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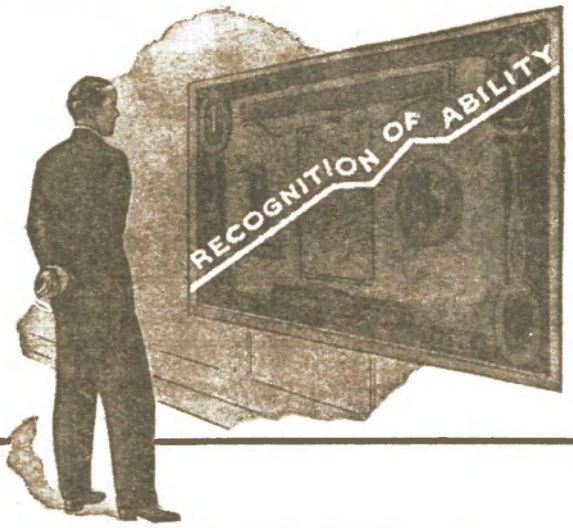

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Cover by Rudolph Belarski

Illustrating A Punt, A Pass, and A Prayer

This magazine is on sale every Tuesday

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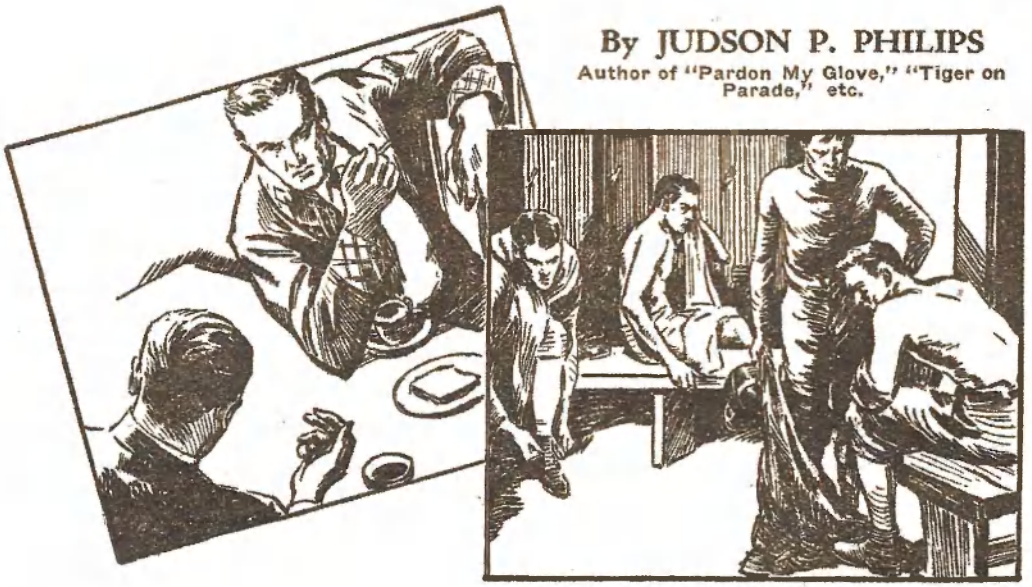


By JUDSON P. PHILIPS
Author of "Pardon My Glove," "Tiger on Parade," etc.

A Punt, A Pass, and A Prayer

Jim Ellis, son of Buck the Great, was a gridiron natural; he couldn't miss. Only Jim hated football; he couldn't pass, or punt, and he didn't want to pray. And Chick Merrill knew it meant his coaching job if he didn't turn Jim into the sensation of the year. . . . An exciting novel of conflict off and on the field

CHAPTER I

THREE WRONG GUESSES

IT WAS a suggestive song. The girl sang it with a roll of the eyes and sway of the hips. Jim Lester, sitting at a corner table by himself, thought that it wasn't so hot. There was something routine about the girl's gestures and inflections that suggested that she had sung the same song in the same way a hundred times. It was mechanical and tired-sounding; but the rest of the customers seemed to be eating it up.

It was really the customers in Ryan's Place who interested Jim Lester.

He wouldn't have walked across the street to hear Miss Moon Marlowe. As if, he told himself, anyone could have been christened Moon Marlowe! No, it was the two salesmen at the bar who nudged each other and spoke in low undertones as they listened to Miss Marlowe performing; it was the garage mechanic from Eastland out to give his girl a good time and apparently embarrassed by the pseudo-biological allusions in Miss Marlowe's number; it was the little broad-shouldered man whose head seemed to sprout out of his shoulders with no neck at all and whose hair was clipped tight to his skull; it was the four gangsterish-looking men with patent leather hair who sat at a table very close to the dance floor and drank their liquor straight; it was these people who in-

Jim hit that dummy with all the venom that he had been storing up in him for weeks

terested Jim Lester and brought him to Ryan's Place on this particular warm September evening.

Jim Lester sat with his feet propped up on an adjoining chair. The smoke from his bulldog pipe added to the thick blue haze which already filled the room. He wore a pair of unpressed gray slacks and a dark brown tweed jacket. The initiated could have told you that the dark blue and gold stripes of his tie were the colors of Eastland College. His eyes were gray and steady, and crinkled up at the corners when he smiled, which he did quite often—a boyish, unaffected smile. His hair was black and wiry, and five minutes after the most vigorous brushing would be once more in a state of bristling disarray.

People interested Jim Lester because, when he graduated from Eastland, which feat would be accomplished in another three years, he was going to be a writer.

He liked to sit in some sort of out-of-the-way place like this joint of Ryan's and speculate about the people he saw. Take Miss Moon Marlowe, for example. She was pretty—small and blonde, with a pert upturned nose, laughing eyes, and a very satisfactory figure. Outside of Ryan's place they advertised her as "that glamorous star of screen and radio." Actually her name was probably Minnie Flynn and she was in all likelihood augmenting the income which her mother made taking in washing to help support six little brothers and sisters. She had probably never been west of Hoboken or nearer to a radio station than the Music Hall.

The four gangsterish-looking men with patent leather hair were probably perfectly respectable business men from the nearby city of Troy out on a binge. The man without any neck and the shaved head, who looked like an escaped convict or a professional wrestler, probably ran a dairy farm or was a veterinary. You couldn't be wrong about the two salesmen. You just couldn't be wrong about that! And Jim knew the garage mechanic from Eastland. He was probably playing the role of man-about-town and telling his girl that if she thought Miss Marlowe's songs were a little rough, she ought to go to Leon and Eddie's on Fifty-second Street sometime. Jim knew that the me-

chanic had been to Leon and Eddie's because he had talked about it steadily for three years.

MISS MARLOWE finished her song and was greeted by thunderous applause from the two salesmen and the four gangsterish-looking men. The garage mechanic's acclaim was a trifle more sheepish. The man with the shaved head acted as though he hadn't heard the song at all. He sat staring expressionlessly into his beer.

Miss Marlowe started across the floor toward the bar. Out of the spotlight, the rouge on her lips seemed to be very thick and the vivacious expression on her face had changed to one of boredom and fatigue. Just as she passed the table where the four men sat, one of them reached out and took hold of her by the wrist. Jim nodded to himself knowingly. They would offer to buy her a drink. She would accept. They would tell a few risqué stories and think they were having a high old time.

But Miss Marlowe didn't sit down. In fact she seemed to be trying to extricate herself from the hold of the man with the patent leather hair.

"Come on, baby, sit down. You don't think I'm goin' to bite you, do you?"

Miss Marlowe evidently thought something of the sort, because she looked around, a little frightened, and increased her efforts to free herself. The man with the patent leather hair gave her arm a quick little jerk so that she sat down abruptly on his lap.

Miss Marlowe gave his face a vigorous slap.

He had his arm firmly around her waist now and there was no way for her to escape. Jim Lester looked around with a faint sense of uneasiness. The two salesmen at the bar were laughing heartily at the scene. Jim's mechanic friend was much too engrossed in his girl to notice anything. The man with the shaved head still stared hopelessly into his beer. But Jim noticed that the piano player had taken one quick look and beaten a hasty retreat into the men's room. The bartender was earnestly polishing glasses and very pointedly not observing anything.

There could be no mistaking the genuineness of the distress mirrored on Miss Marlowe's face.

Jim sighed and pushed away his glass of Coca Cola. He untangled his long legs and stood up, slipping his pipe into the pocket of his coat. There was such a thing as getting too fresh, even with a girl like Moon Marlowe. He sauntered across to the table where the girl was struggling in the grip of the man with the patent leather hair.

He gave the man the most winning of smiles. "Look, fellows, you're riding pretty high, aren't you?" he asked.

One of the other men looked up at Jim, and Jim suddenly had a queer tight feeling in the pit of his stomach. The man had narrow, close-set black eyes, and there was no trace of humor in them, although he was smiling.

"Did you hear that, Greek?" said the man. "He thinks we been drinkin' too much."

Greek looked up.

"Run along, kid," he said, almost pleasantly.

"I guess if Miss Marlowe doesn't want to sit down, she doesn't have to," said Jim steadily.

"Did you hear that, Greek?" said the man with the close-set eyes. "He says she don't have to sit down if she don't want to."

Jim felt the palms of his hands growing slightly damp. If these were four business men from Troy, they were pretty darn hard-boiled.

"Scram!" said the man with the patent leather hair. This time there was nothing pleasant about his tone of voice at all.

"I hate to butt into something that's none of my business," said Jim, "but I'm afraid you'll have to let Miss Marlowe go." He reached out and took hold of the one called Greek by the arm.

Then things happened very quickly.

THE one with the close-set eyes jumped suddenly to his feet and his chair went over backwards with a clatter. His dark double-breasted coat was open and Jim saw a shoulder holster. They *were* gangsters! But he didn't let go of Greek's arm. Close-set Eyes now had a gun in his hand. Greek released Miss Marlowe who ran toward the bar. Greek stood up.

"Don't be a sap," he said in a lazy voice. "Put away that rod. I'll take care of this monkey." With his free hand he reached for a beer bottle on the table.

Jim suddenly realized that this was desperately serious. He let go of Greek's arm, and started to swing a right to the jaw. Simultaneously the bottle moved toward Jim's skull. At the same moment something else moved with incredible swiftness. It was the man with the shaved head. He was not quite quick enough to stop that bottle from connecting with Jim's temple; but he did manage to check the force of the blow sufficiently to save Jim from a serious injury. Jim saw a great explosion of bright lights. But just before he passed out he remembered thinking that the man with the shaved head had moved awfully quickly for a dairy farmer.

. . . Jim opened his eyes. He was lying on a leather couch in what he guessed must be Ryan's private office. A cold wet towel was draped over his forehead. The man with the shaved head and Moon Marlowe were leaning anxiously over him.

"Feeling better, kid?" asked the man with the shaved head.

Jim tried to raise himself up on his elbows and then closed his eyes very tightly for a moment. "I've got kind of a headache," he said with a grin. "I guess I must've been wrong about those four guys. I thought they were just four business men out on a tear."

"Wrong!" The man with the shaved head laughed mirthlessly. "That was Greek Leonides. Just about the most dangerous hoodlum out of Alcatraz."

"Boy, I guess I owe you plenty!" said Jim.

"Never mind that," said the man with the shaved head. "If you can move, we'd better get out of here before those cops come in here asking questions and taking your name."

"What cops?" Jim asked.

"Those two guys at the bar were Federal dicks," said the man with the shaved head. "They were trailing him—waiting for a chance to pick him up. We don't want them spreading the name of the son of the president of Eastland College all over the newspapers."

"So you know who I am!" said Jim a little weakly. Federal cops! He could have sworn— He looked suspiciously at the shaven-headed dairy farmer. "Say, who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Pug Jordan, the new assistant football coach at Eastland," said the shaven-headed one. "And we're getting out of here." He helped Jim to his feet.

"Wait," said Jim. He turned almost appealing to Moon Marlowe. "Look," he said, "I've got to be right about something. Tell me, your name isn't really Moon Marlowe, is it? I mean, nobody was ever really christened with a name like that."

"My name is Sally Brown," said the girl. "And I want to thank you for . . ."

"Not another word," said Jim, holding up a silencing hand. "You've saved my self-respect. I'll be back one of these days when my headache is over."

"The hell you will!" said Pug Jordan, dragging Jim toward the door. "Don't you know this place is on the college black list? If you weren't a football player . . ."

"Don't worry," said Jim over his shoulder to the girl, "I'll be back."

CHAPTER II

MEET THE COACH

JIM gingerly leaned his head back against the leather upholstery of Jordan's Ford roadster. He was wondering what would happen if his head were suddenly to split wide open and expose what-

ever gray matter he had to the soft September moonlight.

After the first rapid spurt away from Ryan's Place, Jordan had brought the car down to a slow, steady pace, for which Jim was grateful. The bullet-headed assistant coach drove in silence for a while, his eyes fixed on the ribbon of white light which the car sent ahead on the concrete highway.

Jim raised his hand and tenderly felt the large lump which had sprouted just back of the hairline on his forehead. "I guess if you hadn't moved as quickly as you did, that bird would really have conked me," he said.

"I guess he would," said Jordan. "Those guys play for keeps."

"When I saw that one guy pull a gun, I thought it was all over." Jim looked at Jordan and smiled a wry smile. "I'd be pretty grateful," he said, "if my family didn't hear about this. Not that they'd blame me or anything, but they'd be kind of worried."

"There's no reason why I should tell them," said Jordan. "But get this straight: Ryan's place is taboo for students and if anyone ought to know that, it should be you."

"I do know it," said Jim, "but college hasn't started yet."

"Football practice starts tomorrow and you're a candidate," said Jordan. "The rules go into effect for you then."

"I know," said Jim in a dull voice. "Seems kind of silly they should have rules like that for anyone twenty years old. Hell, if a man can't take care of himself then, I guess he'll never be able to!"

"I guess your head doesn't ache as badly as I thought it did," said Jordan. "I should have thought after tonight you'd realize what you need is a keeper. Imagine taking a pass at Greek Leonides! I hope you care as little about your neck when you're blocking out a defensive tackle."

"I guess you won't have to worry about that," said Jim. "I'm not much of a football player."

Jordan laughed. "The son of Buck Lester! Say, kid, you'll be in headlines before the whistle for the opening kick-off of the season. The boss is counting on you to go over in a big way."

"The boss?"

"Sure—Chick Merrill, the head coach."

"Well, I'm afraid he's going to be disappointed in me," said Jim. "Of course, I played in prep school, but I wasn't out for freshman football last fall. Not that it matters very much because I probably wouldn't have made the squad."

"Listen, Buck Lester's kid has got to have football in him somewhere! And if anyone can bring it out, it's Merrill. Your father was one of the greatest backs that ever played the game! If he'd been at Yale or Harvard instead of Eastland, they'd be talking about him in the same breath with Thorpe and Coy and Mahan."

"That was my father—not me."

"You haven't met the boss, yet, eh?"

Jim hadn't. There was nothing particularly odd about that. Merrill and the new coaching force had been engaged during the summer. Old Pop Harder, who had been head coach at Eastland for nearly twenty years, had resigned shortly after the completion of spring practice.

Jim knew that his father was responsible for that and for the hiring of Chick Merrill. It had taken considerable persuasion to convince the Alumni Committee that Pop Harder must go. They thought of him as a sort of Eastland institution; but Eastland had been in the doldrums for a half dozen seasons, and when it came to football Buck Lester's word was law.

The football shoes that Buck Lester had worn when he scored the winning touchdown against Yale in a game that was supposed to be a warm-up for the Elis, twenty-five years ago, still hung in the trophy case in the Eastland gym. His jersey with the big number seven on the back of it—a number which no other Eastland player had been allowed to wear since—was also there. Buck Lester, the only player from Eastland who ever made All-American, was still talked about in

awed voices by the undergraduates. Perhaps that was why he made such a good president for the college. The boys respected him for something more than his academic and administrative abilities. He had been one of them—the greatest one of all.

