaras.

Through the center of the city he observed to flow a beautiful river which was responsible for the fertility of the valley.

Forgotten pages in the book of his memory opened and he began to recognize familiar objects.

There was an electric locomotive of great power conducting the train down the terrific grade. As the road twisted and turned he could see it distinctly. It looked like one of the engines on the New York Central; most likely it had been manufactured in an American shop.

Small trees were now growing upon the mountainside and green grass began to appear. This city below was old. He recalled reading that it had been founded in 1548, seventy-two years before the Pilgrims set foot upon Plymouth Rock, by daring Conquistadors, and that the Spaniards had discovered there a city established by the Incas in 1185. The Indians had been waiting a long time for the lake to cover La Paz.

Carney left the coach and passed through the stone station with no delay at the customs desk since he was without baggage, descended a flight of steps and found himself in the Avenue Ismael Montes, a thoroughfare which was clogged with carriages drawn by mules whose drivers waved their

whips toward him and other passengers and vociferously demanded their patronage.

He stepped into one, flopped upon the hard seat and directed the cholo who was on the box to take him to the Grand Hotel.

In no time at all the steel-tired victoria was off the asphalt and bouncing over pavements which consisted of round pebbles taken from the river bed and which had been polished by usage to the smoothness of flints. On just such pavements bullocks draw sledges in Madeira and make better going of it than do wheeled vehicles in La Paz.

The buildings did not differ much from those of other South American cities; low, red-tiled structures with plaster walls and open fronts for shops. They journeyed uncomfortably for some moments, when they came upon a more pretentious avenue with macadam pavement and a better quality of buildings on either side. A few, a very few, automobiles were encountered, mostly American, and they passed a public park and a rather imposing public building.

At an intersection a motor car skidded around the corner on the wrong side of the road. It was a black sedan of a make familiar to Carney. It narrowly escaped collision with the victoria, whose driver emitted a string of Spanish oaths while a young woman in the rear seat leaned forward with an expression of concern which changed at the sight of Pat Carney to one of surprise.

And Pat gazed into the lovely dark face with incredulity—for he was looking at Rosita Montajo. Before either recovered from their astonishment, the sedan swung past and went down the street at high speed.

Patrick Paul Carney came to life.

"*Oiga!*" he bellowed at the coachman. "Turn! Follow that car!"

The half-breed turned around and looked upon him contemptuously.

"*Señor,* it is a motor car," he replied. "Besides, they are the accursed rich. They have no regards for the rights of a poor man like myself."

Carney smiled. "Very well," he said. "Go on to the Grand Hotel."

Everything was all right. Rosita had recognized him. A girl with such initiative as hers would have no trouble locating him in La Paz. So far as he knew there was only one first-class hotel.

SIGHT of the Grand Hotel made it evident that it was grand only by comparison with competitors in La Paz, but he was compensated for its meanness by the discovery of his English friends in the small lobby.

Reggie and Madge were sitting facing each other at a writing table with piles of postal cards at hand, and they saw him simultaneously. Joyfully they bore down upon him.

"By Jove, Mr. Carney!" exclaimed Barton. "I'm delighted to see you. I've been busy all morning in your interests. A search party went out on a special train to the place where you were captured."

"You don't look much the worse for wear," said Madge critically, "though your clothes are very dusty and there are some scratches on your neck. What on earth happened to you?"

"Aside from scaring me half to death, nothing," he replied as he shook hands with his sincere well-wishers. "When the brigands had a chance to question me they found that a mistake had been made, so they escorted me cross country to the railroad from the south, put me on a train and here I am."

"And they didn't rob you, Mr. Carney?"

"Didn't take a thing."

"Damned curious bandits!" remarked Barton. "The whole thing is inexplicable to me. Madge and I were frightfully worried."

"I know that you went with them without a fight because you were afraid that I might be hit," the girl said with shining eyes. "It was sporting of you, Mr. Carney."

"I may say I received darn little help from your minister," declared Barton. "It seems the johnny is down south somewhere, and his assistant is a native who wanted me to prove that you were an American subject before he would lift a finger. I told him I had only your word for it."

"And then he told Reggie, after we had admitted that you spoke perfect Spanish, that you were probably a Bolivian and knew exactly what you were about; that the stopping of the train had possibly been prearranged by you," added Madge. "I was so angry I wanted to slap his face!"

"It was the railroad people who got action," added Barton. "They secured a troop of cavalry and shipped it off early this morning. You had better get in touch with the railroad manager right away . . . We brought your bags here."

"A service which I appreciate," said Pat.

THE humanitarian, bubbling with excitement, followed him to his room, which was typical of the southern continent; tiled, high-ceiled, scantily furnished, with a huge bathroom containing an enormous German porcelain tub.

"Ah!" exclaimed Carney joyfully. "That's what I need most just now."

He turned on the taps and began to undress.

"Tell me something about those Aymaras," pleaded Barton. "They are coca eaters, of course?"

"I really didn't notice," replied Pat, laughing as he pulled off his shirt. "Eh?"

"Great God!" Barton had exclaimed. "How perfectly horrible!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Carney, who was stooping to draw off his trousers and shoes.

"Your back, man, your back! Those appalling weals."

"Oh, those; they don't hurt."

"But they are recent."

Barton had turned deadly pale and sank into a chair which was conveniently placed in the bathroom.

"I'm not a coward," he muttered. "But this is shocking, shocking."

Pat clapped him on the shoulder.

"Buck up!" he pleaded. "Here we are together again in La Paz, and no harm done."

"Will you tell me how the mistake was discovered? For I distinctly recall that the Indian addressed you by name on the train."

Carney reflected. Barton was a decent fellow and brave enough, but Pat didn't think he was overburdened with intelligence and he doubted his discretion. Regarding the token, there was some mystery which had to be solved, and he didn't care to reveal the power of the winged serpent among the natives until he had solved it. And he could not reasonably explain his escape without revealing that he had a talisman.

"I can't tell you," he replied. "They brought me to some squalid native village and they had begun to treat me badly when, suddenly, everything was

changed. I was an honored guest. They fed me and pulled off a native dance for me and escorted me to the railroad line."

"But you want them punished!"

Pat shook his head. "I doubt very much if the troops could locate this particular outfit. Their town is away off the railroad and it lies in a ravine, so it's invisible at a couple of hundred yards. I'm going to forget about it."

"Well, see you later," said the Englishman, and left Pat to his bath.

Pat was so happy he began to sing. He had seen Rosita, and nothing else bothered him. He was completely overlooking the fact that the individual who had hired the Indians to whisk him off the Arica Express had some strong reason for keeping Patrick Carney out of La Paz, and the reason was as good as ever.

**TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.**

## *Preserved for a Hundred Centuries*

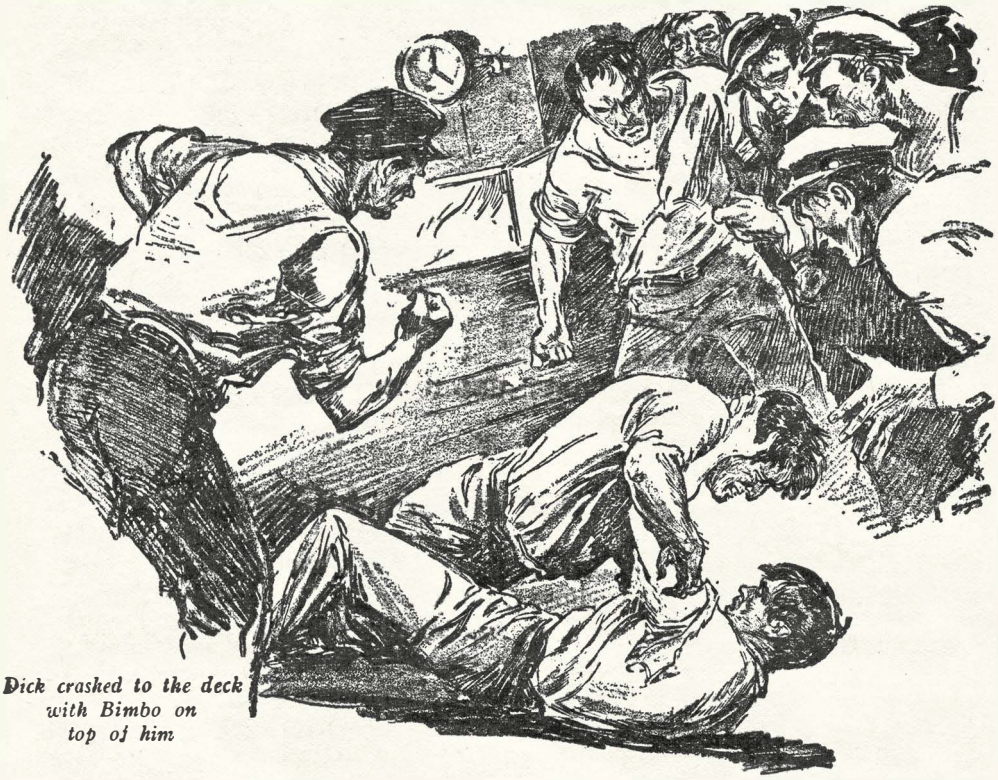
WHEN the Japanese decided to preserve the names of the victims in the 1923 earthquake, they chose a unique method. The usual method of carving them on a stone monument was impracticable, for they wished them preserved ten thousand years! The elements would obliterate them in a fraction of that time and even the stones would crumble to dust in the moist climate. So modern science was called in.

The strongest and most durable paper in the empire was made especially for this purpose and the names painted on twenty-two pounds of it in Japanese characters, using a Chinese ink that outlasts most paper. Then the sheets were placed inside four bottles a foot high, made of fused, selected rock quartz crystals. Since air would cause the paper to crumble and fade the ink, it was all pumped out and argon, an inert gas that has no effect on paper, was placed in the bottles. Then the crystal stoppers were fused on and a coating of asbestos woven over the bottles to protect them from fire. A sheathing of lead was fused on over this and then they were placed in their final outer container of carborundum which is nearly as hard as a diamond and is a better protection than steel.

The bottles were intrusted to the care of Buddhist monks in an ancient temple on Mount Koya, four hundred miles from Tokyo. As there are no roads in this section, they had to be transported on the backs of oxen and were suspended on steel springs in an excelsior-filled chest to prevent possible injury.

While the names are amply protected from the wear of a hundred centuries, it is not likely that man will let them alone for that length of time, and even the language they are written in will probably be unknown then. The oldest civilization known existed only about six or seven thousand years ago in Egypt, and man is thought by scientists to have come into being since the last ice age, about twenty-five thousand years ago, so the Japanese civilization will probably be only a memory in a hundred centuries.

*E. R. McCarthy.*



*Dick crashed to the deck with Bimbo on top of him*

# The Black Gang

***Deep in the stokehold of that doomed ship Dick Cromwell waged a fierce struggle—a duel that meant honor as well as life***

***By LIEUT. JOHN HOPPER***

FOR some time Dick Cromwell had been dimly conscious that the ship was more lively than usual. He was vaguely aware of being lifted, of feeling the shock of impact and the shiver that ran through her as her nose struck a wave, of the following, swift descent of her. Must be running into a storm, he thought hazily.

He opened his eyes and stared at the dirt-stained woodwork above his head. His body was bathed with sweat; his mind was drugged with the intense heat that lay like a damp, hot blanket over the room.

It was almost time for his shift. Although he had been in his bunk for hours, he was as fatigued as when he had flung himself exhausted upon it. It was the heat, the continual, suffocating heat that pervaded everything—in the hold, fiercer in the furnace room, and even up on deck, which day by day absorbed the burning rays of the tropic sun, and by night yielded them up.

He smiled a little grimly to himself. He'd have some stories to tell when he got back to New York!

He began to reflect about the evening that had brought him to his present position. Perhaps he had been a fool. Just because friends had poked fun at his stepping into a ready-made, "white collar" assignment in his father's shipping offices upon his graduating from college, because they had insinuated that he did not have the courage to start in at the bottom in order to learn the business, he had thrown discretion to the winds and made his own terms.

How far away that night in New York seemed now! How silly his prideful anger in saying that he would ship as a stoker on any ship not flying his father's well known flag, just to prove to the mockers that he could handle the worst job in the steamship world—that of a coal heaver in the stokehold—and handle it without the help of favoritism which might be shown him if he signed up on one of his father's ships.

Well, he had stuck it out. He had proved to the unbelievers that he could take a man's job and hold his own. And, what was far more important, he had proved it to himself. He felt more certain now that the next Cromwell to head the world-famous line, which had ships on every ocean, calling at every commercial port of size, would be worthy of the trust to come to him.

While he lay thinking of New York and what he would do when he was back there again, the bunkroom door opened.

"First night shift hit the deck!" bawled a rough voice. "Turn out!"

The door slammed, and the silence which had pervaded the place now gave way to the sounds of men stirring in their bunks. There were audible yawns and muttered curses against the strength-sapping heat. The first night shift was about to take its place before the hungry red mouths of the boilers deep in the hold that would drive the Tropic Queen onward through the storm and the darkness.

Cromwell sat on the edge of his bunk and looked across at the opposite bunk.

"Hey, Kid!" he called. "Come on! It's time to get up."

A PALE young face, topped by long, tousled hair, lifted itself from the dirty pillow and returned Cromwell's look with large dark eyes, within whose depths fear seemed constantly to lurk.

Cromwell felt a momentary surge of pity. It was a tough life for a youngster down in the dirty, dusty hold of a ship, with no one for companions except bohunks, big, powerful men, the riffraff of the sea, the scourings of the wharves.

The Kid had signed on at the next to the last port of call of the Tropic Queen. At Banjermasin, Borneo, in the Dutch East Indies, it had been.

Cromwell remembered the day the Kid had come aboard. The chief had sized up the youngster's frailness, and had guessed at the soft hands.

"What the devil's this?" he had exploded profanely. "I asked for a man, not a kid!"

The company's agent had shrugged his shoulders. "It's the best I could get. I got your radio that you had to have an oiler—and here he is."

Perhaps it had been the thought that the work of little men sometimes belies their size, or perhaps it had been the Kid's appealing eyes; at any rate, the chief had grumblingly taken him on,

giving thanks nevertheless that his need had not been for a stoker. Even a baby could oil bearings.

During the long run from Borneo to Honolulu, the Kid had accomplished his work faithfully, even creditably. He was steady and stuck to his job, saying little to any one.

The work, however, was not the worst for him. It was the treatment he received from the black gang—the stokers. Uncouth, ignorant mountains of flesh, they seemed to delight in tormenting the little devil. Whenever duty took him from the engine room to the stokehold, he was certain to be greeted by ribald remarks and thinly veiled references to his slightness resembling that of a girl.

More than once Cromwell had stood up for him, and by so doing had incurred the enmity of Bimbo, the giant Greek, whose shoulders were as broad as an ordinary door, and whose muscles were like great snakes writhing under the skin. Bimbo was the unofficial leader of the black gang. Because of his hamlike fists they understood it, and accepted it.

Men were beginning to pass out of the bunk room, putting out their hands from time to time to steady themselves against the lurchings of the ship.

"Come on, Kid," encouraged Cromwell. "Let's go. A couple of more days and we'll hit the Panama Canal. A day of rest, and then a short run for home—New York."

THE boiler room was gloomy. An occasional electric bulb dangling from the overhead gave forth a sickly yellow radiance which extended only a couple of feet from its source. Open furnace doors bathed the cleared area in front of the gigantic boilers with a blood-red glow. Draft roared through the fires, steam hissed, iron shovels clanked and scraped. Men, naked to the waist, their glistening bodies gleaming redly, approached the boilers and retreated again. Bulky, shadowy figures, their lips drawn back from their teeth in snarls as they gasped for breath in the terrific heat; they seemed like demons, the stokehold their hell.

A small figure descended the iron ladder leading down to the stokehold and hesitated when it reached the bottom. Finally the Kid gathered enough courage to start across the open space in front of the boilers.

At that moment Bimbo, the Greek, caught sight of him. He dropped his shovel and leaned against its handle. Arch-demon. His curly black hair, uncombed for days, uncut for more, was an awry mass, matted with sweat and coal dust on top of his bullet-shaped head. His small black eyes glittered viciously out of his thick-jowled, unshaven face. Beads of sweat glistened in the hair that covered his chest.

"'Allo, Keed!" he greeted. "What you do down here, eh?"

The youth stopped and turned upon the Greek a look that was big with fear.

"One of the engineers sent me down here," he faltered.

"You hot?" interrupted Bimbo, noticing the beads of perspiration on the Kid's forehead. "Take off de shirt, an' you won't mind de hot so much, I t'ink. Yes?" Bimbo's hairy hand reached out. "What for you wear it alla time, hey?"

By now most of the shift were aware of the Kid's presence, and had stopped work for a moment to watch. A little horseplay was a welcome break in the monotony of their task. Cromwell too had put down his shovel and was edging closer to listen.

The Kid shrank from Bimbo's grasping fingers.

"No, no, no!" he begged in terror.

Bimbo persisted. "No wonder you hot! C'mon, now! I take it off for you."

The Greek's fist clutched the collar of the Kid's shirt. At that moment, the ship gave a tremendous lurch, which sent everybody staggering.

There was a strange, choked cry from the Kid, and the grinning Greek stood away from him placidly holding up the shirt which he had torn from the Kid's back.

Suddenly Bimbo's eyes narrowed. His jaw sagged open. He breathed something in his native language. Then: "A wooman!"

Licking their suddenly dry lips, the black gang edged closer and closer behind the Greek, where they could stare and stare. The yawning, hungry boilers were forgotten. Forgotten was the pitching and tossing of the ship. A woman, a flesh and blood woman here among them in the depths of the ship!

LIKE a man going forward in a trance, Bimbo advanced to put his rough paws on her again. Cromwell stepped between them. While he talked, the girl snatched up a denim coat, which was much too large, and hung down almost to her knees.

"Just a minute, Bimbo! What are you going to do?"

"Do? Do? What I do?" Bimbo put back his head and roared at the crazy question. When he brought it down to face Cromwell's gaze, he was snarling menacingly.

"She my wooman! I see her first!"

The untended fires blackened on top, but still glowed redly beneath. The gloom in the hold deepened. The deck plates assumed sharper angles, rose and fell more swiftly as the ship nosed into the raging storm.

Cromwell put his left hand back to comfort the trembling girl crouching behind him. He felt small, moist fingers steal into his palm. More courage surged through him. He was conscious of strength. Unquestionably now, he knew what was his to do.

"No, Bimbo. She doesn't belong to you—or anybody else." His gaze traveled along the row of intent, sullen faces in the murk behind the Greek. "We'll take her to the chief. And he'll take her to the captain, who will know what to do with her."

"No!" exploded Bimbo fiercely. "She come here. She stay here—wit us!" The black gang growled approval.

Cromwell shook his head. He might have stopped to consider why this girl—she was no more than that—had placed herself in this position, with its ensuing dangers and troubles if she were exposed. But that was not Cromwell. To him a woman was to be protected first and questioned afterward.

He drew her to her feet, and gave her a gentle push toward the iron ladder that led up from the stokehold.

The Greek instantly divined his purpose. With a chesty roar, he leaped forward.

Cromwell was not taken off his guard. He had expected the attack, and was ready for it. His right fist flashed out and caught the Greek in the mouth, sending him staggering back against his fellows. In the brief lull that followed, Dick spoke to the girl out of the corner of his mouth, while keeping his eyes on Bimbo.

"Beat it, Kid! Up the stairs!"

For some reason, the girl did not move. Perhaps she was paralyzed with fright. Perhaps she hesitated to go

above and reveal her identity, which would lay her open to scoffs and sneers. She remained at the foot of the ladder, one hand on the pipe rail supporting her, the other pressed to her heart. Her eyes, bigger than usual, stared at Cromwell and at the Greek, who was preparing to fight.

Bending forward, with his long arms outstretched, Bimbo looked like a huge ape as he slowly advanced.

"I kill you for dis!" His words came through snarling lips and clenched teeth.

The rest of the black gang, which was made up of the scourings of the wharves of New York, waited with visible delight for the impending destruction. There was not a doubt in any thick skull that the smooth-muscled Cromwell, who had never been one of them, would be anything but beaten to pulp. The struggle between him and Bimbo, consistently avoided by the one, long eagerly desired by the other, had at last arrived.

Bimbo knew nothing about the finer points of orthodox wrestling, and less about the science of boxing. His method of fighting was to get his huge hands upon his opponent, and gouge, choke, twist, and pummel—no rules observed. As for fouls, he knew them only as blows and holds to be desired. They crippled his victim more quickly.

He let out a roar of triumph when Cromwell dodged his lunge. To Bimbo, that meant that his opponent was running away, that he feared to stand up to him. The Greek prepared for an easy victory.

He was speedily disillusioned. The boiler room resounded with the satisfying crack of a well-directed fist delivering a neat jab against Bimbo's jowl.

Astonishment and pain made the huge Greek gulp once, and hesitate. Then, bellowing animal-like, he plunged forward again.

NOW it was a grim, silent fight in the murky stokehold. In his efforts to keep up with the shifting, twisting, dodging Cromwell, who never remained where he should have, Bimbo was panting hard. His sudden reaches and lunges for the man in front of him gained him nothing better than air. Meanwhile, more than once his shaggy head was jolted backward by strong punches unexpectedly materializing from his elusive foe. The red welts on his naked ribs increased.

The footing beneath the two men was extremely unreliable. The ship rolled and rocked. Twice Cromwell had been nearly thrown into Bimbo's grasp, and once he was saved from it only by a fortunate roll. Besides, there were lumps of coal scattered about on the deck, one of which, if stepped on, might cause a man's ankle to turn, and send him stumbling to his hands and knees, where he would be at the mercy of his opponent.

It was just one of these lumps of coal that proved to be Cromwell's undoing. He had delivered a solid blow, and was stepping hastily backward to avoid the following rush when his foot met a piece of coal that crunched and moved underneath it. Cromwell strove desperately to regain his balance, and failed, with the accompaniment of the girl's terrified shriek, the Greek's savage, triumphant bellow, and the shouts of satisfaction from the rest of the black gang.

He had barely crashed to the deck when Bimbo's massive body smashed down on top of him. Cromwell had been taken at the worst possible moment. All his faculties were occupied with saving himself from the fall; none

with setting himself for receiving the attack.

Merciless fingers of steel closed around his throat. A relentless knee bore into his groin. Agony caused a dizzy cloud to materialize in Cromwell's brain. The terrible knee pinned him down, and prevented him from twisting loose. With his hands he tore madly at the thick, hard arms above him.

He was lost, doomed. Bimbo was killing him. Cromwell's heart swelled, and beat frantically against his chest to be free. Long stabs of the most intense pain were shooting through his body.

Anything, anything to get this tremendous, life-suffocating leech from on top of him. His hands groped downward, subconsciously taking a wrestling hold he had learned at college. Putting his last ounce of strength into the effort, he pulled. At that moment the ship gave a mighty lurch in the same direction.

Propelled by two forces, Bimbo went flying over Cromwell's head.

Dick staggered to his feet. Life-giving air flooded his lungs, driving the cloud from his brain. His heart once more sent blood coursing through his body, reviving his strength. The crowd of stokers who, like a pack of wolves, had gathered to see the finish, gave way before him.

STUNNED for an instant by the collision of his bullet head with a steel bulkhead, Bimbo lay stretched out on the deck. His skull was inordinately thick, however, and consciousness soon returned full tide. With piggishly small eyes red-rimmed with hate, he pulled himself to his feet.

*Crack!* Cromwell's knuckles smashed against his jaw. The Greek staggered, slumped against the bulkhead, where he remained, husbanding his strength. In spite of his toughness, the blows were telling strongly on him, especially that last one.

However, Cromwell did not give him the chance to leap forward again. The Greek had hardly straightened when his head was snapped back once more by a powerful right. This time he slumped against the bulkhead and slid down to the deck, where he remained in a sitting position, his head lolling from side to side with the movements of the vessel, his glazed eyes staring emptily before him.

For a moment the black gang was stunned by the unexpected demolition of its champion. Then a chorus of bestial growls arose.

"Into the little room!" snapped Cromwell to the girl. Make it speedy now!"

He knew that neither she nor he would have time to make the stairs before the stokers would be upon them. Their one hope lay in gaining the small cubby-hole off the boiler room, where spare shovels, wheelbarrows and various supplies needed at the furnaces were kept. There they could barricade themselves, and hope to hold out until some engineer, making a tour of inspection, entered the boiler room or, at longest, until the new shift arrived.

The girl hesitated an instant until she saw that Cromwell was backing away from the slow, cautious advance of the mob. Then she darted into the room, where she waited for him beside the door.

The stokers were not long in catching on to Cromwell's purpose. With a yell of fury, the leading one leaped at him.

Cromwell seized the fellow by both shoulders. His teeth clamped together at the thought of what he was about

to do. But there was no help for it. It was either that, or death for himself, and worse for the girl. He had to halt the mob somehow until he gained the shelter of the little room.

Exerting all his strength, he swung the stoker around. The man's bare back squarely met the closed door of the furnace. There was an awful shriek of agony as the flesh met the hot iron. It was followed closely after by a sizzling sound. An odor like broiling meat was thinly discernible.

Every stoker halted as if rooted to the floor. With bulging eyes they stared at their comrade writhing at their feet.

That moment, brief as it was, was sufficient for Cromwell to dash into the room, and slam the door behind him. With the help of the girl, he dragged and flung boxes and barrels against the door until he had a mass that would resist efforts from outside to move it—for a time, at least. How long, he did not know.

In the meantime, the black gang recovered from its horror, and became possessed by insane fury. Shouting threats and curses, they pounded at the door with their fists, shoved furiously at it with their shoulders. When they found that it would not yield to such treatment, they used their shovels.

"THEY'VE stopped!" said Cromwell, straightening up from where he had been adding his shoulder to the boxes and barrels. "They've probably gone into a huddle. They'll revive old Bimbo before they do anything else. That gang is lost without him."

He dashed the sweat from his eyes.

"Phew! That was hot work! Never been in such a tight squeeze before!" he grinned. "I thought I was a goner when Bimbo had me down." He talked in a half humorous vein to encourage the girl.

She, however, only stared at him. He could not help thinking what an odd trick she was. She certainly cut a ludicrous figure with that denim coat big enough to fit Bimbo, the Greek. Her hands were lost in the huge sleeves. It was almost as broad as she was tall, and the hem came down practically to her knees.

As he looked at her now, he wondered why he had not been suspicious of her before. That oval face, with its delicate features and big, black eyes could belong to no one except a girl. The hair, if it were washed and combed out, would be lustrous and silky, and make not a bad bob if it were not so short.

Even as he looked at her, she burst into sobs. Although she put up her arms to hide her tears, she could not control the shaking of her small frame. Cromwell was perplexed.

"Don't cry," he said awkwardly. "Everything 'll be all right. Somebody will come along pretty soon, and dominate that bunch of hyenas. Then your troubles will be over."

Her sobs redoubled. They completely racked her body. Nervously Cromwell went to her, and placed a comforting arm around her shoulders. He tried gently to take her hands away from her eyes.

"Don't cry like that. It's bad for you, you know." Feeling much like a fish out of water, he tried patting her on the back.

Her arms came away with a jerk that made him jump. He was conscious of staring into twin, black jewels washed with tears.

"I don't know what you think of me!" she said unaccountably.

Her words staggered him. If he had

expected her to speak, he had hardly expected her to say just that.

"Why . . . why . . . " he floundered. "Nothing . . . nothing at all, I assure you! I . . . I hadn't begun to think!"

"I know," she went on hopelessly. "You must think me pretty awful because I got into this, because I made trouble for you, and because I am in this rig," she added, looking down at her clothes and blushing.

He had not long to think about this strange girl, however, for suddenly the silence was shattered by a furious pounding on the door. Bimbo's raging voice came through to them.

"Hey, you!" Heavy pounding. "*Hey, you!* Open dat door! You open de door, an' give us de wooman, an' we let you go."

The girl seemed to shrink into her big coat. Her frightened eyes fixed themselves on Cromwell. He saw in them wonder as to what he would do.

He laughed mirthlessly.

"Nothing doing, Bimbo," he called. Turning to the girl, he said in a lower tone, "He's a liar. He only wants to get me out there, and then—nobody would see me any more."

Curses, in Bimbo's voice, came from the other side of the door. A confused hubbub of voices in a lower and heavier key told that his comrades were clustered behind him.

Then the tiny room reverberated with the crashing sound of a mighty blow and splintering wood. Cromwell saw the edge of an ax appear in the tough wood.

Looking around him for a weapon, he said, "Well, seems like it's only a question of time now." He picked up a broken shovel handle. With this in his hands he fell into a ready position beside the door.

The girl crossed to him.

"Open the door!" she urged. "Give in to them. I can't let you—"

"No," he retorted grimly. Taking a firmer grip on his club, he continued, "When those roughnecks get in here, they'll find something waiting for them."

The ax, wielded by the tremendous strength of the brute Bimbo, continued to rain blows upon the door, which was gradually being reduced to a jagged mass of splinters. The two inside could now see the burly form of the Greek and the milling mob behind him.

The door gave way at last. With maniacal yells of triumph Bimbo and his followers surged through, sending the piled-up boxes and barrels flying in all directions.

Cromwell swung viciously and had the satisfaction of landing his blow on top of Bimbo's solid, bullet-shaped head. The Greek dropped like a felled ox. But his companions were not to be halted this time. They trampled over his body and came at Cromwell like a pack of snarling wolves.

His shovel handle rose and fell, cut and slashed. Hands reached out to him and tore bleeding gashes down his arms and his chest. Swiftly, one after another, he smashed them away from him. Down they went, some to remain still, others to crawl away, and a few to get up again and hurl themselves back into the maelstrom of whirling, writhing bodies.

The girl looked up to see a lump of hard coal flying through the air. She screamed, but not in time. The piece struck Cromwell on the forehead. He sagged to the deck. Rough shoes trampled over him. Hands reached out for the girl.

As he went down, Cromwell dimly heard a voice crying out in the swiftly enveloping darkness.

"All hands stand by to abandon ship!"

THE stokers stopped, and stared at one another. Then they looked down at the deck. It was covered by a thin, sheet-like layer of water, which had slowly seeped into the room unheeded during the course of the battle. Even as they watched, the depth of this water increased. It was rising before their very eyes.

The terrible truth dawned on them. The violent storm through which they were passing had done something to the ship, and it was sinking. The voice that had shouted down from above had notified them that the ship was about to be abandoned. The black gang was always the last on board to be told. And when they were, time was short, and the ultimate danger very near.

Forgotten was the girl. Forgotten was Cromwell at their feet; their leader, Bimbo, by the door. Like wild animals suddenly stampeded, they rushed for the door and jammed there. They fought frantically with one another as they t r i e d to get through. Cursing, they burst into the boiler room and stumbled up the ladder.

In the murk, which was like dying day, gradually and softly increasing; in the silence, which seemed more awful by reason of the abrupt cessation of the sound of conflict, the girl knelt in the water beside Cromwell. With her heart a block of ice, she raised his pale face into her trembling arms.

"Dick! Dick!" she called frantically to him. He had told her that was his name.

He did not give the slightest indication of returning life. For a breathless, horrible moment she thought that he was dead. It was only when she clasped him in agony to her breast that she felt his heart beating slowly next to hers.

She eyed the ugly, red welt on his forehead where the coal lump had struck him. Somehow she secured a piece of cloth and dipped it into the scummy water which was now eddying around them. She bathed the bruise and his temples. No use. Not a flicker of an eyelid rewarded her.

She looked desperately around her. Aside from Bimbo, who might be either living or dead, the place was as empty as a tomb. For an instant she thought of propping Cromwell against the bulkhead so that his head would be out of the water, while she ran up the ladder for help. But reason assured her that those above would be too concerned about their own safety to risk going deep into the hold to save a common stoker.

Besides, there was the element of time. Her heart skipped a beat. As far as she knew, the ship might go down any instant.

The water in the stokehold was rising faster and faster. Somewhere in the hold water must be pouring in from the sea, ever widening the breach through which it came.

Then the most terrifying thought of all struck her. The boilers! She knew enough about them to know that when the water rose high enough they would explode and send scalding steam, in which no one could live, throughout the hold. She did not, however, know how high the water had to rise. Another inch? A foot? A yard? But it was still rising.

She slipped her arms beneath Cromwell's shoulders. She lifted and tugged. He was tremendously heavy, far more solid than even he looked. Exerting her entire puny strength, she could only move him a few inches. The grim

furnaces gaped at her with their row of toothless, dull-red mouths.

Heavy hands fell on her shoulders. She screamed and whirled around. Released, Cromwell sagged into a sodden lump at her feet.

It was Bimbo. He swayed drunkenly above her. In the gloom he seemed a huge, horrible unreality. Mad light danced in his eyes.

"They all go 'cept me an' you, wooman," he whispered with an insane grin.

The girl backed away from his slow, swaying advance.

"Stop!" she cried. "Can't you see the ship is sinking? We've got to get out of here. All of us."

He did not seem to comprehend. Instinctively the girl knew that his stupid brain was still befogged from the blow he had received.

Trapped in the hold of a sinking ship with a madman!

Even though she sensed that it was useless, she tried to cry out for help. The paralyzed muscles of her throat emitted no sound. Eyes like glowing coals burned into hers. Huge hands reached out to her.

At last her throat functioned.

"Dick! Help!"

LIKE a flame of fire cutting through smoke, that piercing scream cut through the fog that enveloped Cromwell's senses. The Kid! She was drowning too! From somewhere in the darkness she was crying out to him.

He struggled more fiercely. He must not drown! He must get to her!

A floating plank struck him a sharp blow in the face. The pain cleared his head. He opened his eyes. He was wallowing in water that curled and swirled slowly with the now sluggish movements of the ship.

He staggered to his feet.

"Where are you? *Where are you?*" he called.

An inarticulate cry answered him. Striving to hold himself steady, he strained his eyes through the gloom, and made out a struggling, shadowy couple in a far corner of the stokehold.

The water sucked at his knees as he stumbled toward them. He got his hands on Bimbo's shoulders and pulled.

The Greek whirled about, releasing the girl. When he saw Cromwell, the insane glare in his eyes heightened to fiendish glee. An animal smile curved his lips. His massive, hairy chest exhaled one long, sibilant sound of diabolical delight.

"Ah-h-h-h!"

Then he charged forward, head lowered, and seized Cromwell.

The force of the attack drove Cromwell backward. To prevent himself from falling, he grasped the Greek's head with both hands. The impetus of his forward motion, coupled with Cromwell pulling on his head, was too much for Bimbo's balance. With a splash that sent drops of water showering over the girl, and hissing against the furnaces, both men hit the black, scummy water.

Cromwell was underneath. Bimbo's huge fists were flailing his body, but the terrific force of the blows was arrested by the water which covered them both.

Cromwell tightened his grip on Bimbo's head. His arms wrapped themselves around it, clasped it against his chest. Luck had thrust his one chance of success into his arms. He knew, in his condition, that he was no match for the mad stoker. But, if he could manage to keep his hold on Bimbo's head, which was under water, he might win.

It was a battle of lungs, for the heads of both men were submerged now.

As his breath grew short, Bimbo struggled more furiously. Holding onto his head was like trying to hold onto the head of a wild bull. He wrenched and twisted. His hands reached up and gouged into Cromwell's face. The pain was cruel, almost more than Cromwell could bear, yet he hugged that head desperately to him.

His own lungs were becoming like live things within him. They seemed to be leaping and writhing in agony. A million dazzling points of light danced, dipped, and circled in the blackness of his brain, yet he held on. He could not hold out much longer. What were fractions of seconds seemed like endless eternities.

He was near his limit. Cost what it might, he would have to let go, and fight for air alone.

Just as he was about to do so, there occurred that which caused a thrill to shoot through him. The arms that had been tearing so viciously at him were now moving only faintly. Then, at last, they ceased moving altogether.

He had won.

Weakly pushing Bimbo's heavy, unresisting body from him, Cromwell lurched to his feet. For several seconds he stood swaying in the gloom, gulping into his lungs huge drafts of air. He did not even feel the girl beside him.

When his head was clearer, when some measure of strength had returned to him, he took her by the hand and led her to the iron stairs.

WELL-FILLED was the sick bay of the rescue ship that had heard the S O S of the Tropic Queen, and had arrived at the scene of the disaster in the graying morning to pick up the lifeboats tossing helplessly on the still angry waves of the subsiding storm.

Cromwell stole a glance at the girl seated beside his bed. She certainly was lovely! Clothes did make a difference, he decided mentally. Now she was clad in the filmiest of gay chiffon, loaned by some woman passenger of the rescue ship. Her hair, by some miracle of feminine ingenuity, had been transformed into a softly glowing bob, and contained a sedate, yet provocative, part. Copper, heavy burnished copper, Cromwell decided was the color of it.

She had told him that her name was Bernice. Bernice Martin. He liked the sound of it, and repeated it mentally to himself while she talked.

"Years ago," the girl was saying, "my father, who was an American, went to Borneo as a plantation overseer for a Dutchman named Koppes. When I was still a little girl, my father died, leaving Mr. Koppes as my guardian.

"Mr. Koppes had always been very kind to my father and me. As he had no family of his own, it was natural for him to want to be my guardian. He was very wealthy, and my life was happy in his home.

"In later years, however, things began to go badly for him. He lost tremendous amounts of money in business ventures. To make things worse, he had several bad seasons with his crops.

"One day, out of a clear sky, he asked me to marry Mr. Holmers."

Bernice stopped, and looked apprehensively over her shoulder.

"Yes?" prompted Cromwell interestedly. "Who was this Mr. Holmers?"

"He wasn't . . . all white," said the girl, lowering her head, and studying her fingers. "He was a half-caste. His father was English, and his mother a Malay."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Cromwell. "Your guardian must have been crazy to even entertain such a diabolical alliance!"

"He was—almost," said Bernice. "But you can't blame him so much!" she added passionately. "When a man gets old, and sees the savings of his life dwindling away from him, he is liable to do almost anything in his panic. He owed Holmers a great deal of money. Enough to ruin him.

"Holmers is a business man and banker in Banjermasin. He is immensely wealthy. All that he lacked was a white wife. And . . . he wanted me. So—so—"

"You ran away!" Cromwell finished for her.

"I did. I was under age. I knew that I could not hope to get away as myself. They would have followed me and brought me back. I secured boy's clothes, cut my hair, and looked for a job on an outgoing ship."

CROMWELL looked at her with sympathy and admiration.

"You certainly have nerve, youngster!"

"But," she said, with a gesture of misery and hopelessness, "it has all been so futile!"

"Futile?"

"I might have succeeded if it had not been for the sinking of our ship. But, it is the way fortune has of doing things, of turning up unexpectedly and slapping us in the face," she added bitterly.

"I don't see," said Cromwell, mystified, "what the sinking of the Tropic Queen has to do with it! In fact, I think it was lucky for you that it did go down. You are safely out of that stokehold mess, which was, to say the least, becoming rather embarrassing. You can give a false name on board this ship, and continue on to New York just the same. Nobody will be any the wiser."

Bernice silently shook her head despairingly.

"Why not?" demanded Cromwell.

She said just one word. "Holmers."

"Holmers?"

"Yes," she continued wretchedly. "He is on board this ship. I saw him yesterday, and he recognized me. He was a passenger on the Tropic Queen. Both of us were on it when it sailed from Borneo, and neither of us knew it. I told you that he was a banker. He often goes to New York, where he invests his surplus money in American securities."

Cromwell reflected for a moment on this amazing piece of bad fortune, while the girl sat silently beside him.

"Well," he said finally, "what can he do now?"

"He has already demanded of the captain that I be turned over to his charge. They are radioing Banjermasin, and when the answer comes back—"

Bernice stopped abruptly, and covered her face with her hands. Her words came brokenly through her fingers.

"Oh, Dick, Dick! I'm so afraid! Afraid of him—his horrible smile, his greedy eyes always watching me, his creeping, yellow fingers!" She shuddered. "What can I do? What can I do?"

Shaken to the very roots of his being by the girl's terror, by the paroxysm of sobs that racked her slender frame, Cromwell extended a hand to comfort her. However, he knew little to say that could encourage her. His position on this ship was only that of a rescued stoker, a member of the black gang of

a vanished vessel. It was not likely that the ship's officers would listen to him. And he could not, as he did before, save her by the use of his fists.

SO deep in his thoughts was he that he did not notice the group of men approaching until they were standing beside his bed. The white uniforms and brass buttons of three of them identified them as ship's officers. The fourth member of the group, he who had moved immediately to the side of the girl, wore a tropical suit of linen which stamped him as a passenger.

It was upon this last man that Cromwell's gaze focused. His eyes narrowed. Cromwell knew that he was looking at Holmers, the half-caste banker of Banjermasin. The man was tall and bony. In his lean, parchment-yellow face, beady black eyes were sunk into deep sockets above his high cheek bones. His lips were thin and bloodless, and were curved with a sardonic smile as he looked down at Bernice.

"Come, my dear," he said in a smooth voice, "I have taken a nice cabin for you next to mine."

The girl shrank from his touch. She turned appealing eyes upon the three ship's officers, who were looking at her soberly.

The oldest and most important looking of them cleared his throat noisily.

"I'm sorry, Miss Martin," he said. "But that is the order of your guardian. Will you be kind enough to vacate the cabin you now occupy?"

"But, captain—!"

Cromwell clenched his fists.

The portly, gray-haired gentleman turned away. He had performed the disagreeable task of informing her of her guardian's wishes, and now he was anxious to get away from the scene. There were many strange things in the world, as his years at sea had taught him, and this was one of them.

Suddenly the quiet of the sick bay was rudely shattered.

"I won't go with you!" cried the girl hysterically. "I won't! I'll kill myself first! I'll jump overboard!"

When the ship's officers and Cromwell turned toward her in surprise and alarm, they saw Holmers's hand shoot out like a striking snake and grasp her wrist.

"You will come with me," insisted the half-caste in a low, menacing voice. His beady eyes contained the cold, merciless quality of a reptile's.

"Oh!" cried the girl in sudden pain as his long, yellow fingers tightened around her wrist.

She had hardly uttered the cry when Cromwell was out of his bed, flinging the covers from him. The surgeon, who had placed him in the sick bay, had marked him as suffering from exposure. Had the good doctor seen his patient at that moment he would have been greatly astonished.

With all the power of his solid young body behind the punch, Cromwell crashed his right fist against Holmers's jaw. If a sledge hammer had struck him, the Banjermasin banker would not have dropped any faster.

The three ship's officers crowded in to seize the pyjama-clad figure of the stoker gone berserk.

In spite of his best efforts, he was shoved back, held forcibly in his berth.

"Confound your impudence!" the captain spluttered. "Stay in your bed or by the Lord Harry I'll clap you in the brig!"

Furious as he was, Dick Cromwell realized the futility of battling the law of the sea. Instead of helping Bernice, he had only angered the ship's officers needlessly. He stared hopelessly, grim-

ly, almost unseeingly at the faces of the men in the cabin.

THE portly captain stooped to pick up his uniform cap from the deck. Dick was so submerged in the whirl of his thoughts that he did not realize for several seconds that he was staring fixedly at something familiar. When the significance of what he was looking at finally penetrated his consciousness, he started, and examined it more closely. That insigne, that colorful bit of enamel in front of the captain's cap! Cromwell began to smile.

"What ship is this?" he demanded.

"You'll soon know what ship it is!" shouted the captain, who was very red of face from exertion and wrath. "You can't assault passengers in this fashion!"

The passenger at that moment was in the act of raising himself from the deck, and whimpering audibly as he held a tender hand to his broken jaw.

"I take it," replied Cromwell, ignoring the captain's remarks, and pointing to the device on his cap, "that we are on board one of the ships of the Cromwell Line."

"You are," said a voice.

"Thank you," returned Cromwell. "Then," he continued, turning to the captain, "you don't have to worry about Miss Martin any more. I shall be responsible for her."

"You!" said the captain.

"Me," grinned Dick. "My name is Richard Cromwell. My father happens to own this ship. And I'm willing to give you odds that he backs anything I do."

"Why — why — " stammered the captain in the violence of his rage. "You—you—!"

One of his subordinates touched his arm.

"Begging your pardon, sir!" he murmured. "We did get a radio from the home office asking if a Richard Cromwell had been picked up among the survivors of the Tropic Queen."

The captain lowered his threatening fist.

"We shall settle this matter later," he said uncertainly. "After I have had an opportunity to get in touch with the home office."

"Okay," laughed Cromwell. "And," he indicated the half-caste, "take Dr. Fu Manchu along with you. If he causes any more disturbance, refund him his passage money and make him walk."

When they were at last alone, Cromwell turned to the girl.

"Well," he said quizzically, "there can't be much more trouble that can happen to you!"

"Oh," she said softly, her dark eyes shining at him, "I think you're wonderful!"

He grasped her hand.

"Do you really mean it? Gee!" he breathed. "I hope you always will!"

**THE END.**

# Connor Takes Charge

***To manage a Far East business in spite of Chinese intrigues takes both courage and brains; and Vincent Connor's friends never guessed he had either***

***By H. BEDFORD-JONES***

***Author of "An Outlaw of Siberia," "Solomon's Caves," etc.***

*Novelette—Complete*

## CHAPTER I.

### EMPIRE BUILDERS.

CONNOR was well aware of the rather oblique directions in which news travels, particularly in China; a thousand miles away from a given point, one may know better what is going on than persons there. He was not surprised, therefore, when the blow fell.

He was lunching, after a morning's work-out at polo, with a light-headed, giddy young British *attaché* just down from Mukden, full of Manchurian news and anxious to show off how much he knew. To him, as to every one else in Tientsin, Connor was a pleasant but negligible fellow who had inherited vast commercial interests in China, enjoyed life, and was not to be taken seriously.

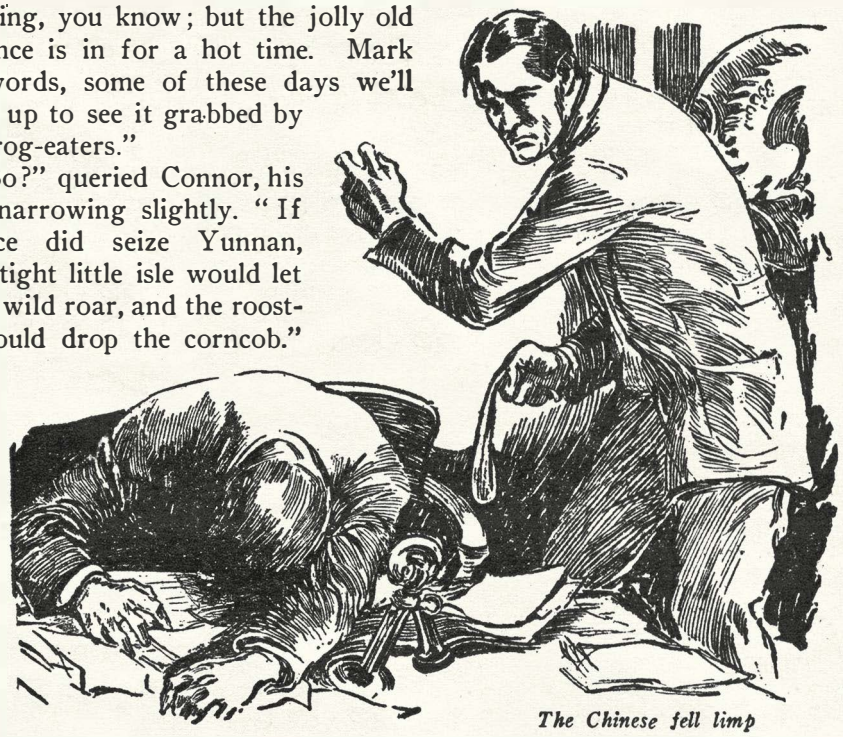
"I say, aren't there Connor interests down in Yunnan?" he asked abruptly.

"Rather!" Connor chuckled. "Tin mine at Muling, various things in Yunnan City, and so on. Why?"

"Better sell out," said the other, wagging his head sagely. "Can't say

anything, you know; but the jolly old province is in for a hot time. Mark my words, some of these days we'll wake up to see it grabbed by the frog-eaters."

"So?" queried Connor, his eyes narrowing slightly. "If France did seize Yunnan, your tight little isle would let out a wild roar, and the rooster would drop the corncob."



*The Chinese fell limp*

"Never heard of a corncob," said the other. "London's in a bad way; coalition government and what not. Deuced bad way! Can't let out any roars. Besides, who knows? Tit for tat, and all that sort of thing. Sell out your Yunnan interests, old chap."

Three drinks later, Connor returned cautiously to the subject, and his guest thawed a bit. A deft query pried loose a pearl of information.

"You'll see a devilish clever chappie bob up in the south one day. He was in Mukden a fortnight ago. A remarkable fellow and all that, name of Wang Yin. Oxford and Sorbonne; been in Russia a year or so."

At this instant the British consul sauntered over to their table, and Connor's source of information was immediately frozen.

Although he had two horses entered in the afternoon racing, Connor chucked the events, turned over his box to friends, and drove back to the city. He did not go to his office, but direct to the Tientsin Club, where he dispatched several telegrams, and after calling various numbers, at length tracked down the man he wanted—Severn, the Australian distance flyer, who had landed three days previously in the Taku River after a flight from Seattle to Japan, and who was bound for Australia. He spoke rapidly, and Severn assented.

"I'll be over in twenty minutes, Connor. Come to your room? Right."

Connor hung up, lit a cigarette, and stared at the map on his room wall.

MORE than mere money was at stake now, and he realized it with startled alarm. Connor was one of the many white men in China who sincerely admired the old

nation, who had been fighting to save it from anarchy and worse, and who saw themselves slowly defeated by greed and selfish ambition. No one knew or dreamed of Connor's interest, however, except two or three Chinese who could be trusted.

"Mm! This Wang Yin was in Mukden; some sort of a deal was made with the British," he reflected, and gazed at the map thoughtfully.

North and South China were as usual at handgrips. Manchuria, where one or two alleged Japanese spies had just been shot, was under the threat of seizure by Japan. Yunnan, off to the south and with French influence predominant and upholding its grim old governor in power, enjoyed peace; though war was just across its borders. Indo-China was seething with revolt against the French, while Burma had just been in open rebellion against Britain.

And England herself was in the throes of financial and political crisis—an emergency which, some said, meant the end of the Crimson Empire. No, the British Lion was in no position to roar if the French seized Yunnan and added it to their colonial empire. Already they held it in a tight commercial grip.

A telegram arrived, a tremendously long telegram. It was in Chinese, and it was also in code. The signature told Connor that it had come from old Chang, who had been his father's partner, and who, from his retirement in Shanghai, kept in close touch with all the affairs of China. He settled down to decode it, for Connor spoke and wrote Chinese more fluently than the majority of the yellow race themselves; it was a long task, however, and he was still working at it when Severn arrived—a tall, rangy, sandy-haired man of thirty.

Connor set out cigarettes and a drink, and settled down.

"Severn, I want to get down to Yunnan City," he said abruptly. "In a straight line, it's about a thousand miles. By way of the coast, it's an impossibility; I want to get there as quickly as possible, a non-stop flight. There's a good landing field at Chengtu, about halfway, if you have to make a stop."

"A thousand miles?" said Severn cheerfully. "Can do—rather, could do if necessary, old chap. I'd like to oblige, but I've made my plans to go by way of Shanghai and Hongkong, and then down to Saigon—"

"Change them," broke in Connor, and pushed across the table a check he had previously filled out. The airman glanced at it, picked it up and inspected it a second time, and looked up amazedly at his host.

"Can do?" asked Connor dryly. "It would mean leaving here in the morning, and keeping my identity secret. I don't want a soul to know that I'm going. When I get there, I'll leave you immediately. You can make up your own yarn to account for it."

"To-morrow morning before daylight, eh?" Severn squinted down at the check, then glanced at his watch. He folded the check across, slowly, then thrust it into his pocket and reached for his drink. "Can do. How!"

TEN minutes later Connor, alone once more, resumed his work on the telegram. A slow whistle broke from him as he realized its import, but not until he had finished the last phrase did he pick up the translated sheet and give it his full attention. Then he realized how shrewdly he had acted in making his deal with Severn at the first possible moment. The mes-

sage made clear to him an appalling situation:

> Total disaster threatens house of Han. No action possible as storm will break within week. Our friends in Yunnanfu are dead. Only Sung remains, hiding at Hei Lung. Communications dead. Person about whom you inquire undoubtedly agent for French interests planning extensive outbreak. Governor Yuan will ascend dragon, but blind and deaf. Am helpless.

Connor translated this still further in his own mind, as he read it over. Governor Yuan, war-lord of Yunnan, was an able and honest ruler; he was doomed to death and would listen to no warnings. Wang Yin was the center of everything; he probably planned some revolutionary outbreak designed to give the French a pretext to move in. Those with whom old Chang were in touch down there had been wiped out, and the one remaining person, Sung, was hiding. Hei Lung undoubtedly meant the Hei Lung or Black Dragon temple, a famous place just outside of Yunnan City. The plot would burst in a week's time or less, and from it would come the ruin of all China.

"So there's the game—as much of it as Chang can tell me, at least!" thought Connor, laying down the paper. "A thousand miles; well, Severn could make it by to-morrow night, for that Albatross of his is a devil for speed, and if not forced down he could manage it easily. There's a good landing field at Yunnan, too. All right. Get there, look up this chap Sung, and go to work. And now for camouflage!"

He called up his office, arranged for cashier's checks in a large amount to be sent over to him, checks good at the Banque Industrielle branch in Yunnan, and then packed his belongings for the trip.

At four o'clock he reached the Jockey Club, sauntered into his own box, and was warmly congratulated. His horse had won the Peking Plate twenty minutes before. Connor fell into light-hearted chatter with his friends. He was leaving in the morning for Peiping to get hold of some antique bronzes recently brought to light there, he said; and knowing grins went around.

"Poor Connor!" observed one lady, sotto voce, to a visitor from Hongkong. "A charming fellow, but he has no sense of business at all. He says he just buys anything that is thrown at him—does not know what to do with his money!"

## CHAPTER II.

### A TEMPLE CONFERENCE.

At ten thirty the next night Connor secured a room at the Terminus Hotel, in Yunnan City.

All the excitement and publicity centered about Severn, who had landed unheralded and unexpected. His passenger had no difficulty in slipping away with his bag and getting a car into the city, and as his papers were quite in order, he aroused only a superficial curiosity. No one here knew Connor personally. The wealthy idler and sportsman of Tientsin, whose father had built up a huge industrial heritage for him, was here only another foreign devil, and his name aroused no comment whatever.

After a good night's sleep Connor breakfasted and sought out the hotel manager, a polite Frenchman. He was quite the tourist, with a camera slung over his shoulder, and explained that he wanted to take pictures of the Black Dragon Temple. This was entirely

natural, and the manager arranged to have a guide and horses around in twenty minutes, at a price, the temple being ten miles northeast of the city.

"Any danger from bandits?" asked Connor timorously.

The Frenchman chuckled. "*M'sieu,* Yunnan has no bandits! You are safe, absolutely safe."

Connor nodded and strolled out, delighted with the beauty of the city, which lay on the east side of a lake above twenty miles long, with girdling hills and mountain peaks closing the horizon. He realized that this was the practically independent capital of a huge province, with its own telegraphs, telephone and electric system, mint and arsenal, as he strolled about, finding soldiers everywhere — brown, alert, smiling men. The friendliness and hospitality of Yunnan were proverbial.

"Damned shame!" thought Connor as he returned to the hotel, to find a guide awaiting him with horses. "To ruin all this in order to let France grab off a new colonial empire! But it isn't done yet."

Connor admitted to no knowledge of Chinese, but the native guide spoke French, so all was well. They mounted and set off at a brisk pace.

Thus, an hour later they were approaching the temple in its mountain grove of towering trees. The temple guarded the famous Black Dragon spring, which gushed from the limestone and carried fertility to the plain below—clear, cold mountain water. As they dismounted before the inclosed terrace, Connor saw a monk standing in the sunlight watching them.

He turned to the guide. "Remain here. I wish to take pictures and see the place by myself."

"But, *m'soo!*" protested the native volubly. "One must interpret—"

"One must obey," said Connor, his tone checking further argument. "You will be well paid none the less. I may stop here for lunch. Your business is to remain with the horses."

Leaving the astonished guide staring after him, he turned to the terrace and the entrance, where the impassive monk eyed him. Going up to the man, Connor addressed him.

"Venerable ancestor, I am named Connor. I have come from Tientsin at the bidding of one who is named Chang. I desire to see a man named Sung."

"I will see if there is any such person here," returned the priest. "Follow."

Connor was led into one of the side rooms of the central hall and bidden to wait. In five minutes he saw before him a man wearing the robes of a priest, but without the three holes burned in his shaven head that mark a Buddhist monk. The face was wrinkled, shrewd, kindly.

"Is this a miracle performed by Kwanyin?" said Sung, regarding Connor.

"No," and Connor smiled a little. "The venerable Chang told me you were here. I came. It is possible that we may do something, but I must have information from you."

"I am a relative by marriage of the honorable Chang," said the other calmly. "Let us sit down. My friends and those who managed your interests here are dead. I am alone, sought far and wide. They knew we would imperil their plans, you see. I dare not leave this roof, or be seen by any one. I can give you no help."

Connor sank into a great temple-chair of carved wood.

"Information is help," he said, seeing that the man before him was

despondent and hopeless. "Tell me where to find Wang Yin, what he is like, and his plans."

"You know much already!" exclaimed Sung, starting slightly at mention of Wang's name.

Connor nodded calmly. "That is why I am here."

"You can do nothing."

"That is not for you to judge. Tell me what I seek, or I will go elsewhere."