"How come you didn't go out for freshman football?" Pug Jordan asked. "I know your father has great hopes for you. I should've thought he'd have been pretty disappointed."

"I couldn't go out," said Jim. "Broken arm."

"How come?"

A faint smile played over Jim's lips. "I was in an accident."

"That's too bad," said Jordan. "What kind of an accident?"

"I was down in Troy one day. There were some pickets outside one of the collar factories. Somebody sent along a truckload of strike-breakers to go through the lines."

Jordan gave the boy a quick look and his lips were pressed tightly together. "So you took a hand, eh?"

"Well," said Jim a trifle sheepishly, "there were a lot more strike-breakers than there were pickets. And the pickets had nothing to fight with but their fists."

"So?"

"So somebody hit me on the arm with a length of iron pipe and that was that."

"Don't you ever mind your own business?" Jordan asked.

Jim grinned at him. "I've got kind of a feeling about underdogs," he said.

"Well, that's great," said the assistant coach, "because Eastland is certainly the underdog in the football world. They haven't won a major game in about six years. We need guys who are willing to give everything they've got to balance the odds in our direction a little."

JIM opened his mouth to speak and then closed it. He'd been on the point of saying that that was different. It didn't seem very important to him whether Eastland won football games or not. However, he had voiced those sentiments around the campus before and found that they led to dreary arguments about "college spirit" and "duty to the school." He looked at Jordan questioningly as the assistant coach suddenly turned the car off the main highway and into a private driveway that led up to a white cottage standing just on the outskirts of the Eastland campus.

"What's this?" he asked.

"This is the boss's hangout," said Jordan. "Harder's old place was too small for him. I see by the lights he's still up. I know he'd like to meet you."

"Can't say that I feel very social," said Jim, touching the bump on his head.

"That needs looking after," said Jordan. "A little aspirin, some iodine, some black coffee, and you'll be a new man. You don't want them fussing around with it at home, do you?"

Jordan brought the car to a halt at the front door and, since there didn't seem to be any room for argument, Jim got out. He still felt a little rocky; Jordan took him by the arm and led him up the flagstone path. The assistant coach worked the brass door-knocker vigorously.

There was a moment's delay and then the front door seemed literally to be wrenched open. A short, stocky little blond man stood revealed by the lights inside. His mouth was a thin straight line and in one corner of it an unlighted cigar was clamped. His eyes were pale blue—the coldest blue Jim had ever seen.

"Say, what the hell kind of a time is this to come banging on a guy's door?" demanded Chick Merrill. "You know damn well that I—" And then the head coach saw Jim standing just behind Jordan in the darkness. "Oh," he said, "come in."

"Chick, this is Jim Lester. He's gotten himself in a little scrape and he needs patching up."

A subtle change took place in the coach's manner. He took the cigar from the corner of his mouth and his lips widened in what passed for a smile. "Come in, Lester, come in. I've heard about you.

Your father was talking about you only today."

"Hello, sir," said Jim, and held out hand.

Merrill was a half a head shorter than Jim, but his grip was pulverizing, and Jim had to struggle to keep his knees from buckling under him.

"There's plenty more to hear about him," said Jordan. "You should've seen him tonight. Who do you think he tried to pick a fight with? Greek Leonides and three of his hoodlums! He was lucky to get nothing worse than a clout over the head with a bottle."

The head coach frowned. "Sit down," he said abruptly. He literally pushed Jim into an upholstered armchair. His fingers, none too gentle, explored the lump on Jim's head. "Just a slight abrasion. There's iodine in the medicine cabinet, Pug. Fortunately, there won't be any contact work for several days. You won't have to miss any of the fundamentals. Stay away from fights after this!"

Jim smiled. "You can count on my staying away from Greek Leonides," he said.

Merrill didn't seem to hear him. "You weren't out for freshman football last year. Your father explained. Accident. Here, Pug, give me that iodine." The head coach took the stopper out of the iodine bottle and poured the raw disinfectant on the cut. Jim writhed in his chair.

"Boy, that stings!" he said.

"Probably a good thing you didn't go out," said Merrill. "Won't have to unlearn anything. We start at scratch tomorrow. Brand-new system. And we're playing football to win. We're going to put Eastland on the map. Publicity. You play a big part in my scheme. We've got no stars. But you're a name. Son of Buck Lester . . . Plenty of newspaper space on that. What position did you play in prep school?"

"I was an end and not a very good one," said Jim.

"No matter," said Merrill. His conversation sounded to Jim like the barkings of a rapid-fire gun. "We're going to make a back of you. Same position your father played. You've got football in your blood. We'll make it run hot. No more fights. No carousing around . . . No special privileges because you're the president's son. Now get home to bed. Two workouts tomorrow—morning and afternoon. Need all the rest you can get."

Jim suddenly realized that he had literally been lifted out of his chair by Merrill and was being propelled rapidly toward the front door.

"Want me to drive you home, kid?" Pug Jordan asked.

"Walking good for him . . . Clear his head," said Merrill.

"Thanks, anyway," said Jim weakly. "It's only a step."

He was suddenly out on the front porch and the door had slammed behind him. He felt a trifle dizzy and it wasn't entirely from the effects of Greek Leonides' beer bottle.

CHAPTER III

SON OF HIS FATHER

DR. BRUCE LESTER looked at himself in the mirror and a wry smile twisted the corners of his mouth. Half of his face was still covered with shaving lather, and on the other half, which he had already gone over, was a little jagged nick which bled profusely. He reached into the medicine cabinet for the styptic pencil to stop up the cut.

It was idiotic, he thought, that his hand should be so unsteady this morning. Yet somehow he wasn't ashamed of the fact. Through twenty-five years of struggle, first as an underpaid instructor, then as a full-fledged professor, and finally as president of his own college, he had still been looking forward to five or six days in the future. When he thought of these days he was not thinking as Bruce Lester, Doctor of Philosophy, progressive educator; but as Buck Lester, the greatest halfback who had ever lugged a football in the Little Ten Conference. Buck Lester

had had his own moments of triumph and they had been sweet.

There had been the day when he had first been installed as a regular in Eastland's backfield. There had been the day when he had been first awarded his *E*, which he proudly wore on the front of his sweater all through the sweltering heat of the summer. There had been the day when he had made the headlines in all the big Eastern newspapers by defeating Yale practically single-handed. There had been the day when he had been elected captain of Eastland's Varsity without a single dissenting vote. And there had been the day when he had opened the morning paper to discover that Walter Camp had selected him for All-American honors. He remembered all these days now with a little stirring of emotion, but at the time he had taken them more or less in his stride.

But now, on this tenth day of September, 1938, twenty-five years after all those honors had been left behind him, he found that his hand was unsteady and that his heart was beating a little more rapidly than usual against his ribs. This was the day when Jim, his son, would make his first appearance with Eastland's varsity squad.

This was the beginning, Buck Lester told himself, of a career which would match his own for brilliance—a career in which he would take even greater pride than he had taken in his own. If he had ever had any misgivings about Jim's potentialities as a football player, he had stowed them carefully away. Jim hadn't been anything very wonderful on his prep school team, but he had been young and growing very fast—tall and thin for his age and apparently lacking the vitality or energy to give everything that he should to the game.

But Jim had filled out now, put on weight. He was ready for the career that Buck Lester had dreamed of for so long. The latent ability that Buck Lester's son simply had to have would show itself now!

The president of Eastland College managed to finish shaving without cutting his throat. He went back into the bedroom to dress. He was about a half an inch taller than Jim and a trifle broader. His body was still flat and trim and well muscled. Even now, when his administrative duties permitted, he sometimes donned a football uniform and scrimmaged with the boys. He took delight in the fact that he had been able to wallop a long line of college golf champions, and that Eastland had yet to produce a squash player who could outlast him on the court. His jaw was a little squarer than Jim's, his gray eyes a little harder; but, like his son's, no amount of brushing of the wiry black hair, which still showed no signs of gray, could make it stay in place.

HE STOOD in front of the dressing table, his big fingers struggling with the intricacies of a dotted bow tie. He looked down at a silver frame on the bureau which contained a picture of a very pretty young woman.

"I still can't tie these darn things," said the president of Eastland College softly.

Then he heard footsteps in the hallway outside his room. "Hi, Jim."

"Hi."

"Come in here a minute, will you?"

"Sure." The door opened and Jim came into the room. His unruly black hair concealed any evidence of last night's adventure.

"It's this damn necktie," said Dr. Bruce Lester, Ph. D., progressive educator.

"They're out of style, anyway," said Jim.

"Not according to Esquire," said Dr. Bruce Lester. "Besides I never spill anything on them."

"Maybe I can wangle it from behind," said Jim.

The boy stood behind his father and worked methodically on the necktie for the moment. The result might not have satisfied a Bond Street tailor.

"But it's the best I can do," Jim said.

Dr. Lester turned and faced his son. His gray eyes were very bright. "This is a great day, Jim."

"Yes," said Jim casually, "we've had a wonderful break in the weather lately."

For a fleeting second, Dr. Lester's gray eyes contracted at the corners. Then he dropped a hand across his son's shoulders. "Let's go," he said. "I could eat a horse this morning."

"I meant to speak to you about that," said Jim drily. "You've been saying that for so many years that I think Della has taken you literally. Where has she been buying the bacon lately? It's certainly not pig!"

"You won't have to worry about that any longer," said Dr. Lester. "You'll be having chops or steak for breakfast at the training table."

Father and son went downstairs together into the dining room. The table was set and a glass of orange juice stood at each place. As Jim and his father sat down, the swinging door from the kitchen opened and Della appeared carrying a silver platter with a domelike cover. She put it down in front of Dr. Lester and then stood back, her hands on her hips. Della was short and fat and of an indeterminate age. She had been Jim's nurse when he was born and had kept house for Dr. Lester ever since his wife had died. Her face was always beet-red as if she had been working over a hot stove. At the moment her lips were compressed and she seemed to be struggling to control a savage temper.

Dr. Lester looked at his son gravely. "Brimstone for breakfast again," he said.

"My guess," said Jim looking thoughtfully at Della, "is molten lava."

Della snorted. "You can have your laugh," she said, "but it's that paper boy! He's late again. If I get my hands on that scalliwag . . ."

Jim pushed back his chair. "I'd better warn him, Father," he said in the same grave tone. "We can't risk the scandal of a campus murder."

"You sit down and eat your food," said Della. She reached forward and took hold of the cover on the platter. She removed it with the gesture of a magician about to produce a rabbit from a silk hat, and stood back.

Jim stared at the platter in awe. "My gosh," he said, "broiled kidneys and bacon!"

"Seeing as it's your last morning," said Della. "Though why I fuss with you I don't know."

"About the bacon," said Jim slowly. "I—"

"None of your lip!" said Della. "That's the best bacon that money can buy and well you know it." She suddenly stiffened. From outside came the sound of a bicycle bell. "There's that boy!" she said. She moved with amazing speed toward the kitchen door. Just as she reached it, she turned and flung over her shoulder, "You'd better wait. There's popovers coming. If they haven't all fallen by this time!"

Jim and his father looked at each other and laughed. This same routine had been going on for more years than they could remember and if they had neglected it, Della would have been deeply wounded. After a moment she returned carrying a plate of golden-brown popovers and a silver coffee pot. The morning paper was stuck under her arm. She slapped it down beside Dr. Lester.

"A puncture indeed!" she said indignantly. "In my day, feet were good enough to deliver papers on!" She whisked herself out of the room again.

They looked at each other laughing.

AS SOON as Dr. Lester had served the breakfast, he picked up the morning paper. The Spanish revolution, the New Deal purge, and the trial of Mr. James J. Hines seemed to hold no interest for him. Instead he opened the paper to the sporting page. The kidneys and bacon remained untouched on his plate.

"How did the Yanks do?" Jim asked.

"What? Oh, the Yankees," said Dr.

Lester vaguely. "Let's see. They won a double header from the Browns."

"I guess they're in," said Jim. "Boy, when that outfit starts to go to town . . ."

"Um," said Dr. Lester. He was smiling faintly. He read with keen absorption for a moment and then passed the paper across to Jim. "How do you like those for apples?" he said.

Jim took the paper from his father and began to read and as he read, a frown creased his forehead.

EASTLAND BEGINS FOOTBALL UNDER NEW REGIME.

CHICK MERRILL IN CHARGE OF LAST YEAR'S CONFERENCE TAIL-ENDERS

SON OF FAMOUS BUCK LESTER COUNTED ON TO BOLSTER ATTACK

A new spirit pervades the campus at Eastland, as its football squad gathers today at Barkley Field for the first practice of the year. Hopeless tail-enders in the Little Ten Conference, the Eastlanders are looking forward to better days under the guidance of Chick Merrill, the new head coach. Merrill, who has been ontstandingly successful in the Middle West, was persuaded during the summer to take over the coaching portfolio by Dr. Bruce Lester, President of Eastland, and one of football's immortals himself.

The name of Lester looms large in the football destinies of Eastland, for among those who will report to Coach Merrill at the field today is Jim Lester, son of an almost legendary father.

"It is a little early to make predictions at this time," Coach Merrill told your reporter. "I of course only know about the members of the squad by reputation. Apparently Eastland's greatest defect during the past few years has been the lack of a triple threat back who could really go to town. I am hopeful of finding such a man amongst our sophomore players and I don't mind saying that I think we have a great man in Jim Lester. If he is even a shadow of his famous father, he will fill the bill for us nicely."

Jim looked up from the paper at his father, still frowning. He didn't bother to finish the rest of the article which dealt with the probable makeup of the team.

"That's laying it on a little bit thick, isn't it, Dad?" he said sharply.

Dr. Lester smiled indulgently. "You're going to make it, Jim, I know," he said. "Perhaps Merrill *was* a little premature in making such a statement, but he's a great believer in publicity for developing local and alumni interest in the team and —well, you are a name, you know."

"You mean, you're a name," said Jim. "You know darn well, Dad, I wasn't any good in prep school and there's no reason to think I'm going to be any good now. As for my turning into a triple threat back, that's hooey! I've never even carried the ball in a scrimmage." He pushed away his plate with an impatient gesture. "I wish I were all the things you'd like me to be, Dad, but I'm not and there's no use pretending."

The corners of Dr. Lester's eyes were crinkled up, but he was still smiling. "Merrill's a great technician, son. That's why we've got him here—because he knows how to teach football. You're strong and you're fast and I think Merrill will bring out the talent I know you have."

"Darn it all, Dad, I don't even like the game!"

"When you begin to click, you'll like it," said Dr. Lester. He got up and came around the table to the side of Jim's chair. "There's something I want to tell you," he said. "I had a talk with Merrill yesterday and I—well, I guess I'm as sentimental as the next fellow, Jim, although some of the boys may not think so. I asked him when he was handing out the uniforms to let you have Number Seven." The doctor laughed a little unsteadily "You know, nobody's worn it since I used to tote it around on my back. I thought it ought to go back into circulation again."

"But, Dad! I mean—oh, hell!"

"I know how you feel, son," said Dr. Lester, completely misunderstanding. "But I'm not worried about Number Seven going places *again*."

The kitchen door opened and Della

came in. She glared fiercely at the uneaten popover on Jim's plate. "What's the matter? Aren't they any good?" she snapped.

Jim looked up at her. "They're swell, Della," he said. "But I—I'm just not hungry."

CHAPTER IV

"IT'LL BE SOMEBODY'S NECK"

BARKLEY FIELD and the Barkley Field House were a recent gift to Eastland from a wealthy alumus. The oval concrete stands around the field were built to take care of much larger crowds than had ever attended an Eastland football game since their erection. Part of the job of the new coaching regime was to fill those stands, on seven Saturday afternoons, because football, greatest of all amateur sports, has to pay not only for itself but for all the rest of a college's athletics. During the last six years, Eastland had had small chance to attract the public to its stadium. Watching the home team take a shellacking each Saturday afternoon is not particularly exciting.

As he walked slowly along the elm-lined main street of Eastland, Jim Lester found a series of catch phrases running through his brain. "That gem of athletic architecture nestling in the heart of the Berkshires," the newspaper men called Barkley Field. "The valiant forces of Eastland fighting gamely but to no avail on the emerald-green turf of Barkley Field," wrote the sports editor of the college paper. As he approached the field house, Jim thought ironically of another headline which might soon grace the Eastland Daily:

JIM LESTER, SON OF FAMOUS BUCK LESTER, FUMBLES THREE PUNTS, MISSES SIX TACKLES, AND IS CARRIED SCREAMING FROM BARKLEY FIELD.

Jim's hands, sunk deep in the pockets of his brown tweed coat, were tightly clenched. This whole set-up was cockeyed and he was the only one who seemed to know it. Even if he had been really good, the build-up they were giving him, the comparison to his father would have been a tough load to carry.

He remembered how desperately he had tried when he first went to prep school to get the hang of the game. He had spent hours trying to learn to kick; but punts had a way of sliding off the side of his foot, or going straight up in the air over his head, or rolling miserably along the turf in front of him. He couldn't seem to get the timing on passes; always undershooting or overshooting the mark. He had studied all the books on football tactics that he could get his hands on, hoping to become a brilliant strategist; but the days of the quarterback who did nothing but think were passed. Nowadays the quarterback was usually a big bruiser who did the blocking for the team.

He had read about football specialists whose job was to kick points after touchdown with mechanical precision. Unfortunately he could neither drop kick nor place kick with any degree of accuracy. "They laughed when I stepped into the Eastland backfield. They didn't know I had been taking a night course with the International Correspondence School!"

Yes, they were going to laugh.

It wouldn't have mattered much to Jim except for the fact that it was almost certainly going to break Buck Lester's heart. Jim knew that he could produce the Great American Novel tomorrow, that he could make a million dollars in Wall Street, that he could be elected President, and that his father would pat him on the back and say, "Nice work," and all the time be bitterly disappointed that the old Number Seven hadn't gone to town again.

Well, he had to go through with it! And he was going to give it everything, everything he had. Maybe Chick Merrill was a miracle man. Maybe he could find gold where there'd been only slag before.

ON THE steps of the field house Jim hesitated for a second, fighting back an impulse to turn and run. And then, his hands still clenched tightly in his pockets,

a one-sided smile on his lips, he sauntered as casually as he could into the locker room. Babel greeted him. Most of the boys were already getting into practice uniforms. And what uniforms! No longer would the sons of Eastland go through their afternoon workouts in castoff jerseys and pants from another year. Pug Jordan and one of the assistant managers stood near the door behind a long table on which the new uniforms were piled. White headguards—white jerseys with big blue numbers—dark blue oilsilk trousers.

"Hi, kid," said Pug Jordan. He handed Jim his uniform. The white jersey lay on top of the pile, the big seven face up. "You've got something there." The assistant coach grinned.

"Yeah," said Jim dully. He had something all right—the works . . . the business!

"You're sharing locker forty-three with Conlon," said Jordan. "And step on it! The boss will be wanting to start things in a minute."

"But Conlon's a senior," said Jim. "Isn't it customary for them to share lockers with other seniors? I mean . . ."

He looked puzzled.

"The boss is changing all that," said Jordan. "Conlon's varsity quarterback. He can teach you a lot about backfield play. The boss wants you hanging around with him as much as possible."

Jim's heart sank. He had a bare speaking acquaintance with Conlon—a short rugged little redhead who had been one of the few outstanding players on Eastland's disastrous team the year before. Conlon wasn't going to like this arrangement.

Seniors at Eastland were clannish, and it had been a tradition for years that they shared lockers with each other.

Jim walked down toward the end of the room where he saw Conlon sitting on a bench in front of number forty-three pulling on his shoes. Jim was uncomfortably aware of the fact that a dozen pairs of eyes turned in his direction as he walked between the lockers. All of the players spoke to him, and he responded feebly. Not having been out for any team before, he knew them chiefly by sight and reputation. There was Flash Lucas, the captain, and a pretty fair tackle; Carl Crouch, who had been touted as a potential All-Conference center the year before until he had broken his leg in midseason; there was Cupid Ames, a roly-poly, moon-faced guard, who was one of the most popular men on the campus; there was Bill Barnhardt, who had made history the fall before by playing two periods against Marquand with a broken collarbone and making about seventy-five percent of the tackles in the secondary with one arm hanging limp at his side. There were McQuinn and Thorpe and Ellis, who had been the ace of the freshman squad.

Jim had a sudden sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. These men would all have read the morning paper. They would all be wondering about him because they had never seen him on a football field. By the time he reached the bench where Conlon was sitting, his knees were wobbling.

"You use the right-hand side," said Conlon without any preliminary greeting.

"Look, I'm sorry about this," Jim said. "You ought to have one of the other seniors in here with you."

"Forget it," said Conlon. "Merrill has an idea there may have been a lot of cliques on the squad last year so he's separated everybody who was together before." Conlon laughed. "The only clique we had was the one in which we banded together to get our brains beaten out every Saturday afternoon."

"Maybe things'll be different this year," said Jim.

Conlon's little blue eyes narrowed as he looked at Jim. "Maybe," he said. "I read the paper this morning."

Jim's fingers fumbled desperately with a shoelace. "That was a lot of hooey!" he said. "I've never played a backfield position in my life. I'll be the most surprised guy in Eastland if I even make the squad."

Conlon's manner seemed to soften. "That makes it kind of tough for you," he said. "Well, if you're half as good as old Buck—I mean, your father," he added apologetically.

"I call him Buck myself when he's feeling good," said Jim.

"He's okay," said Conlon.

"Yeah," said Jim. "He's okay."

"All right, boys, step on it!" Pug Jordan shouted from the doorway. "The boss'll be ready for you in about five minutes."

CHICK MERRILL stood in the center of the group of thirty-five players who made up Eastland's squad. He wore a pair of gray baseball trousers, a gray sweatshirt and a black baseball cap. A whistle attached to a black cord hung around his neck. There was a moment of complete silence as he looked at each of them with his cold blue eyes. There was something challenging, almost belligerent about that look, as if he were daring them to make any comment about the change in arrangements in the locker room, the new uniforms, or even himself.

And when suddenly he began to speak in his clipped, staccato fashion, it was like a jab in the arm.

"You're as big as the guys you have to play against. You're as fast as the guys you have to play against. Presumably, you have some brains or you wouldn't be able to stay in college. That's enough to win with! You've gotten into the habit of losing. You've been going into games hoping, instead of being certain that you were better than the other guy. That won't do.

"When I get through with you, you're going to know football. You're going to have the plays to win with. If you don't win, it will be because you haven't got what it takes!"

He gave them that cold, challenging stare again. "Some of you may have some fancy ideas about where you belong on this team. You may think you're potential All-American backs. I may think you're a second-rate guard and put you on the scrubs. Some of you may be hot shots in your fraternity houses. Out here you're just guys playing football. You won't hear any sentiment from me about dying for dear old Eastland. I've been hired to put you on the map and that's where I'm going to put you! We've got to pack this stadium with people and the only way we can pack it is by playing heads-up football. Each one of you is going to play that kind of ball or go out of here on your ear!

"There're a couple of you who are campus heroes. On a good football team there aren't any heroes. The only guy who stands out from anyone else is the mug who doesn't do his job. Maybe some of you will catch the public fancy and get the headlines. If you do, we'll play that up because it's good publicity and it brings the crowds. But don't forget that to me no one of you is any more than one-eleventh of the team! You'll eat all your meals here at the field house. We've got a special chef for you. If you don't like the food, you'll eat it anyway because we know what's good for you.

"Unfortunately, you have to live in your dormitories or club houses; but you'll go to bed early and you'll keep training. If you don't, I'll know about it and deal with you accordingly. Now, if there are any complaints or questions or bellyaches, let's have them!"

There was dead silence again while those cold blue eyes moved from face to face.

"Then, let's go! There'll be two workouts a day—at ten and two until classes begin. Calisthenics this morning. This afternoon we'll begin with fundamentals. You'll eat your lunch here at the field house without changing your uniforms. All right, Pug, line 'em up!"

There was scarcely any conversation at all as the group broke away from around the coach. Jim looked at Frankie Conlon and grinned.

"Well, anyway," he said, "calisthenics are my meat!"

FROM Jim's point of view that morning workout ended all too soon. It was a sort of reprieve for him against the time when they would all know the truth about him. He could do squatting exercises or lie propped on his shoulder blades kicking his feet in the air as well as the next one. They were lined up in military formation for these exercises and told to remember their places so that there would be no delay in going through them each day.

After these preliminaries were over the squad was split up into backs and linement. Pug Jordan took the backs down to one end of the field. Here they went through the business of practicing quick starts—crouching in the position they would use in waiting for a pass from center and then, on a signal from Jordan, charging forward ten or fifteen yards, hugging their arms to their stomachs as though they were carrying the ball. Then they would crouch and charge again. They kept at this, up and down the field, until Jim's tongue was hanging out. This was all right for him because the one thing he could do was run and run fast. Once Pug Jordan looked at him and grinned.

"You never developed that speed getting out of the way of trouble," he said.

But this was finally brought to an end by a shrill blast of Chick Merrill's whistle.

They were all to go back to the field house, relax for about fifteen minutes, get their first blackboard talk, have lunch, and then turn out again for the first drill on fundamentals. Gymnasium mats had been spread out on the floor of the basketball court and the players were ordered to lie there at full length without any conversation for a quarter of an hour. Perhaps the others were able to relax, but Jim could feel the muscles begin to tighten across his stomach. Soon the real business of football would begin!

His thoughts were cut short by another blast from the coach's whistle, and the boys piled up off the mats and crowded around Merrill who stood in front of the big blackboard at the end of the gymnasium. A series of crosses and circles had been made on the board. Jim had seen a thousand such diagrams, but somehow he couldn't concentrate on this one. He kept his eyes fixed on Merrill's face, trying to make sense out of what the head coach was saying.

Eastland had been playing old-fashioned football for too long a time, was the gist of it. The game was growing more complex every year. Defensive strategy was advancing faster than offensive strategy. In the old days, you could plan an attack with the certain knowledge that you would be confronting a seven-man line with only slight variations in the secondary defense.

Now you had six- and five-man lines, shifting to meet the attack. In the old days, the blockers in front of the ball-carrier had one set of simple assignments. Now there must be two or three variations to their jobs. Where a team once might have had thirty attacking plays, they now must have ninety.

Merrill began to demonstrate on the board the possible variations in the simple, off-tackle run.

Jim's mind kept straying away from those diagrams. You were supposed to come to college to study—to get an education. You were supposed to spend at least five hours a day in your classes. You had to have at least three hours a day to eat. Football practice absorbed another three hours. You were expected to spend at least three hours preparing your classroom work for the next day. And if you had to keep ninety offensive assignments and God knew how many defensive assignments at your fingertips, you'd have to take at least three hours to that. And the boys were supposed to get at least eight hours' sleep—it said so in the college catalog. That added up to a twenty-five hour day and didn't allow for bull sessions, dates, or even stopping to light a cigarette in the wind.

And you certainly couldn't call football recreation! It was sheer hard work. Of course, there were Sundays, Jim thought. But if you'd been in a hard game

the afternoon before, you'd probably spend Sundays in the infirmary.

"And now, Lester," Merrill's voice cut gratingly in on his thoughts, "suppose you tell us just what your assignment would be if you were blocking in front of the ball carrier on an off-tackle slant against a 5-3-2-1 defense."

All the color drained from Jim's face and his throat went dry. "I—I'm afraid I wasn't following very closely, sir."

"If you men don't get the gist of things in these general talks," said Merrill addressing the whole squad, "you'll have to have special sessions in the evenings."

Lord, thought Jim, there's a twenty-six hour day, and still no fun!

THERE were quantities of raw carrots and celery, lamb chops, baked potatoes, great stacks of unbuttered whole wheat toast, and gallons of milk for lunch. Jim wasn't hungry.

His place at the table was only a few feet away from the head coach and he was aware of those cold blue eyes turned repeatedly in his direction. Somehow he managed to stuff down his quota. He wished that while they had been practicing those quick starts on the field he might have kept on running, right out through one of the exits and far, far away. Immediately after lunch, they returned for another siesta on the gymnasium mats.

And then at last the moment for which Jim had been waiting arrived when Pug Jordan shouted from the doorway:

"All up, now, and on the field!"

The other boys moved eagerly, anxious to get their hands on a football once more; but for Jim it was the beginning of a nightmare that was to last for days and weeks.

There were eight or ten new footballs stacked along the fifty-yard line. Somebody thrust one of them into Jim's hands, and he got the smell of fresh new leather —the smell which he always associated with the drudgery, the misery that football spelled for him.

Then it began.

The backs, at one end of the gridiron, began tossing the ball around to each other just to get the feel of it. Conlon and Ellis and Barnhardt and the others caught and threw the leather as easily as if it had been a baseball. But Jim, his arms tense from his shoulders down to the tips of his fingers which seemed to stand out rigidly like ten awkward thumbs, couldn't seem to get hold of it at all. From some distant place he heard someone laughing and saying, "Gee, I seem to be all thumbs today." And then he thought: That was me! I was laughing. I said that. And then he wiped the sweat from his face—cold sweat—and raced after a ball that had bounced clumsily out of his grasp.

Then they lined up in a row. Jordan would throw out a ball, send it bounding loosely along the turf. Each one of them in turn would spring forward and fall on the ball, clutching it to his middle. Each one but Jim, who found that when he closed his arms around the ball it would pop away from him as though it had been greased. Then he would get up and wipe the dirt from his face and go back into line. All the time he was grinning a grin that seemed to be frozen there.

Then he and Conlon and Mac Ellis were selected to kick punts to the other backs. But after three or four miserable attempts, in which the ball slid off the side of his foot and went rolling toward the sidelines, he was sent down to join the receivers. This was even worse. The high, twisting spirals that Conlon and Ellis were sending down the field were much too much for him. He did notice that the other boys weren't doing any too well with them, either. After one inglorious muff, Jordan spoke to him for the first time.

"Takes a few days to get your judgment back on these," he said. But he was frowning.

CONLON sent another punt booming down the field in his direction and Jim found himself staggering around under

it like an outfielder who's lost the ball in the sun. As it dribbled through his fingers, he felt a sudden blind and futile rage at his own incompetence sweeping over him. He tossed the ball back up the field and turned away, the hot sting of tears in his eyes.

But the practice ended on a slightly better note for him. A session on the tackling dummy. It was one of the few things Jim could do. It wasn't like tackling a man out on the field where you had to guess which way he was going to cut, where you had to face a murderous straight-arm with the fear of failure clutching at your throat. The tackling dummy just hung there and took it. He felt an almost fierce joy as he went racing down the runway, hurled himself on the canvas dummy, wrenched it from its fastening, and went plunging with it in his arms into the sawdust pit beyond.

"If you hit 'em like that out on the field," said Pug Jordan, "they'll stay hit!"

Well, let him think that if he wants to, Jim told himself.

Finally Merrill's whistle ended it all.

Jim trudged slowly back into the locker room, feeling bruised and tired and utterly discouraged. He realized that somewhere way in the back of his mind there had been a tiny hope that perhaps this year he might not be such a complete frost. A steaming hot shower followed by needle-points of cold water, and then by a vigorous rubdown with a rough towel made him feel a little better. As he was getting into his clothes in front of the locker, Conlon joined him.

"After you've laid off for a couple of years," said the redhead, "it takes a few days to get the hang of things again."

"I certainly was lousy!"

"You got started wrong and tightened up, that's all," said Conlon. "Forget it."

Conlon meant to be friendly and kind, but it was like rubbing salt in an open wound to Jim. In a day or two the quarterback would know that it wasn't just a matter of staleness. And after everything that he and others on the squad had been led to believe about Jim's potentialities, failure would be bitterer this time than ever.