"I WILL tell you; why such haste?" said Sung, and sat on a stool of porcelain. "Wang Yin is very clever, far too clever for these French agents with whom he deals. They think that he is going to break out in a revolt, destroy foreign property, probably kill a few white people, seize the palace and kill the governor. He will set himself up as ruler, and then the French will move up their troops by the railroad, capture Wang, and retire him on a pension. That is their program. They will then rule Yunnan, as they rule Annam and Tonkin."

Connor whistled softly. "I see! But Wang is too smart for them—how?"

"He has made his plans better than they know. He will seize the palace and kill the governor, yes; old Yuan means well and is honest, but refuses to listen to stories of plots. Then, instead of destroying foreign property, Wang Yin will protect it, will kill no white people."

"Oh! He'll double-cross the French, after he gets what he wants?"

"Exactly," and Sung nodded. "Instead of r e v o l u t i o n, widespread destruction, fire, there will be only a short, savage capture of the palace. Wang will be giving orders instead of Yuan. The army will obey him, for the army obeys the paymaster. He has an administrative government ready to function immediately, even his proclamations are printed and ready for distribution."

"I see," said Connor. "Then, how will China be disrupted by his success?"

"Because Wang Yin is a communist," said Sung. "His chief men and aides here, like himself, have been trained in Russia, are backed by Russian support. Once he is in power, he is joined by the Cantonese Reds. He makes Yunnan a communistic state, threatening Burma on one flank, Indo-China on another. French and British will join hands to crush him. The most orderly and prosperous province of China will be devastated by communism, by war, by all manner of chaos, even as the north now is. Even without war, Wang Yin will institute communism here, and the result will be the same. Better to continue as we are."

"Infinitely, of course," said Connor. "When does Wang's coup take place?"

"Within the next three days."

"Shorter and shorter, eh? H'm! Is Wang himself here in Yunnanfu?"

"Yes. He uses his own name. He has rented the Evremond villa, near the lake, and is living there with certain of his aides. No women. But why do you ask? You are helpless."

Connor dropped his cigarette, leaned back in his chair.

"Venerable Sung," he said dryly, "for the past ninety years, ever since the Opium War, foreign diplomats have visualized just one way of grabbing portions of China—by intervention following the murder of missionaries or other foreign devils. It has worked like a charm, and no new process has ever been necessary. Within

the past year, I myself have broken up two or three identical attempts, working along the same old lines. The innocent bystander is the main sufferer, and some foreign interest or country is the gainer. Now, my venerable friend, it does not pay to try to beat such a man as Wang Yin at his own game."

"It does not," agreed Sung mournfully. "My son was one of his aides; he is dead. My family and friends are dead. We thought that we were clever."

Connor rose. "I am not clever," he said crisply. "At all events, not clever enough to match wits with Wang Yin and on his own ground."

"Then you realize that you can do nothing?"

"Eh?" Connor smiled slightly. "Not at all. I can try to do everything, and I shall. With the proper break of luck, I may pull some of your chestnuts out of the fire. Tell me whether there is one man in Yunnan City on whom I can rely for information, help, advice. One man who will obey me and ask no questions."

Sung's wrinkled features were anxious, as he peered at Connor.

"There is one such man, yes," he said slowly. "No one knows that he was associated with me; much of our information came from him. His name is Tsing Fan, and he is a porter at the Hotel Terminus."

"Eh? A porter!" exclaimed Connor.

The other smiled slightly.

"The peacock pretends to be a sparrow, that no one may steal his feathers." Sung removed a large Buddhist rosary from about his neck and extended it. "Give him this, and he will know that you are the man. I can do no more for you."

"That is enough," said Connor, and rose.

Outside, he rejoined his guide, said curtly that he was not staying for lunch after all, and headed back for the city.

It was past noon when they reached the hotel. Connor lunched there, then spoke with the manager, asking to have the porter Tsing Fan sent to his room.

"A friend who was here recently recommended him to me," he said negligently, "and he may be of service."

"At once, *m'sieu*," was the response, and Connor went on to his room.

CONNOR looked curiously at the man who entered. Tsing Fan was apparently young, very stalwart, his face keenly intelligent; but, in the hotel uniform and cap, he looked like a fish out of water. Tsing Fan closed the door, and spoke in French.

"You sent for me, *m'sieu?*"

"This unworthy little brother requested the honor of your presence," said Connor in the most formal Mandarin. The other started slightly; his eyes became alert, suspicious. "You are acquainted with the venerable Sung, I believe?"

"There is no such family, to my knowledge," said Tsing Fan. Connor laughed and pointed to the bed.

"Lift up the pillow."

Tsing Fan hesitated, then went to the bed and lifted the pillow. He saw the big rosary lying there, dropped the pillow, turned with a sharp exclamation.

"What!"

"Sit down and talk," said Connor. "I have come from Tientsin at the request of my old friend and partner, Chang. I have seen Sung. He says that you will obey me."

"That is so, heaven-born," murmured Tsing Fan, staring at him. "Connor! I know now. You are of that family in the north."

"Exactly," said Connor. "Will you help me against Wang Yin, or not?"

"This humble slave is at your command, venerable ancestor," murmured the other, dazedly. He sat down. "You have but to ask."

"You know the Evremond Villa where the man Wang lives?"

Tsing Fan looked up, and his eyes flashed.

"Yes. It is within large grounds, above the lake."

"Guarded?"

"Men watch the grounds, yes. The servants came with Wang Yin, and are his men."

"How many?"

"Two or three. I cannot say certainly."

"The villa has a telephone?"

"Yes."

Connor regarded the man intently. "When one treads upon the tiger's tail," he said in the familiar locution, "it is necessary to step swiftly. Wang Yin is undoubtedly on his guard against any sort of attack. He is too clever to be met with guile. Am I right?"

Tsing Fan assented. "He watches the foreign colony closely. By this time he must know of your arrival. I myself heard you came with Severn."

"Are you willing to go with me tonight to his villa?"

"Of course!" The dark, oblique eyes flashed again. "What will you do there?"

"I do not know," said Connor frankly. "It depends on what turns up when I talk with him. His men are armed?"

Tsing Fan laughed bitterly. "Have not our friends and relatives been killed like flies in the past two weeks? They are killers, all of them. I have talked with merchants who went to that villa. They say every one who comes is searched for arms."

Connor's eyes narrowed. "So? Valuable news. Have you other clothes than those you wear now?"

"I have nothing, excellency," said the other. "I am a house-boy, a porter. I play the part. I live up under the eaves with two others in the same room. Thus, I have never been suspected of being other than I seem."

"Very well," said Connor. "Have you a knife?"

"Yes."

"Bring it. Be here at eight o'clock to-night."

"Very well," said Tsing Fan composedly. "You bear the rosary of Sung; therefore you are to be obeyed in all things. But I tell you that we cannot enter that villa unseen. We could not get past the gates."

"We shall not enter unseen," and Connor smiled. "There are plenty of rent-cars here? Pick the best automobile you can find, hire it for an hour, and have it here at eight. That is all. Here is money."

Tsing Fan departed. Connor sallied forth, engaged a guide at the hotel entrance, and set out for the bazaars. There, through the guide, he purchased an outfit of the finest Soochow silk, such as a wealthy Chinese gentleman might wear; he was outrageously cheated, but he dared not let any one guess that he spoke the language himself. A coolie was engaged to carry the parcels, lest the guide lose face, and so Connor came back to the hotel, with the afternoon largely spent.

HE remained in his room until dinner time, then descended and dined in leisurely manner, and learned that Severn had taken off successfully that morning to continue his

flight to Saigon. Returning to his room, he took a brief-case from his bag, emptied out the papers it contained, and in their place put a slender whalebone slung shot. A knock sounded at his door. It was precisely eight o'clock as Tsing Fan entered.

Connor pointed to the outfit on the bed.

"Get into them. Where's your knife?"

He whistled softly as Tsing Fan produced a wickedly curved blade, thin and razor-edged. Connor tucked it into the brief-case and buckled the latter shut. Then, taking one of his own engraved cards, he went to the writing desk and sat down. Beneath his name he wrote in English:

> Bringing letters from Mukden. Also Yao Erh Sze of Canton. Urgent. Confidential.

Pocketing the card, he rose and surveyed Tsing Fan, who grinned widely in his new outfit, and looked vastly different. Connor dived into his bag and produced his make-up box.

"You need a few marks of age, my friend, and a mustache. I can provide them in a few moments." As he provided them, he went on talking. "I have been thinking just what I should do, were I in Wang Yin's place and occupying that villa, and receiving callers.

"Now, here are your orders! You are to say and do nothing, except to say that you are a friend of mine and bear certain proposals from the Canton government, supplementing my own proposals. Don't say this unless forced. Your all-important task is to watch me. After I have opened this brief-case, be ready. When I put my hand inside it—switch off the lights. Then seize your knife from inside the case and if anybody comes into the room—get him. Is that quite clear?"

"Very well," said Tsing Fan, with a nod. "Suppose your mind is changed after you get there?"

"Then I'll give you a shake of the head—no!" exclaimed Connor. "In that case, I'll not open the brief-case at all, which is better still. But time yourself carefully, and don't jump for the electric switch until my hand slides into the case. There's your mustache. Take a look at yourself and let's go. If the hotel people wonder who the strange Chinaman is, no matter. The car is waiting? Tell the driver to go to some tea-house here. Once we're away from the hotel, direct him to the villa."

Together they descended the stairs and passed out of the hotel. A battered Mercedes was waiting in front, with a French driver. Tsing Fan gave him an address, and changed it a moment later, once they were off.

Connor could not but admire the blind and implicit manner in which Tsing Fan had obeyed him, without asking explanations, without protests. Knowing that their driver could neither hear nor understand, he touched the other's knee and spoke quietly in Mandarin.

"You are thinking that it is strange I have not told you what I mean to do?" He felt Tsing Fan start at these words, and laughed softly. "My friend, it is simply that I do not know. I gamble everything on what turns up at the moment. We may go to disaster; certainly we go to danger; but what we do is not for ourselves."

"Thank you," said Tsing Fan. "It is for the millions of people around us; I quite understand, my friend."

In his tone was a certain dignity

which impressed Connor, as they rolled along.

SOON they were out of the brilliantly lighted streets, passing through tree-shaded avenues of the residential quarter built up by the foreign element; the walls, high hedges, stout gates, bespoke French influence. The car turned in before two high iron gates, blocked to a height of six feet with plates of sheet-iron, and the driver honked insistently. The gates were opened enough to give exit to a native, who barked a question. Connor leaned from the window and beckoned, holding out his card.

"Take this to your master," he said, "and admit us promptly."

Within the grounds showed the lights of a house. The man took the card and passed it to another inside the gates. The French driver talked to himself, with frequent curses on the insolence of the yellow race. After a moment a bell jingled and the native threw open the gates, gesturing them to pass on.

"Am I to wait, *messieurs?*" asked the driver.

"No. This is all we require," said Connor. "We shall walk back—perhaps."

They drew up beneath a *porte-cochère;* this villa, it appeared, was a pretentious place, at least on the outside, though it did not seem a large building. A light flashed out overhead, and a black-clad Chinese appeared and bowed slightly.

"My master will receive you at once, gentlemen," he said in perfect French. "Follow me, if you please. Do you wish to see him in company, or separately?"

Connor had anticipated this query, which indicated success. Two callers would be received with more suspicion than one, unless their business was plausible.

"We have letters to present that mention us both, in regard to certain matters," he responded. "When these have been attended to, my business with him is confidential—as, I believe, is that of M. Yao, here."

"He will be at liberty in a moment, and requests that you wait here," and the servant showed them into a small and rather tawdry salon, then closed the door and went on down the hall.

Coming to another door, the servant knocked, then entered.

This room was a combination of library and office. A large, flat-topped desk held neat piles of papers and documents, a telephone, a radio receiving set. The room was brilliantly illumined by an electric cluster in the ceiling. About the walls stood bookcases, half hidden by large maps outspread and pinned in place. Two chairs stood by the desk.

At the desk sat a man, with Connor's card lying before him. He was of medium height and build and wore loose English tweeds. His hands were large, powerful, with square-ended fingers. His face was delicately outlined and unimpressive, until one observed the heavy brow and piercing eyes; those eyes were cold, unwinking, reptilian in their deadly regard.

"Well?" he said curtly.

"They have certain mutual business," said the servant, "but each one desires to see you in private, afterward. The son of Han, I do not know. The foreign devil is the same who arrived here last night by air. He carries a portfolio."

"Yes, these men must always carry their papers in something," said Wang Yin, his lip curling in disdain. "Search

them. If they carry any weapon, detain them and advise me. If not, admit them at once."

His hand went out to three push-buttons set in a holder on the desk. He touched one and looked up. A picture between two bookcases, on the opposite wall, slid away to reveal the face of a man in the opening.

"Close the opening," said Wang Yin, "unless I signal you. In that case, be ready to shoot if necessary."

The picture slid back into place. A moment later there was a knock at the door, and Connor and Tsing Fan were shown into the room. They had been searched. Wang Yin rose and bowed.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said, and motioned to the two chairs. "I am very glad to see you, Mr. Connor. I have been expecting you ever since your visit with Mr. Sung this morning."

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## CHAPTER III.

### CONNOR'S LAST TRUMP.

CONNOR gave no sign of his startled surprise at these words. He was prepared for Wang Yin's perfect mastery of English, for his shrewdness, for his enmity—but he was not prepared to find his business with Sung known to this man.

He bowed slightly and advanced to the desk, laid down the brief case, and with a smiling word of thanks accepted a cigar from the box Wang Yin extended. Tsing Fan refused, and seated himself.

Wang Yin spun a lighter and Connor accepted it.

"So you keep an eye on Sung, do you?" he asked pleasantly.

Wang Yin nodded, and selected a cigar for himself.

"Naturally," he rejoined. "I am curious to know why you saw him before you saw me, if you come from Mukden. You have references, no doubt."

"Yes." Connor rose and stepped to the desk, and started to unbuckle the brief case. Wang Yin had resumed his chair, almost beside him there. "Certain British officials asked me to see you—but I presume you had best see the letters first."

"By all means," said Wang Yin dryly.

Connor was not anxious for any verbal sparring. He was only too well aware that a word too much, an incautious phrase, would spoil everything; also, there was the subconscious influence, the telepathy, which would certainly give Wang Yin warning within another moment or two.

So, laying down his cigar, he opened the brief case and thrust in his hand as though to bring out his papers. He saw Tsing Fan calmly leave his chair and start toward the wall switch. Wang Yin caught the movement, and sent a glance at the Chinese.

Connor caught out the slung shot and struck, swift as a flash. Wang Yin's fingers had almost reached the three push-buttons on the desk; they fell limp and then trailed off the polished wood and fell, as Wang's head sagged forward. At the same instant the room was plunged into darkness.

For a moment Connor held his breath, listening, then he relaxed.

"All right; switch 'em on," he said. "He was reaching for those push-buttons. No doubt he meant to signal whomever was watching the room."

"He who treads on the tiger's tail," said Tsing Fan with a chuckle, "does well not to neglect precautions. We took the chance; it is well."

The lights clicked on again.

Connor looked distastefully at the man he had struck down; such a blow smacked of treachery, and revolted him. Yet he knew it had been vitally necessary. In no other manner could he have done his work—and he was striking, not for himself, but to destroy the tentacles that threatened to grip the uncounted thousands of yellow men in a clenching grapple of death and ruin.

"Empty his pockets, take him over into the corner and tie him up," he ordered. "Make some sort of a gag, too, that will keep him from shouting."

"And the knife? Is it not better?" Tsing Fan, holding his wickedly curved blade, made an eager gesture.

Connor frowned. "We are not murderers. Do as I say."

Tsing Fan lifted the senseless Wang Yin from the chair. Connor reached out for the papers piled so neatly on the desk—and at this instant the telephone rang.

THE two men exchanged one startled look. Then Connor dropped into the chair and put out his hand to the combined receiver and mouthpiece on its rack. In their brief conversation he had noted the voice of Wang Yin; despite his perfect English, the man spoke with the peculiar singing note of the upper-class Chinese, the soft modulation of voice that denoted one accustomed to speaking pure Mandarin.

"Hello!" he said in English, aping that voice so far as he could.

"This is your servant Lung speaking," came the reply in the same language.

Connor perceived instantly that luck was with him. Evidently Wang Yin used English wherever possible, as in Yunnan City it was seldom spoken.

"The secretary of the governor is here at my house," went on Lung. "He is ready to use the poison to-morrow at noon. I called you to make certain."

"One moment," said Connor.

In a flash he perceived the chance that was given him, and fought for self-control. So grim old Governor Yuan was to be poisoned—the coup was set for the morrow! Everything else was swept overboard. Connor realized now with full force that he must act in Chinese fashion, with supreme disregard for anything except the winning of the game.

"Lung!" he said, carefully imitating the intonation and the English accent of Wang Yin. "I have just learned that his secretary is playing us false. He has already betrayed us. Have him killed at once, instantly!"

"It will be done, master," came the response.

Connor thrilled exultantly — this man suspected nothing.

"Warn the others that they are to be seized at midnight," went on Connor. Glancing up, he saw the eyes of Tsing Fan fixed upon him, startled, distended. Evidently Tsing Fan understood English. "Troops are being moved out. We are unable to strike now. The traitor has given a list of names, most of us are known. Warn every one to leave the city within half an hour. Go to Wuting-chow, and I will be there to-morrow night."

"As ordered, master," came the emotionless response. Evidently, the men who served Wang Yin were surprised at nothing. "Shall the man be killed slowly?"

"No. Waste no time."

Connor laid the instrument on its rack and drew a deep breath.

"You understood?"

"Yes. I speak English," said Tsing Fan quietly.

"The governor's secretary was to poison Yuan at noon to-morrow."

Comprehension flashed in the dark, oblique eyes.

"And you have ordered him killed!" Tsing Fan broke into a laugh; the laugh of the Chinese, to whom a touch of cruelty appeals strongly. "Excellent! And the others will flee?"

"This man Lung suspected nothing," said Connor. "We have the chance to destroy the whole plot at one blow, from the inside."

Tsing Fan bent over the figure of Wang Yin and completed his task. Rising, he placed on the desk the articles taken from Wang Yin's pockets; money, a few letters, nothing else. Connor placed the letters aside, with the other papers on the desk, which he swiftly gathered together.

The telephone rang again, and he picked up the instrument.

"Hello!"

"Master, this is Yo Chow!" came a thin voice in Chinese. "Lung sent me word—I wish to know whether it is true! If there has been some mistake—"

"The only mistake is your folly in not obeying instantly," said Connor, and gave Tsing Fan a grin.

"Very well. Forgive me, master."

Connor replaced the instrument with a chuckle. He turned his attention to the drawers of the desk, glancing through the papers there, and adding some to the pile set aside.

Tsing Fan, meantime, went to the walls and inspected them narrowly.

"This house," he observed, "belonged to the French collector of customs who killed himself last year. He was a great scoundrel; he took bribes, kept many women, was said to have had secret hiding places in the house."

Connor paid no attention, for he had come upon a number of letters and documents bearing the Soviet symbol, though written in Russian, of which he knew very little. He drew the brief case to him and began to cram these and the other papers into it.

Tsing Fan came to the picture high on the wall between the two bookcases, opposite the desk. It was a small French color-print, set in a frame without glass. Tsing Fan touched it, and found it did not move. He examined it more carefully, and perceived that it was solid in the wall, apparently. He tapped it sharply with his fingers, then again. His knife flashed up and he drove it into the center of the picture with all his force.

Connor looked up, startled; a frightful sound had burst upon the room, like the gasping groan of a dying man. He saw the long knife of Tsing Fan still fixed firmly in the picture, then Tsing pointed to it with an exultant word. Connor saw something dark appear on the surface of the picture, spread upon it, then drip down the wall in a steady red smear.

"He heard me tap, put down his ear to listen—and that was all," said Tsing Fan. "The picture is on a panel of wood."

Reaching up, he made an effort, and the knife came away in his hand with a rush of blood.

"The devil!" exclaimed Connor, starting to his feet. His forgotten cigar was burning the desk-edge, the varnish smelling evilly. "Tsing, we've done the job; now to get out of here. Not a sign of any weapon in the desk, unfortunately. Can we reach Governor Yuan by telephone?"

"No," said Tsing Fan. "He is old

style and refuses to have telephones in the palace. We must get out by carving a way with the knife, I think."

Connor nodded. "Looks like it." He buckled shut his bulging brief case and caught up the slung shot. "All right, let's go."

Tsing Fan drew open the door, which opened into the room. The lighted hallway outside was empty, but the two men stared in abrupt dismay and consternation; the doorway opening was completely closed by a steel grille.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE INQUISITION.

CONNOR closed the door swiftly, quietly.

"There's been no alarm," he said. "Probably this was some gadget devised by Wang Yin to keep any one from leaving the room except at his signal. Try the windows."

Tsing Fan pulled back one of the heavy draperies cloaking the windows, then let it fall again.

"Barred on the outside," he said briefly.

"Stand by, then. See what happens." Connor went to the desk and pressed the three push-buttons, one after the other.

A click sounded from the wall. The split panel with its picture moved aside, to let a small deluge of blood down the wall; the skull of a Chinese showed in the opening, motionless. Tsing Fan went to the door, opened it slightly.

"The steel is gone!" he exclaimed. "Come quickly!"

One of those three buttons had released the sliding grille outside. Another had slid away the wall panel. But the third—

Connor stepped to the door and switched off the light in the room. With brief case and slung shot, he followed Tsing Fan out into the hall, and closed the door. No one was in sight. For an instant, Connor felt the heart-leap of victory. Already Tsing Fan was at the door opening on the *porte-cochère*, plucking at it—but vainly.

"Locked!" he exclaimed.

And at this instant, the house was plunged into darkness. A thin, shrill cry filled the air; Connor felt the reverberation of naked feet thudding on the hall floor. He threw himself sidewise. Something struck him with fearful force and hurled him headlong, the brief case flying from his grip. It was gone. A figure stumbled over him, a shrill voice cried out. Then Connor was up, on his feet, lashing out blindly with the slung shot. There was a tremendous crash of bursting glass from the door.

The third push-button had brought the avalanche upon them!

A body struck against Connor, gripped him; the slung shot cracked home, there was a scream, he was free again. A terrific uproar was going up all around. Recollecting that there had been side doors from the hall, Connor groped for one, found it, swung it open—and the ray of an electric torch picked him up as he was closing it. There was an instant yell. Bodies came crashing against the door. They were after him, had seen him.

He released the door abruptly. It flew back against him, hurled him against the wall, concealed him perfectly, as men hurtled into the room. Chinese voices filled his ears. The torch ray stabbed about. Then, suddenly as it had gone off, the house light was switched on again. From somewhere lifted a thin, piercing, metallic voice

screaming in rage. Connor knew instinctively it was the voice of Wang Yin.

The din quieted. Connor heard the men around him ebb out of the room.

"Both of them gone!" cried a voice that pierced him. "Fools—outside! Comb every inch of the compound and find them! Do not hesitate to shoot."

Wang Yin was in charge, then. Connor gently shoved the door, and discovered that he was in the same salon where they had waited when they had first come in. The room blazed with light. So Tsing had escaped! That was what the bursting glass had meant—he must have gained the gardens outside.

The door closed, Connor snapped off the lights, crossed hastily to the one window, and drew the curtain aside. An iron grille on the far side of the glass greeted him, and he let the drapery fall again. Even if Tsing Fan had got away, the brief case with its precious freight was gone. Failure weighed heavily upon him. After all, he should have let Tsing put a knife into Wang Yin when they had him. Nothing else would insure the destruction of the man's infernal schemes.

What to do now? Connor thought swiftly, desperately. They were all outside seeking Tsing Fan—ah! Audacity, the one thing they would never expect; and why not? He had bungled things miserably. Why not seize the chance to repair everything? Wang Yin would have found the brief case, would of course take it back into his workroom—

HIS brain thus racing, Connor darted across to the door, opened it, looked out. By the shattered entrance door, now ajar, sprawled the black-clad figure of one of the servants, eloquent testimony that Tsing Fan's knife had found one mark, at least. No one else. The hall was empty. His brief case was gone, of course.

Connor turned toward the room he had so lately left, slung shot in hand. A sudden outburst of voices welled up from outside, instinct with savage ferocity. He came to the office door, and found that the steel grille was not in place.

"We have found him!" came a voice from outside. "We have him, master!"

Another instant and they would be back in the house. Tsing Fan was lost, then. Connor flung open the door before him and darted into Wang Yin's office, slamming the door again.

Wang Yin was not here. Save for the crown of the dead Chinaman in the wall aperture, the room was empty. Nor was there any sign of the brief case.

From the hall sounded the thudding of feet, the shrill sound of excited voices. Battling down his keen dismay, Connor remembered the accident that had saved him, and with two quick strides was behind the door, where it would open against him. A hand rattled the knob, shoved the door partly open.

"He is dead?" asked the voice of Wang Yin. "I see that he is. By the ten hells! This man has no mustache."

"Here is a false one that we found in the hall, master," said another.

The telephone rang stridently, insistently.

"Take his body into another room. Search it and bring me whatever you find," said Wang Yin hastily. He entered the room, slammed the door shut, leaped to the desk and seized the telephone. "Hello!" he said in English.

Tsing Fan dead, then!

Connor took a step forward, then an-

other. Wang Yin leaned over the desk, back to him, and emitted a sudden blasting torrent of oaths. He was just learning about the orders that had been issued in his name, evidently. He had laid an automatic pistol on the desk when he seized the instrument.

"Wait a minute—wait!" he exclaimed. "There is something wrong—"

Connor shoved a thumb into his back.

"Drop it!" he commanded. "Hands up—quick, you devil!"

Wang Yin twisted about, caught a glimpse of Connor's face, and without hesitation dropped the instrument and lifted his arms, his features contorted with fury and dismay.

"Don't try any tricks or you'll stop hot lead," said Connor, and reaching past him, took the automatic from the desk. It was loaded, the safety catch off. He stepped back a pace and grinned cheerfully at the reptilian ferocity of the other man's expression.

"Now put the telephone on the rack—quick, damn you!"

Connor's eyes hardened. Wang Yin reached out and replaced the instrument, staring fixedly at Connor. The latter backed around to the other side of the desk.

"Where's my brief case?" he demanded. The yellow man looked blank.

"Whose game are you playing, Mr. Connor?" he asked slowly. Connor ignored the question and glanced around. No sign of the brief case anywhere. Wang Yin had not brought it back into the room with him—perhaps he did not realize its importance. Across those venomous saffron features flitted a swift glance of understanding.

"Oh!" said Wang Yin. "I see now. It was you who gave those orders they just called me about—I suppose Lung telephoned me and you were clever enough—yes, yes! You're no fool. And the man with you, pretending to be from the Canton government — just who was he, if you please?"

"You might find that out for yourself," said Connor crisply, "since you've killed him."

"As you thought you had killed me, eh?" Wang Yin lifted a hand to his head, his eyes flitting about the room. "Well, you fooled me; I admit it freely. Still I must insist that you assuage my curiosity. Where did you learn so much? Who sent you?"

DESPERATELY, Connor cursed the lost brief case. He dared not mention it again lest Wang Yin discover its import; without it, however, now that Tsing Fan was dead, he did not want to leave here. Then Wang Yin started violently, and his eyes widened.

"So—my papers—everything! You foreign devil, who sent you here?"

"China," said Connor calmly. "Your whole scheme is known, Wang. You expected to double-cross the French—"

A spasm of frightful and unutterable rage contorted the yellow features.

"So that's it—I might have known! Those cursed French devils—ah! I was warned not to trust them! I might have known they merely waited a chance of betraying me somehow! Where are my papers gone? Spy! Assassin! Where are they?"

Suddenly Connor sensed something amiss—felt the intangible yet powerful flow of thought from the other man. Wang Yin was sparring for time, was deliberately play-acting a rôle, for some reason. And he remembered the hole in the wall. With a swift feeling almost of panic, he

stepped aside, glanced up at the aperture. The head of the dead man was no longer there.

"Hands up, Wang!" he exclaimed, lifting the pistol. "Go to the door—there'll be a pistol in your back now, not my thumb! And if any one shoots me, my finger will contract on the trigger. Step out! You'll take me out of here, anyhow, papers or no papers."

He strode around the desk as he spoke, grim purpose in his eyes, half wishing that Wang Yin would give him an excuse to fire. The other man read his look aright, and without protest turned and raised his hands and went to the door. Connor thrust the pistol-muzzle into the yellow man's back and reached around him, opening the door an inch.

"Pull it open yourself and march to the entrance!"

They stepped out into the hall. No one was in sight except one of the black-clad servants, by the outer door. He straightened up, staring at them.

"Be silent, or your master dies!" Connor spat at him viciously. "If we—"

Connor heard nothing, caught no glimpse of the man who had appeared behind him in the hall, was given no warning whatever; all his attention was fastened upon the servant by the door. A hand reached around from behind him, struck his wrist a smart blow, and at the same instant a crashing impact came against his skull.

The pistol fell from his hand, unfired, as he crumpled up.

WHEN Connor regained his senses, his head was aching badly and he had an egg-sized lump over one ear. Also, his wrists were handcuffed together.