Jim's one thought at the moment was to get away for a few minutes by himself. He wanted to think. Subconsciously he was groping around in his mind for some out—some way to get clear of this before the final fiasco took place. He hurried into his clothes and went out of the field house. He paused outside to fumble in his pocket for his pipe. He had forgotten for the moment about training rules. As he stood there he heard his own name spoken by a voice he recognized as Pug Jordan's. He was standing under the windows that opened off the head coach's office.

"Young Lester looked pretty bad out there this afternoon," Jordan said.

"Any comment from the rest of the boys?" Merrill asked sharply.

"They're reserving judgment on him," said the assistant coach. "They think maybe he was nervous after that build-up in the newspapers and a two-year layoff."

"Keep plugging that line," said Merrill in his quick, staccato fashion. "If you have to, play up that row he was in last night. If he doesn't show anything, we might keep him under cover for a while—suggest that he's suffering from a concussion or something. But we've got to make that build-up stick, no matter how phoney it is! You know why that old goat up on the hill chose this year to fire Harder and hire us. It's because his whole life is tied up in that kid's being a star for the next three years. He wanted him to have the best coaching he could get. If we fail with the kid, it won't matter what we accomplish with the rest of the squad. We'll get the axe. He'll have to alibi the boy's failure somehow."

"Yeah," said Pug Jordan.

Standing under the window, Jim felt himself choking with anger. They were talking about his father! Buck wasn't like that. He'd be scrupulously fair no matter what happened. He might be disappointed, but he'd never alibi!

"We're going to make a football player out of that kid, Pug, if it's the last thing we ever do," Merrill's voice came through the window. "Keep at him night and day. We'll teach him to handle a football if we have to work with him out there in the moonlight. It's not hopeless. He's fast and he's strong and, from what you say, he's not yellow."

"You can lead a horse to water," said Pug Jordan, "but you can't make a silk purse out of it."

"That kid is going to play football," said Merrill savagely, "or be killed trying!"

CHAPTER V

DROWN YOUR TEARS

JIM heard his own voice coming from a long way off. "You can't talk about Buck that way! Buck isn't like that. He wouldn't blame my failure on you." Then he opened his eyes.

It was dark and it took him a moment or two to realize that he was in his own bed in the dormitory. From down the hall came the sound of someone strumming on a banjo. That would be Cupid Ames. Jim glanced at the illuminated clock on his bedside table. It was just nine. Only half an hour ago he had crawled into bed, his body aching, his mind going around in a dizzy, bitter whirl. In that half hour of sleep he had gone through a grotesque repetition of the past week. Things hadn't followed in their proper order because at the very end he had been standing under Chick Merrill's window again listening to that conversation with Jordan. And it was his own voice shouting out in protest that had wakened him.

That was wrong, because that had been the beginning of things and at the time he had said nothing. At the time he had walked away to a distant corner of the grandstand at Barkley Field and had it out with himself. He had decided then that he would say nothing. In the long run it didn't matter why they wanted to make a player of him. The only thing that mattered was to make the grade in some small way so that Buck would not be completely disappointed. Some day, when it was all over, he would tell Chick Merrill what he thought of him.

That had been the beginning of seven days of unadulterated hell! There had been no classes to break the grind of football. It started with breakfast each day. His place at the training table had been moved so that he sat next to Pug Jordan. He would just be lifting a spoonful of oatmeal to his mouth when Jordan would say:

"Where do you go on K-34 if you're playing against a seven-man line with a diamond defense in the backfield?"

Jim's hand would begin to shake and he would feel his throat going dry. His mind was a confused mass of circles and crosses and dotted lines. In that nightmare he had been through it all again. Chick Merrill's face, very far away, his voice very faint, saying, "Run faster, Lester, faster!" And then that face would draw nearer like a monstrous close-up on a movie screen and the voice would grow louder until it seemed to shatter his eardrums. "Faster, Lester, *faster!*"

Then he seemed to be running, clutching a ball that weighed pounds—that seemed to writhe in a kind of human attempt to get out of his cold fingers. A swarm of Goliaths seemed to be smashing into him from all sides—Cupid Ames, Carl Crouch, Flash Lucas. And then he would go down on turf that seemed as hard as concrete and a voice would shriek in his ear: "Fumble! Fumble! Fumble!"

And then a mocking voice that he couldn't identify with anyone he knew whispered in his ear, "Eastland's little hero!" That was because Jordan had spread the story about Greek Leonides. First the boys had been impressed and crowded around him to hear about it. Someone had dubbed him the "Killer" and the nickname stuck. Once it had sounded friendly and good-natured, but now, after those dismal days of practice, it had taken on an ironic note. He remembered Carl Crouch breaking through

on a scrimmage play to throw him for a terrific loss and saying as he got up, "If you're going to leave your interference that way, you'll need an escort of G-men to get anywhere!"

Then, in the nightmare, he seemed suddenly to be very small while the rest of them were grouped around him in a circular huddle, peering down at him, and all talking at once.

"Where do you go on B-2 against a w-w-l defense?"

"That was K-7 not K-17! That was K-7 not K-17! You were supposed to go inside tackle not outside—inside not outside."

"Where were you on that one, Lester? Where *were* you on that one?"

"Cut in, Lester, cut in!"

"You fathead! You *fathead!*"

And then everyone seemed to fade away but Mac Ellis—Mac Ellis who sneered at him and said very softly, "Does your father own the papers, Killer?"

In the nightmare Jim tried desperately to explain to him. It wasn't his fault or Buck's that the papers were still referring to him as a potential triple-threat star. It was Merrill's doing. But Mac Ellis didn't seem to hear him. He just kept sneering and saying, "Does your father own the papers, Killer?"

Jim lay there in bed, his eyes closed very tightly, his fingers clutching the bedclothes. He found himself thinking, "Which *is* it on K-17, inside or outside tackle?" Then very abruptly he sat up in bed, reached over and turned on the light.

"Lester," he said in a perfectly audible voice, "you're going nuts! The hell with this! The hell with the whole damn lousy business! You'll make Buck understand somehow. You'll make him understand that you've given it all you can and it's no use."

He got out of bed and walked over to the bureau. He leaned forward and looked at himself in the mirror. Over one eye he had a cut which was covered by a piece of court plaster. His lower lip was split and slightly swollen. Mac Ellis had given him that—with a knee that had come up sharply in a scrimmage. Maybe it had been an accident.

Jim spoke out loud again. "You're all through with football, Lester. No more people shouting at you. No more banging around. You're going to have fun. Do you hear that, Lester? Fun! And right now!"

RYAN'S PLACE was crowded. Ever since the night Greek Leonides had been captured there by Federal men, everyone wanted to hear the story told by eyewitnesses. Everyone wanted to see the exact table at which Greek had been sitting. They never tired of hearing Moon Marlowe tell how she had struggled to free herself from the Greek and how a young college boy had sauntered over and taken a poke at him. After that the Federal men had made their arrest on the charge of attempted murder.

The place was thicker with smoke than ever and the atmosphere heavier with the smell of stale beer. The piano player sat at the upright mechanically banging out a series of jazz tunes, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Moon Marlowe stood at the bar talking to a plumbing-supply man from Schenectady about the now-famous evening. Somebody wedged his way up to the bar on the other side of her.

"Hi, Sally!" said that somebody.

Moon Marlowe turned abruptly at the sound of her real name. "Well, for Pete's sake!" she said. She looked critically at Jim Lester. "You look as though you'd been to the wars again."

"I have," said Jim. "Every day since I last saw you. But the war's over now—finished—*kaput*. . . ."

"This is the kid that took that sock at Greek Leonides," said Moon to the plumbing-supply man.

"Say," said the man in awe, "I'd like to shake your hand!"

"Great pleasure," said Jim.

"Say, it must have taken a lot of nerve to walk right up to the Greek and put the slug on him!"

"If I'd known who it was," said Jim, "I'd have double-timed right out the front door."

"Oh, sure!" said the plumbing-supply man derisively. "Well, I want to say that if more people like you would stand up to these yellow rats, pretty soon there wouldn't be any more rackets!"

"Or any more people to stand up," said Jim. Then someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was Ryan, the proprietor.

"I've been waiting for you to come back, kid," he said. "The house owes you a drink. Anything you like. Sky's the limit. Even champagne, if you want it."

"You serious?" Jim asked.

"Absolutely."

Jim turned to the bartender. "I would like," he said, "four double Scotches, lined up from right to left."

"Okay," said the bartender.

"Wait," said Jim. "I think I have made a slight error. Make them triple Scotches and line them up from left to right. And I would like to buy Miss Marlowe a drink."

"What'll it be, Moon?" the bartender asked.

"The usual," said Moon Marlowe. She was looking at Jim, frowning. "What's eating you?" she asked.

"I have," said Jim solemnly, "what are known as the screaming meemies. The only way to silence them is to drown them. They gurgle a little at first but they finally shut up entirely."

The bartender put the first triple Scotch and "the usual" down on the bar. "The usual" turned out to be a hooker of rye and a small beer chaser. Jim picked up his glass.

"I give you a toast," he said. "To President Lincoln and the freeing of the slaves! And allow me at the same time to introduce myself. I am a fugitive from a chain gang." He proceed to drink. Moon Marlowe was still frowning.

"You're starting on a bender," she said.

"Sally," said Jim, "I am starting on the doggonedest bender in the history of Eastland. I'm going to enjoy every minute of it as long as I stay conscious."

"Before you begin seeing double," said Sally, "would you mind if I had a little conversation with you in private?"

"I am a gentleman," said Jim. "If you are a lady in distress, I cannot refuse you. Remember? But if you've got any more gunmen you want beaten up, I'd like to call your attention to the fact that this is my night off. *His Night Off*, a four-bell picture, starring James Lester and Sally Brown."

"You're coming with me!" said Sally.

"There's still the matter of three triple Scotches," said Jim, and he gestured toward the three glasses which were already lined up on the bar.

"They can wait," said Sally. She tugged at the sleeve of his coat.

"Well, anyway, two of them can wait," said Jim. He picked up one of the glasses and spoke to the bartender. "Guard these, my friend, as though they were your own loved one," he said.

GLASS in hand, he followed Sally out a side door. She led him through the parking space to a little garden which, she explained to Jim, was Mr. Ryan's pride and joy. In the center of the garden was a small pool. It was a foolish little pool with a miniature Japanese bridge spanning the distance from the edge to a pile of rocks in the middle. A monstrous-looking wooden duck floated around in the water. Sally and Jim sat down on a bench beside the pool.

"Now, let's have it," said Sally.

"Sorry, lady," said Jim. "I may do battle for you, but this is my drink."

"Don't try to misunderstand on purpose," said Sally. "I've seen you in there a dozen times before. You've never taken anything stronger than Coca Cola. And then you barge in tonight talking about wars and chain gangs, and start trying to poison yourself. Something's eating you. Maybe you'd feel better if you told me about it."

Jim laughed. "I've always wanted to be dragged back from the depths of degradation by a beautiful woman," he said. He

took a long swallow from the glass in his hand and then he said, with a semblance of seriousness: "Sally, for a long time I've been doing something that I didn't want to do at all—just to please somebody else. About an hour ago I decided I wasn't going to do it any more. I feel very good about that and I'm celebrating."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't think you'd understand it, Sally, in the first place. In the second place, I'm afraid it would sound like kid stuff to you."

"Why don't you try me?"

Jim drew a long breath. "Did you ever hear of Buck Lester?"

"No," said Sally. "Sounds like a Western star in the movies. Is he a relative of yours?"

"He is," said Jim. "Do you know what to do when you're blocking in front of the ball carrier on an off-tackle slant against a 5-3-2-1 defense?"

"That sounds like hog Latin to me," said Sally.

"It's worse than that," said Jim. "It's the essence of all nonsense and futility in the world! I might add in passing that it's also a part of the great American game of football. But, you see, you haven't the necessary grasp of the essential facts. You wouldn't understand my little problem."

"Why don't you start over again and say it in words of one syllable? Maybe you don't understand it yourself."

"Ah, but you're wrong there, Sally. I do understand it. However, I'll try again for your benefit. Buck Lester is my father. He is also the president of Eastland College. He was once one of the greatest football players in the world. He's been dreaming for twenty years of the day when I would be a great star, too. Unfortunately for him and for me, I can't play the game worth a damn! I've been working at it for a week and I've suddenly come to the conclusion that it isn't worth the pain. Having come to that conclusion, I am celebrating my escape from the chain gang."

Sally looked puzzled. "Football is a game, isn't it?" she said.

"That is a very popular misconception," said Jim.

"There can't be anything so tough about just playing a game," said Sally. "And if you're so pleased with your decision, why are you taking on these knockout drops?"

"That seems to be a fair question," said Jim. "You see, my father's going to be pretty well busted up when he finds I've quit. The rest of the boys on the squad are going to think I'm pretty much of a heel. I'd like to forget those things just for tonight."

"When you want to forget some decision you've made as badly as that," said Sally, "there's usually something sour about it. Maybe you're going to feel worse about quitting than about not making the grade."

"I was never so glad about anything in my life," said Jim stubbornly.

"So you're trying to forget it as quickly and as completely as you can!" said Sally. "If you're so glad to be free of this thing, why aren't you sitting in there in the corner the way you used to, smoking your pipe, and drinking Coca Cola, and looking at the people? That's what you like to do, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Jim. And then almost shyly, "You see, I'm going to be a writer, Sally. I guess people interest me more than anything else in the world."

"So now that you're free and you've made a decision that tickles you pink, you're going to get yourself blind drunk and not look at anybody, particularly yourself."

"You sound like a Sunday School teacher," said Jim.

"Almost anyone does when they talk sense," said Sally. "I don't know anything about this football racket. Maybe it's tough. Maybe it's just as tough as you say it is. But from the way you're acting, I think this quitting business is going to be tougher for you. I never heard of anyone's heart being broken

because somebody really tried and couldn't make it. It's only when you don't give it the whole works that you start turning the knife in the wound." She stood up abruptly. "Well, I've got to get back in there and put on my act. You'll pardon me if I don't go to your funeral with you."

Jim sat where he was for a long time after Sally had gone back into Ryan's. Presently he heard the sound of her voice singing, but he didn't really listen. At last he got up and started back across the garden himself. The second drink, only half-consumed, remained behind on the bench. He want into Ryan's and walked up to the bar. The two triple Scotches were still waiting there for him. A crooked little smile twisted his lips as he spoke to the bartender.

"There must be some poor families in the neighborhood who'd enjoy having those," he said, indicating the drinks. "Will you attend to the matter for me?"

Then he turned away and went across the room to a table where Sally was sitting with a couple of customers.

"So long," he said casually.

"Where are you going?" she asked him.

His grin was a little twisted.

"Back to the salt mines," he said.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Cow Jumps Over Moon

COW history has been made in the Northwest. Just recently a Jersey out there jumped over the moon—and if you'll be a little patient, you'll believe it. Whenever a cow produces more than one thousand pounds of butter-fat in a year, she is referred to, in dairy circles, as having "gone over the moon." In fact, they hang out a flag about it at the American Jersey Cattle Club.

The cow in question—name of Sybil Tessie Lorna—produced 1,020.5 pounds of butter-fat in ten months, thereby breaking not only the Jersey but the all-breed record as well.

Well, this Lorna really executed a remarkable triumph. The record-breaking amount of butter-fat came from 17,121 pounds of milk. If you are interested in statistics, that is equal to 3,400 pints of fifty percent cream, to 2,652 pounds of American cheddar cheese, or to 7,472 quarts of ice cream. And all done, remember, in ten months. The American Jersey Cattle Club is in a great hi-diddle about Lorna's feat.

—*Albert George*

He was something to write home about —that tyee

Tyee Man

By JACK PATERSON

It was one fish in half a million, and worth exactly half a million to one man

YOU need to know Tumble River, that strange outdoors madhouse where only two things are of consequence—fish, and market reports. It's an evergreen paradise of wildly swirling tide changes and the piscatorial mecca of foreign kings and current Hollywood sensations, where the money-bored spend August and September each year proving to the outer world that while certain sports may tend to mold a brotherhood of man, competitive fishing chooses to remain competitive fishing.

A slice of mystery metal six inches by two might seem natural enough precipitating a panic in Wall Street steel, particularly in the face of present world scuffling; but for that same trinket, when not tailing ninety feet of salmon line, to lie snug in the pocket of a blue flannel shirt domiciled in a tent on far-off Vancouver Island in Canada might seem just a bit incongruous.

The shirt, in this case, belonged to Fitzmaurice, being about the one thing J. J. Creighton had not grabbed, but Old Fitz walked into the Tyee Club office that bright September morning as if he never had lost the $10,000,000. That is, while he nodded to former friends lounging there. The pay-off came when he reached the desk.

"I would like," he said calmly, "a job as fish guide."

Every eye jumped to attention, startled, yet obviously awaiting some further word. It came. Fitzmaurice examined a display of cohoe flies and tyee rods and tackle behind the rough board counter, then

turned to Daniels, the sharp-faced secretary who made club rules his code of life.

"Later," he told Daniels, "I may do some fishing."

Ah-h-h! It was a silent, gloating chorus. A guide faded through the doorway; feet swished in loose gravel. In two minutes the whole camp, from the Honolulu woman with the four Pekinese to the kid who scrubbed the boats, would know that Reginald Fitzmaurice was back to attempt recapture of world-wide club supremacy from his former friend and erstwhile betrayer, James J. Creighton, New York steel tycoon.

At that moment Creighton's half-Siwash guide, Simon Pete, passed the office door bearing slender rods and tackle kit. Men gathered there within the four walls hung with totem-designed Indian sweaters and timber-wolf pelts for tourist sale, waited in morbid hope. Creighton was now on his way up from the float; here the two must meet.

All knew the story. For eight summers they had seen the white Fitzmaurice family yacht lie there in the strait below Seymour Narrows with Creighton's black and gold pirate craft; they had seen the children of the two men run wild, play and fish together like young Indians. For seven seasons Creighton had copped the coveted honor of Tyee Man but the eighth Old Fitz took a 67-pound buck salmon with light rod for the club record, and a month later wakened one morning in Chicago to find himself cleaned to the piping tune of $14,000,000, just four millions more than he had.

Members had watched the pirate craft, its rival thus neatly disposed of, twice return alone. Last year Creighton had muffed, but a week ago he had confounded law-of-average statisticians by tying to the ounce the Fitzmaurice record. The world had heard of it, and here was Old Fitz, tall frame a little more sagged, pleasant mouth not quite so firm, but with a new glint about blue-gray eyes.

So it was that a stir went through the crowd followed by a ripple of broad a's.

DALRYMPLE of the Indian Army, fifteen straight summers a visitor, was blithering about the merits of cohoe—on fly of course. "Sport," he spouted, loose-hung jowls aflame with too-frequent earlier sippings of hot rum from a thermos. "Ten fish yesterday. Fight like the devil those ten-pounders. Sport." His left eye rolled grotesquely. "Tyee? Mornings, yes. Evenings, gentlemen—cohoe."

"Cohoe, hell!" James J. Creighton stamped in and stood spraddled, a huge man clad in khaki duck, purple face topped by a white yachting cap. "Tackle a fish your own size, General. I got one today nearly that. Just under sixty. Ha? First thing I know I'll be breaking—"

He stopped, seeing Old Fitz. Pebbly gooseflesh stood up along a jaw suddenly blue. James J.'s hand came out.

"Hello, Reg," he said thickly. "Surprise. Didn't see the *Elsie Dee* come up. Family here? Ha?"

"Car and trailer." Fitzmaurice was casual. "Just Marilyn."

"Marilyn? Ha! Jay Junior will like that. He's on the *Ultra*. Finished college. Did well. Always has."

Fitz nodded, one corner of his mouth quirked in quiet amusement. The others had fallen silent; the big man sensed it and broke for new ground.

"Trailer, you said? Come and see something real. Best on wheels." He steered Fitz out. Fitz went. The faint smile stayed.

They crunched up steep gravel flanked with whitewashed stones toward cabins tucked in green velvet woods. J. J. paused for breath and turned, words rasping his throat.

"Glad to see you're *in* again, Reg. Like old times, ha? Must come aboard. *Ultra's* due back from Alaska tonight; $250,000 a year to operate, may as well keep her moving. Guests you know. Ha? That's why I got this trailer. Office and secretary right with me. Male of course. Ha!" He offered a cigar, replaced it in a breast pocket when Fitz refused, and swallowed with faint anxiety. "Steel, Reg?"

For a moment Fitzmaurice failed to answer. He was seeing a picture, blue, green, white, and empty; blue water, the smooth green of Cannery Cove Island a mile beyond, white snow peaks of distant mainland mountains, an empty spot where the *Elsie Dee* might have been. Familiar sights and sounds crowded upon him, a rusty Alaska freighter pounding north against the tide, the clatter of small boats being dumped and handled on the float directly below them, chopped speech of guides gutting the morning catch, the sharp sworl of dogfish fighting for the offal.

"Ha? Steel, Reg?"

Fitzmaurice sniffed the sea breeze, sweet and fresh as mild caviar.

"Oil," he said.

"Ha," J. J. led on and seconds later pointed. "The *Golden Chrysalis.* Best thing on wheels anywhere. Had to be. You know me, Reg. Ha?"

The trailer was half as long as a pullman, sleek and sinuous to the eye, finished in that dull gunmetalish gilt that glows warmly alike in sun or in such deep shade as now canopied it. A litter of tools and metal cuttings lay about on the ground. Two men were at work on the trailer roof.

"New skylight," J. J. grunted. "Ten thousand to a designer, $40,000 to a builder, and dingy as a dungeon. Skylight can't be done satisfactorily they say. Ha! Flew three experts out from Detroit. Costing me plenty, but I'll show 'em! Ha? Come in."

Fitzmaurice had seen trailers. He stacked everything he had seen in heaps of ten, and J. J. still had them topped. One end for his secretary, the balance office. With the new skylight the *Golden Chrysalis* was a marvel of brightness. J. J. was proud of it. Old Fitz listened long, and refused a drink. As they stepped outside the smile clung to his mouth.

"Where's your trailer?" J. J. demanded. "Like to see Marilyn. Take you both aboard the *Ultra* tonight. Ha? What oils you in, Reg?"

Fitzmaurice faced him. The gray eyes were sober, set for the change he knew must come over that blotchy face.

"Just oil. I run a gas station in the mountains. Colorado."

Creighton swayed a little forward. He fumbled uncertainly for a cigar, bit an inch from its wrong end and seconds later discarded the ragged result as speech returned to him in lumpy phrases.

"You—you mean you—?" Ha? Ha?"

"I'm managing a vacation with pay by guiding here. Marilyn's cooking for me." Fitz paused as J. J. goggled with horror. "It's the third tent along Guides' Beach. We'd—"

"Guiding!" J. J. mopped oily sweat from a pinkish bald head. "Great God!" he croaked, and escaped into his gilded trailer palace.

THE fleet had been out only twenty minutes next morning when the first strike came. *Kree! Kree! Kre-e-e-e-e-e!* The sound of the screaming reel cut through the wavering early mist against a background medley of thumping oars, bickering gulls, and the lowered voices of warmly muffled boat occupants hunched on swivel seats. At once nearby lines were retrieved while parties veered off, guides pulling strongly. A lone boat headed for the open strait where man and fish might fight their battle of hours free from shelving bar or floating kelp.

Like the crackle of wireless word flew throughout the seventy boats.

"Dalrymple. Big one. New Pidcock spoon must be a killer!"

Kre-e-e-e-e-e-e-e! A boat with a shrieking woman spun like a chip, was half towed out to sea. Silence settled. Figures sat erect now, guides churning lightly at glugging oars. In turn they circled up and back to cut the edge of the tyee hole, deep, close inshore . . .

•

A crowd was at the weighing dock when the morning's flurry ended, summoned by

an unusual display of bunting on the white flag arm. Seven times the red flag had gone up, four times the blue, twice the white, proclaiming fish weights in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, to capture bronze, silver, and gold Tyee Club buttons.

Now the lanyard sagged with the pull of all three colors. A diamond-pin salmon had been taken, a silver monster in the 60s. And beneath, seeming to flaunt the rakish *Ultra* dawdling at anchor far up the Narrows, fluttered a Union Jack denoting nationality of a member who this day had broken the club's all-time record.

The king salmon hung from the scales, a rope hitch about its tail, a redfaced Dalrymple posed beside it for photographs, impatient, the reason for that impatience clutched in a hairy right hand.

He brandished the empty thermos. "No speech, dammit!" he shouted. "Not a syllable. Gurgles speak louder than words, gentlemen. I repeat—Cabin Fourteen."

People straggled in chattering groups up the ramp and along the sandy slope beach. Guides pulled their boats clear of the water and followed.

THE float seemed deserted to slapping waves and snowy gulls until a youthful male voice came from the depths of a black and scarlet speedboat moored there.

"Apoplexy, darling, is what James J. Creighton will have when he sees that 69 chalked up on the weighboard." Jay Creighton Jr. paused. "Wonder what's keeping him? Must have landed that fish by now."

Marilyn Fitzmaurice stirred. The top of a brown head showed. "By sitting up with the glasses we could see."

"And spoil everything. No. You haven't said *when* yet."

She sighed. "I'm an innocent girl, but what would everyone say? That I came back here to recoup the family losses."

"They'd be wrong. If I marry you I'm cut adrift like a gangrened arm. He told me last night."

"After he found Pops was guiding?"

Jay nodded. "It irks him to be tied with a guide, as it were. One of the best Jimmy J.—when he's top dog."

He leapt up at the thump of oarlocks. "Holy Henry! He's right on us." He motioned her down and stood there in whites and sleeveless, blue-striped sweater, brown arms rippling with long muscles, hair crisp, dark, carelessly wavy. He flicked a hand in salute to the incoming boat and swung about.

"Wait till he sees that 69 on the board. Hell hath no—"

"Jay! Get me out of here!" Eyes that matched the sea's blue were big in earnest. Navy slacks and jumper showed active, slenderish curves as she moved.

He dropped beside her, took her hands. "Kidding out, Maril, no matter what happens I'm not letting you go again. I'll tell him today. Right now. Here—hurry." A soft mouth was on his.

It was a pleased J. J. Creighton who stepped to the plank float. "Hello, Jay! Kept you? Ha?" He turned quickly. "Wait, Simon, I'll give you a hand with that." He helped the surprised Breed with the boat. "Who's that—Marilyn? Ha?"

"We've been making plans," Jay Junior gambled. "Permanent ones."

"Plans? Good!" He strutted to meet her, ruddy face beaming. "Sweet enough to kiss. Ha? May I? Ha! There, my dear."

"You going out to the *Ultra,* or coming ashore, Dad?" Jay's husky shoulders were valiantly hiding weight figures on the board. With quick inspiration he motioned her toward the speedboat, adding, "I'm taking Marilyn out to see Mother."

"Ashore. Be out later. Work to do—and play. Ha, Simon? Ha?" Simon's beady eyes set in burnt copper gleamed. J. J. jerked a thumb. "Stand clear of that weighboard, son. Think I can't see a flag signal? There's a new record in the sixties. What weight? Ha?"

"Sixty-nine and fourteen ounces." With Marilyn, Jay Junior dived for the boat. He had it clear, motor purring, when Creighton Senior strode to the dock edge. Creighton Senior was grinning.

"Meant to surprise you later. If I don't get out take a peek through my Moccner Specials at the flag staff. Ha? Hear me? Ha?"

"And see what?" Jay yelled above the motor.

"Old Glory instead of the Jack." James J. expanded to the limit of his ample khaki coat and flicked a proud hand. "I just landed the daddy of 'em all!"

FITZMAURICE was balanced on a log, noting carefully each wobble of the six-inch flash of metal he was testing when James J. Creighton picked his way over the driftwood tangle edging shacks and tents along Guides' Beach. Fitz unhooked the spoon, wiped salty drops from it with a handkerchief and placed it in a breast pocket.

"Message from the *Ultra*." J. J. paused to wait for his breath which at the moment had strength if not vitality. "Marilyn's aboard for dinner. Young crowd this jaunt. She'll fit in well. Great pair, Jay and Marilyn, ha?"

Fitz nodded. "I have thought so."

J. J. ran fingers nervously along the double row of Tyee Club buttons adorning a soft doeskin belt and glanced up.

"I wasn't myself yesterday, Reg. Lot on my mind. Wish you'd just forget it. Ha?"

"You did act a bit like a spoiled kid."

"Senseless. Senseless." J. J. produced his favorite conference frown and sat upon a smooth log. "How'd you like back in, Reg? I can fix it, finance it. In no time at all you'd be—"

"No thanks." Blue-gray eyes glinted. "Some friend using information confided in him would probably just clean me again."

J. J. gulped at that one. "Now see here—" He rasped his throat and settled to it. "There's no need—"

"Listen, J. J." Fitz slowly lit his pipe. "I want you to understand something. I'm happy. So is Elsie. I've learned how to sleep nights and I like it. I'm glad Jay and Marilyn still hit it off."

"They do. You bet they do." J. J. was more than affable. "Shame to see them apart. No reason they should be. Ha? We've had our differences, Reg. Let's forget 'em. Ha? Life's a matter of luck, some up, some down. But luck. Ha?"

Fitz still eyed him. "Like fishing. What did it weigh, J. J.?"

"Weigh?" J. J. jerked up. "Oh, so you've heard, ha?" His ruddy face glowed, his chest came out. "Just an even seventy, Reg. A fish that weighed seventy pounds. No club button designed for it yet. I've suggested a fishhead set in diamonds. Buy it myself, of course. Ha? Some fish, Reg. Ha?"

"Luck again," Fitz observed dryly. "Tyee Man Creighton."

"Right," J. J. chuckled. "Not happy unless I am. Well, I can afford to be. At that, money doesn't count in fishing. We have our different tackles, spoons, gadgets, but after all it's luck, Reg. Ha?"

"You missed one item." Fitzmaurice puffed slowly at his pipe. "A smart guide makes a difference. All the difference," he added.

J. J. sensed an inference and bloated with quick indignation. "Whatcha mean? Ha? Ha?"

Fitz removed his pipe and stood. "I mean you've developed into what the guides call a fish-rat, Creighton. I had a hunch when you tied my record; that's why I came. You didn't mean to strain the law of averages; you meant to be four ounces over my 67. It was Simon blundered that time." He paused as Creighton stared. "You took a big fish this morning, but flags ashore and your own boat scales told you it wasn't quite big enough. You needed a 70-pounder to be sure. That Siwash of yours fixed it as he did the other, with four-ounce lead weights from his tackle box."

Creighton swallowed slowly. "You're crazy," he managed. He removed his yachting cap and wiped his pink head.

"I was purposely out there alone," Fitz carried on. "I still have the binoculars you gave me years ago. Moccner Spe-

cials. Good ones. Best in the world, you said."

Creighton had staggered to his feet. Purple veins swelled at his throat. "You lie—you—you—" His voice was a whisper.

"I'll tell you the rest," Fitz continued evenly. "There was a difference in the scales. You discovered it before the weighman came down. More lead wouldn't do; someone might be watching. Instead, Simon washed the fish off and took it to the beach tripod for photographs. Between photographs Simon lowered the catch and turned it for a new angle. Dry sand that clung to the wet fish made up the difference, Creighton. The weighman didn't look for anything like that. Why should he? This is a sporting club."

There was silence for a long moment. J. J. spoke in a hoarse croak. "Whatcha going to do about it?"

Fitzmaurice shrugged. "On account of Marilyn and Jay Junior, nothing. Except to go out and get a bigger fish than yours."

"Hell!" J. J. regained face then. "They don't come any bigger."

Fitz poked at his pipe without haste. "A fish I took this morning on Old Galvo, a spoon I designed and made, weighed 71 pounds."