He lifted his head and stared around. He was in a corner of Wang Yin's office; Wang sat at the desk, speaking rapidly into the telephone. Two of the black-clad servants stood beside the desk; beside them dangled a half-inch line, depending from a stout hook in the ceiling. Another guard stood over Connor, and seeing the latter move, thrust a rifle-butt into his ribs as a significant hint to be quiet.

"And get here as quickly as you can, Lung!" Wang Yin was saying. "No help for the damage that is already done; we must guard against further harm. It's midnight now, so make haste."

Midnight! Then he must have been unconscious for a considerable time, thought Conner dully. He was aware that Wang Yin had left the telephone and was standing looking down at him, but cared not. The pain in his head was intolerable, and a deeper hurt ached within him. He had failed, miserably and totally. All that he had accomplished was the death of Tsing Fan. If he had given the latter his way, Wang would now be dead and the game won, but his inhibitions had overpowered him.

The two guards leaned over, seized him by the arms, jerked him to his feet. Wang Yin regarded him coldly, calmly.

"I ask you for the last time, my friend: Where are the documents you took?"

Connor was bewildered.

"How do I know?" he rejoined hopelessly. Wang leaned forward, struck him across the face.

"You will soon remember, then! You hid them somewhere. When you have hung for an hour and your body is disjointed, perhaps your memory will waken, eh? String him up."

That blow in the face wakened Con-

nor, lashed him to action. His wrists were bound, his arms held—but his foot flashed out in a swift kick that caught Wang Yin under the chin and knocked him sprawling. Instantly Connor was seized and held motionless. With a scream of rage, Wang struggled to his feet, one hand at his throat, then got himself under control and made a gesture.

One of Connor's hands was freed from the handcuffs, he was forced to stand on a chair, and about his free wrist was bound the cord. The chair was withdrawn and he was left hanging by the right arm, his feet well off the floor. One of the servants appeared with an iron weight. This, by means of a cord, was attached to his left ankle, and he spun about slowly in the air, his distended eyes vainly seeking some aid, some release from the weight. Soon, he realized, his arm and leg would be out of the socket, his body disjointed.

"You will remember, yes?" said Wang Yin, regarding him with a thin smile. "After an hour, it will be the other arm and leg, my friend. Oh, yes, I think you will remember."

Taunting, jeering cruelly, he forgot the lesson just given him and came close. Connor spun slowly about—then his left arm whipped out. The handcuffs on his wrist slapped across the face of Wang Yin, and Connor laughed as the infuriated man staggered back.

AT this instant came the bursting crack of a pistol shot, outside.

A yell followed, then another—wild, shrill screams instinct with alarm and terror. Wang Yin stood as though paralyzed, in the act of wiping the blood from his cut face; he turned toward the door, listening, thunderstruck. One of the three servants darted out of the room with a cry of inquiry. As he passed through the door, there came a shot in the hall and the man pitched forward.

Wang Yin leaped into life, uttered a hoarse cry, hurled himself at the desk, trying to reach the spring that would close the sliding door of steel bars.

He was a fraction of an instant too slow.

Connor, literally being torn asunder, racked with spasmodic agony as his muscles slowly gave under the strain, glimpsed a rush of figures in the hall. Three of them came hurtling into the room. Then the steel grille clanged into place, one of the servants slammed the door.

A shot burst out, and another. One of the three uniformed figures was down under the knife of a servant. The other, pistol out, shot the other servant, but pitched forward as the weapon in Wang Yin's hand exploded. The third intruder, who had stumbled and fallen headlong, came to his feet just as Connor, slowly revolving on his cord, turned about and came face to face with him.

This third figure was Tsing Fan.

Connor saw it happen, all in the veriest fraction of a moment, as he slowly spun, helpless. Tsing Fan uprose like a ghost, and the pistol in his hand jerked sharply, twice. To the reports, Wang Yin whirled, flung out his arms, stood there for an instant with the utter ferocity of a wild beast in his face, his eyes blazing hatred and venom. Then, a rush of blood coming from his lips, the life fled out of his eyes and he collapsed.

Tsing Fan leaped to the desk, slashed at the cord with his knife, and Connor, with a sense of blessed relief, felt himself caught and lowered. A moment

later, the weight cut from his left leg, he dropped into a chair and stared at the man before him. From the door came a frantic, insistent hammering and pounding. The uniformed Chinese, having finished his opponent, flung open the door, and Tsing Fan put out a hand to the push-buttons and released the steel grille. Figures came bursting into the room.

"You!" Connor gripped the hand of Tsing Fan as the latter came to him again. "Is it real? They said—you were killed in the garden."

"It was one of our men there, spying," said Tsing Fan. "I had posted him there—had not told you. He was the only one I could depend on, and—well, what matter? Your brief case struck me in the darkness. I seized it and got outside. He helped me get away, but they caught him before he could follow over the wall. I went straight to the governor's palace and laid everything before Yuan. He is here, himself."

There was a sudden silence.

Connor looked up, and from the pictures he had seen, recognized the grim old governor who had held Yunnan so firmly in his grip during the years of chaos. Yuan reached out a hand to him and gripped Connor's fingers.

"My friend," said Yuan, "I owe you and others a great deal, but my chief debt is to you. With the documents you obtained, Yunnan is safe from any foreign domination; I have evidence that will hold these vultures back from further attempts."

The impulsive, hearty grip wrenched Connor's arm. A spasm of pain shot through him, and his head fell forward. But, as his eyes closed, there was a smile upon his lips.

The game was won.

THE END.

## *Irish Free-Lances*

THE Irish have long been known as a race of fighting men, yet it is not general knowledge that Irish free-lances once fought in the ranks of the Roman emperors. "Wild Geese," the Irish legions of mercenaries were called, and they also fought for Spain, France, Italy, Austria and Poland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Until the end of the fifth century, Rome was a mighty power, and maintained many foreign warrior groups. Strangely enough the Romans applied the name of Scotti to the Irish, and memorials to gallant members of the "Primi Scotti" or "First Irish Guards," are to be found on Roman walls.

The formation of this regiment was a matter of care, and only picked men were accepted. The Primi Scotti had the distinction of taking prisoner, during a raid in South Wales, a young man whose name has become famous the world over. He was none other than St. Patrick—and he converted his captors to Christianity.

The Wild Geese of comparatively modern times originated with O'Neill's Irish Brigade which fought for Spain in 1608. From 1681 until many years later no Irish Catholic was permitted to wear a sword. This led to wholesale migration of Irishmen from their native land, and other nations profited by their skill at arms.

*A. G. Preston.*

# Singapore Sammy

*The object of Singapore Sammy Shay's man-hunt was the worst thief in the Orient— so Sammy planned to bait a trap with the man's own sapphire hoard*

*Dolores shrank back at the sound*

**By GEORGE F. WORTS**

***Author of "Jungle Justice," "The Grapevine Murders," etc.***

**LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT.**

"YOUR name is Samuel Shay," said the girl on the South Seas steamer. "They call you 'Singapore Sammy.' You're looking for your father. I think you want to kill him."

"Not unless he tries to kill me, sis," explained Singapore Sammy. "All I want is a will he stole from me and my mother. It's worth about a million bucks in the U. S. A."

He told Dolores de Silva that the search for his father, an elusive trickster who wore Buddhist priest's robes to impress the natives, had lasted seven years. He showed her the valuable blue pearl he wore on a wire around his neck. Dolores was fascinated.

During the night an attempt was made to steal the pearl. Sammy concluded he had been most unwise in showing the pearl to Dolores de Silva.

On reaching Chantaboun in Siam, Sammy learned that Dolores's father was a notorious crook and a crony of his own father. Dolores protested that she was shocked at her father's trickery.

The elder Shay and de Silva had just mulcted a young American, Bruce McCoy, out of ten thousand dollars, by selling him a "salted" sapphire mine. Sammy persuaded McCoy to brace himself and continue working the apparently worthless mine.

Soon after Singapore arrived in

**This story started in last week's Argosy.**

Chantaboun, his father fled with de Silva into the jungle on elephants. They took with them some sapphires with which the phony mine had been salted. Sammy believed that if he could steal those sapphires, he could bring his father to terms on the will.

As he was leaving in pursuit, he learned that an old friend, "Lucky" Jones, would soon arrive in Chantaboun in his schooner, the Blue Goose.

Disguised as a native, Singapore located the de Silva camp and loosed the elephants. In the confusion de Silva charged out of his tent with gun and flash light, straight in Sammy's direction. Would he recognize Sammy in native disguise?

## CHAPTER VI.

### A ONE-MAN RAID.

A FIRE kindled into existence in front of the tent. The native who had been on guard there was on his hands and knees, blowing the embers with blasts from puffed-out cheeks.

Sammy, circling about to avoid de Silva's hasty progress, reached the provision pile under its tarpaulin. There were bags of rice, sheathed with straw, also cases of canned goods.

He seized several cans and tossed them to the base of a tamarind tree. He would recover these later. Then he applied flaming matches to the pile.

There was already confusion in abundance. But he wanted more. He heard de Silva roaring at the mahouts. He heard the two bull elephants trumpeting as they fought.

The man at the fire sprang up as Singapore limped toward him. His knife came up—not a *parang,* but a Siamese skinning knife.

Singapore knocked him over the head with the butt of his revolver as the knife came up. The man quietly seated himself, and quietly rolled over.

Listening a moment, Singapore plunged into the tent. He knew that de Silva might be carrying the sapphires. Yet he might not. Singapore hoped not. He did not relish a revolver duel with de Silva. He neither wished to kill nor to be killed. He had been a guest in Siamese jails, and he had no hankering to repeat the experience.

He found the stub of a candle on a packing box. He struck a match, held it to the wick, and began hastily but systematically to search. The angry roars of de Silva indicated that he was trying to arouse the drunken mahouts.

Singapore smashed the lock of a small iron trunk with the butt of his revolver. Far away, he heard the squeal of an elephant. Was it a wild one? Was a herd of wild elephants coming to add to the confusion of de Silva's encampment?

The red-head tossed the contents of the trunk on the ground. Clothing. Nothing of value. No sapphires. He heard the man he had knocked unconscious begin to groan. He smashed the lock of a leather trunk. Shotgun shells. Rifle cartridges. Pistol ammunition. No sapphires.

He ransacked a suitcase, a valise, a small red-lacquer box. Toilet articles. A set of Mah Jong. Oil, rags, cleaning rods.

He heard rapid footsteps approaching from the picket line. De Silva was returning!

A happy impulse sent Sammy to the cot on which Roderigo de Silva had recently been reposing. A folded soft blanket served as a pillow. Singapore jerked at the corner of the blanket. It came snapping off, unfolding.

A buckskin bag tumbled onto the dirt. Singapore snatched it up, hooked two fingers into the throat and yanked.

The interior of the tent was faintly suffused with cool white light as the powerful beam of the flash light in de Silva's hand fell upon the canvas.

Singapore held the opened throat of the buckskin sack to the candle light; peered inside. A dull blue glow produced a pleased grunt from him. Sapphires! Uncut, assorted sapphires. Deep blue. Pale blue. Large fellows. Little fellows. Just about a hundred carats of uncut sapphires!

HE stuffed the bag into a hip pocket. He blew out the candle. He picked up the empty leather trunk as fingers plucked at the tent flap. When a head showed, he hurled the trunk.

It collided with a hollow thump with de Silva's forehead. The flash light vanished. De Silva roared in pain and fury. A revolver went off. The bullet smashed through the roof pole past which Singapore, on his belly, was sliding snake-like under the tent.

He heard de Silva, still roaring with rage, plunge into the tent; heard him stumble over the litter Sammy had scattered about on the floor, and fall headlong. The revolver went off again.

Singapore scuttled about to the front of the tent, picked up the still beaming flash light and clicked off the light. He now hastened to the tree where he had tossed the canned goods. These he stowed away in his *engyn*, then paused a moment. He needed iodine for that thorn w o u n d in his foot. But he dared wait no longer. He heard the drunken shouts of the mahouts as they pursued the panic-stricken elephants. The provision pile was blazing merrily.

While men shouted and elephants trumpeted, the man who was sometimes described as the worst trouble-maker in the Far East slipped out of the encampment and limped down the trail which led back to Chantaboun.

Behind him, the uproar of the camp continued unabated. The provision pile was sending fat golden sparks higher than the tree tops. Singapore limped along. The blaze behind him dwindled. The drunken shouts grew fainter.

He flashed on the light at intervals. It presently fell upon an alarming mountain of gray which moved. Two pig eyes, glittering in the flash light, scrutinized him.

Sammy and the elephant, facing each other on the trail, came to a halt. The elephant made a sniffling sound.

The man spoke softly but urgently. In the mahout's tongue, he called the gray mountain a fragrant flower from the hills of Shan. He called it a wretch and a lazy pig, and bade it bow down in shame to the sovereign commands of its master.

Singapore was taking a very long chance. It might have been a wild elephant, pausing there a moment before it charged and trampled him to death.

But Singapore was filling straight flushes in the middle that night.

The gray mountain whimpered in its trunk and salaamed. When it got to its feet again, Sammy was astride its neck, poking it behind the ear with the butt of his revolver.

And so the return trip to Chantaboun was begun.

BRUCE McCOY's bungalow occupied the center of a cleared space in the jungle at a point where the river bent like a crooked arm. Inland a hundred feet from the point of

the elbow, the palm-thatch bungalow stood. The Chantaboun River moved past with the stately dignity of a gorged snake. McCoy's sapphire claim encompassed all of the bend on both sides and about five hundred yards up river and down river to boot.

When Singapore, yellow-eyed and burning with fever, returned and restored the elephant to its astonished and grateful owner, he proceeded at once by canoe to McCoy's property, to find that the young man had been acting most energetically upon his share of their bargain.

He had gone even farther than Singapore had hoped, for he had begun the construction of a stout teakwood dam at the narrowest point of the river, which would divert the sluggish water through a low swamp and thence, by a bayou, back into the river on the opposite side.

McCoy was smeared from head to foot with blue clay when Singapore arrived. His green eyes were glittering with the light to be seen in men's eyes who are on the happy side of a good fight. He was already master of the river. The dam would be done in a day or two. Boys could then go down into the blue muck; shovel down to the white sand and bring it up in large quantities. He had been studying the methods of the Burmese and had picked up the idea from a man who knew something about large-scale emerald mining.

He was so enthused over the development of his idea that he was scarcely interested in Sammy's buckskin bag of sapphires.

" I've got a hunch," he said. " I've got a hunch there's sapphires down there if we dig deep enough."

" The layout looks good," Singapore complimented him, but he was, in his heart, doubtful. " I'm goin' to bury these sapphires somewhere where Do—where de Silva, if he comes sneakin' back, won't find 'em."

" Suit yourself," the dam builder answered indifferently. " I'm gonna make that sack of sapphires look like a drop of water in an ocean."

" Go to it," Singapore said heartily. " Seen anything of Dolores?"

Some of the glow receded from the green eyes. McCoy's mouth hardened. " I've seen her about the village, but I haven't talked to her. What are you grinning about?"

Singapore swallowed the grin. McCoy stared at him coldly.

" Would you mind not bringing her name up?" he asked. " You know how I feel about her. You're convinced she's no good. I happen to think you're mistaken. I intend to marry her as soon as I've struck pay dirt. As long as we disagree about her, let's not discuss her—now or ever."

" O. K., blondy," Singapore said gravely, and went about his business which was, first of all, to heal his infected foot.

For the next week, he lounged about the bungalow or in the clearing, waiting for antiseptic-soaked bandages to draw the poisons from the wound.

When the swelling went down and he was able to travel about again, he went to the village and picked up what gossip he could. De Silva's mahouts had returned, with their elephants; but de Silva had vanished. Dolores, he learned, was living in her father's house. He did not want to see her for a while, and wondered what her next move would be. He was sure she had not stopped trying for the Malobar pearl.

His real interest, however, was in the murmurings among the Burmese

lapidaries. They had heard, to be sure, of the salted sapphire mine. Now, as McCoy and his laborers got nearer possible pay dirt, the Burmese were beginning to display a lively interest in the operations. McCoy was already tapping the curious soft white sand below the blue-clay stratum.

Singapore continued to circulate. He made friends among the lapidaries, the mat makers. He wanted to be informed when his father and de Silva returned, if they should return. He was certain de Silva would retaliate in some way for his invasion of the encampment and theft of the sapphires. What form would the blow take?

ONE afternoon in the bazaar a lazy, musical voice beside him inquired:

"Why are you avoiding me, Singapore Sammy?"

He turned slowly and looked down into large, shining brown eyes. There were dark blobs under them, as if Dolores had been crying a great deal, or been ill. He was shocked at the change in her. She looked more fragile; and this fragility gave her an entirely new appeal.

He said, amiably: "Hello, sis! Was I avoiding you?"

"You have been back from your famous mule ride two weeks and you haven't made the slightest effort to see me."

"I didn't know you'd be speakin' to me after my famous mule ride."

"Then you are very foolish and do not understand women at all. I thought it was very audacious of you. I had heard that you often did such things, but when I heard of the way you threw my father's camp into such confusion, I laughed till I cried."

"Your old man tell you about this?"

She laughed at him. "You would like to know, wouldn't you, Sammy?"

He shrugged. "Maybe not so much, sister. I got what I went after. At least, I got some of what I went after."

"And do you think Mr. McCoy's mine will produce sapphires in paying quantities this time?"

"It would put you on a pretty mean spot if it did, wouldn't it, baby?"

"You mean, I would regret I hadn't married him? No, no, no. I wouldn't regret it. Even if he were suddenly worth millions, I wouldn't regret it. I don't want riches, necessarily. First of all, I want love."

"Yeah? Well, it takes all kinds of things to make the world go round, sister. Drop up and see the diggin's some day."

"Drop in and see me some day," she answered.

"Thanks, sister," he said.

He left her, wondering just what Dolores would do if McCoy did strike sapphires in paying quantities. He was sure she had flipped one fish off her line because a larger one was lurking. But he wished he was surer.

He was cleaning his revolver one morning in the bungalow when shouts from the river attracted him. He went down to find that McCoy had struck sapphires. There were only three of them, and they were not large—less than a carat each—but they were a rich reward for his faith and his hard work.

McCoy was standing in blue mud ankle deep, with mosquito bar shrouding his helmet to keep the flies and mosquitoes out of his eyes. A broiling hot sun was steaming the clay. A lazy wind from the Apple Green Gulf drifted up the valley, bearing the stench of the stewing marshes, the sickening odor of the mangrove swamps at low tide.

One of the Annamese coolies had clambered up the oozy wall to the sluiceway with a bucketful of the white moist powder at either end of a bamboo shoulder-pole. He had poured the sand into the trough and lifted the tiny dam from the crude culvert so that a yellow, foaming flood had run down.

When the sand had settled through the copper mesh and floated off down the tail race, three dark pebbles had remained.

McCoy had seized them with trembling fingers and polished them eagerly upon a cloth of raw silk. The color of the three pebbles had emerged—as blue as the dome of the sky!

HE had begun shouting, and these were the shouts which Singapore heard and to which he responded. He squinted at the little blue lumps cuddled in McCoy's palm. The boy slapped him boisterously on the back.

"Half of all the sapphires that come out of here are yours," he declared.

"Boloney," Singapore said.

"All right! Take charge of them and we'll argue about it afterward. Hide them somewhere. Cache them with the others."

"O. K., blondy."

The news traveled down the native grapevine telegraph to the village. Within two hours, the river about the bend was swarming with dugouts and a hundred brown men were staring down into the swampy pit below the dam.

And late in the afternoon, McCoy's coolies struck another pocket, a richer one this time. In a dozen buckets of sand, they found sixteen sapphires, ranging in size from a half carat to three carats.

Singapore was in the village when the news reached there. He hastened back to find McCoy so excited he could hardly talk. He showed Singapore the sapphires and cried:

"Sam, old-timer, we're going to be millionaires!"

"Listen, kid," Singapore said; "I don't wanna be a millionaire. All the millionaires I've met are so busy countin' their jack they don't get time to have any fun. All I want out of this is the fun. Don't forget: this is your old man's money."

"We'll settle up later," the boy said. "Will you cache these with the others?"

"O. K."

"Where you hiding 'em?"

"I'm buryin' 'em when nobody's lookin'."

Next morning the river bottom below the dam disgorged further riches. By noon McCoy had taken out of the white sand and Singapore had weighed more than forty carats of the blue stones. Among them was one which weighed five carats.

Early in the afternoon Dolores de Silva came visiting. She said she wanted to be among the first to congratulate Bruce. She did it very prettily, Sammy thought, and he wondered just what was taking place in her clever little brain.

HE and McCoy were in the bungalow when she came to the door. McCoy turned white, then red, then white again. But Dolores was not rattled or, apparently, the least embarrassed. Singapore, in the background, looked and listened with cynical attention.

It was wonderful, she said, that Bruce was reëstablishing his lost fortune.

"I hear it's going to be one of the richest strikes on the Chantaboun," she said. "And I want you to know that it makes me terribly happy that your luck has changed."

McCoy said bluntly: "Dolores I'm glad myself, for two reasons. I don't want my father to suffer, and I want to marry you. I'm making no bones about it. I'm crazy about you, and I want to prove to you that I'm worthy of you. I'm not saying that becoming rich through a lucky sapphire strike proves that; but you'll have to admit that I took my beating and came back."

She was looking up at Bruce in her familiar way, obliquely. Singapore awaited her answer, holding his breath. He wondered how she was going to handle this.

"Bruce," she said, "I admire you tremendously, but I can never marry you. It's simply that I do not love you."

"Do you love somebody else?"

"I do!"

"Who is he?"

"I won't tell you. People said I would have married you before because you were rich, and people said I broke things off with you because you went broke."

"Did I ever say that?" he demanded angrily.

"No, Bruce. I think people will realize now that I might have married you, not because you were rich, but because I thought I loved you. They were mistaken, and so was I. I hope you do become a millionaire. Good-by! Will you take me down to my boat, Sam?"

"O. K., sister."

The green-eyed man did not look at Singapore as he followed her out the door. On the path to the river she snuggled her arm through his, looked up at him and said: "Now, what do you think of me?"

"I can't make up my mind," Singapore admitted.

The truth was, he was completely bewildered. By all indications, McCoy would soon be a very rich young man. In comparison to his wealth, the Malobar pearl was worthless.

"I told you," Dolores said, "you don't understand women."

As her canoe went down the river, Singapore suddenly realized that she was much cleverer, much more dangerous, than he had hitherto given her credit for.

What he particularly wanted to know was, when would the presence of Roderigo de Silva and Bill Shay make itself felt?

## CHAPTER VII.

### CASH FOR SAPPHIRES.

SINGAPORE learned very definitely the next day that Roderigo de Silva was back. He heard it in the bazaar, in the lapidary stalls, and in the Sapphire Sandal. De Silva had slipped home some time after midnight last night.

That afternoon Dolores paid another visit to the mine; a business visit: she was her father's emissary.

To the two young men she said:

"I won't beat about the bush. My father wants to buy this mine back."

"Listen, sister," Singapore said; "you run along home and tell daddy if he wants to talk business to us, to come and talk it in person."

"The mine isn't for sale," McCoy said curtly.

She smiled at both of them, but her eyes lingered on Singapore's face.

"My father is willing to pay cash

and to pay generously. He knows how many carats of sapphires, approximately, have come out of the mine so far. He is willing to take a chance that you have struck pockets and that your mine may peter out at any moment."

"You can tell him," McCoy repeated, "the mine isn't for sale. We've already taken out over a hundred and forty carats of sapphires. There isn't enough money in the world to buy this mine."

"If he wants the mine so bad," Singapore put in, "why won't he come up personally?"

"He is ill, and he realizes the feeling there is between you and him and between him and Bruce."

"Any feeling between him and me," Singapore said, "is all on his side."

"Of course it is!" she cried. "How would you feel if a man you wanted to do business with had stolen into your encampment, got all your mahouts drunk, burned up your food—"

Singapore laughed. "He must be a lot more sensitive than he looks, sister. Well, you can tell him the mine ain't for sale."

"He offers one hundred thousand *ticals*."

"He must be crazy," Bruce snorted. "This is the richest strike that's ever happened in this field. Tell him we're not interested in his proposition."

"Very well." Dolores murmured, and departed.

"If de Silva is on the job again," Singapore reflected aloud, when she had gone, "it's a cinch my old man ain't far away. And believe me, blondy, we'll know it when that old fox hits town!"

"How?"

"Hang around and see!"

The mine continued to be a sensational producer. Within a week McCoy had taken from the sluice and Singapore had weighed upward of three hundred carats of sapphires. And they continued to come in unabated abundance.

At the same time, strange and mysterious things began to happen. Little things; trivial things. And you would have to know the tropics, and especially the Siamese tropics, to understand how maddening these trivialities could become.

There was, to begin with, the laundry. Chinese in the village did the laundry. It began coming back with buttons missing, holes in places. Holes likewise mysteriously began to appear in the mosquito bars which surrounded the two men's cots.

NOW, in tropical Asia, a mosquito bar is not merely a protection against mosquitoes and similar insects. It is a white man's fortress against death in strange and terrible forms: not only Anopheles mosquitoes, but scorpions, tarantulas and the like.

More than one white man has packed up and left Siam when holes began appearing night after night in his mosquito bar. For any white man living long in such countries will read very important meanings in such trivialities.

Singapore listened to his companion's profane ravings; saw him get up each morning, more irritable, paler, with a little less energy to carry on the day's work. He knew what was going on, but he said nothing about it until the morning when McCoy awoke to find that, during the night, a log had become loose from the dam, and a day's mining would be lost while repairs were made.

Then he told McCoy what it meant.

"My old man's here," he said. "He's back of all this."

"But what the hell is the big idea?"

"Ain't it plain enough, kid? He and de Silva want this mine back."

"They won't get it back!"

"Well, this is their way of making it easy for you to make up your mind to sell."

"Can't we put a stop to it?"

"You're in Siam, blondy."

The petty persecutions continued. One morning the coolies did not put in an appearance. An entirely new crew had to be recruited. The drinking water went bad. An entire family of chickens, the pride of McCoy's native cook, died one night in their pen behind the bungalow.

Their cook vanished. They hired a new one. The fish he cooked for their evening meal tasted queer. An hour later, Singapore felt queer. He felt as if flies were buzzing inside his skull. He knew that the fish had been doped. He felt sleepy. He went into the kitchen; interrogated the cook until he was convinced of his guilt; kicked him down the ladder and told him he would shoot him the next time he saw him. The cook fled.

Singapore mixed mustard with warm water; drank the mess and forced McCoy to do likewise. For the next half hour, the two young men were heartily sick. But the emetic had not brought up all of the drug. What had previously entered their circulation was getting in its work. They grew sleepier. They drank brandy to stimulate their hearts; but the effects of the brandy wore off, and the effects of the drug became more pronounced.

They decided to walk about their compound. They tried to box. And their boxing was like a slow motion picture. They staggered and floundered about. They fell down, and when they did, found it difficult to prevent themselves from falling asleep where they lay.

"This," Singapore said presently, "is bad on our hearts. Supposin' we take turns sleepin'—an hour on and an hour off. You take your nap, and I'll take mine. Whatever you do, don't sit down when you're on watch. We don't trust anybody in the world to-night but ourselves."

HE aroused McCoy at the end of an hour; aroused him by slapping his face and dousing him with buckets of water.

It was during Singapore's hour of sleep that McCoy learned something of the truth about Dolores de Silva. At a few minutes before midnight, he was standing in the copper-screened window which overlooked the river. In the light of stars and a half moon he saw a canoe slip across the river from the opposite shore. He saw it come to rest at the clump of areca palms some distance below the sluiceway. He saw a slim figure emerge from it and walk swiftly toward the house.

When he perceived that this figure was Dolores de Silva, he slipped into a dark shadow and waited with a racing heart. He heard the faint scraping of her feet on the ladder. A moment later, he saw the silhouette of her slim body against the palely glowing sky.

She came into the room. Now she was invisible. A moment later he saw her pass the cot in which he always slept. The mosquito bar shrouding it would have made it impossible for her to see him, if he had been lying there.

He waited, with clenched fists and madly thumping heart.

He saw her go to Singapore's cot; saw her lift the mosquito bar slowly,

an inch at a time. A small flash light beamed. Light fell on Singapore's face and flaming red hair. He was sleeping on his back with his mouth slightly ajar. He was softly snoring. His freckles stood out sharply.

The light glistened on the copper wire about his neck, at the bottom of which, McCoy knew, was the celebrated Malobar pearl.

He saw the girl's slim fingers reach to the copper wire and slowly begin to pull it up. It was undoubtedly the bitterest moment of McCoy's life—far bitterer than his discovery that he had lost his father's savings. He was incredulous still. He had had faith in Dolores, in spite of Singapore's frequent allusions to her.

If he had had a revolver in his hand at that moment, there is no question but that he would have shot her dead.

Instead, his voice shot from the darkness: "Get away from there, you slut, before I kill you! Get out of here!"

The flash light blinked off. He ran to her. Even in the face of discovery, the pressure of her eagerness made her desperately try to gain this thing that she coveted so.

She snatched at the wire in the darkness. McCoy heard Singapore grunt. The boy's groping hands found hers. She had the wire in her hand. It was broken. He snatched it away from her; made sure the chamois sack was still on the end of it; felt of the priceless round bubble inside.

"Get out of here before I kill you!"

He hardly heard her go. Singapore growled: "What the hell is goin' on here?" Then: "The blue pearl's gone!"

"I've got it," McCoy snapped. He struck a match and lighted candles. He extended the broken wire with the dangling sack to the red-haired man.

Singapore frantically opened the sack with his teeth, dumped out the fire pearl into his hand, and gave a deep grunt of relief.

"Come here," McCoy said at the window. "A thief got in."

"Dolores?"

McCoy did not answer for a long time.

"Yes," he said.

Singapore got up, yawning. "I guess we can both sleep now," he said. "We know who doped the fish."

"What a sucker I've been!"

"There's an old Siamese sayin'," Singapore grunted. "'The more you know, the more luck you have.'"

THE two young men awoke late next morning to find that their new force of coolies had failed to appear for work, and that, some time during the night, the sluiceway had been carted away.

Contemplating the empty pit, Singapore said:

"Blondy, I've got to talk to you like a Dutch uncle. I have spent seven years in these nutty countries, and I know something about the way the Oriental mind works. I also know something about the way the mind of a white man works who has spent a lot of time out here. You are gonna be licked. You might as well sell out and blow."

McCoy turned on him fiercely. "It isn't like you to make that kind of a crack, Sam. I've never heard you say quit yet. I'm going to keep on scrapping—damn their rotten hides!"

"It's like this," Sam explained. "Did you ever hear about the time Napoleon tried to lick Russia? Did he get by with it? Listen! What you are up against is what Napoleon was up against in Russia. He went bargin' in

there with a big army, expectin' to meet a big army and lick it, like he always did. That's where the Rooshans put over a fast one on him. He didn't meet any army. All that happened was a lot of little pesky things. It wore him down. The harder he hit, the less it got him. It was like havin' a fight with a python. The python don't fight you. All he does is hang on and squeeze a little harder. And before long, the python has you inside, digestin'."

McCoy nodded. 'I see what you mean, but we can't quit now. We're right on the verge of real money."

"We'll quit, but we'll put on that we ain't quittin'," Sammy compromised. "We'll repair the dam, and build a new sluiceway, and hire us a new gang of coolies. We'll put up a bluff. But you'll sell. How you fixed for jack?"

"The roll you left me when you went to follow de Silva is just about gone. We'll have to sell some of the sapphires."

They cooked their own breakfast. And while they were solemnly eating it, Dolores came.

Pale, haggard, and with hollow, frightened eyes, she came up the ladder and into the kitchen.

IN surprised silence the two men stared at her. Then McCoy sprang up and sent his chair spinning on one leg into a corner. Singapore looked up at her and grinned.

He said amiably: "Hello, sister! Walk right in and have a cuppa coffee. Honest to God, there ain't a drop of dope in it!"

She had caught her hands to her slim breast. "You must think I am a fool to come here," she gasped, "after last night. But I had to come!"

"Sister," Singapore answered, "you don't have to apologize for anything. You are always welcome. Sit down!"

"My father made me come here."

She was wearing a white silk shirt, trim white breeches, snake boots. In her hand was a large bulking canvas bag.

Singapore flipped a freckled hand toward the bag.

"What you got there, kid—dynamite?"

"Money."

"Well, that's just dandy. How much money you got there?"

"Two hundred thousand *ticals!* It isn't all in *ticals;* but at current rates of exchange, it amounts to that. There is Hongkong money, Singapore money, Siamese—"

"Then it must be my old man's bank roll," Singapore interrupted her. "He always carries a lot of mixed currency."

Dolores said tensely: "My father wants to buy this mine."

"It is not for sale," McCoy said harshly.

She flicked an oblique look at him; returned her glittering, frightened eyes to Singapore.

"I can't argue. I'm too nervous. But I will tell you that what has happened here in the past few days is only a sample of what may happen."

"Trot some more tricks out of your bag!" McCoy jeered.

"Sam," she said in a broken voice, "I don't have to argue with you. You know I'm not lying or exaggerating. You know what those two men can do to you. You and Bruce are strangers here. They'll kill you if you don't get out."

"Boloney," McCoy growled.

"No," Singapore contradicted, "it ain't boloney, blondy. Go on, Dolores."

"They could kill you, but they would

rather not. They would rather pay a fair price for the mine. Two hundred thousand *ticals* is a fair price. It's more than sixty thousand dollars, gold. Perhaps this mine is worth more. Perhaps it's worth less. You know, Sam. You talk to him."

"I'll tell you what, sister," Sammy replied. "You go back to my old man and tell him he can have the mine for sixty thousand, gold, if he comes here personally."

"You know he won't come here!" she cried.

Sammy knew it. He had scouted industriously about the environs of Chantaboun since the petty persecutions started, trying to find some trace of his father. But Bill Shay was too foxy. It was beginning to look as though half of Sammy's plan would succeed, and the other half would fail. He would send McCoy back home, a rich man; but he would not succeed in capturing his father. However, he would keep on trying.

"Just what," he asked Dolores, "is your proposition?"

"Two hundred thousand *ticals* for this property. A bill of sale signed by Mr. McCoy."

"Not a chance," said the stubborn young man.

"When do we clear out?" Singapore asked.

"By noon," Dolores replied.

"No," said McCoy. "We stick and we fight."

"Supposing," Dolores suggested, "you reason with him, Sam."

"There's a trick in it somewhere," McCoy said. "They tricked me before—or thought they did. They'll try it again."

"What she said a minute ago," Singapore argued, "is true. We're strangers in a strange place. They know the natives. They've got the natives behind them. If we don' take this offer, they can run us out—kill us. They've shown you they can put you on a spot. Anyhow, they've shown me. I'm convinced. I say: Take this jack and clear out. You'll have your ten thousand back and fifty thousand more. You can go back home, put your dad on easy street, and still have enough left to set yourself up in business. You've played in big luck so far. But you don't know this country. There's an old Siamese sayin', 'If you want to go fast, go the old road.'"

McCOY gazed darkly at Dolores. "But where do you come in, Sam? Half of this money and half of the sapphires we've mined are yours. I want to go you fifty-fifty."

"I'll make you a dicker," Sam said. "When I left to follow de Silva, I left you my bank roll—twelve hundred *ticals*. Pay me that and let me have the sapphires we've mined as my share. How many sapphires have we mined?"

"Six hundred and twenty carats."

"They'll fetch," Singapore estimated, "about fifty dollars a cart, when they're sorted and graded. Call it thirty thousand dollars. That's enough for me."

"It isn't fair," McCoy protested. "If it hadn't been for you, I'd be a beach comber this minute. You rawhided me into reopening this mine. You put up the money for it. You certainly deserve half of everything. Give me half the sapphires—three hundred carats—and split the sales money."

But Singapore would not consider this proposition. He argued that he didn't want anything but the six hundred carats of sapphires. It represented, approximately, a third interest, and he was entitled to no more than that.

McCoy wavered and, in the end, reluctantly accepted these terms. Then Singapore said to Dolores:

"Now, sister, let's have a look-see at that jack. I've got a low-down, suspicious nature, and I wanna make sure it ain't funny money."

She surrendered the canvas bag to him. It contained bundles of Hongkong dollars, bundles of Javanese guilders, bundles of Siamese *ticals,* bundles of Straits dollars, Indian rupees, Burmese rupees, Indo-Chinese *piastres,* and twenty rolls of United States gold double-eagles.

Singapore sorted out the money, carefully inspected it, counted it and reckoned its value in Siamese *ticals* at prevailing rates of exchange. It amounted to slightly more than two hundred thousand *ticals*—approximately sixty-four thousand dollars in American gold.

He subtracted from it the twelve hundred *ticals* he had lent McCoy and gave the balance to him.

McCoy protested that it wasn't fair; that Singapore deserved more. Singapore grunted these protests aside.

"Haven't I got six hundred carats of sapphires plus the hundred carats I got from de Silva? We forgot to count them in. That makes a grand total of seven hundred carats, don't it, at fifty bucks a carat? Thirty-five thousand bucks! Boy, that's more jack than I ever saw in my life! Now, sis, how do you want the bill of sale made out?"

"It's to be made out to William Shay and Roderigo de Silva."

Singapore looked at her shrewdly for some time. He said, "O. K., sister. I guess my old man has put over another swift one on me, but I guess I'll have to grin and bear it."

When McCoy had written out the bill of sale, he was still protesting.

"Sam, I hate to quit. At the rate we were going, I'd be worth a million dollars inside of a year. I hate to think of those two getting all that money."

"There's an old Siamese saying," Singapore answered: "'Past events are as clear as a mirror; future events are as dark as lacquer.'"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### DEATH-MARKED.

WHEN Dolores was gone with the bill of sale, Singapore said:

"Blondy, we're still in a spot. We don't dare move out of Chantaboun until the Laughin' Lady puts in. We can't use elephants because my old man and de Silva would follow us sure as hell and kill us for this money.

"Now, here is my plan: You move our stuff out of here right away. Take it down to the *sala.* Wear your revolver and have your rifle loaded and ready. I'm goin' off on a little private business errand, and I'll meet you at the *sala* later.

"We'll stock up the *sala* with food and water, and keep all visitors out until the Laughin' Lady calls. If Lucky Jones shows up with the Blue Goose, we'll sail with him. I wonder what's keepin' that guy. He should have been here a week ago. The Laughin' Lady is due in day after to-morrow. If Lucky doesn't show up by then, we'll take her."

He buckled on his revolver and went down to the river. His intentions were to follow Dolores, to be near by when she handed over the bill of sale to her father and Bill Shay. He was certain Bill Shay would be somewhere in the neighborhood, because Bill Shay was sly and would not trust de Silva.

Singapore selected a canoe and poled rapidly down river. At the second bend, he sighted Dolores's canoe. He went ashore a hundred yards above the clearing where the de Silva house stood. Concealing himself behind a mahogany tree, he watched her step out of her canoe. De Silva clambered down the ladder from the house and ran to meet her. But he was alone. Bill Shay was not in evidence.

Singapore waited expectantly. He was certain his father was not far away. The pair moved leisurely toward the house. They were talking excitedly. He heard scraps of their conversation. They were discussing the sale of the mine. He overheard no reference to his father. Perhaps he was waiting in the house. If so, he would come to the doorway when they started up the ladder.

But no one came to the doorway. Dolores and her father went up the ladder and vanished into the house. Their voices came to him clearly on the still air. There was no other voice.

Singapore concluded that Bill Shay was not there. And he realized fully the difficulties which would beset any attempt he made to find Bill Shay. Bill Shay was like a wise old leopard. You might trail such a leopard for months without capturing him. The only way to catch him was by surprise. It was too late for that now.

But Singapore did not give up. He returned to the village and asked careful questions of the lapidaries and the mat makers. He went to the caravansary. And he realized that the answers given to all his questions were carefully guarded. He knew that these natives were lying; that they were against him, perhaps because his father dressed as a Buddhist priest.

Siam is the greatest remaining stronghold of Buddhism. These people looked upon Bill Shay as a holy man. Religious zealots, fanatics, they would promptly resent any harm Singapore did to him. More than that, it was quite likely that they would waylay Sammy; actually murder him, if his father gave the word.

Having exhausted all possibilities, Sammy abandoned the search and joined McCoy in the *sala*. Now, a *sala* is a unique Siamese institution. Every Siamese village, however small, has at least one *sala*. It is a small house built for the benefit of travelers. Any visitor to a Siamese village is welcome to use the *sala*.

The *sala* in Chantaboun was on the bank of the river, a few hundred feet below the dock. It chanced, in the event of an attack, to be strategically situated. It occupied the center of a small clearing. Its ladder ran almost into the river.

SAMMY found McCoy arranging the provisions he had purchased. He had bought a dozen large earthen jars and had filled these with fresh boiled water. There was enough food and water to last them a week. McCoy had bought a half dozen boxes of revolver ammunition in the bazaar. Singapore asked him where his money was.

"I'm wearing it next to my skin. And I'm beginning to think we can't get out of here any too soon. I wish that steamer was coming in to-night, or that pal of yours would show up with his schooner. Where are your sapphires?"

"I'm goin' up river for 'em now. I'll be back in an hour."

He returned with exciting news. De Silva and Dolores had taken possession of the bungalow at the mine. The

sluiceway had been reërected. Forty coolies were digging in the pit and carrying up buckets of white sand.

"Was your father there?"

"No."

McCoy looked at him curiously. "You look pale, Sam, and you act mighty nervous. Anything wrong?"

"I wish we were out of here," Singapore said. "There's gonna be trouble. I can feel it in my bones."

His hand flew to his revolver when, a few minutes later, a voice called from the compound. He went to the doorway. A brown boy of ten or twelve was looking up. When he saw Sam, he waved a piece of paper.

Singapore told him to come up. What had looked like a piece of paper was a sealed envelope. It was addressed simply to Sam Shay.

He tore it open, extracted a folded sheet of paper. It contained a penciled message. He read it aloud to McCoy.

MY DEAR SON:

How much longer are you going to be a sucker? As I have informed you before, I don't want to see you and I'm not going to let you see me. Take my advice and stop horning into my affairs. Get yourself and your friend out of here as fast as you know how or you are going to be sorry. I have an idea your sapphire mine is going to make me a rich man. It's too bad I had to take candy out of babies' mouths, but babies don't belong in tough countries.

A dry finger does not lick up salt.

Your loving father,

BILL SHAY.

Sammy, finishing the letter, looked about for the boy who had brought it. He had vanished.

McCoy asked: "What does he mean by, 'A dry finger does not lick up salt'?"

"It's an old Siamese sayin'," Sammy answered. "It means, we are a couple of suckers. It means we aren't properly equipped to deal with clever guys like him and de Silva."

"I wish we hadn't sold the mine."

"I wish," Sammy said nervously, "we were out of here. We will take turns sleepin' to-night, the way we did last night. Don't move around much when it's your trick. Don't stand near windows or door. I mean, don't make a target of yourself."

"Don't you think," McCoy asked, "you're letting all this get your goat?"

"Sure, it's got my goat, blondy! I'm scared! I'm scared stiff! We are in one tough spot, and don't you forget it. If my old man wants this money and these sapphires bad enough, he will work on these people until they swarm in here after us like ants. Don't forget they're religious fanatics, and that he wears the robes of a Buddhist priest."

"We can hold them off until the steamer comes."

"I only wish Lucky was here!"

THAT night passed without incident. Singapore slept hardly at all. He was nervous, jumpy. When dawn came, he pulled up a chair at the window which faced down river, and he spent most of that day in the chair, looking toward the Gulf; frowning, as if with concentration—as though with sheer will power he would compel Lucky Jones's schooner to come sailing up the river.

But the Blue Goose did not come. And the Laughing Lady was overdue. She should have been alongside the dock at noon.

At dusk a half-dozen natives came into the compound and stared up at the *sala*. When they drifted away, after an hour of apparently aimless staring, Singapore grunted.

"Something is brewin'. Hell is gettin' ready to pop."

McCoy was losing his patience. Penned up in the small room with Singapore for twenty-four hours had worn his nerves thin.

He growled, "Aw, stop beefing, Sam."

"Kid, I tell you, we're on a spot."

"What in the devil has got into you, Sam? I never saw you this way before."

"If Lucky would only show up! If that steamer would only come!"

"I don't see anything to get so hot and bothered about. Stop worrying."

"I wish I could."

He turned back to the window. There was no moon to-night, and there would be no moon; but the stars afforded him sufficient illumination to see the river.

He began mistaking fireflies for misty starboard lights swinging around bends. But even if the steamer or the schooner came up the river, it would not be until almost midnight, because high tide at the bar was not until ten o'clock.

There was a stiff breeze from the gulf, plenty of breeze to bring the schooner up river under her jibs. This same breeze caused rustlings and rattlings in the palm trees behind the *sala,* and these added to Sammy's jumpiness.

Said McCoy: "Listen, Sam. Even if Lucky Jones should get across the bar at high water to-night, he would anchor in the mouth of the river for daylight. So would the steamer. Look here. Are you holdin' out on me?"

"Huh?"

"You've got somethin' on your mind that you haven't let me in on. Now what is it?"

"How do you figger that out?"

"The way you've been acting. I don't see why we are in the slightest danger."

"Any guy with sixty thousand bucks in cash money pinned to his B. V. D.'s is in danger."

"Stop tryin' to kid me, Sam. What your father said in that letter is true. He and de Silva, when they bought that mine for sixty thousand bucks, were takin' candy away from babies. We practically gave them that mine. They're too busy forking out sapphires to bother with chicken feed like sixty thousand berries, and you know it."

"Yeah."

"Then what's eating you?"

"They're a coupla tough eggs, blondy."

"Uh-huh. And maybe you're soft-boiled. Quit worrying."

"O. K."

But Singapore, with plenty to worry about, disregarded his friend's advice and kept on worrying.

MIDNIGHT came and went. At about two o'clock Singapore saw a pale glow far in the distance toward the gulf. It vanished. His spirits went up. Maybe it was the schooner! Maybe it was the steamer! A little later he heard some one moving about in the compound. He gripped the butt of his revolver and tensely waited. A whisper floated out of the night:

"Singapore!"

It came from below. McCoy was asleep, softly snoring. Sam went to the door. Below him flowed the river. He had reasoned that, in case of dire necessity, he could probably take a running dive from this doorway, do a belly-smasher, and swim to the dubious safety of the farther shore. The water

lapped the shore on this side not a yard from the foot of the ladder.

In the starlight he saw a small, pale face uplifted.

Another whisper: "It's Dolores, Sam. I must see you."

"What about?"

"You know what about!"

"Yeah? What's that you've got in your hands?"

"My Mannlicher. You're going to need it."

"I can still shoot pretty good with my forty-five."

"I'm coming up. Give me your hand."

Singapore's heart was thumping in his throat. Sweat formed a clammy film on his face and forehead.

She handed up the rifle, butt foremost. He pulled it up and stood it against a roof post. Then he reached down for her hand. It was like ice. He pulled her up beside him. She clung to his hand. She was shivering. In the semi-darkness he could hear her teeth chattering. And he could hear her breath coming in little gasps.

"They're going to kill you and Bruce!"

A sleepy voice inquired: "Who the hell's that?"

Sammy said: "Pipe down. It's Dolores."

He heard McCoy's feet thump on the floor. A match scratched, flamed.

"Put that light out!" Dolores whispered.

"What are you doing here?"

"They're wise," she said, when he had extinguished the light. "Sam, they have had forty men working in the pit since yesterday noon. From dawn till dark to-day. They haven't found a solitary sapphire."

"That's their tough luck," said McCoy.

"It's your death warrant!" Dolores snapped.

McCOY stood up and walked toward her. He asked in a growl: "How do you figure that out?"

"How," she retorted, "do you suppose they figure it?"

"Look here, Miss de Silva," McCoy said; "we sold you that mine in good faith. If it happened to peter out the day we sold it, that's no fault of ours. We got over six hundred carats of sapphires out of that pit. There ought to be sixty thousand carats more."

"Are you trying to kid me?" Dolores inquired coldly.

"Listen," Sam said; "he ain't in on it. You talk to me."

"Haven't I told you enough? Why didn't you two clear out of here immediately? Why did you have to wait?"

"Never mind that," Singapore said. "How come you're takin' all this trouble? Have you switched camps?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You can ask yourself that question."

"Sister, let's can the riddles. What is your racket this time? Are you still workin' for the blue pearl?"

"No, I'll tell you why I'm here. And I'll tell you why I've ditched my father forever." She hesitated. "Sam, I love you. That's why I'm here."

McCoy laughed. "Your father kicked you out. That's why you're here!"

She said, huskily: "Sam, you believe me, don't you?"

"Sister, your brain is too fast for me. What do you aim to do?"

"Stay here and help. Some time between now and daylight my father and a gang of armed natives will try

to kill you and Bruce McCoy. If I'm here, they may not shoot. That's logical, isn't it?"

"Everything you've ever said, sister, is logical. That's just the trouble."

"I came here only because I love you. I don't care what happens to me now, as long as I can be with you. Don't you believe me?"

"No!" McCoy snapped.

Sam laid his hand on her shoulder gently. He had always been sorry for her, and he was sorrier for her now than he had ever been. He could not reconcile himself to the demonstrated fact that a girl so beautiful and so innocent-looking could have such a twisted brain.

Dolores bent her head until her cheek was lying on his palm.

"I love you so much!" she whispered. Her arms flew about his neck. She kissed his mouth and fiercely clung to him.

Singapore removed her arms; made sure that the copper wire about his neck had not been tampered with.

"Sister, let's have some more dope on this assassination we're on the receivin' end of. Blondy, you go back to bed. I'll handle this."

McCoy said something under his breath about female snakes.

"Wait," Singapore whispered to the girl. He heard, in the darkness, the groaning of McCoy's cot as he lowered his weight onto it. He whispered into Dolores's ear: "He doesn't know. He thinks all this is a false alarm. He will be asleep in a minute. Stand by, sister."

He pushed her onto a bench and sat down beside her. Dolores fumbled for his hand, found it and clung to it. She laid her head on his shoulder and sighed. Singapore sighed, too.

He waited until McCoy began to snore, then said:

"Say what you feel like sayin' about the sapphire business, sister, and I'll do the same."

"Doesn't he know you salted the mine?"

"Sister, he does not. He thinks six hundred and twenty carats came out of that pit. Well, so they did. But he doesn't know that the original hundred carats I stole off your old man went back into the white sand as fast as he sluiced 'em out. I didn't want him to know. I still don't want him to know. It might hurt his conscience. Me—I haven't any conscience."

"I suspected it from the beginning," the girl whispered. "Every night you took all the sapphires he had sluiced out during the day and threw them back into the pit."

"That's right, sister."

"I don't blame you," Dolores said. "You put over a very clever deal on those two old crooks. It served them right."

Nestling her head on his shoulder, she sighed again. Sam wondered what her game was now. He didn't believe she loved him. It pleased his vanity to think that she might, but he was too hard-boiled; he had seen her in action too many times. Her father and his father had been outfoxed. He and McCoy had the hundred carats of sapphires and the two hundred thousand *ticals*. Also, he still had the Malobar pearl. She was playing for big stakes now.

"Sam, I love you so much."

He got up. "Sister, if you will stand watch at the window at that end, I'll keep an eye on this one. Is your rifle loaded?"

"Yes, Sam. You haven't said you like me. You might at least say that

you forgive me and that you like me. You think I'm a rather dreadful girl. Perhaps I am. But you'll admit I haven't had much of a chance to be otherwise. I don't care whether you're a saint or a devil. You could be the lowest kind of thief, and I'd still love you. I loved you the night I met you. I knew, whatever else you were, that you're strong. You're the only man I'd ever known I've ever wanted. You've got to say you love me. Say it!"

Her arms went around his neck again. Sam kissed her lightly on the lips and got up.

"Take your post, soldier," he growled. It occurred to him that she might have come up deliberately to kill him and McCoy. He could not say why he was so sure that she had not come up on such an errand.

He was more than half convinced that she was telling the truth.

## CHAPTER IX.

### SUCKERS.

SAMMY pulled in the ladder and awaited developments. The wind from the gulf blew fresher. The palms behind the *sala* rattled and clicked and created the illusion of falling rain, as palms do when they are attacked by a strong wind.

Shortly before dawn, there was a hail from below. Singapore, springing to attentiveness, recognized the harsh voice as Roderigo de Silva's.

"Dolores!"

She did not answer.

"Dolores, I know you are up there. I warn you it will do absolutely no good. This place is surrounded by armed men. I know that you three cannot have many days' food and water supply. It is difficult to hold these men back. I cannot even promise to hold them back until you are forced out by hunger and thirst. Will you come?"

"I will not!" she cried.

De Silva now addressed himself to Singapore.

"Shay," he said, "you haven't a chance, and you know it. Throw down the sapphires and the money and you can go. I will give you ten minutes to decide."

"He doesn't need ten seconds," Dolores cried. "You don't dare shoot because I'm up here."

That was the end of the parley. Dolores whispered to Singapore: "We can certainly hold out until the steamer comes. Then we can make a dash for it."

But Singapore wasn't so optimistic. He was thinking of his father's influence on these fanatical natives. It required very little to set them off. A howling mob of them might attack at any moment.

HOURS dragged by. The Laughing Lady came steaming up the river and tied up to the dock. Making a dash for the dock would have been sheer folly. Through chinks in the walls, Singapore could see brown men not far away; men with knives and rifles.

Dusk brought the situation to its climax. A bullet crashed through the thatch roof. McCoy was kneeling, looking down with his revolver in his hand, ready. He returned the shot. A man between two palms fell limply—a brown man.

Angry murmurings reached the three in the *sala*. Some one fired from the other side.

Then it was that Singapore, stand-

ing back from the down-river window so that he could not be seen, saw the snow-white sails of a schooner bellying before the breeze. He would have known that little ship amidst any amount of shipping. Some men can give their hearts to a ship more easily than to a woman. It was so with Singapore Sammy and the Blue Goose.

Even at this distance she showed evidences of the loving care her owner bestowed upon her. Such a princess of the sea was certainly deserving of the best. Her deck was holystoned to the whiteness of parchment. Her bright work gleamed in the failing tropical light. You knew that her standing and running rigging were in perfect condition. Her steel-blue hull gleamed like new metal.

He yelled, "Ahoy, there, Lucky!" But she was a full quarter mile away.

A bullet clipped a roof post close to him.

The besieged three crouched and watched the schooner. She came along swiftly, on the port tack, with water foaming whitely at her bows. But the Blue Goose did not make for the dock. She stood off, came sharply into the wind when halfway across the river—still well beyond hail. Her jibs fluttered down, then her foresail and mainsail as the anchor splashed.

Singapore waited. If Lucky did not come ashore now, he would in all probability wait for morning. Darkness swiftly closed down, and no small boat left the schooner.

McCoy groaned: "We may be dead by morning!"

"Not us," Singapore said. "I'm gonna swim out to her!"

"What good will it do?" Dolores wailed.

"Sam," McCoy growled, "you know this river is alive with alligators."

"You'd be shot," Dolores added, "before you got a dozen feet."

"You'd be swept down with the current," McCoy argued. "What can the little handful of men he has aboard do against this mob?"

"Plenty," Singapore said. In the darkness, he had been slipping off his clothing. "Stand away from that doorway!"

He ran back to the opposite wall; braced himself, sprang forward at a run, and vanished out the doorway. McCoy and Dolores heard him splash. They saw the spurts of red flame as rifles blazed.

Singapore executed that dive as he had earlier planned. He fairly crashed onto the water; then he dived down and swam a dozen lengths before coming back to the surface. He heard the rifles on shore, but none of the bullets struck close enough to worry him.

With a powerful trudgeon stroke, he struck out for the Blue Goose. When he was within fifty feet of the schooner, he yelled: "Lucky, ahoy! Don't shoot!"

The hard voice of his old friend emerged from the darkness of the poop, bellowing orders in Malay to his crew. Then a laugh and:

"What in hell are you doin' out there?"

"Haul me in—quick!"

THEY hauled him in. Sammy outlined the situation in the fewest possible words while the Chinese steward went below for a dry shirt and dungarees. Lucky profanely wanted to know what Sam wanted him to do.

"Run up alongside that bank, under the *sala*. Take the kid and the girl aboard."

"You know what that means, redhead?"

"Sure! Your decks will be pumped full of lead. We both may get shot. I thought you liked a fight!"

"Yeah. But I like to pick my fights. I don't like 'em shoved down my gullet." He began roaring orders in Malay. "Up anchor! Get those sails up!"

The Blue Goose became, in a matter of seconds, a living thing again. Singapore took the wheel while Lucky went below to break out arms for his handful of men. *Parangs* and pistols for the Malays. A rifle for himself, another for Singapore, and a sawed-off shotgun for the Chinese steward.

The land loomed close. Singapore kept the lights of the Laughing Lady over his port quarter as a landmark until he saw that the steamer was moving ahead. She was pulling out. Then he steered by guesswork, or it may have been by excellent memory coupled with experienced judgment.

The *sala* was clearly outlined soon against the light of stars. Lucky came aft and took the wheel.

"You go for'ard," he said, "and run this show. It's your show, redhead. And may God have pity on you if we get stuck in the mud!"

That was what was worrying Sam—the depth of the river close under the bank. But the schooner slipped along; came in closer.

He softly called: "Blondy! Dolores! Get ready to jump! Jump when she's under you! Jump in the mainsail, Dolores!"

Rifles began to blaze now. They set up a twinkling along the shore like red fireflies. Sam returned this fire; heard the reports of the Malays' pistols, and the tremendous discharge of the steward's shotgun.

Some one had thrown a torch on the roof of the *sala*. The dry thatch began to burn fiercely. In the ruddy luminance of this, Sammy saw two half-naked brown men clamber aboard from the bank. Simultaneously he saw a flash of white. Dolores had jumped.