Creighton's mouth gaped at the corners like that of a spent tyee. "Where is it?" he choked out. "Whatcha do with it?"

"It's over there." Fitz nodded toward Cove Island, a mile across the strait. "You're safe enough for one day. Being only a guide," he added, "I sold it to a cannery boat for eight cents a pound."

FITZ was abed when Marilyn came. He heard them say goodnight, several times, saw the light flash on in the trailer.

"Dads! Awake?" She came to the tent, was quickly beside his cot, voice eager. "Everything's the same. Jay, his mother, and Pauline—they were grand. Everyone!"

"I'm glad, 'Lyn," he said.

"We're being married." She found his hand. "In one month. It's all arranged. Big game hunting in the Caribou Hills, then Honolulu."

"Did you tell J. J.?" Fitz queried.

"He knows. Jay told him, and he kissed me, and—"

"When?"

"This morning. When he came in from the eddies. Why?"

Fitz hesitated. "I'm afraid that unless Jay is prepared to pull his own oar, you'd better forget it all, you two."

"Goose!" She laughed. "Mr. Creighton was grand! Anyway, Jay's not helpless." She rose.

"Good," he told her slowly, "for between J. J Creighton on one side and your own paternal failure on the other, strange things may be about to happen. Goodnight, Chick."

THE three days following will long be talked of at the Tyee Club. That first morning Fitzmaurice brought in the only big fish, a 64-pounder, with the curt announcement: "Taken on Old Galvo." Guides stared. "Galvo—galvanized," they mused later, and went about camp snipping and testing spoons of that material.

The second morning Fitz had three fish, the largest of which strained the scales, and the credence of onlookers, at an even 72.

"What's this!" A purple countenance under a white yachting cap shoved its way through the crowd to Daniels. "What kind of a club is this? Ha? Guide taking record fish to sell a cannery! Are we crazy? Ha? Ha?"

The secretary faced him coolly. "Club Rule 21 allows a guide to test new spoon designs. Fitzmaurice is testing an 'Old Galvo', so registered."

"I'll contact committee members—Sir John in England, Goff in Vienna. I'll stop this fish slaughter if it costs me $50,000 in cables."

Creighton whirled about. Marilyn Fitzmaurice stood, wide-eyed, in his path. He brushed her aside without a glance.

She was with Old Fitz when they came

in the third morning, both exhausted. Word had preceded them from the eddies. For hours the Fitzmaurice reel had screeched and wound in turn, the girl rowing like mad to follow, saving precious feet of line that at times thinned down to scant winds on the spool. Three miles along the Narrows the battle had ended. Now, each to an oar, they drove with frantic haste for the landing.

Already there was excitement ashore. That morning a fresh run of big tyee had found the river mouth. Days later, after biding their appointed time in foodless irritation before going upriver to spawn and fertilize, their color would be dark, their girth from five to seven pounds less; but now they were fat, full weight, a gleaming silver in color. Boats had reaped a sportsman's harvest. Creighton and his guide had six.

The six were being checked when Fitzmaurice and Marilyn reached the dock with a hurried shipping of oars. A monster salmon, the ultimate in streamlined beauty, lay in their boat bottom. Badly gaffed, it was bleeding steadily, every slow trickle a loss in weight.

"Clumsy me." Trembling, Marilyn clung to Jay Junior. "I—I was all in, I guess." She sensed a sudden bickering about her. "Let's get away, Jay. Please."

The bickering came from a group demanding that the big fish be given preference at the scales. Creighton snapped one word: "Ruling?"

Daniels complied. "Number 11. Weighed in order as brought ashore."

Simon Pete took his time. Beady eyes grew more somber at curt remarks from watchers. General Dalrymple strode up, left eye rolling.

"I say, Creighton," he blustered, "must you be such a damned stickler for regulations? The brute is losing tons, can't you see? Probably a record fish. Why not give way, old man? Why not?"

Creighton ignored him. Fitzmaurice stood quietly by. "Old Galvo," he answered repeated queries. Simon Pete scowled and became slower.

Their final fish was at last weighed and listed. Willing hands boosted up the other. Necks craned and eyes clung as the beam tilted, steadied. A hush fell.

"Seventy-four pounds, six ounces!"

Creighton's roar was louder even than the applause. "Commercial!"

"Not at all." Daniels drew himself up authoritatively. "Mr. Fitzmaurice is a registered member."

Creighton spun about. "Since when?"

Daniels hesitated and looked at Fitz who nodded permission.

"Mr. Fitzmaurice is paid up for eight years," Daniels stated.

"Ha? You weasel-faced fool, a guide can't take a button fish!"

Daniels stayed calm. "The guide license was transferred to his daughter last night. The change was posted on the public board as under Rule 14. Mr. Fitzmaurice is holder of a new, and I might say, splendid, club record."

THERE was sudden silence. J. J. Creighton fumbled for a cigar, broke it in the process, hurled it from him as he turned. The crowd made way. Head down he charged along the float. A rumble of comment began and stopped as abruptly when Creighton wheeled about and returned to face Fitzmaurice.

The grimness of his purple jaw showed snap decision, the spraddled stance his determination to crash through with it. "Fitzmaurice, I want you to act as my guide. Ha?"

Fitz eyed the haggard lines under the white yachting cap. His own blue-gray eyes were steady, no smile now at the corner of his mouth. "You have had Simon for years," he reminded J. J. "Anyway, following re-instatement I'll be guiding Mrs. Rutter."

"I want someone who can find fish. I'll fix it with Rutter. What's your price? Ha? Name it. Ha?" He gestured impatiently as the other indicated the crowd. "To hell with them. They'll all know anyway. Everyone knows everything around here. Name it!"

Fitz thoughtfully lit his pipe. "The season for big fellows won't last much longer—"

"I know all that—$100 a day—$500. Ha? How about it? Ha?"

Fitzmaurice stirred his pipe bowl with a match end. "A thousand."

The heavy jaw came out. "Right!"

"For five days—"

The big head nodded.

"Right!"

"And," Fitz added softly, "use your own spoons and tackle."

Creighton's face was dyed a deeper purple as he bellowed: "Watcha think I'm paying you $5,000 for? Ha?"

"Five thousand won't buy old Galvo." Fitzmaurice smoked calmly.

Creighton shrugged. He subsided and lit a cigar. "All right. What price?"

The crowd about the weighboard stood like wooden figures with prominently painted eyes. Fitzmaurice slowly pursed his lips.

"First," he said, "I'll remind you that in all Tyee Club history only three fish over 70 pounds have been taken, all of them on my spoon."

"Mostly luck."

"True—luck in finding the right combination. Guides spend years striving for a spoon that will tantalize the big ones, make them strike. I've got it. Old Galvo. The last three mornings I've proven that." Fitzmaurice paused. "You know markets, Mr. Creighton, the value of supply and demand."

Creighton gestured impatiently. "How much for the spoon?" he rasped.

"One hundred thousand dollars—if you're putting it on the market for other people."

A crowd murmur rippled and died. J. J. stiffened. "And for my personal use only? Ha?"

"That," Fitzmaurice said cooly, "will cost you $500,000."

"Great Omnipotent—"

"Sole rights to Old Galvo and source of material," Fitz added. Back of him people babbled openly.

Creighton purpled dangerously. Preliminary croaks heralded speech.

"You fool," came gratingly at last. "I've offered you a break, trying to help you out." He lowered his voice. "Now we're through. The young ones—all of us, understand? Finished!"

Sputtering, blind with fury he turned, almost colliding with his personal secretary hurrying to him.

"New York calling," that menial blurted. "Urgent, sir. On the trailer wire—the *Chrysalis* wire," he hastily amended.

"*Ha!*" Boots crunched in gravel. Stout legs pushed uphill like twin pistons driven by a dangerous head of steam. The door of the golden trailer slammed.

It was just ten seconds later that aforementioned hell tore loose in Wall Street.

IT WAS more than an hour later that Reginald Fitzmaurice approached the *Golden Chrysalis*. From within he recognized the throaty roars and short barks of J. J. still on a rampage. The camp swarmed with talk of how Creighton was handing it out. Wires and radiophones buzzed and blatted as distraught men, here and remote, crawled to the steel king in his golden castle, pleading without pride and later without hope. Already, Fitz noted, the *Ultra* had up-anchored according to orders and gone, Jay Junior with her. Thought of Marilyn's tears during the past hour made his mouth harden.

The tumult that was Creighton abruptly died. Fitz opened the door and entered.

From behind his desk James J. glared. He jerked a pinkish head. Fitz took the chair indicated.

"Jacobs!" The secretary left. Creighton sat back and studied Fitzmaurice.

"I sent for you because I have news. I've been doing some arranging, Reg. In three days I can have you back where you were. All for the small matter of a—"

"Sorry, J. J.," Fitz cut in. "As I told you before, I'm not interested. Lazy? Crazy? Call it what you will. I prefer to be as I am. Old Galvo is still available at the price quoted."

Creighton's hand cut the air with a sharp sideways gesture. "Your damned spoon isn't worth that!" he snapped.

"Strictly a matter of angle," Fitz agreed, and rose. "Three record fish in as many days, with more to come—"

"Sit down." Creighton's huge hand chose a ready check, slid it across the desk. "There is, a cool half million. You," he taunted bitterly, "were perfectly happy. Ha? Money meant nothing to you. You could sleep nights. Ha?"

Fitzmaurice glanced at the check. "That still goes. This is for Marilyn and Jay. The way we've trained them they'll need money." Blue-gray eyes held steady. "I had a time persuading Jay to go with the *Ultra*. Of course I wasn't certain about you and Old Galvo so couldn't tell them. Now I can wire Jay to wait in Seattle." He flicked the check. "This is their wedding gift."

"Ha? Ha?" Creighton was up, arms rigid. "Why—the pup! He won't get a dollar." He yanked open a shirt collar that choked him. "The deal's off."

"I have your check."

"Check, hell! I'll stop payment, you damned idiot. Ha? This minute." He grabbed a phone.

Fitz sat unmoved except for one arresting, upraised finger.

"No you won't Jim." He gazed musingly at the ceiling. "Donna and Elsie will enjoy planning a wedding, and there'll be a wedding." He paused. "James J. Creighton is not going to be laughed out of his favorite club for a mere half million dollars."

"Laughed out? Ha? Ha? By whom?"

"By everyone." Fitz took from his shirt pocket a slice of metal six inches by two. He indicated a galvanized surface tooled in tiny whorls.

"Old Galvo," he announced. "Made from scrap I picked up. It may be contrast that interests the big ones; you never know with tyee. Anyway it's the other side that rates the half million." He shoved the spoon across.

Creighton flipped it over. Its under side glowed a dull gunmetalish gold.

"Chrysalis finish! Ha?" His jaw clicked. "Where'd you get—?" His gaze jerked to the new skylight above him, swung back in startled understanding. "Made from my own—"

Fitzmaurice stayed silent, his thoughts mirrored in a half smile that clung to one corner of his mouth. James J. Creighton, steel tycoon, raised an unsteady paw to mop oily sweat drops from a pinkish head.

"Let's," he said quietly, "have a drink. Ha?"

The Laughing Lily

On that white forgotten trail she lived—Lily Lane, cold-faced and beautiful . . . and each time she laughed one man died. A novelet of the endless search for Alaskan gold

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON
Author of "River Pig," "Pirates of Foggy Reef," etc.

I

WALLY STEARNS turned his snowshoes west. He believed he had lost all control over his legs, that if he stopped shoving one web ahead of the other he could never start again.

His delirium was not complete. He remembered Brad Galbert's warning to stay away from Hungry River. Brad had insisted that they keep on south to the Wolf Jaw range, where they would find a well traveled trail with frequent road houses.

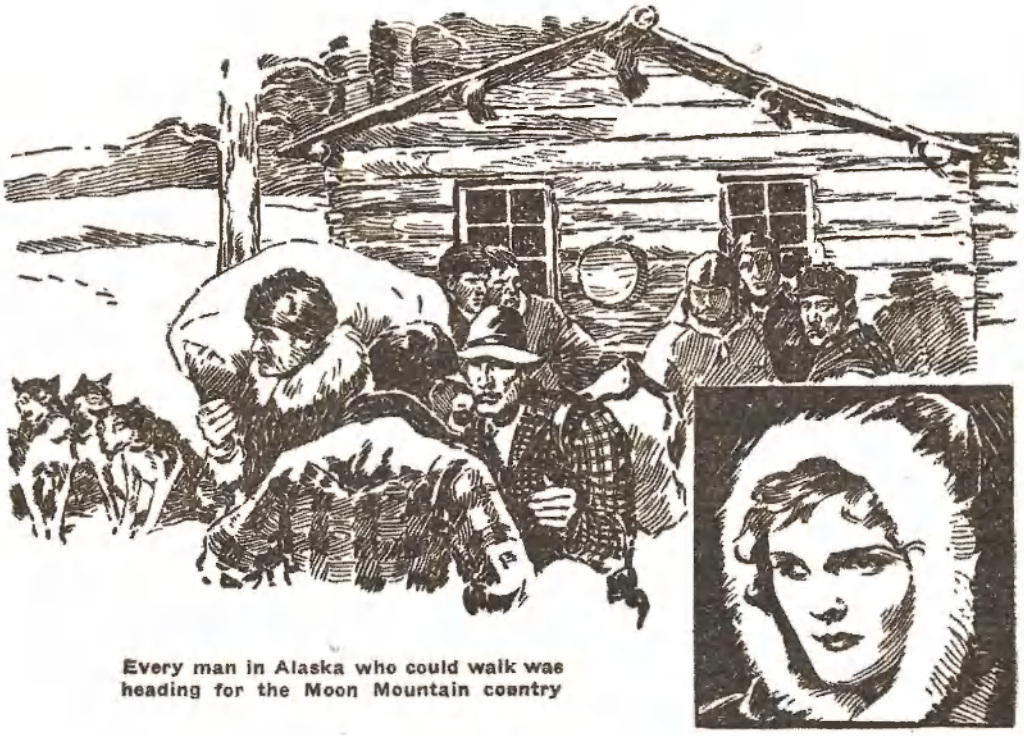
"You got no chance on Hungry River, not with your name," Brad had said. "Besides, nobody uses that way any more and there's only Lily Lane's road house."

But now Brad Galbert lay unconscious on the sled. He had a fever and he babbled. The sled carried robes, rifle and cooking dishes but no food. It had held no food for three days, and no dog food for four. Wally Stearns was not so delirious but that he knew they were starving, that he could not travel much farther, that the dogs were about through.

So Wally turned west. He believed he could cut Hungry River in ten miles, but whether it would be above or below Lily Lane's road house he could only guess. Wally considered that an even chance, and he knew he could never reach the Wolf Jaw country. Neither he nor the dogs had the strength to travel so far.

As the day wore on he began to wonder if he could ever reach the Hungry. Sometimes the dogs halted from exhaustion, but Wally did not. He was afraid to stop. The obsession that his legs were functioning without his control was firm now. He had started them once, and they would keep going so long as he left them alone. But if he dared fool with those legs in any way there would be nothing left for him but to lie down and die. He felt like a passenger being carried along above the snow.

Wally Stearns did not think of Brad Galbert's warning to keep away from Lily Lane's road house. At the time he had



Every man in Alaska who could walk was heading for the Moon Mountain country

understood it was important and concerned with his father. He had even understood something of the story and recognized the danger.

"If you was starving and frozen, she wouldn't give you a cup of tea," Brad had said. "She might even laugh when she heard you was Jerry Stearns' son."

But whether Lily Lane laughed was no longer of any consequence. Brad's condition was. Brad had been ill for ten days, and Brad might die. Wally forgot his legs as he thrust the snowshoes forward. He remembered only that Brad must live.

Brad and he had just become rich. The sack of samples on the sled proved it. And after thirty years in Alaska, Brad must not die as soon as he had made his first big strike. Wally did not care about himself. He was young, his numbed mind kept saying, only twenty-four, but Brad Galbert was the finest partner a man ever had. Brad must live to cash in on those thirty years.

Wally Stearns was thinking of this when he opened his eyes and saw a log wall in the yellow glow of a lamp. It did not seem strange that he was in a warm cabin or that his legs had stopped at last.

"Where's Brad?" he called. "Go bring Brad in."

"Brad's in," a woman's voice said. "He's sleeping."

That was all Wally needed to know. He closed his eyes without seeing the speaker, and he did not open them again until he was shaken many hours later.

"Time to crawl outside some moose broth," the same voice said.

"How's Brad?" Wally asked as he turned over.

"Fair. He had something more than starving."

"Yes, some kind of fever. I was afraid—"

WALLY broke off and stared. He had never seen a face like the one above him. It had been beautiful, he knew. It still was, but beautiful as is the face of a statue. There was no expression, no suggestion of change. Even the eyes, a deep blue, were like glacier ice and not like the sky. They were not unkindly. They simply

told nothing—nothing at all or whatever.

Contrasting with the face, which was still youthful with a smooth skin overlaying rose, was a great mass of pure white hair. It lay as a cloud above her brow and when she turned her head a huge braided roll of it was revealed.

"Probably pneumonia," she said. "I think he's past the worst of it. Brad's a tough old codger. Take this."

Wally felt that he was drinking strength itself as the warm liquid slipped down his throat. His dark hair was long and uncombed and a dark stubble splotched his drawn face. His brown eyes had retreated into his skull but they could always smile warmly. Now they beamed his thankfulness.

But no answering smile came.

"You're coming around," the woman said in the same calm voice. "Know where you are? I'm Lily Lane."

"Brad told me—on Hungry River, isn't it?—before he passed out—"

Wally was fumbling, in a panic.

"I'm sorry," he hastened to say. "My name is Wally, Wally Kearns, and I—"

The blue eyes turned from ice to flame.

"Did you say Stearns?"

The expression did not change but the voice had hardened.

"Kearns," he said. "Brad Galbert and I are partners."

"Yes. I've known Brad a long while."

She was looking at him steadily, searchingly. Wally squirmed within.

"It's funny the shape I was in," he said quickly. "Had a notion that if I stopped walking I couldn't start my legs again. So I just kept on. Didn't dare quit. It's the last I remember."

"Men get queer ideas when they're played out and starving," Lily Lane said. "I've seen one undress at fifty below because he thought he was walking across hot desert sand. I've known them to stumble past this place and never see it. But the dogs would stop and we would go bring the man in. You're all right. You're coming around fast."

"Brad—sure he's all right?"

"I've seen worse cases pull through, and I've handled a lot in fourteen years."

"Fourteen!"

"Since ninety-eight," she said. "Here on the Hungry since nineteen hundred. Only, there's been no travel on this trail the last few years."

Her eyes were no longer searching. Wally relaxed.

"I had another queer idea," he said. "I thought while I was walking, and afraid to stop, that I met a woman. Only her hair changed from brown to copper red. She walked beside me for a long while, arguing that I could stop and rest."

"And you said it was no trouble for you to walk, that your legs did all the work," Lily Lane said. "Only you weren't walking. You were lying in the trail and the dogs had stopped a quarter of a mile behind you."

"Then you brought me in!" Wally exclaimed. "I'm—I want you to know I'm all-fired grateful for—"

"All-fired!" she broke in sharply. "Why do you say that?"

The eyes were glacier blue and cold, and Wally knew his habit of using the expression was his father's too.

"I'd have to swear to tell you how thankful I really am," he hastened to explain. "But mostly for saving Brad's life."

Lily Lane looked away and her voice was calm again.

"I didn't do it," she said. "My daughter, Natalie, was down river."

"And her hair is copper color?" Wally asked.

"Yes, as mine was eleven years ago."

Lily Lane arose abruptly and left the room. Wally Stearns stared after her, and wondered what he should do. The woman hated his father and sought to kill him. Wally remembered her eyes when she had asked, "Did you say Stearns?" and wondered if she were not capable of killing him as well.

WALLY did not get up that day, or the next, and he did not see anyone except Lily Lane. "You must have gone

more than a week without eating," she said. "Brad tells me he doesn't remember much but he never saw you touch food."

"Brad had to have all there was," Wally protested. "He was sick. And I didn't dare stop to do any hunting."

"Where did you come from?"

"Up in the Moon Mountain country."

"That's quite a ways, the shape you were in. Are you green?"

"Two years in the territory."

"Some men learn a lot in that time," Lily Lane said. "Some never seem to learn. Anywhere near Burnt Ridge Creek?"

"Beyond that."

"I've been there. Eleven years ago. Had a claim. May be you saw the cabin, just below the forks."

"We passed it," Wally said. "Brad said there was a rush on that creek but it didn't amount to much."

"Not much," Lily Lane said, and she arose and left quickly, as she had that first day.

The next day Wally heard a step at the door. He had been thinking a great deal about Lily Lane, remembering what Brad Galbert had told of her, and knew he must be on guard constantly. Twice her suspicions had been aroused. Somewhere near, three men had been killed at her bidding, and Brad insisted that she remained on lonely Hungry River because some day she hoped to wipe two more names off the list. On that list was Jerry Stearns.

Wally had watched her closely and had failed to find any indication of cruelty in her beautiful face. But he did not forget the flame in her blue eyes and tried to have something to talk about when she came, something that would keep her thoughts from him.

Now, when he looked, he found another person in the door. A girl came forward hesitantly, but the glance from her gray eyes was level and a little smile parted her lips. What Wally noted was that the light from the other room revealed red glints in her hair.

"Hello, Natalie!" he exclaimed eagerly. "I wondered when you would come to see me."

"Your partner has kept me busy," she said. "But he is better now."

"Then your mother didn't tell me—"

"It would have done no good to worry you. And you needed rest and food."

"Brad's all right now?"

"I'm sure of it. He has been sleeping, and is no longer delirious. It is just a question of time until he gets his strength back."

"You mean he has been out of his head?"

"And talk!" Natalie laughed and came to sit beside him. "Hours on end."

"What about?" Wally demanded.

"Don't worry. Mother's taken care of many like that. She has a feeling that we are like nurses and doctors, that nothing we hear must be repeated. Only I did gather that Brad Galbert likes you tremendously."

Wally was silent for a few moments. Brad might have said anything. He might have called Jerry Stearns' name in delirium or even have told who Wally was. But Natalie only smiled, and suddenly Wally was aware that she was as beautiful as her mother.

"I'm glad you came to see me," he said. "I've wondered where you were. I haven't thanked you for saving my life, and Brad's."

Natalie laughed and the sound of it dissipated his fears.

"Did mother tell you how funny you were, lying there on the trail and insisting your legs were carrying you without your having anything to do with them?"

Natalie laughed again, and he laughed with her, for suddenly he remembered what Brad had said, what he himself had seen, that Lily Lane never laughed, never even smiled.

Yet all through the great valley of the Yukon she was known as "The Laughing Lily." Her laughter had been heard. She had laughed three times. And each time a man had died.

Suddenly Wally Stearns understood

what life for this girl must be, lonely, dreary—a life lived in dread of laughter.

II

WALLY was young and husky and some of the strength of a bull moose was quickly transferred to his body through the broths and stews which Lily Lane and her daughter fed him. The day Natalie came to visit he was allowed to dress.

The Lane road house, he discovered, was more elaborate than the usual trail tavern. The main room was so large two huge stoves were required to heat it. A bar stood on one side, but the shelves behind it were empty of bottles now. Round tables covered with frayed green felt were pushed back against the wall and the long dining table had been reduced to a square.

Empty and silent as the room was when Wally entered, it held in his imagination the crowds of eager gold seekers who had once trooped along the Hungry River trail. Old-timers intent and efficient, green men fresh from the outside, gamblers and the usual hangers-on known to every stampede, men with high hopes and men in despair, all had sought shelter within those log walls.

"I wasn't here in the busy days," Natalie explained, "but mother has told me of times when all the rooms and bunkhouses were full and men slept on the floor of this room."

"That was when the Moon Mountain rush was on, I suppose," Wally said.

Her face clouded, and he saw pain and a shadow of terror in her eyes.

"Father built the road house then," she said. "There were other rushes later with all the winter travel passing up and down the Hungry. But I have never seen more than three men stop at one time, and you and Brad Galbert are the first this winter."

"You haven't always lived here?"

"I never saw Alaska until four years ago. Father and mother left me with grandma when they came in Ninety-eight. They didn't expect to be gone long. I was five and I never saw my father again. He was murdered in the Moon Mountain country three years later. Mother never came out. She wrote wonderful letters, and said she would come soon, but I felt something was wrong, that she wasn't happy. So I came to be with her."

Wally Stearns turned to look out a window. He had been in Alaska long enough to understand how loneliness drives words from the mouths of men and women, how the excitement of seeing a strange face looses confidences that would otherwise not be expressed.

And Wally knew that his father was believed to be one of the murderers of Lily Lane's husband. How many believed that, he did not know. He knew very little about the case, vague whispered stories on the creeks and in the mountains when men learned his name. Brad Galbert had not told much, scarcely more than a warning to stay away from Hungry River and never to let the Laughing Lily see him. Wally had only his knowledge of his father and a firm faith that Jerry Stearns would never have murdered a man to rob him of a mining claim.

So now to keep this girl from talking of herself and her parents Wally asked about his dogs. Before Natalie could answer, a man pushed open the door and came in with an armful of wood.

HE WAS a huge man, at least six foot six, and a loose fitting parka swelled his great size. The fur-rimmed hood of the parka was thrust back from a massive head thatched heavily with yellow hair. The face was broad and angular, and the pale blue eyes seemed strange against a skin tanned a deep walnut color.

The man dumped his wood into a box and turned toward them.

"This is Juul Wefald," Natalie said. "He helped bring you in and has been caring for your dogs."

Wally's hand went out quickly and he spoke his warm thanks. But he brought no change of expression in the giant's face and the huge paw he grasped was limp.

"Your dogs are all right," Juul said. "Get feed into a dog before he dies and he get good as ever quick."

He stared at Wally as he spoke. It was a searching look but shielded, like an Oriental's. Wally felt that anything this man was thinking would never be revealed in his face.

Juul Wefald turned abruptly and went out. Wally saw that the fur rim of his parka was almost bare in spots, that his clothes were patched. Wally had already seen that wool dresses Lily Lane and her daughter wore were clean but worn and mended with tiny stitches. The food brought to him had been broth and meat stews. Potatoes were plentiful but bread was scarce and there was no pastry.

"Juul has worked for us ever since father and mother came to Alaska," Natalie said. "I don't know what we would do without him."

Wally asked if he could see Brad Galbert and was taken at once to the old sourdough's room. Natalie arranged Brad's pillow and scolded him for trying to sit up.

"Nothing the matter with me," Brad insisted. "Give a woman a chance and she'll nurse you right out o' your hide."

"You've been very sick," she said.

"I never was sick a day in my life!" he exploded. "Only way a woman can get the upper hand with a man is to feed him soft pap and tell him he's dyin'. We'll start tomorrow, boy."

Brad Galbert had never weighed more than a hundred and forty-five pounds and now he couldn't raise a wrinkle in the blankets. His lined face seemed thinner beneath the straggly gray beard.

"I've seen monkeys in a zoo that looked like him," Wally said. "Same beady eyes and same temper."

"He must be a terrible companion when he's well," Natalie laughed as she went out.

Wally sat down close to Brad.

"There's the finest girl that ever stepped out of a petticoat," the old prospector said. "And that ice-faced Lily don't treat you chilly either."

"My name is Kearns," Wally whispered as he leaned closer. "She thought I said 'Stearns,' and you should have seen her eyes."

"I been callin' you 'boy' and 'kid'," Brad said. "When I knew what I was sayin'. Don't know what I spilled when I was out of my head."

"And when I said 'all-fired' you'd have thought she was going to kill me in the bed. Look, Brad! What's the real story of this thing? Dad didn't have anything to do with that murder, did he?"

"You'd have to ask him. Knowin' Jerry Stearns, I'd say he didn't. But there's nothing in Alaska except gold and emptiness, and them two together can twist a man's soul until it looks like the tether chain of a sledge dog that's got himself a notion to go call on his girl."

Wally rose and closed the door.

"Give me the whole thing," he said.

"THE Burnt Creek rush was in nineteen hundred," Brad said. "Hugh Lane had the git up and go of fourteen bobcats. He was in first after discovery and was supposed to have the best claim. But Hugh wasn't the sort that starts spendin' a million soon's he gets the assay report. Just on a chance that Burnt Ridge Creek didn't pay him anything, he built this road house, right where he'd get everybody going through to a big country that hadn't been prospected. He was wise. This place paid ten times over what was took out of Burnt Ridge Creek."

"But Lane was killed the next year," Wally interrupted.

"That next spring. There was a pocket on his claim and it looked like he had himself something sure. There was quite a camp in there on the creek, and in them days you got all sorts. Besides, this was a long way from anywhere and there wasn't any law except what the boys made up as they went along."

"What was Dad doing?"

"Jerry got here too late to stake," Brad answered: "He was willing to buy. Made Hugh Lane an offer and they got to rowing

about it. Everybody knew Jerry made the offer, but nobody heard about the row until after Lane was dead. Then the story got around that they'd had a regular knock down and drag out when they met on the trail. Lane was goin' to the claim and your dad was coming here. Jerry got to drinkin' here and said he was bound outside. And while he was drunk, Thresher Macdougal and his bunch came in. That was Yukon Yager, Squaw Pete, the rest of whose name nobody ever bothered to ask, and Three-Toe Brown. Brown always claimed he didn't get his feet froze but was born that way, which is about the only thing he ever said that anybody believed."

"They sound like a nice gang."

"Yeah, the sort you don't camp near or stake alongside of or shoot craps with. The kind I wouldn't throw a rope to if they went through the ice. Only nobody has to worry about 'em any more. The Laughing Lily took care o' that."

Wally Stearns went to the door and listened, opened it a crack and saw that the hall was empty.

"Do you suppose Natalie knows?" he whispered. "That would be tough, a girl thinking her mother—"

"What's wrong with it?" Brad snorted. "There wasn't any law here then and none to speak of since. Lot o' folks think Lily's some sort of monster, but I'm for her. She done a good job."

"You don't mean she killed them?"

"Not any more'n a man who pulls a rifle trigger can be said to kill a man two hundred yards away. Since Hugh Lane was murdered, Lily's never be known to laugh except three times. Quite a few heard her, and among 'em Thresher Macdougal, Yukon Yager and Squaw Pete. And that big moose of a Juul Wefald. You seen him around here?"

"Yes."

"Ain't he big!" Brad exclaimed. "And strong! I've heard how he's got under a horse that was stuck in the snow. Just bent that back under the horse's belly, grabbed himself a couple o' armfuls o' legs and walked off. And that's the way Lily pulled the trigger. When one of them three came into the road house here, Lily talked to him a bit and then she laughed. Laughed loud, too. Right in his face. I never heard her, but men as has say it started the creeps running up their backs. And Juul heard her, and looked at who Lily was talking to. And after that night nobody happened to see that man again."

"I still don't understand where my father comes in on this," Wally protested.

"Maybe he don't, boy. I can only tell what I've heard. But the story goes that Jerry Stearns was drunk and sore and that he got Thresher's bunch to go jump Lane's claim and put Lane where he wouldn't make trouble. Then Jerry was to buy the claim from them. Thresher said it was true, before that big Scandihoovian of a Juul got his glaums on him."

"But Dad went out that year. He never bought the claim. And he's not the sort—"

"Take a look at Lily Lane's eyes," Brad Galbert broke in. "Want to tell her Jerry Stearns ain't that sort? The way Lily sees it, there's two left, your dad and Three-Toe Brown. And Lily'll wait here until they peddle ear muffs in hell, just on the chance Jerry or Brown show up. Stick around, kid, and you'll hear her laugh."