Then he saw de Silva coming aboard. Singapore brought up his rifle and pulled the trigger, aiming from the hip. The hammer clicked on an empty cartridge chamber.

De Silva, his yellow face contorting, lifted the revolver clutched in his hand. Sammy was too far away to use his rifle as a club.

Something dark and rod-like flashed past him. He learned later that it was an iron belaying pin. He saw it thud into the shadow between de Silva's eyes, heard the crunch of cracking bone, and saw de Silva, limp, lifeless, slide down the mud into the water. Lucky Jones's aim with belaying pins had always been excellent.

A bullet stung across Sam's shoulder. Then a heavy body thumped down onto the deck beside him. A man went to his knees. It was McCoy. Blood dripped down his face from a gash over his left eye.

LUCKY shouted: "All hands below. Watch out now!"

He had thrown the tiller hard over; the Blue Goose was drifting out into the river. Her sails swung over with a crash as she gybed. Sammy saw the bo's'n pick up a lifeless brown man and hurl him far out into the water. A bullet gashed the deck at his feet.

Sam dropped below the bulwarks and crawled forward. He wondered where his father was. He called Dolores. Her frightened voice answered from the windward side. He slid on his belly between two cabins and found her huddled down in the lee of the after one.

"Hurt, sister?"

"No. I saw my father die."

"It was tough, sister; but it was him or me."

She came close to him. Automatically, Sam reached up and touched the copper wire at his neck. The famous Malobar pearl was still safe.

She said lifelessly, "You don't love me."

"That's my tough break," Singapore said.

"But I love you. You are the only man I have ever loved. You believe me. Oh, you must believe me!"

"You aren't playin' fair, sister. Look back, will you? Just look back to all the times you double-crossed me. I couldn't trust you. The first night you met me—"

"I tried to drug and stab you—for that pearl. But I love you now. What is to happen to me? My father is dead. What will become of me?"

"Sister, quit worryin'. You'll never starve. You'll always have pretty clothes. You're too smart. You're too good-lookin'."

She did not answer. He took out of his hip pocket the buckskin bag of sapphires—the one hundred carats of uncut stones which had deceived several credulous men. He laid the bag in her lap.

"You need these sapphires more than I do, sister. They're all yours."

"Sam, I love you so much!" Her heart was breaking in her throat; but Singapore observed that her hands closed greedily about the precious buckskin bag.

Lucky called: "Where-away? Down river, red-head?"

"Get alongside that steamer. We've got a passenger for her."

"The lady?"

"Yep. The lady."

Lucky hailed the steamer. Its engines stopped. The schooner came alongside. As Sam helped Dolores up onto the deck, she said:

"I will love you all my life—and I will never forgive you!"

SOME hours later, when Singapore had concluded his recital of his latest adventure to his old shipmate, Lucky said:

"You are the world's biggest sucker. You spend weeks, you risk your life to make suckers out of a sapphire racket—and what have you got out of it? Tell me, willya? You got soft-hearted and gave that kid all the money. You tossed five thousand dollars' worth of sapphires away on a skirt who would as soon carve your heart out as look at you! You think you're hard-boiled. You think you're tough. You think you're smart. You think you made suckers out of everybody. You big lunk, you are the biggest sucker out of the lot! Tell me, what did you get out of it?"

"A nice souvenir," Sam said resentfully. "A nice sapphire-handled dagger."

"Oh, boloney!"

"All that aside," Sam said, "what is this red-hot deal you got on that calls for my slick methods?"

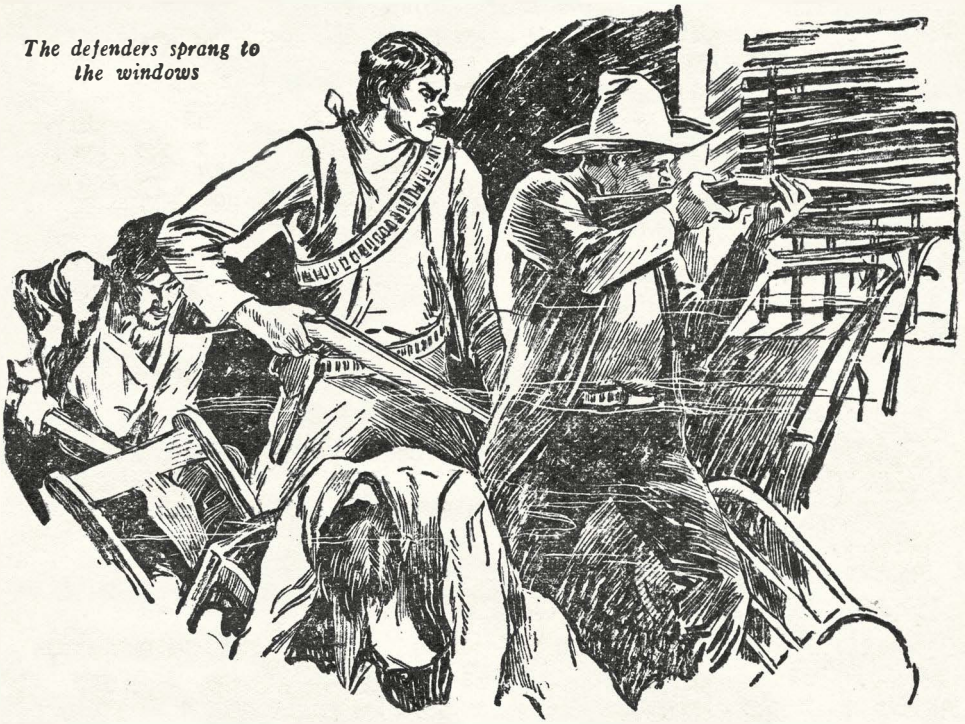
"Pearls!"

"Where?"

"In the Gulf of Tomini! An old guy whom I lent a hundred dollars to in Singapore gave me the low-down out of thankfulness. He says the pearls there are so thick you can scoop 'em up in your hands!"

Sammy bellowed with laughter. "And you think I'm soft-boiled! You call me a sucker!"

**THE END.**



*The defenders sprang to the windows*

# Red Hot Chili

***Salt may work on a bird's tail, but Jimmy Carroll planned a different bait for the Chilean bandits who wanted his gold***

**By C. A. FREEMAN**

*CLINKETY - CLUNK, clinkety - clunk!* The lead mare of the pack train snatched at a bunch of grass growing by the trail, and plodded onward with her copper bell thudding dully. Behind her trotted six Peruvian mules, their *aparejos,* or packsaddles, loaded with bulging canvas sacks. Ten yards in the rear rode Antonio Salcedo, Jimmy Carroll, and two half-breeds whose Indian blood showed strongly.

All four men were heavily armed. Behind the high-cantled saddles in which they sat dangled gas masks of the type used by Uncle Sam's troops overseas. Under each left leg the butt of a carbine nodded in a gun-boot, and around each waist was belted a .45 Colt. To this armament the half-breeds had added a knife, but Salcedo, the white Peruvian, like Carroll, disdained such a weapon.

" Well, we've got the stuff we came after, Tony," offered the American, puffing out a cloud of cigarette smoke.

" Yes," admitted Salcedo in perfect English. " Those gas masks sure remind me of our soldiering in France. It was just as you thought, Jimmy—that the *Cueva de los Muertos,* the Cave of the Dead, was protected by a

gas stratum. No wonder the old Spaniards fought shy of it."

"We've sure busted the hoodoo on the Cave of the Dead," chuckled the American. "Anybody can go there now if they wear a mask, but we've swept the place clean. Those Inca ornaments are pure gold, Tony, and even if we sold 'em by weight they'd bring *beaucoup francs*. What say we take a run over to Paree when we cash in?"

The question was not answered, for as the riders rounded a bend they came to a stream by the side of which was camped a party of men, who by the appearance of their clothes and horses had recently completed a long journey. Saddles and short rifles lay in an orderly line strangely reminiscent to Tony and Jimmy of military service.

"*Chilenos!*" exclaimed the white Peruvian. "With sawed-off rifles, too, I'll gamble! Wonder what's driven them across the border." He eased the six-gun in his holster as he spoke. Traditionally at least, Peru has no love for bandit-ridden Chile, and these men, if only judging from their *recortados* or sawed-off rifles, so easily concealed under a poncho, were of the bandit breed.

Carroll did not answer, but imitated the gun loosening movement as did the breeds. The strangers were getting to their feet, and a one-eyed man, evidently the leader, came forward.

"*Holá,* comrades!" was his friendly greeting. "We ride to the fair at Salinas to gamble a bit at *monte* with our Peruvian friends. It is said that the town is rich. Can you tell us how far distant it is, and if we are on the right trail?"

Salcedo explained briefly, and the little cavalcade splashed across the ford and rode on. All four men noticed the curious glances cast by the *Chilenos* at the canvas sacks carried by the mules.

"I'm wondering," muttered Jimmy Carroll, "if that one-eyed lad is the bandit *El Tuerto* the Chilean press has so much to say about. He sure fits the description."

"He may be," admitted the white Peruvian, touching his horse with the spurs and pushing forward toward the pack train. A minute later his voice was raised in a shout. "*Aquí, todos*—come here, all of you. One of these sacks has ripped a seam, and some of the junk has spilled out. I don't mind losing it, but if those damned *Chilenos* have picked up any it might be just too bad!"

The breeds skillfully rewrapped the sack in question with a blanket. Then, at a faster pace, the ride was continued until at two in the afternoon the small mountain *hacienda* of Salcedo's uncle, Don Pedro Castro, was reached.

THE place seemed strangely abandoned. Only one person was about. He was the storekeeper, a breed named Epifanio Suarez.

"Don Pedro and the ladies have gone to Santiago for a vacation," he told Tony. "Everybody else is attending the *fiesta* at Salinas. The big house is being painted, but the painters knocked off for the day and have gone to Salinas as well. You gentlemen will have to sleep in the store."

Salcedo nodded and swung out of the saddle as did the others. "Bring the packs inside, and also all our saddles," he said to Gregorio and José. The breeds began the job, and Tony, followed by Jimmy, tramped up the steps. The building was large and provided with barred windows and heavy iron shutters. This was common to all isolated parts of Chile and Peru.

The two friends selected chairs, unbuckled their gun belts and sprawled at ease. Suarez brought in brandy, and they drank as the breeds piled the dunnage in a corner.

"This joint smells like the boodwar of a lady barber," grinned the American, glancing around as a large fan, propelled by electricity from the *hacienda's* own generating plant, droned and buzzed.

"We've got to keep everything, from cheap soap to garlic, for our tenants," answered Salcedo. "Look over there at the cans of red pepper on the shelves, mixed with boxes of candy. Those big carboys below are filled with liquid ammonia, for uncle's going to start a little ice plant when he gets around to it. He's always experimenting. Those square cans contain axle grease, and I'll admit they smell, but not as much as does the *bacalao*." The big Peruvian pointed to a pile of dried codfish.

After a makeshift dinner prepared by the breeds, the two adventurers began their nightly routine of cleaning their guns. The brief dusk of the subtropics melted into velvet darkness, and despite the rising moon, Salcedo snapped on the lights. Suarez puttered about the store, and then, attracted by the barking of a dog, went to a window. The animal had heard something. What could it be?

Suddenly the breed challenged sharply. "*Quién es?*—Who is it?" His answer was the crack of a rifle, and the unfortunate man toppled backward, drilled between the eyes. The four remaining occupants of the store were instantly on their feet.

Jimmy slammed the iron door and barred it, the others doing the same with the window shutters. Riding like the wind, circling the store and firing as they came, swept a band of horsemen. Their bullets pattered harmlessly against the shutters and the door, chipping chunks from the stone walls.

It was all done so quickly that the store's inmates had no time to return the fire, through the cracks of the shutters, before the raiders were out of sight behind a low, rambling stable.

"It's *El Tuerto* and his gang!" barked the American, slipping a shell into the chamber of his carbine and crouching at a window. "The moon's so bright that I caught a glimpse of that one-eyed *hombre*. He's the same lad we saw this morning at the stream. Yeah, he's got a black patch over that bum lamp now. I'd sure like to puncture the other one."

"They'll be making a demand for our gold in a few minutes," offered Salcedo. "There! What did I say? Here comes *El Tuerto* now. See him? The damned robber's waving something white. We should plug him, but —well, we just can't. Not under that white rag." The one-eyed man, who was on foot, pushed briskly forward.

The besieged waited tensely. As the raider halted twenty feet from the *bodega* he began to speak. "I am *El Tuerto* the *Chileno*," he said in a strident tone. "We know that your packs are laden with golden ornaments. Give them up and go free. If not we will blow your refuge to pieces, for we have dynamite. What is your answer?"

"Go to hell!" roared Salcedo. "When I have counted ten we begin firing—and I'm counting now. *Uno, dos, tres—*" *El Tuerto* scurried away.

A MINUTE later a few shadowy figures slipped from behind the stable and, throwing themselves prone upon the ground, opened fire. This the besieged returned.

"Damn the fellow who did that!" bellowed Carroll, tenderly touching a scraped ear. Then he and the others in the store began to cough and sneeze violently, for the same slug had ripped the cover off a can of red pepper. Wafted by the force of the electric fan the stuff was spread in all directions.

Salcedo snapped off the fan and the lights, but instantly snapped the lights on again at the American's request. "That gives me an idea," gasped Carroll. "Break out those gas masks, barricade the door, and let 'em come. They're probably fixing the fuses and caps on the dynamite and we haven't much time to lose. Hurry!"

"Have you gone nuts, Jimmy?" demanded Salcedo. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," snapped the American, "that we'll open all that pepper—if we have time. The ammonia carboys too. Then when the door goes in and the bandits rush we'll switch on the fan again, provided the current isn't cut off. And anyhow, even if it is, we'll have the best of it!"

The bandits were amazed that no gunfire greeted them when, fifteen minutes after Jimmy had finished speaking, they dashed for the door. As a matter of fact, the besieged were too busy opening cans and carboys to bother about bandits. But hardly had the four defenders taken up positions behind boxes and barrels when the door was blown off its hinges by a terrific explosion.

Strangely enough the shock did not break the electric light bulbs, and the foremost raiders could see, as they were catapulted into the store by the pressure behind, a strange, murky-red haze. That was the last thing many of them were ever to see, for a well directed fire dropped the leaders in their tracks.

Over them sprawled the others, gasping, choking, and blinded. The four masked figures seemed like devils from the pit, and their trigger fingers worked with almost uncanny rapidity. It was Jimmy Carroll who downed *El Tuerto* as he came stumbling forward, and the slug fired by a crack shot of the old A. E. F., took him in his single remaining eye.

The fight, or rather the slaughter, was of only a few minutes duration. Screaming imprecations in which the word *brujería* or "witchcraft" predominated, the surviving bandits pitched down the steps and ran to their horses. Then the sound of galloping hoofs announced their flight.

Picking their way carefully over the dead and dying, the defenders reached the open air and pulled off their masks. Then, as the breeds capered with delight, Salcedo broke into a roar of nervous laughter.

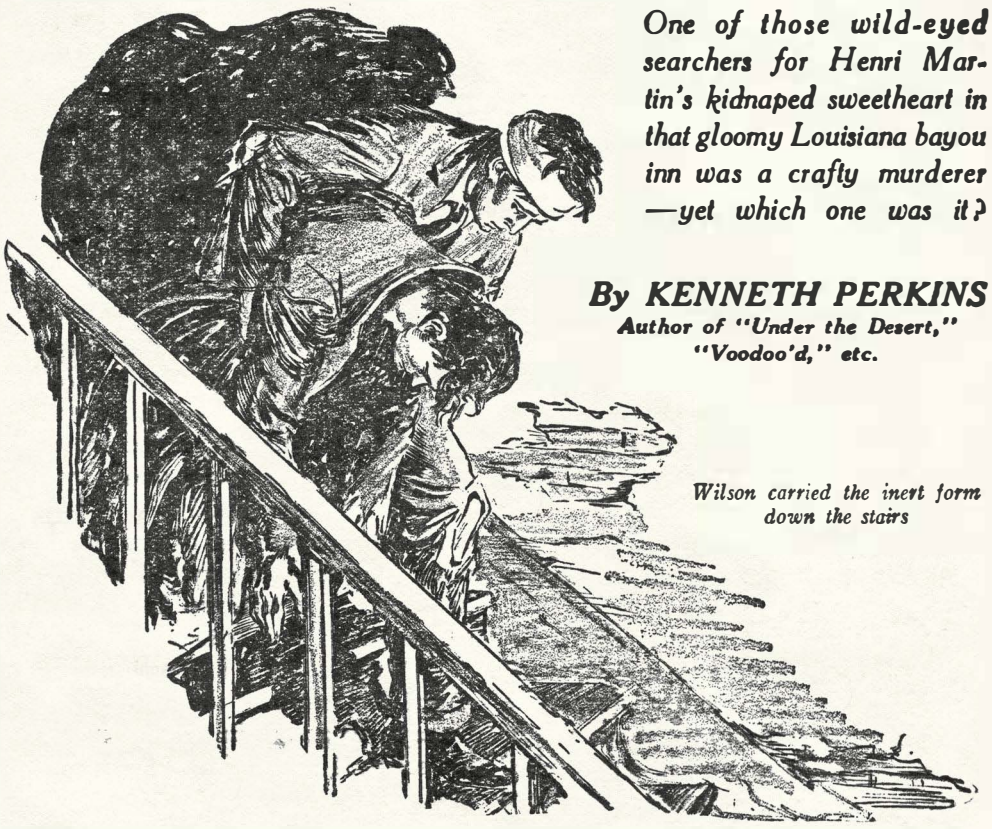
"Jimmy Carroll," he shouted, banging his companion over the shoulders with his gas mask, "you've done something to-night that Peru will remember for a long time to come!"

"What's that?" queried Jimmy suspiciously.

"Given a bunch of Chilean bandits their own medicine—Red Hot Chili!" chuckled the big Peruvian.

THE END.

# The Tavern of Terror



*Wilson carried the inert form down the stairs*

*One of those wild-eyed searchers for Henri Martin's kidnaped sweetheart in that gloomy Louisiana bayou inn was a crafty murderer —yet which one was it?*

**By KENNETH PERKINS**
*Author of "Under the Desert," "Voodoo'd," etc.*

**LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT**

BUFFETED by the hurricane that has wrecked their roadster in a roadside ditch in the Louisiana bayous, three figures stagger out of the night and into the desolate old manse known as the Brack Tavern. They are Henri Martin, newspaper man; Cosette Catalan, his fiancée; and Tom Wilson, who is to be best man at their wedding to-morrow.

Shaking the water from their dripping garments, they tell Mme. Brack, the frightened, stupid-looking woman who answers their summons, that they wish accommodations for the night. As the *madame* dumbly escorts Tom and Cosette to the second floor, Henri starts down the road to find a telephone. Instead of a phone, he locates a native, who warns him that "death and worse things" happen in the Brack Tavern, which has had no guests for a year.

Hastening back, Henri finds that Cosette and Tom—even the automobile—have disappeared. Frenziedly he storms about the house, seeking his companions. Brack, who has come in

**This story began in the Argosy for November 28.**

since Henri's departure, first assures the distracted young man that he has the wrong house. He calls in Deputy Sheriff Carrazas, another malignant figure, who starts to take Henri away at the point of a gun. "He must be crazy," the deputy and the Bracks say.

But there is one man in the house who does not agree. It is crippled old Gambrille, who, from his wheel chair, has heard the comings and goings of the night. When Henri breaks free, Gambrille tells him that perhaps murder has been done.

Tom Wilson staggers into the house. He had been slugged and thrown into a swamp as dead, he says.

Another figure, more sinister than all the others, appears. It is the "doctor," the eccentric veterinarian who has given the Tavern its evil reputation because of the queer things he does to animals.

Confronted by Henri, Jaloff, the doctor, is seized with a fit, and is placed upon a bed. A few minutes later, while the Bracks and Tom and Henri are in the yard searching for Cosette, or her body, a horse plods toward them from the swamps. On its back is Jaloff, the doctor, dead.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### HOW JALOFF DIED.

AIDED by Brack, Henri and Tom took the body of Jaloff from its grotesque seat and carried it into the house, to the bed upon which it had lain but a short while before.

For a moment they stood there, each one concerned with his own peculiar reaction. Mme. Brack did not enter the room. She had followed the shabby and bewildered members of that little cortège as far as the hallway, and then dropped out of sight unnoticed. There was something about the doctor's death which touched a vibrant nerve in her flabby being—something that savored of animal-like fear.

Henri Martin and Wilson stood stunned at this event which seemed to signify the complete frustration, the end, of their search. Jaloff had possessed a precious secret—and he was dead.

Brack, the innkeeper, was visibly and emotionally affected. He stood with his big hands clasped in front of him, staring down at the ungainly thing on the bed, tenderly, sorrowfully, his hollow eyes dry and gleaming.

There was the squeak of wheels, a chair bumping against a doorway, then a soft rolling sound as Gambrille wheeled his chair out of his room, another squeak as he turned his wheels in alternate directions and appeared, sitting there, just outside the door.

"What is it? Jaloff dead? You found him out near the barn? What a lunacy—to go out in this weather after his seizure! These drafts would be the death of any one—even in this hall. Let alone going outside!"

He was the only one of the group who seemed affected in a totally unemotional way. That does not mean that he was not affected at all. His Voltaire-like features, thrown into relief by the darkness of the hall and the lamplight in the room, were transfixed in a mask of sharp sardonic wrinkles. His eyes darted keenly from one face to another, lighting finally on that face on the bed.

"We found him ridin' from the road toward the barn," the innkeeper said. "Settin' in a sawbuck saddle. He'd gone out there—wanderin' in his mind, most like. But I figure he had sense enough to know he had to light out—

after what he's done, you know. Climbed aboard and tried to get away. Must 've died just settin' there, leavin' the reins fall. The old plug, findin' it wasn't bein' led anywheres, just turned around and moseyed back home. Lucky I saw him, or he'd of been settin' in that saddle all night."

" Quite a grim picture!" Gambrille remarked, stroking his lean chin. " A spavined old plow horse turned into a riding pony! But appropriate. The Navajos bury their dead that way, I understand. Except that they use the best horse—and the best saddle and accouterments. Their chieftains must ride in glory on the way to the Happy Hunting Grounds."

HENRI and Tom Wilson turned toward him with an impatient gesture. They cared nothing about these grim obsequies of the Brack household. They wanted to get out—and start all over again from the beginning on their task. But Gambrille's wheel chair blocked their exit.

" I am sorry, young gentlemen, that our chief witness is no longer available. But there may be others. According to Mr. Brack's quite logical, but not necessarily inevitable solution of the mystery, Jaloff had exercised his fear-sway over Mrs. Brack, which was the reason for her lie."

" Yes, yes, we must see her!" Henri said eagerly. " Where is the woman? She must tell us everything now!"

" Exactly. Inasmuch as Jaloff is dead, she need have no more fear of his machinations. So she will of course tell. But—" he added softly, scratching his chin with his birdlike claws so that it made a deliberate rasping sound—*" suppose she is still afraid?"*

" That would mean Jaloff had nothing to do with it!" the innkeeper said. " But he did. It was him that was running amuck to-night, Mr. Gambrille. My wife ain't a murderess. She wouldn't of harmed these folks. You know that! She's a good woman. She is kind to every one."

" If you young gentlemen will stand aside," old Gambrille said, " I will wheel in my chair. This draft in the hall is quite unbearable."

Henri and Tom Wilson were only too glad to accommodate him. They slipped out when his chair passed the threshold of that stuffy and abhorrent chamber, and hurried on down the hall. Mme. Brack must be found. The truth must be extracted from her at all costs.

They came into the big vestibule in the center of the manse—a limitless expanse of dim light and massive shadows in which there loomed the figure of a man.

Wilson clutched Henri's arm. " Who in Heaven's name is that person?"

Henri had no cause to share his companion's alarm, for the man was not unknown to him. The fact was he knew him only too well.

Deputy Carrazas was standing by the desk, his legs spread apart belligerently, his great paw yanking fiercely at the meager strands of his mustache.

" So you give me the slip, did you, you cantankerous young nut!" he stormed. " Like to have cracked my jaw in pieces! I treated you like a gentleman, but I'm workin' different now. I'll show you how I treat lunatics!"

He paused in his advance toward Henri, seeing for the first time the figure of Tom Wilson—who, although somewhat harmless looking, was evidently an ally of the " lunatic " behind whom he was standing. Tom Wilson had found an opportunity to bind his head with a torn towel. This, together

with his muddy face, still with a trace of clotted blood, seemed to confuse the deputy.

"Who's that bird?" he asked.

Henri vouchsafed an answer.

"He's the man who was lying unconscious in the room upstairs when I called you," he said. He knew that he would have to have his disagreement out with this ponderous yokel before he could search any further. "Perhaps when you hear his story you'll believe I wasn't a raving lunatic—and perhaps you'll help us."

"But there wasn't any such bird up there—'lying unconscious' as you say," Carrazas objected in utter confusion. "You was only imagining him!"

"Imagining me!" Wilson exclaimed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Let him feel your muscles, Tom, and find out if you're a figment of the imagination or flesh and blood."

"I—a figment of the imagination?" Tom repeated vacantly.

THE deputy glared at both men. Confusion and a thorough respect for their combined strength, as well as for the fierce desperate determination on Henri's face, stayed his first impulse. It would have to be a hand-to-hand combat, for the deputy had within the last few moments made the discovery that he had no gun.

"All right," he said, "I'll listen to what you got to say. But first I want my automatic."

"What automatic?" Henri asked blandly.

"The one you frisked me of, after you'd knocked me out."

"Better go back and hunt for it on the roadside," Henri said, turning away. "You'll get no automatic out of me. Come on, Tom, let's find that Brack woman."

"Say, listen—"

"Hey there, Bill! Is that you?" a voice came down the hall. The innkeeper came hurrying out into the light. "You've come in good time, Bill. Somethin' happened. Come on back here."

"I won't go nowhere till I get my gun from this escaped nut!"

"Listen a moment, Bill. Everything's changed. He ain't a nut. He's trying to find his girl—and she was lost here."

"*You* say that!" the deputy exclaimed.

"I say it. And it's the truth. A crime's been committed, Bill. And it's up to you and me to solve it."

"Sure a crime's been committed. *He* committed it—" The deputy shook his fist at Henri. "I'll have him in jail, nut or no nut. He resisted arrest, didn't he? He knocked down an officer of the law!"

"That don't matter now, Bill," the innkeeper said impatiently. "We've got other things to attend to. Their girl's been rustled off somewheres. Further and more," he added tersely, "Doc Jaloff is dead."

"Jaloff!" This announcement at least was sufficient to quell the deputy's anger. "Well, look here!" he said, yanking more gently now at his mustaches. "That's different. Jaloff dead? Where's he at? I got to report this to the sheriff. Another fit, eh? I *thought* he was acting queer."

"He's in the room back here, Bill. Come on. Gambrille's in there messin' around. Tryin' to fit the poor old Doc in one of his crossword puzzles. Get out of there, Gambrille! Deputy's here and wants to examine the remains."

Gambrille came out in his wheel chair, but not in response to the impatient innkeeper's order.

"Good evening, Deputy Carrazas," he said as the latter was stalking down the hall. "You've come in very good time."

"Brack told me," Carrazas replied.

"You see he'd got out of his bed," Brack was saying, "and crawled off to the barn, and saddled a horse—"

"That's the point that gave rise to a slight element of doubt in my mind," Gambrille said, wheeling on down the hall toward the deputy, who had paused in his advance toward the death room.

HENRI and Tom Wilson, still remaining in the vestibule, heard Gambrille's dry, brittle voice, and his last announcement arrested their attention.

"What do you mean 'doubt'?" the deputy asked, completely at sea. "What was there to doubt? Who had said anything to be doubted? What had happened? Jaloff had a seizure of some sort, crawled out into the stormy night, saddled a horse, succumbed. Two strangers go crazy hunting for a lost, and as yet unauthenticated personage—a girl. Gambrille, puzzle expert, doubts something. What the hell are you all talking about? What's happening in this house?"

"We haven't the slightest idea," old Gambrille cackled. "Nor can I understand how Jaloff had the strength to lift a saw-buck saddle. I think, however—"

"Let me get this straight," Deputy Carrazas said. "Jaloff croaked. I got that. But this stuff about his horsin' around—"

"He croaked, as you express it," Gambrille admitted, his bald head, nodding in its cowl of flannel folds. "But even that expresses but a part of the truth. The whole truth is this: Jaloff was murdered."

Wilson and Henri stood speechless a moment, then both, prompted by the same impulse, ran down the hall and accosted old Gambrille.

"Murdered!" Wilson exclaimed. "You mean there is some one else in this house that—" He did not finish.

Henri could only gasp: "Good Lord! What has happened to Cosette!"

"Cosette!" Gambrille repeated, his keen sardonic face turned upward so that the eyes seemed to gaze beyond the ceiling. "Yes, and Jaloff murdered. Where's the connection?"

Carrazas grasped the innkeeper by the arm. It seemed a necessary gesture to support himself, for his enormous frame seemed unsteady—a hulk of flesh and muddy clothes without the reënforcement of its human skeleton. "I got to get the sheriff," he mumbled. "I got to report this. I'll run down to my house and send the hired man to St. Pierre. I'll be right back—" The big deputy was the very picture of impotence if not of panic. "I'll send a message by him and tell the sheriff that Doc Jaloff was murdered up here to your house—"

"And that the murderer abducted a young woman," Wilson reminded him.

"And be sure to tell him," the man in the wheel chair added dryly and with a total absence of emotion, "that Jaloff met the same fate as *madame's* cat. He was choked to death with a wire."

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## CHAPTER XV.

### THE STRANGLER.

AFTER the deputy had made his abrupt departure, the inmates of the Brack house found themselves once more thrown upon their resources. The law, the police, any in-

fluence outside of those grim walls had been withheld from them. They were adrift.

Just who was in that shadow-haunted manse Henri did not know. Mme. Brack had locked herself in a room somewhere. The innkeeper was at the front door, bolting it as soon as Carrazas left. Henri and Wilson were still standing before Gambrille's wheel chair, gazing at his upturned sardonic face in utter impotence and despair. Jaloff was in his room, the door of which was blocked by the wheel chair. And that was all—except two other possibilities: Cosette and the Unknown.

In this situation, which could be likened to a sudden dead calm at sea, Henri turned to the man in the wheel chair. The oracular and cool-headed Gambrille had a peculiar effect on him. When every one else in the manse seemed helpless under the numbing drug of fear, this old curmudgeon with his inordinate relish for puzzles and the detection of crime seemed to possess a certain power. He was aloof, demure, uncannily sagacious. He was a god thoroughly amused at that group of distracted mortals.

"What can we do?" Henri cried, stretching his tense trembling hands toward the old man. "Where can we look? Can't you tell us? You told me before. Where can we go now?"

"You can wheel me back into my room," Gambrille rejoined. "This draft is killing me."

"Come on, then," Wilson said. "I'll help you back. Then we must start our search again."

"Ah, yes," old Gambrille said, looking up over his shoulder as Wilson wheeled his chair down the hall. "But where will you search?"

"That Brack woman is the one to tell us," Henri answered, "if we could only force the truth out of her."

"Which would be quite impossible," Gambrille commented. "This is what will tell us," he pointed his bony forefinger to his forehead. Arriving at his own door, he gave the wheels two rapid turns, manipulating the chair himself, and wheeled it to the little table where he had left his lamp, his gross of pencils, his notes.

Henri and his companion stood aghast. The outlandish *sang-froid* of this old cormorant was enough to horrify them. There he was fumbling with his claws upon the table, adjusting his spectacles and calmly looking over some notes which he had actually written while every one else in that bedlam of a house was raving!

"I might succeeed in piecing together this crime if I only knew one thing: Just how was that horse saddled? I asked Brack that question, but naturally he had not noticed it when he found Jaloff dead. Jaloff knew how to cinch a packsaddle. But I'm wondering if Mme. Brack—"

An exclamation from Wilson stopped him. "By Heaven, we might get the answer there!"

"Go on out, Tom," Henri said. He himself was more eager to get some gleam of light from Gambrille's uncanny sagacity than to bother about the cinching of packsaddles. He did not care who cinched that saddle, or how Jaloff died. He wanted to know where to search for Cosette.

Wilson hurried out into the littered courtyard.

HENRI turned to the old man. "Can't you tell something else?" he begged. "Where can I hunt? Do you think she's been killed? Was she taken away in my car?"

"No," Gambrille replied, still studying his notes carefully. "That hypothesis will not hold; the criminal first abducts your girl, takes her away in the car, then returns to murder Jaloff." He looked up, his fox-like eyes twinkling. "Quite nonsensical, isn't it, now?"

"I don't know. I can't think!" Henri cried, wringing his hands. "If you could only tell me—"

"Be calm for a moment, young man, and I may be able to tell you. From what I have been able to piece together, I understand you left the house to find a telephone and were gone an hour and a half. No one was home at the time but Mme. Brack and myself. But Mme. Brack cannot drive a car. And I have not wheeled my chair off the first gallery for several years. Who else?" He consulted the back of an envelope. "Brack arrived at eleven twenty, and Deputy Carrazas arrived at midnight."

"Brack!" Henri burst out suddenly. "He said he'd gone down to get the deputy! They know something. Those two cutthroats! Where are they? I'll force the truth from them. I'll get it from them at the point of a gun!"

"The deputy is at his home arranging to send for the sheriff," Gambrille reminded him. "As for Brack, you'll have to hunt him up yourself."

Henri had dashed to the door. But at the same moment he heard some one running down the hall. As he stepped out a black cat scurried under his feet and slipped off into the dark. And the next instant a squat, flabby figure sheered up heavily against him. Recovering his balance, Henri reached out and grabbed a fat, soft arm. It was Mme. Brack who accosted him.

"My husband—where'd he go? I'm looking for him!"

"So am I," Henri said, and then taking the woman by both arms he whirled her around so that she faced him. "Look here. Your husband did not go to any lodge to-night. He lied. He knows what's been happening here. If he doesn't tell the truth, I'll kill him!"

"No, no, mister!" she cried, her gray lips quivering with terror. "Wait! I've got something to tell you. I know where she is—your girl. I know. I heard some one moaning. It couldn't have been the wind. It was that girl!"

"Where?" Henri cried madly.

The terror-stricken woman lifted her arm, so that her jewels trembled and flashed in the light from Gambrille's door. She was pointing upward. "Somewhere up there—in the attic—just now!"

As Henri turned to run toward the vestibule, he found himself facing a lean, shambling figure.

The innkeeper had run down the hall—perhaps in response to his wife's call. And he now stood there, blinking out of his cavernous eyes.

"Some one moaning? The attic?" he was saying. "No, that can't be. We searched the attic. It was the wind she heard, mister."

BUT Henri had shoved him aside and was heading for the grand staircase at a run. He heard Brack calling after him:

"Wait, mister, wait! You'll need a lantern if you're goin' up there. It's dark. Wait for me. I'll show you there ain't anythin' up there."

Henri had already reached the second story. Long bands of moonlight, filtering through the blinds, shot down the length of the hall, making a pattern of iron bars on the wall of the

stairway. This was all the light he needed as he bounded up the next flight toward the attic.

Here it was pitch dark, for the windows at the two ends of the attic hall were boarded up. Henri had already explored the place, knowing that several doors on each side of the hall led into small rooms between the hall and mansard roof.

He groped his way to the first door, opened it, found himself once again in a room littered with broken furniture and trunks. Dim bands of blue light filtered through crevices in the ramshackle roof. Bats squeaked and zigzagged about his head. The wind had died—as *madame* had said. But there was one faint fleeting moan. Then came the shrill concert of the locusts out there in the oaks—raucous, plaguing, jubilant—a chorus from the throats of a thousand devils to deafen the frantic lover.

Where had that other sound come from—the sound that was so sweet and pitiful to Henri's ears? It seemed to have been in the air—the air which he had beaten with his arms in order to strike off the pesky bats. Soft as it was, it had filled the room, enveloping him, caressing him, thrilling every cell in his tense body.

Then in another one of those curious lulls in the locusts' chorus, when the whole world seemed to hold its breath, Henri heard her voice again.

Muffled as it was, he knew it was her voice.

"Cosette! Cosette!" he screamed out. "My darling Cosette!"

She answered, and he thought his own name came in thickly muffled, inchoate gasps out of the darkness.

He staggered over boxes and broken chairs toward one wall. Her call might have come from there. He plunged back, kicking away the bric-a-brac at his feet, groping, beating at musty velvet, crashing over to the other side of the room.

Again he called to her. But her beloved name would not come to his lips. He choked and gasped. He was seized with the impotence that muffles the call in a nightmare. Something was at his throat. A cold thin tentacle, hard as metal, crawled at his neck, like a viper.

He clutched at it—his fingers digging at the thing that cut into his flesh.

"Henri!" he heard her voice distinctly now from just beyond the wall which he had reached.

He beat at the boards in an utterly ridiculous attempt to crash down the barrier between him and his beloved Cosette—pounding weakly, still like a man in a nightmare who cannot lift his arms.

"Henri! My own! My Henri!" Cosette called again, abject and sweet and pitiful.

His knees crumpled beneath his own weight—which seemed to have multiplied to the weight of many tons. Those tiny beams of moonlight which found their way between rotten shingles and swallows' nests, began to dance wildly before him, crossing each other like searchlights, tangling themselves together, bursting into skyrockets.

Then came utter darkness—and Cosette's voice calling piteously.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE PROWLER.

TOM WILSON, in a moment's surcease from the mad pandemonium of that night's tragedy, had mercifully removed the sawbuck saddle from the patient old plug standing outside the barn door.

Wilson had something to say about that saddle to Gambrille. Thus he headed back directly toward the old man's room.

On the way he saw the lights in the house, moving fitfully from window to window, dying out, reappearing again. Now a sickly yellow light gleamed in one of the windows upstairs, now there was a light in the kitchen below.

Through a tall window with broken shutter, he caught a glimpse of a squat, dark figure with high comb—like the crest on some strange ungainly fowl—flitting past the window. It was a weird sight seeing Mme. Brack wandering like a lost spirit through the rooms of her fear-ridden domain.

And now as he ran up the kitchen steps he heard her voice calling: "Brack! Brack! Come down here! Quick!"

Purely out of chivalry for a woman—even though she might be an enemy—Wilson stopped on his way through the kitchen toward Gambrille's room.

"Now what's up, *madame?*"

"Not you! I'm not calling you!" she replied. "It's my husband I want. But wait!" she added, holding up her lantern and peering into the startled face. "Did you see anything out yonder—in the oak grove? Something that was moving along fast—like moss in the wind?"

"Perhaps it was moss you saw," Wilson replied. "I've seen so many streamers of moss in the air to-night that I don't waste time wondering at it."

"But wait. There was no wind. This could not have been moss. It was like a formless thing walking—"

The innkeeper, having heard his wife's call, came running down the stairs. "What's happened now, Maggie? Been hearin' some more moans?"

"No. I saw some one out in the oak grove. Kind of a tall thing in a robe."

"They're all around us, them tall things in robes," Brack said in disgust. "You seen some moss hangin' from an oak. And what you heard upstairs was only the wind moanin'. The young feller went up in the attic—and he's rummagin' around them trunks now, fallin' all over himself. I ain't goin' up again. Let him hunt." He reached for the jug of taffia and poured himself a good bracer. "You're all worked up, Maggie. I'll b'ile you some coffee. Wish Carrazas would come back. He's takin' a powerful long time."

WILSON hurried on through the kitchen and hall toward Gambrille's room. He found the old man seated by his bed, his bald pate bent forward and shining in the yellow lamplight, his parchment-covered hand scribbling rapidly.

"I know something about saddling a horse," Tom reported. "Have a few of my own. And I can safely surmise that whoever put the sawbuck on that plug knew little about the science of it."

Gambrille looked up, his head nodding knowingly. "That eliminates Jaloff," he remarked with the triumph of one who has stumbled on a tricky word for a puzzle.

"But I thought he was eliminated long ago."

"Not necessarily." Gambrille cocked his head and studied Wilson intently. "Young man, do you know anything about catalepsy?"

"Can't say that I do. I'm not a doctor. It's a disease in which a patient falls into a trance, I believe—a trance resembling death. But Cosette—"

"Exactly. And since you are not a doctor—nor am I for that matter, nor

Brack—how do we know that Jaloff is dead?"

"You mean you think—" Wilson's eyes popped. "But look here! There was the mark of that rusty wire!"

"Quite so. Jaloff, as I said, is eliminated. Let's concentrate on some one else."

"On whom?" Tom asked helplessly.

"I have been spending the whole night—since I was awakened earlier in the evening, in trying to analyze Mme. Brack," the old fellow said. He rummaged among his papers and extracted one. "Since you brought the subject up I would like to have you read this."

"You want me to *read* something!" Wilson was almost horrified. "Read—now! Heavens! No! I must find my friend. I want to know what he's doing! I can't stay here—"

A fragile, clawlike hand gripped him by the arm. "One moment, young man. You and your friend have been spending something like five hours running around this house and this plantation. I suggest a different course. You are both interested in Mme. Brack. Now I have some notes on this peculiar lady which I wrote some time ago for the sheriff."

"You mean in that case of the murdered quadroon girl?" Tom asked, suddenly intrigued. He paused in the very act of turning to the door to escape. "Yes—go on. The quadroon girl—Did *madame*— Let me see what you wrote about the Brack woman. I knew it all along!"

"Here you are, young man."

And this is what Wilson read:

"Mrs. Magnolia Brack. Aged 53. Her parents the Faucheux of Terrebonne Parish. Deed to the plantation in her name. Superior to her husband in family and breeding. A passion for acting which was never gratified was inherited from her grandmother, famous star at the Theatre St. Philippe, New Orleans—"

Tom Wilson thrust the paper back into Gambrille's hand. "It doesn't interest me," he said. "I have no time. Take it."

"But hold on. Listen to the rest," old Gambrille said, reading the notes himself:

"'Inveterate user of cosmetics. Abhors housework, but is sedulous in keeping the steps of the front gallery clean. Detests Jaloff and his horses. Given to flirtation, over-eating, Creole coffee, and to ogling Deputy Sheriff Carrazas.'"

"Look here, I can listen to no more of that!" Wilson interrupted. "I must find Martin. Never mind reading any more—"

"'Carrazas reciprocates,'" Gambrille went on, his face wrinkling in amusement. "'But whether because of *madame's* personal charms or because she is the owner of the plantation—is not known.'" He folded up the paper carefully and looked up at Wilson. "Yes, your friend went up to the attic. But I can't imagine what has kept him there so long. Something must have happened to him."

Wilson started. "Happened to him!" he gasped. "You mean—"

HE did not stop to hear more. He dashed for the door, ran down the hall and did not stop until he came to the kitchen. Mme. Brack and her husband were still attempting to restore their shattered nerves with rum.

"Where's my friend?" Tom cried. "Where's Martin? What's he doing upstairs? Where is he?"

"Why I thought he'd come down and was in Gambrille's room with

you," Brack said in some surprise. "I heard some one on the perron out there —quite a while back." He pointed through the dining room to the staircase on the outside of the house.

Mme. Brack was staring through the dining room window at that moment. She could see the black silhouette of the perron or staircase which led from the first story gallery up to the second. Her eyes widened as she stared. She gripped her husband's arm, and in a low, almost guttural whisper said:

"See that yonder!"

"See what?" both Brack and Wilson asked.

"Some one was coming down the perron—and—"

"And what? Where'd he go?"

"I don't know. Into the dark—"

"Reckon it's your friend, mister," Brack said.

Wilson turned and ran through the dining room. Brack picked up his lantern, and his imagination fired as well as emboldened by his taffia, he started after Wilson. Perhaps there *was* something to his wife's hallucination.

"No, no, don't go, Brack!" the woman cried in terror. "Let him go! It's his business. 'Tain't ours. We'll all be murdered if we mix into this! Don't go, I'm begging you."

But Brack, throwing off her eager clutch and brushing past her, rushed into the dining room and climbed over the window sill to the gallery, where Wilson was standing. The latter was peering intently across the half acre of weedy littered yard which terminated in the dense wall of moss-hung oaks.

As both men looked, they saw a black form slouching toward them from the darkness.

It was the giant deputy, crouching tensely as he walked as if approaching the house with the utmost caution.

They heard him breathing heavily as he came to them.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### FOOTSTEPS IN THE DARK.

MME. BRACK was waiting for the dawn which seemed beyond an eternity. She yearned for it as one ridden with insomnia and pain yearns for the end of night.

The night was gripped now in silence —not a complete or perfect silence, but one in which there was a suggestion of inchoate sounds like the rhythm in a sea-shell for which there is no palpable cause. Locusts had stopped their shrilling. The marsh birds, thoroughly frightened by the havoc of the night, kept to their hiding places. The wind had died, so that the air hung motionless, damp, oppressive.

Had the wind died before Mme. Brack had heard that moaning in the gloom and shadows upstairs? Her husband had gone up there, and satisfied himself that the moaning, if there had been any, meant nothing. But according to his report he had not continued as far as the attic. Henri Martin had gone up alone.

But what had happened to him?

A peculiar intimation of disaster gripped Mme. Brack. She cared nothing for Henri Martin—or for his fiancée, for that matter. But tragedy lurked in the house. The girl was already a victim. Jaloff had been next. And now, where was Henri Martin?

Finding herself deserted by her husband, Mme. Brack was tortured with the realization that she was alone in the old manse—alone except for that paralyzed old zany Gambrille. There was, of course, the body of Jaloff—just up the hall in a bedroom. And Henri!

And perhaps there were others. A sudden fear gripped her that her house might be peopled with many characters: *madame* herself, the living; Jaloff, the dead; Henri, Gambrille; perhaps the abducted girl whose voice *madame* was now sure she had heard. And beyond these there might be—the Enemy!

Mme. Brack gripped the lantern, clinging to it as if it were the only bit of tangible refuge and strength in that world of moving shadows.

She went to the door of the kitchen, reacting to an impulse to flee out into the night. But the scene out there was as fearsome as her own house—the house in which she had lived since she was born. Broken trees, piles of flotsam, the black bayou, the looming barn, the ghostly precincts of the oaks.

She did not go out. She came back again into her kitchen, circling about like something in a cage.

And it was then, providentially, that her husband returned with Wilson and the deputy. Their entrance should have reassured her—if anything in the world could. But the serious looks on their faces only increased her panic. They were helpless before a hovering terror. "What did you find?" she asked, peering eagerly into Brack's face.

"Bill Carrazas. That's all," Brack said.

THEY came in. Brack made for the taffia jug, his one faithful ally, threw it over his gaunt shoulder and poured a half tumbler.

"Bill just got back from his house," he explained to his wife. "Sent his hired man for the sheriff—and he ought to be here before sun-up—"

"Not until then and maybe a long while later," the deputy corrected.

"Bill was huntin' around out there in the oaks, because he says when he was gettin' back, he seen somethin' walkin' down the perron—kind of a woman or a man, he don't know which."

"That's what I saw!" Mme. Brack cried.

"No. It was before you seen it. What you seen was Bill himself. He says he went up to the second story and down again and then headed off into the grove huntin'. We found him as he was comin' back."

Carrazas caught Wilson's eye. The latter was studying him keenly, suspiciously. And the deputy, somewhat nettled at the frank, blank scrutiny, faced him, spread his legs out, and yanked belligerently at his mustache. "What's eatin' into you, young feller?"

Tom Wilson was caught unawares. He was slow, scatterwitted in his response. "I'm worried about my friend," he said. "He's dropped out of sight for quite a while."

"Well, ask the missus here. She knows everything that's goin' on in this house, except she won't tell."

"Something's happened to that boy!" *madame* burst out. "I'll tell you all that much. He went upstairs—and I know well enough what I heard." She turned to her husband accusingly. "You came down, Pete, without taking any stock in what I said. You left him up there!"

Wilson turned to the door of the hall. "I say! May I have a lantern? I'd like to go up there and look!"

"So would I," said the deputy. The two left the room, and Brack, deliberately taking his time, poured himself another bracer of rum, reached for his lantern and went to the door.

"Don't go, Brack!" his wife cried as before. "The girl was up there, I tell you. And something's happened to

the young man! Don't go—you'll be killed!"

Once again Brack was indifferent to his wife's frantic pleadings. He went out through the big vestibule and up the grand staircase. Mme. Brack—either through a deep conviction that she was going to see something vitally interesting or through anxiety for her husband's safety, clutched at the lamp on the table and hurried out after him.

Wilson and the deputy had already reached the second story. Noticing the open door of Room Twelve—the room which had been assigned to Cosette—they paused to look in, the deputy sweeping it for a moment with his light.

"Some one started buildin' a fire since I was here last," he observed.

"Quite right. Mrs. Brack built it. In fact, we caught her at it," Wilson observed as he hurried on to the next room, continuing his search alone.

He looked into the room where—according to Henri's report—he had been found shut up in an armoire. But there was no trace of his friend there.

Brack and his wife meanwhile arrived on the second story, the former deliberate and skeptical, the latter clutching her lamp, and peering fearfully across its upward shining beams. Her face thrown thus into sharp relief was like a Greek mask carved in the rigid furrows of terror.

DEPUTY CARRAZAS came out. His hands were covered with soot, and in one of them he held up a long limp wet thing like the skin of a black snake.

"What do you make of this, Brack?"

Brack took it, spread it out, squeezed it till it dripped. "It's a stocking," he said.

His wife, meanwhile, pretending not to notice this interruption to their search for Henri Martin, passed on down the hall, staring apprehensively into each separate room.

"A silk stocking," Brack was saying. "My wife don't wear 'em silk like this. It's the girl's stocking."

"Let me have it. I'll show it to Gambrille. He's the puzzle expert. Come on, we're huntin' this boy Martin right now."

They went on down the hall, but paused abruptly when they observed the actions of Mme. Brack.

The fat little woman was standing in the middle of the hall, clutching at the lamp, with a brilliant sparkle of jeweled rings. Her face had blanched so that the rouge stood out like two hectic splotches. Her eyes were staring intently at the ceiling.

There was nothing up there for her to see—except the ceiling festooned with many cobwebs. But the men stood in their tracks and followed her gaze.

"You hear it?" Her whisper carried down the length of the hallway.

"Hear what?" Both men listened. There was a slight scratching like a rat gnawing up there in the attic. Then a thump.

Mme. Brack came running in a frantic waddle toward her husband. He grabbed the lamp which it was quite obvious she could hold no longer.

The deputy left Brack and his wife—the former clinging to the lamp, the latter clinging to her husband. Walking on tiptoe so that he could still listen to the sounds that came from above, Carrazas approached the narrow flight of stairs that led to the attic. Here he cast the circle of his flash upward, moving it up the warped dusty steps, and across the scaly paper of the two narrow walls.

At the top of the stairs there was the picture—which had no dimension of depth—of an old trunk, a frame without its canvas, a chair with torn rattan—all repeated in larger silhouette upon the background of a raftered sloping ceiling. A startled bat skimmed out of a black crevice, flapped in the air, skimmed off on another tack.

Then there came a queer indescribable series of light thuds—that by no stretch of imagination could be likened to the sound of a human being walking.

Mme. Brack fled.

Her husband backed away, his lamp making the shadow of the deputy swing across the hall like a pendulum.

Carrazas stood still, aiming his circle of dim light against the interior of the mansard roof. He waited—having no intention of going up while that footstep, if it could be called a footstep, approached the top of the staircase.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### "I CAN'T TELL!"

COMING out of the last room he had been searching, Tom Wilson saw that picture: Mme. Brack, screaming, rushing off to the grand staircase like a frightened and honking goose; the innkeeper backing away with lamp in hand, ready at a moment's notice to follow his wife in flight; the deputy pointing his flash light up the narrow stairway that led to the attic.

And there was another detail:

A man came groping and staggering down the attic stairs.

His face was swollen, his eyes glassy, his hands fumbling as if prompted by reflexes only, at his open collar and throat.

Tom Wilson, rushing forward and elbowing the inert form of Carrazas out of his way, ran up the steps toward his friend. He scarcely recognized the hapless and wretched youth, who was now like a sleep-walker, still searching in his dreams for his lost sweetheart. And then as the deputy's flash light shot its beams upward, they saw that Henri Martin's throat had a red swollen line across the Adam's apple.

"Lend a hand here, you!" Wilson cried to the deputy, who stood impotent and gaping. "It's my friend. And he's hurt."

"Hey, Brack!" the deputy called. "Lend a hand. The kid's hurt."

By the time that Brack had gathered courage enough to approach the attic stairs, Wilson had the staggering form in his arms, and was carrying him down the rest of the flight.

"Into this room—and on the bed," Wilson said. "Get him a drink."

They half carried the big athletic form, which was now like the body of a broken old man, to the nearest door. It was Room Fourteen—the room which had originally been assigned to Henri and his companion that night. As they pulled aside the mosquito bar and helped him to the bed, he sank backward utterly exhausted, his swollen face a mask of hard-set muscles, like a man with lockjaw.

Brack bustled off for some water at the washstand but found the pitcher empty. "Water isn't what he needs," Wilson said. "Get the rum bottle!"

"And some extra cups!" the deputy added.

Brack left the room, but before he returned Henri struggled up again, turned his glassy eyes toward the deputy and scowled fiercely as if trying to recall the big wind-tanned face, the long wisps of mustaches, the mane of black hair. He was like a man only partly awakened, confusing the dread

bogy of his dream with the living form. He drew away violently, then once more, his hand went to his throat, and he sank back.

"Where is she?" he gasped. "What have they done with her? Who are *you?* What's this place? Where's Tom?"

"Here I am, old man. We found you wandering down the stairs. You're all right now."

Henri looked about the room, his gray forehead wrinkling in perplexity. "This room—"

"We brought you in here, kid," the deputy explained. "You was upstairs. Who tried to choke you? Pull yourself together and tell us."

"Something wound around my neck. I fought. That's all I know—" Then he burst out with a gasp: "Cosette! I heard her! She's in this house! Was I upstairs? Yes, I remember. The attic. She was in the attic and she called to me—"

Wilson had leaped to his feet. "Upstairs!" he cried. "You mean—"

"I heard her moaning. Then she called to me. I was hunting in one of the rooms—when that thing began to tighten around my neck—" He had struggled up once again, first to a sitting posture in the bed, then heavily he dragged himself to the edge. His feet thumped to the floor. He clung to Wilson and lifted himself. "Come on, Tom—quick. She's up there!" He lurched wildly toward the door, banged it open as he fell toward it.

Brack was standing there with the rum bottle.

"TAKE a drink of this first, kid," Carrazas said, snatching the bottle and holding it to Henri's lips.

"Out of my way!" Henri cried. "She's up there—" He staggered and Wilson caught him. At the same moment the big deputy tilted the bottle, pouring the taffia into Henri's mouth as if he were forcing medicine on a child against his will.

Henri stood a moment swaying, the rum dripping from his lips and down his red swollen throat. "Come on!" he gulped. "Cosette—she's in this h o u s e—up there!" He staggered through the door, elbowed Brack out of the way and headed for the staircase.

The deputy took a good swig out of the bottle himself, then: "All right, Brack. Bring the lamp. Looks like the search is about over."

"But his throat!" Wilson exclaimed. "Did you see his throat?"

"Sure, I know. And we may get the same dose. But we'll stick together."

Thus they went after that half-crazed man staggering up the stairs.

They searched the room where Henri had been attacked. Brack held the lamp and stayed at the door. The deputy's flash light skimmed everywhere like marsh fire. Wilson and Henri rummaged wildly among the old trunks, the boxes, the broken chairs, the moth-eaten piles of clothes and curtains.

They searched the adjacent room. They searched every room in the attic, every closet, every trunk. There were slippers, gowns, poke bonnets, calashes a storehouse of worthless costumes that dated as far back as the Louisiana Purchase.

Henri did not pause over a single detail—even though he might have thus discovered a clew. He tossed things wildly about him as if in a desperate hope that he might find Cosette lying there. It was the deputy who was the

first to notice a significant detail: It struck him not through the sense of sight—but of smell.

There was the odor of ether in the room.

And a moment later his flash pointed out a piece of cotton in one corner of the floor.

"She was here, and she was drugged!" he announced triumphantly, holding the cotton up before Brack's lamp.

Brack stared down at it, his eyes popping as if Carrazas had picked up a live moccasin.

Wilson took the piece of cotton, held it to his nose. "I declare!" he cried. "Ether it is!"

"Well it proves you weren't dreamin', anyway," the deputy said to Henri, as the latter paused in his search, exhausted, baffled, half mad. "And this room was right next to the room where you say you were attacked."

"She was calling to me through the wall!" Henri cried, wringing his hands. "And I tried to come to her—"

"Well you come too late," the deputy said. "We've searched everything here except the inside of the shoes. We've searched the whole attic. And the girl ain't here!"

BAFFLED, they went down stairs and in the hall they found Mme. Brack.

"You're the one who knows the truth!" Henri cried accusingly. "Here we are hunting around like blind bats—when you hold the precious secret." He went to her, pointing his trembling finger at her face. "You tell us—here and now, why you lied this evening. What were you trying to hide? Who are you trying to shield!"

The deputy stepped between them, but he seemed uncertain as to just which side to take in the conflict. Finally he turned to the woman. "It's pretty near mornin', Mrs. Brack, and we're just where we was last night. Why don't you give us a lead?"

Mme. Brack started to knead her jeweled hands. "I can't tell!" she pleaded. "I'll be killed! I've told you all that I'll be killed."

"Some one threatened to kill you—if you didn't keep your mouth shut. Is that it?" Henri asked, shoving the deputy out of the way. "And you don't care what happens to that unfortunate little girl as long as you can protect yourself and this house and this husband of yours!"

*Madame* cast an imploring look at Brack, as if begging him to help her.

"Pete, don't make me tell!" she whimpered. "Wait till the sheriff comes. Wait till there's a posse here. I'll run away. I can't stand this dark house any more. I'm afraid of—I don't know what it is, but I'm afraid!" she went to her husband's arms. "We'll all be killed, Pete, like he says. And I'm tryin' to protect you. Don't ask me any more. Just believe me!"

Still holding the trembling woman to him, Brack turned to the others. "Look here, gents. You can see she's afraid of somethin' and it ain't her imagination. My wife don't imagine things, I'll say that much. Why can't we leave her out of it? I'm askin' you man to man, please don't make her tell."

Henri and Wilson darted a quick glance at each other and then at the innkeeper. Deputy Carrazas, somewhat slower in his thought processes, followed their look, and all three stared at the gaunt, serious, raw-boned face.

"*You* say that!" Henri cried in a rage. "You beg us not to make her

tell, just so you can save your rotten hide—" He paused abruptly, his face suddenly livid. "I see it now! *You don't want her to tell what she knows!*"

He went at the man with outstretched hands as if to tear him to pieces. But both the deputy and Wilson stopped him.

At the same moment there came a piping and importunate voice from the depths of the house—somewhere in the direction of Gambrille's room.

The deputy hurried down the stairs, and a moment later called back to Henri and the others.

"Come on down, folks. Gambrille says he's just figured out somethin' which will curdle our blood. Come on."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE FINGER OF SUSPICION.

TOM WILSON'S earnest pleading checked his friend's homicidal impulse—at least for the moment. The tensity of the situation in that upstairs hallway was broken.

The innkeeper and his wife, thankful for their deliverance, slipped off into the latter's room. The other three—Henri, Tom and the deputy—entered Gambrille's room.

"All right, Mr. Gambrille," the deputy said sarcastically. "Who's guilty and where's the girl at?"

Gambrille smiled his laconic Voltaire smile and shot back his own question: "Was *madame* right about hearing the girl's moaning in the attic?"

"I'll say she was!" the deputy answered. "Which I suppose you'll be drawin' a diagram showin' she's up there now. Which she ain't."

"And this young gentleman with the red throat and the glassy eyes?" he asked. "May I have the bare details?"

"Some one strangles a cat, then tries the same medicine on the kid. Is that bare enough?" Carrazas answered.

"Cosette was calling to me!" Henri was repeating over and over again—"from the next room! She called my name! I couldn't help!"

"And needless to say when help did come she was gone." Gambrille nodded his head sagaciously. "Let me see." He drew a few lines on a paper. "This is the attic. A window leads out through the mansard roof. Below it is a dove-cote on the second story gallery. The Unknown took the girl down by that route, of course."

"And from there—" Henri and Wilson asked eagerly.

"I believe some one was seen on the perron that leads from the second to the first gallery?"

"Sure!" the deputy agreed. "And then out in the oak grove, but we've already been there. I thought you had something definite to tell us. All you're doing is listenin' to us."

"What I wanted to say is this," Gambrille rejoined. "There is some one in this house who has plotted a fiendish crime, and has worked it out to the minutest detail. Thus far we have not found a single clew—"

"Hold on, now!" the deputy said triumphantly. "I been huntin' for clews. Here's one." He held out the wet, partially burned silk stocking. "I found this upstairs in Room Twelve. The room which was the girl's. A fire had been built there and these gents here say they caught the missus building it."

Gambrille took the stocking, gave it a cursory examination and asked: "You put the fire out, of course? Good. When the sheriff comes and we have a little time at our disposal I will examine the ashes. Anything that *madame*

tried to burn can be revealed—even if it were paper."

ALL three men uttered a protest. "Bein' you're such a great detective, Mr. Gambrille!" the deputy cried impatiently, "I wish you'd just tell me this: How can this girl be shuffled around from one room to another without our catchin' a whiff of the criminal? How can he gumshoe around here without our hearin' him, or seein' nothin' of him, except somethin' that looks like a ghost floatin' around yonder in the oaks?"

Deliberately the old man in the wheel chair unfolded a paper: "I have written down here: 'At about ten minutes to three Mme. Brack, Martin and Wilson are in the manse. Jaloff is riding in a sawbuck saddle, dead. The deputy is accounted for—'

"That leaves only one unaccounted for—Brack."

Henri and Wilson looked at the old fellow sharply. "Then it's true—Brack—" Tom burst out.

"One moment. When Mr. Martin here goes upstairs and hears the girl calling to him, Brack follows him. And then comes back later with the uncertain tidings that Henri had probably found no one, but was rummaging in the attic."

"I'll be ding-helled!" the deputy exclaimed. "Brack could of really *followed* him into the attic. But no! I don't believe it."

Gambrille went on deliberately:

"Mme. Brack having consummate faith in her renegade of a husband may be convinced that Jaloff is the guilty one. *Madame* feared Jaloff not only because of his looks, but because of those seizures which may have impressed her as something supernatural. Even now she may believe his seizure was something in the nature of a trance. None of us is competent to say with authority that Jaloff is dead.

"When Mr. Martin called for help, having discovered Wilson in the armoire, the deputy went up with his electric torch—"

"Yes, that's right. I get that straight," the deputy agreed.

"But Brack did not follow," Gambrille said, looking up quizzically.

"He came behind me—arrived right after we'd discovered there weren't no such thing as a body in the clothes hanger," the deputy objected.

"Ah, yes, but in the meantime, what was he doing?" He referred to a diagram of the house. "Could he not have come up the back stairs, got Wilson's inert form to another hiding place, perhaps the very next room, then made his appearance? Finally, at another time, could he not have dragged the inert form to Pappabotte Bayou and rolled it into the hyacinths?"

"Where is this scoundrel now?" Wilson cried. "I'll make him pay for that!"

"We left him with his wife," the deputy said. "She wanted some one to stay and protect her."

"Hold on now, gentlemen!" old Gambrille said hurriedly. "Don't spoil the whole game. Say nothing to him—"

But Henri had dashed out of the door, with Wilson following on his heels.

When they got to the room where they had left Mme. Brack and her husband, they found her standing in the middle of the floor, nervously stroking the bobtailed cat that was curled up, purring in her arms.

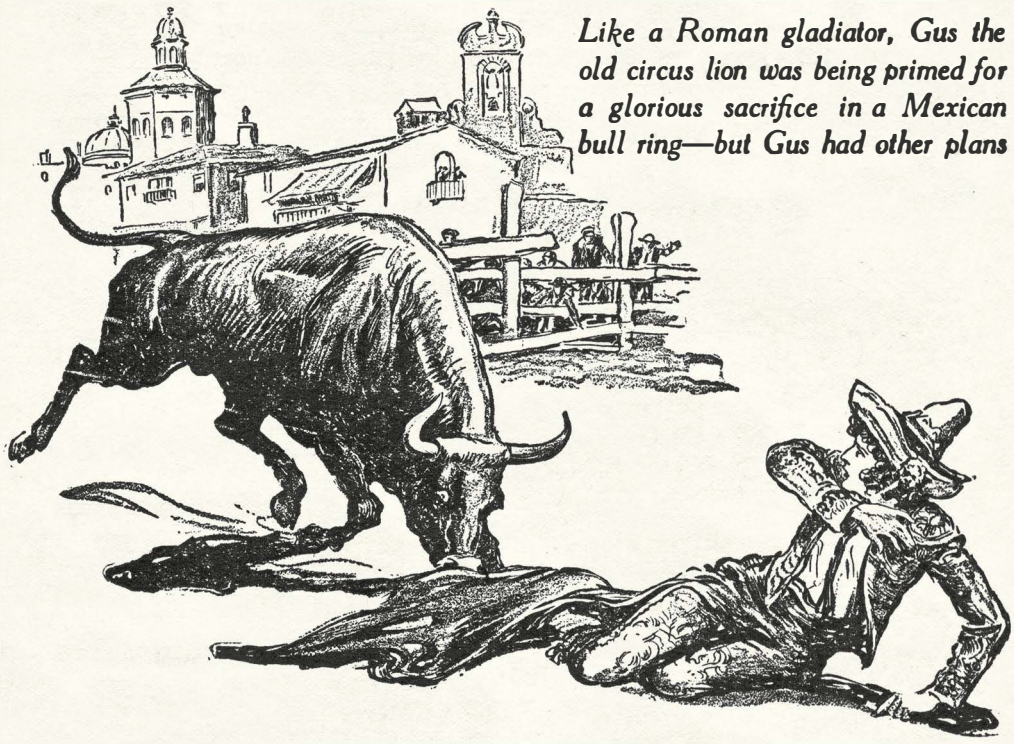
The innkeeper, however, had disappeared.

**TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.**

# A Pension for Gus

**By JOHN A. THOMPSON**

*Like a Roman gladiator, Gus the old circus lion was being primed for a glorious sacrifice in a Mexican bull ring—but Gus had other plans*



*Carlota fell as the bull lunged*

GUS felt low. Old age had handed him a raw deal. Here he was still trouping when long ago he should have been retired to some home for ancient and decrepit circus beasts. His roar lacked the old enthusiasm. His yellow mane was slightly mangy and his skin hung on him in folds like a blanket thrown loosely over a skeleton.

" Nothing fierce about the old lion now," Gus might have said about himself as he surveyed what he could of Mexico from his cage which stood in one corner of the bull ring in a wide open Helldorado of a border town across the Rio Grande.

Gus had come to Mexico as one of the stellar attractions of Armand Fiddle's circus, but the show was attached for debts and Fiddle fled back to Texas.

The owner's departure had been quickly followed by that of the rest of the old lion's friends. Foster's Flashing Equestrians, the Three Thorpes, Alonzo the Human Skeleton, " a natural X-ray, every bone showing, showing every bone," the Fat Lady, and the rest of them drifted away, one by one.

The red wagons, the big top, the live stock and other seizable property remained impounded in the walled courtyard behind the city jail, to be knocked down for what they would

bring under the gavel of a dark Mexican auctioneer. But Gus had been spared the ignominy of public sale. Don Luis Oubierto saw in him a chance to provide the patrons of his bull ring with a novelty—a fight between a lion and a bull.

So Don Luis pasted bright lithographs on every dirty wall in town announcing the new stupendous attraction. At the bottom of the posters, in smaller type, was the information that Carlota Felicitas Mendoza y Oubierto, the girl matador of Mexico, would also do her stuff on that gala occasion.

Carlota was pretty and she made a young and entrancing figure in the colorful costume of a brave matador. As a bull-fighter she was a laugh; for, being Señor Oubierto's only daughter, the *señor* took no chances on having her get hurt. All she did was prance around in front of a tired old bull, flaunting her huge red cape in its face, and then bow gracefully to the crowd which always applauded her daring. While the likelihood of an accident was small, nevertheless it took more nerve than most girls possessed.

Gus was not looking forward with eagerness to his forthcoming fight. He was too old for such didoes. In his circus days he had seen men don gloves and smash each other about the prize ring for money and a vague something called a crown. His own kind fought only when they were hungry, or perhaps for love in the mating season. And the conclusion Gus's leonine intellect reached was that, by and large, lions were probably more civilized in many respects than human beings. Certainly they were more sensible.

Suddenly the old lion's nostrils quivered. He caught the scent of meat and raised his tawny head to sniff again. Out of aging watery eyes he glimpsed a young woman walking toward his cage and perceived that she carried a parcel.

As the girl came closer Gus admired her lithe beauty. She moved with the grace of a leopard and was quite strong and capable, for all her slimness. Her eyes and her hair were the sleek blue-black of a raven's wing; her skin was olive.

"Good morning, old fellow!" exclaimed Carlota, unwrapping the parcel and tossing several chunks of beef into the cage. "Napoleon said full stomachs are the strength of fighting men, and I suppose that goes for lions, too."

Gus chewed the meat noisily with his almost toothless gums. A bond of sympathy had sprung up between the old beast and the young girl who came to feed him every day. Somehow, subtly, girl and beast were friends. And both understood it. Carlota was not afraid of him. Gus liked her for that. She seemed to sense his loneliness, and she took the place of his former companions in Armand Fiddle's one-ring circus. In fact, she was nicer than any one in the circus, and prettier.

Carlota leaned forward and stroked a thick paw that hung through the bars.

"Good luck, old-timer," she said. "To-morrow we perform for the multitude."

THE arena was jammed with a restless, excited mob of Mexicans and a few sight-seeing Americans from across the border. Tickets had sold at one and two dollars. A dollar ticket for the sunny side of the ring, but it cost two dollars to sit in the shade.

Gus's big crate-like cage, with its heavy wooden slats for bars was wheeled into the center of the open

arena. A bull was let out from the pens. One side of the cage was carefully raised by attendants sitting safely on top of it. Gus understood what was wanted of him, so he lumbered clumsily out of his prison and opened his gaping mouth in a roar. The crowd cheered.

Gus ambled over to the bull, sniffed at a safe distance and turned away. After all, the thing was too silly. At his age what did he want to be charging into peaceful bulls for? He was willing to rise up on his hind legs and dance his awkward waltz that had brought down the house in his early trouping days, but to battle this nervous bull fidgeting a few yards away from him was dumb. Just plain dumb. He had no quarrel with the bull. Besides, he hadn't any teeth to bite him with anyway.

The crowd yelled for action. Attendants tried to shoo Gus toward the bull, to shoo the bull toward Gus. Gus could not be bothered, and when he turned suddenly to face the attendants, the latter ran clear to the end of the bull ring before they stopped for breath. Good clowning that, thought Gus, and the spectators apparently thought so too, for they laughed uproariously and stamped their feet. A few shouted in derision.

One or two more attempts were made to get Gus and the bull together, but the lion definitely decided he was too old to make a monkey of himself for a lot of yawping human beings.

Gus was thankful for that as he looked about and saw Carlota, resplendent in her gaudy costume, a tall, silver-spangled sombrero set jauntily on her head and tied beneath her chin with flowing ribands of red silk.

She stood inside the arena fence, clapping her hands and laughing. Beside her was her father, pompous, red-faced, angry. He intended giving his customers a thrilling battle for their money, not an exhibition of low comedy on the part of these two creatures he had widely advertised as mean and ferocious beasts.

Still, there was nothing he could do. The animals wouldn't fight and the crowd wouldn't stop laughing. With as much dignity as he could command he ordered Gus driven back to his cage. The bull was chased out of the arena.

That part of the spectacle being over, the crowd in the grand stand set up a new cry. "Carlota! Señorita Carlota! The Mendoza girl!" they shouted. "She can put on a show anyhow."

"Bah!" snapped Don Luis Oubierto. Then turning to his daughter, "Are you ready, minx? A little action this time, too, to take the bad taste of that stuffed lion out of my mouth. I don't believe he has energy enough left in him to crush a horsefly."

CARLOTA'S eyes twinkled gayly. She was ready. She had no fear. She knew the kind of ancient, tired old bulls her father let into the ring when she was performing. She never killed them. They were never fast enough to so much as scratch her with their horns.

As far as she was concerned, it was a musty joke by now, but her father's patrons seemed to find it ever new and enjoy it afresh each time.

Carlota moved gracefully to the center of the ring. An expectant hush fell over the crowd as they waited. The door of the bull pen swung open, and a snorting, charging black beast plunged out—an unleashed, wild fury. Carlota gave a gasp of horror. Her father shouted, but too late, and the people tensed on their wooden benches,

powerless to avert the tragedy that seemed imminent.

Some one in the crowd recognized the bull.

"*Madre!*" he screamed. "El Majestico...the most savage animal ever raised on the Oubierto ranch!"

There were more shouts, advice, cries of terror. It wasn't the shouts of the populace Carlota wanted, but courage in her heart. Her father was screaming frenzied orders to have the bull captured, shot, anything to save his daughter from the mad onslaught of those lowered sharp horns.

Like a charging meteor the bull shot forward, straight toward the red cape about Carlota's shoulders. Fire blazed in the creature's beady, bloodshot eyes. By a miracle Carlota managed to sidestep the first vicious plunge.

Carlota was standing near the cage that held Gus. The old lion sensed her danger with that strange instinct for such things that circus animals develop. The girl backed toward the cage. Perhaps if she could reach it, she could leap for the roof. The attendants on the top of the cage saw what she intended. One of them lay flat on his stomach and stretched his arms downward for her to grasp.

Carlota could almost feel the bull's hot breath behind her. She jumped for the helping hands, missed, and fell full length on the ground. Momentum carried the bull past the cage, but he turned abruptly and started back to gore and trample the prostrate girl.

SUDDENLY the caged lion let out a roar, vibrant with defiance and anger. Summoning all the strength in his old body, Gus pitched forward, shattering the strong wooden slats to splinters with his shoulders, and leaped straight for the bull's back as the creature plunged past again. The lion's weight struck the bull behind the shoulders, swerving him from his course, staggering him.

Instinctively, Gus sought to bite into the quivering flesh of the bull as he slid from his precarious hold on the beast. The old lion was toothless. His jaws made no mark, but his claws were still sharp and efficient.

The unexpected attack gave Carlota a chance to scramble to her feet, a chance for life. In three strides she reached the cage and was pulled to safety as the bull wheeled and made a desperate attempt to gore his new enemy.

Gus was fighting now. First it had been for Carlota. Now it was for life as his breath came with increasing difficulty and he dodged and clawed, ducked the horns and sought the haunches of the whirling bull.

Gus was doing his best, but he couldn't hold out much longer. His movements were slower. If he failed to dodge just once those horns would rip him wide open, and he knew it.

Around and around milled the two animals. A horseman galloped toward them. Others followed him. The leader was swinging a Mexican horsehair lariat. Out flew the loop, perfect and true. The rope settled about the bull's neck and in the arena a trained cow pony slid to a sitting halt. Other ropes were thrown. The bull was captured.

As the dust cloud cleared, Gus, panting, looked about him. A great cheering broke from the crowd. "*Viva el leon!* Hurrah for Gus!" shouted the mob.

For a lion Gus felt very happy. Once more the old trouper was listening to the plaudits of the multitude. It was music in his ancient ears and, re-

membering a trick that had once been popular, he sat down on his haunches and lifted his right forepaw, waving it at the crowd much like a shaggy, overgrown St. Bernard asking some one to shake hands with him.

The shouts broke out anew. Gus turned and ambled up the runway to his broken cage. Carlota had leaped to the ground. "Thanks, old fellow," she called out to him. "You saved my life that time."

And from a discreet distance away Don Luis Oubierto's grateful words, "Yes, and for that I shall order a pension for Gus. Good food, good quarters, and nothing to do but sleep in the shade and dream of his native jungles."

Gus watched the attendants timidly and hurriedly nailing up the broken bars on his wooden cage. A pension for Gus, he was thinking. He blinked his eyes and sighed restfully.

THE END.

## *The Inca Gold Chain*

CUZCO, Peru, was the capital of the Incas at the time of the Spanish conquest. All the world knows of the immense quantities of gold and silver taken from the Incas by the Spaniards and of the many stories concerning the treasures that they did not get. Much money has been spent since that day in seeking these treasures and some have been found from time to time, but no man has ever uncovered the Inca Gold Chain.

According to tradition this chain, made from solid gold, surrounded the main plaza at Cuzco. This plaza was five hundred feet long and probably about that wide, so the chain must have been at least two thousand feet in length. It was wrought into links which were as big around as the ordinary man's wrist and each link was about a foot in length.

When the Spaniards sacked Atahualpa they marched upon Cuzco and the Incas immediately stripped the town of most of the gold and silver. It probably required hundreds of men to carry the great chain away. The Incas and allied Indians had a habit of throwing their gold treasure into lakes and it is thought the treasures of Cuzco were thrown into Lake Urcos. While some treasure has been recovered from lakes, the great chain has never seen the light of day since it disappeared from the plaza. All sorts of contrivances have been used at Lake Urcos, which is hundreds of feet deep in places, but without success. At one time a syndicate was organized to tunnel through a mountain and drain the lake, as the sacred Lake of Guatavita of Colombia was drained. Although they were capitalized for five million dollars, they finally agreed that to drain such a deep lake would be too expensive.

When Lake Guatavita was drained the cost was high and not near so much labor involved as would take at Lake Urcos. Even after the Colombian lake was drained, the bottom was covered with a mass of liquid mud, which the engineers were unable to dispose of. Dredging in this mud, however, brought up many gold images and coins, so the great Gold Chain of Cuzco may be lying in the mud of Lake Urcos awaiting some enterprising man to come along and salvage it.

*Ray C. Endicott.*

There was a vague, huddled something down there, clothed in sodden silk

# Red Herring

**A Novelette**

***With a Fake Ruby and a Fat Lady, Leith Upsets High Society in His Hunt for the Cleverest Crook of Them All***

**By Erle Stanley Gardner**

## CHAPTER I

### The Society Criminal

LESTER LEITH, reposing in his easy chair, ankles crossed, an indolent cigarette in his lips, regarded the police spy who posed as his valet, and grinned.

"But, Scuttle, why should I interest myself in the missing Madison necklace?"

"This crime is unique, sir."

Lester Leith sighed.

"In what way? I don't want to get interested, so just answer briefly."

Lester claimed not to be interested in the crime, but Scuttle knew that he was. And he knew that Lester was out to pull off another coup when Leith gave a fat lady a fake ruby and set her up in high society. But he couldn't guess what dizzy antics there were yet to come.

Don't miss this thrilling, hilarious novelette in next week's DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY.

# Argonotes

## The Readers' Viewpoint

MAKING Chicago safe for Erle Stanley Gardner:

Chicago, Ill.

Sometimes when we haven't anything to do, I look in back of the book, and oh, what a surprise I get, to find about five persons nagging my authors. But I don't mind, because I know that the ARGOSY can't satisfy us all at the same time. So please be patient and we all will get our stories.

Also, I would suggest bringing Mr. Erle Stanley Gardner out of the desert and making him give the ARGOSY a real gangster story, all about Chicago. He has clear sailing now—Mr. Al Capone is gone and Mr. Gardner can leave all his artillery in the desert. Tell him it is safe in Chicago now. Why not make it a serial? Not saying that I don't like his desert stories, but I've read some of his gangster stories and find them excellent. Please keep up the good work.

JOHN MADEJ.

A GREAT relaxation:

Rochester, Minn.

I have been a reader of ARGOSY for many years, and I find it a great relaxation from my work to sit down to a good adventure story.

I like all kinds of stories, especially the science-fiction kind. I often wonder if Ray Cummings and Starzl are only fiction writers or modern prophets.

DR. R. S. RAWSON.

AN outspoken fan:

Eaton Rapids, Mich.

My especial liking is for fantastic stories. My favorite author is A. Merritt, whose "Face in the Abyss," "The Snake Mother," and especially "The Ship of Ishtar," will live long in my memory. I like the ideas upon which Ray Cummings writes his stories, but I do not like his jerky style and standardized plots. Fred MacIsaac surprised me favorably with his ice age tale. I like my fantastic stories convincingly written or not at all. For that reason the withdrawal of Edgar Rice Burroughs from your pages was a disappointment to me.

I like all types of stories. My favorite series characters are *Gillian Hazeltine,* his brain-brother *Peter the Brazen,* and *Bellow Bill.* "Captain Judas" was an exceptionally fine story. W. Wirt is terrible; he must be some relation to the editor to get his stories printed. Theodore Roscoe is good, although I have an instinctive dislike for orange-peel moons. I like H. Bedford-Jones if he'd leave *John Solomon* alone. His "Escape!" was good, but where was the plot?

Thanking you for keeping Edgar Franklin from committing any more such crimes as "Moving Day," I am,

Yours sincerely,

EARLE MILLER.

SPEAKING of ARGOSY quality—J. Allan Dunn has just been asked by Prof. Herbert Carroll of the University of Minnesota, Educational Psychology Department, for permission to use a selection from "White Rock Trail" as a literature test for high school students. The selection began "The wind was rising with sunset . . ." (p. 590, Oct. 17 issue).

KNOWS from experience that his wife—

Long Beach, Calif.

It has taken almost fifteen years to get this on the way to you. In that period of time I don't believe I have missed more than five issues. I used to smuggle them in as a kid and spend a glorious night reading in bed after the folks had gone to sleep. They kicked about that and said I would ruin my eyes, so I was allowed to "sit up." It was mighty seldom I rolled in till the last page was turned.

Now I never put it down till I am finished, for I know from experience that my wife would get her hands on it and I would have to sit around and twiddle my thumbs till she put it down where I could grab it again.

Just keep the old magazine going as it always has. I have never yet failed to find enjoyment in each issue. The old authors are good, all of

them, and so are the new ones. You keep a good variety of stories all the time and if I should happen to go sour on one kind for a while there is always another to sweeten up my disposition.

D. D. CUTTING.

WALKED two miles for every copy in the pioneering days:

Chicago, Ill.

Have been a constant reader and booster for ARGOSY from away back about 1885. Used to walk two miles to our nearest neighbor in Nebraska to borrow their ARGOSY (we could not afford to subscribe at that time, being new settlers) and read the splendid stories contained therein. I do not know of any magazine that has kept up its standard of facts and fiction as well as the ARGOSY.

Incidentally, I wish to mention there was a story written and printed in the ARGOSY about four years ago about my father, "Hank Crawford," who shot Plummer, the road agent chief, in Montana. This story was true in every particular just as my father told it. He shot Plummer in the arm, which dethroned him as the quickest man on the draw in the West—at that time—although it was just luck that my dad got in the first shot.

FRANK F. CRAWFORD.

## YOUR CHOICE COUPON

*Editor,* ARGOSY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

**The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:**

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12-19

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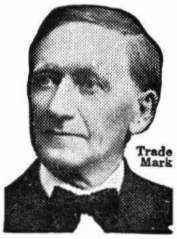


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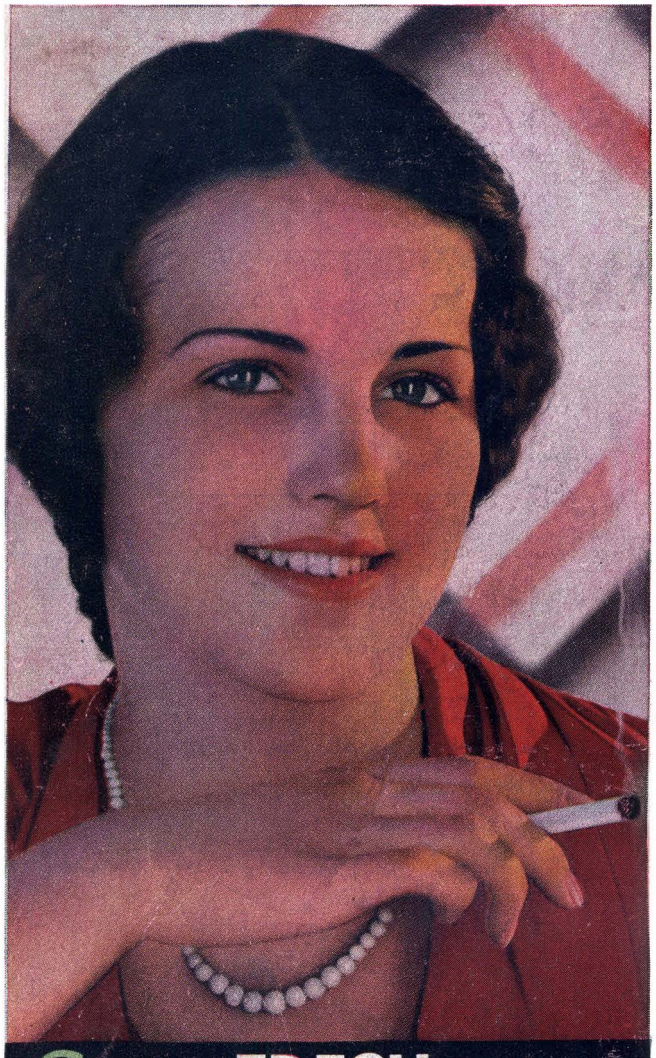

# *This year you can give* FRESH *cigarettes*

NEVER before at Christmas could you give what you can send to friends this year—because this is the first Christmas of Camel Cigarettes in the Camel Humidor Pack.

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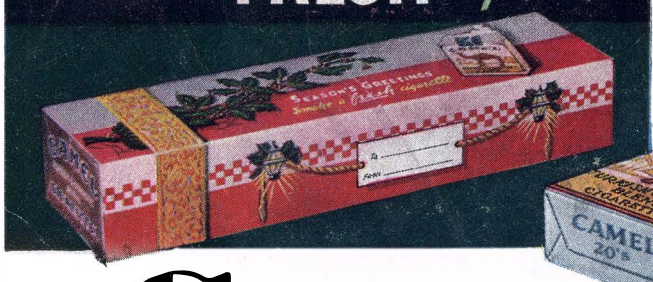
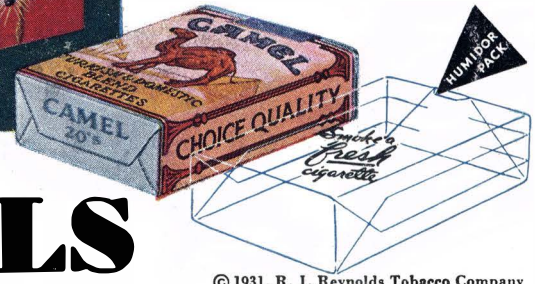
Smoke a FRESH cigarette




# CAMELS

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