III

BRAD GALBERT had always been tough. Despite his size, he packed burdens with the next man and could best most on the winter trails. But Brad had been in Alaska since '82, ten years as a trapper and twenty more prospecting, and at sixty he was developing soft spots. Pneumonia had sapped his vitality and his strength did not flood back as he expected.

The old sourdough would not admit this. He wanted to get up and travel.

"I'll be getting bed sores, lyin' here so long," he stormed. "And don't sit there shakin' your head, Lily. How can you tell if I'm well or not?"

Lily Lane glanced at Wally Stearns. Wally was watching her, as he had been

ever since he heard her story, and he was beginning to understand the will and purpose of this woman who waited in an empty wilderness to finish her revenge.

Except that she never laughed, never smiled, that the frozen beauty of her face could not demand admiration, Lily Lane had aroused Wally's sympathy rather than his fear. In her kindness to Brad and to him, in her attitude toward Natalie and the light in her face when she watched her daughter, he saw a person wholly unlike the Laughing Lily of Alaskan legend.

Now, as she looked at him, Wally was sure he caught a twinkle in her eyes.

"All right, Brad," she said suddenly. "You ought to know how you feel. There are your clothes. Come on, Wally. We'll let him run his own affairs."

Wally followed her out. He was worried, because he knew Brad was not ready to travel.

"The only way to get sense into the heads of those old boys who think Ninety-eighters are still chechahcos is to use a singlejack and a drill," Lily Lane said.

Soon they heard Brad coming. For a moment, as he entered the big room, he walked with certain step. Suddenly he stopped. An expression of incredulity and rage contorted his grizzled old face and his slight body swayed.

"Damn you, Lily!" he gasped. "I knew that pap you been feeding me had no strength to it. And what you been doing to my knees?"

He toppled over then. Wally was ready to catch him and carried the frail body back to bed.

"Now who's boss, you cantankerous old wreck?" Lily asked. "The next time you get up is when I say the word."

"And if you'd fed me fat pork and beans, I could be doing forty miles a day right now," Brad retorted.

Wally remained with his partner when Lily departed.

"Quit worrying," he said. "Those claims will stay there even if we don't file on them right away."

"But you can't take chances on a setup as good as that," Brad protested. "I've seen too many queer things happen in Alaska, and this is the first good strike I ever made."

"You can't travel, so there's no use talking about it. And here's something else. Neither of us would be alive today if it wasn't for Mrs. Lane and her daughter."

"We've got money to pay for stopping here."

"Maybe that's all your life's worth." Wally grinned. "I figure I owe a lot more. What's the matter, while you're lying here, with my taking Natalie or her mother to the Moon Mountains so they can file on a couple of good claims?"

"You complete damn fool!" Brad barked. "And your name and Jerry's wrote plain on the notices?"

"They needn't see it."

"And Lily waiting here all those years just for the chance to laugh when she sees your dad."

"You haven't been around this place," Wally said. "No grub hardly, except the moosemeat and fish Juul brings in. Nobody has stopped here this winter. Their clothes are old and patched. Juul is ragged. They've had tea but no coffee for a month."

"I've gone a year without either," Brad snorted.

"It's the one decent thing we can do. Doesn't cost us anything. When the rush comes through here, they wouldn't have a chance."

"Thought you was letting your dad in on this."

"I am," Wally said. "I am writing him, and I'm telling him the whole Laughing Lily story. Asking how much truth there is in it, too. Then it's up to him whether he comes to take up the claim I staked for him."

Brad stared his disbelief.

"Listen, kid," he said. "You going to give the Lily a chance to laugh and feed your dad to that big Scandihoovian grizzly?"

"I don't think Dad had anything to do with killing Hugh Lane. If he did, he should be warned away. I know I'd have

been wolf bait if it hadn't been for Mrs. Lane and Natalie. I know they're up against it, close to starving. I'm not paying only a board bill here."

Brad Galbert scowled, and then he grinned.

"What's so funny?" Wally demanded.

"You—and me. I been wonderin' how I could do something for Lily. She's took care of a hundred frozen bums and not had even a 'thank you' half the time. But you, and your dad, and that laughing business—I didn't see a chance."

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"You never can learn about a partner just by listening to him," Brad said. "Go to it, boy."

Wally started toward the door.

"But hurry," the old man warned. "If you ain't back in four days, I'm leaving."

NATALIE was not in the big room, and it was Wally's thought to tell her what he planned. Since he had been permitted to get up he had talked with her for long hours, and always he had been aware of the tragedy that hung over her life, of how she was being cramped and thwarted, buried in a wilderness by her mother's purpose. A rich claim might release her.

As Wally started for the kitchen to find the girl, Lily Lane called him.

"I want to talk to you," she said, turning to a corner of the big room.

Her voice was strange. Wally saw that she was upset when he sat down facing her, and at once he was on his guard.

"There is something I must ask," she began slowly. "You need not answer if you do not wish.'

Wally did not speak. He could not.

"Brad was delirious," she continued. "He talked a lot. "I've heard sick men babble before. Sometimes it doesn't mean much. I try not to pay attention. I don't want to hear things that come from way inside a person. It isn't decent."

She was looking at him. Wally felt himself tighten up within.

"This was different," Lily Lane went on. "I tried to forget it. But it means too much to me. What Brad said seemed true. The facts fitted. And I want you to know I never asked such a thing before. I'm asking now only on account of Natalie. Did you two make a strike on Burnt Creek Ridge?"

Wally felt himself sway. It was as if he had risen to the surface after battling deep water.

"I know how an old-timer is afraid of leaks," Lily Lane said. "Brad has been sounding me, trying to learn if he talked when he was out of his head. But he likes you. Says you are the best partner he has had in thirty years."

Wally was grinning now. In his relief he jumped to his feet and grasped her hand, shook it warmly.

"Why didn't you come right out with it?" he demanded. "You had me scared to death. Brad and I were just talking about this. I told him I was going to take you and Natalie to stake claims before the rush starts. And Brad was thinking the same thing, only afraid I would—"

He broke off suddenly. That was the trouble with being alone in the wilderness for long periods, Wally knew. A man talked too much when he met people.

"But I wasn't asking for a claim!" Lily Lane protested. "I don't want it. I won't take it. I only wanted to know if there would be a stampede. If there is I must get in supplies. I'll do a big business here and I must be ready for it."

"You'll get the business," Wally laughed. "More than you can handle. We really have something up there, Mrs. Lane. But why do you count on catching only the crumbs? You can be in on the ground floor, stake next to discovery."

Her face hardened and her eyes had that cold glint of glacier blue.

"No," she said. "Not in the Moon Mountain country."

"But it isn't far, and while Brad is getting strong enough—"

"No!"

Her voice was firm, but it was a cry of pain. Wally was silenced by the stricken

look in a face that had always been expressionless and controlled. She stared at him a moment.

"You have been in Alaska long enough to have heard about me," she said. "You've heard of Laughing Lily. Life stopped for me on Burnt Ridge Creek. It has never started again. Do you think I would go back there? Take money from that place? Dig gold in the ground where he is buried?"

There was nothing glacial about Lily Lane now. The blue eyes were aflame. Her beauty had come alive. And yet in it Wally could see the remorseless spirit that had bound her life to revenge. Suddenly he saw how completely Natalie's life was bound by that same compulsion.

"I can understand that," he said. "But you can't keep your daughter from her chance."

"Natalie wouldn't—"

"Why wouldn't she? She can scarcely remember her father. She came up here to be with you. She can't get away. You haven't any right to do that to her."

Lily Lane was on her feet, glaring at him.

"You cub!" she cried. "What do you know? If you dare say anything to Natalie about this I'll—"

She clapped a hand over her mouth, but not soon enough to smother the first note of her laughter.

IV

SOMETHING other than fear of Lily Lane kept Wally Stearns from telling Natalie about the Moon Mountain strike. He talked with her a long while the next day, much of the time alone while they looked over his dogs, felt of their washboard sides and rubbed salve on shoulders where collars had cut skin against bone.

The girl was in no mood for tragedy. Wally was the first young person she had seen in a year, the first who knew her own San Francisco, and he did not have the heart to refer to the gold he and Brad had uncovered. It might uncover the past.

Natalie seemed to gain new life in his presence, in the release from monotony of Hungry River. Her laughter echoed from the cliffs behind the road house and the Lane dogs added a chorus of yips and howls and raced about their corral.

The girl's beauty was real, warm, not like that of the frozen mask her mother wore. In the crisp air her cheeks were aglow and her hair, fringed by the gray cross-fox of her parka hood, glinted red in the light of the low sun.

Wally Stearns forgot the Laughing Lily as he talked to Natalie. He forgot Juul Wefald and his silent waiting, forgot his own father, even the death that had made a tomb of this road house beside a trail no longer traveled. He wanted only to make the girl laugh, to hear bright laughter where for so long laughter had been only the signal of death.

And before that day was over, Wally knew that he would always want to hear her laugh, that he wanted a rich claim that would permit him to take her away from Hungry River.

Once he saw Lily Lane watching from a kitchen window. The woman stood staring a long while. Juul Wefald came to stand beside her, huge and silent, and Wally shivered. The giant was the shadow of Lily's laughter.

That night after supper, while Natalie was in the kitchen, her mother spoke to Wally.

"I have told Juul to have the dogs ready in the morning," she began abruptly. "He will go with you and Natalie."

Wally did not speak. He could not be certain of what he had heard.

"And if you and Brad are willing, I would like to have Juul stake a claim for himself," Lily Lane said. "He has been working for us fourteen years. He would never join a rush, never leave us. I owe it to him."

"Of course," Wally said.

"And thank you for what you said to me."

She turned quickly away. Later that night, when they gathered in Brad's room

she listened as Natalie talked gaily of the journey.

"There's never been a rush on the Hungry since I came to Alaska," the girl cried. "I have scarcely known a prospector. The only gold I've seen is some Juul found long ago and that he has always kept in a greasy skin bag."

"You'll see it in the Moon Mountains," Brad said. "See more'n you know what to do with. But when you get a good chance to sell, take it. It's the only thing to do with a claim so far from anywhere."

Wally saw Lily Lane start, and he remembered his father's offer to Hugh Lane. Wally marveled at the iron nerve of this woman. She hung on, in a place where everything that happened and everything that was said could be only a reminder of days when she could laugh and men were glad of her laughter.

BEFORE he went to bed that night, Wally talked to Brad. "We'll be gone a week," he said. "See that you're well by the time I'm back."

"Never mind me," Brad growled. "Watch that big Juul. Keep him away from our notices. If he was to read Jerry Stearns' name, you may never come back."

"Mrs. Lane will have to know it some time."

"See that it's when you're a thousand miles from that grizzly. You noticed his hands?"

"Wah!"

"They're what's supposed to have done for Macdougal and Yager and Squaw Pete," Brad said. "Nothing was proved. Them three being dead didn't get anybody excited enough to smell around except out of plain curiosity. But a lot of guessing went on, with this added to that. Now everybody believes it was done a certain way."

"Juul choked them to death?" Wally asked.

"Or maybe wrung their necks. He could do it. That part didn't matter. But there never was a track of a man leaving and the bodies were never found. We figured Juul dumped them in the water hole he kept open in the river. Wired weights to 'em to sink 'em. But because he didn't want 'em sunk near here, he tied cedar floats to the corpses too, tied 'em with string. That way, the bodies would go with the current clear to the Yukon. After a while the strings would rot off and the weights would sink the body. Would you think the big ox had the brains for that?"

"You're guessing, all right."

"Maybe," Brad agreed. "A body did get stranded on a bar three hundred miles below here. The weights were still wired on, but there was only rotted ends of the strings."

"Was it one of the three?" Wally asked.

"After the ice and the fish got through with it? Even if it had been Three-Toe Brown, there'd been no proof. When you said it was the corpse of a human, that's as far as you could go."

"You know a lot of pleasant stories about Alaska, Brad."

"And don't forget there's stories like that still in the making. Stay away from Juul's hands."

"Where is Brown now?"

"Nobody got hep to Lily's laugh till after Squaw Pete faded away so sudden. Then Three-Toe Brown went down river quick. He was seen in Nome the next year. I bumped into him on the Kobuk five years ago and he was met coming out by the Koyukuk since. Maybe he's still around Candle."

Wally did not speak for some time. Brad was tired and lay with closed eyes.

"This thing must be stopped!" the young man exclaimed suddenly. "It's a rotten break for Natalie. Her mother has no right to do this to her."

Brad opened one eye.

"So?" he drawled. "You sure dote on complications, kid. Jerry Stearns' son and the Laughing Lily's daughter. How you going to get an answer out of that?"

Wally did not know when he started with Natalie and Juul long before daylight the next morning, and for a time he did not give the matter much thought.

THEY used the Lane dogs. Natalie rode, and Wally did too when the trail was level, for he had not regained all his strength. Juul ran ahead on snowshoes, and as the miles slipped by, Wally marveled at the physical fitness of the giant. Big men seldom travel well. They have too much weight, too big a load for their legs, and they lumber along, feet hitting hard.

Juul Wefald ran with the easy gliding shuffle of the dog-team driver who seems as effortless at night as in the morning. His face did not show weariness. He plunged into camp making with as much energy as he broke camp before the day's start.

Natalie was ecstatic.

"It is the first real trip I ever made," she said. "I go up or down river a few hours sometimes just for the change. That is how I happened to find you. But I have never been away from the road house over night since I came."

"If your claim pans out, you will be able to go back to San Francisco," Wally said.

All the happiness fled from her face. It was the second night's camp and Juul was gathering fire wood. And now the blaze revealed terror and hopelessness in her eyes.

"Mother has never spoken of leaving Hungry River," she said. "There are several things she never speaks of. I wonder sometimes—"

Miserable and helpless, Wally waited. He did not dare look at her.

"It is so useless, so senseless, after all these years!" Natalie cried. "She thinks I don't know. But in Alaska no one can help knowing such things. I heard a little of it on the way in four years ago. You know—stopping at road houses with crowds of men traveling, men drinking, men talking, because they haven't had anyone to talk to for months."

"What a beastly way to learn it!" Wally exclaimed.

"If I had only learned it all! But there were just hints, parts of sentences, enough to make it seem so much more terrible. I didn't dare ask mother or Juul. It was two years before I got the whole story from an old prospector who stayed with us a week."

Wally did not speak.

"It is so useless," Natalie repeated. "Those two men will never come back. They are warned. Before you brought your news, I thought we would have to leave. Our money is gone. We can't earn a living here. Now mother is all excited over a new rush into the country, over—"

The girl shivered. Wally knew what she meant.

"Those two that are left—do you know their names?" he asked.

Natalie nodded. She did not speak again before Juul returned with a sled load of wood.

Each day they passed two or three camps that Wally and Brad had made on their slow, starving way out. They passed the tumbling remains of a log shack below the forks of Burnt Ridge Creek. Juul did not stop nor did Wally speak, but Natalie looked at the building and asked. "Is that where father lived?"

Wallie nodded. They went up the west fork a few miles, climbed a ridge, dipped into a narrow valley in the heart of the Moon Mountains. It was long after dark when they reached the little cabin Brad and Wally had built.

"THIS is a new place," Juul said after supper. "Not where we had the Burnt Ridge Creek rush."

"No, and it is a different formation," Wally answered. "Brad and I worked here most of the summer and all fall. We would have gone out sooner but we wanted to make certain and took time to look the whole place over."

"All this snow, the ground frozen, Natalie and I have to take your word for it, eh?"

"If you're going to get right back, you will."

"Your word is good with me," Juul announced. "You did not have to bring us, or tell us what you find."

"Brad and I know this whole district," Wally said. "We have staked for ourselves and one other, taking what we thought was best. I can show you and Natalie the next best claims and I'm pretty sure they are almost as good as ours."

They went on the next morning at dawn. Wally explained the formation, told where they had worked and taken samples. He even led them to a corner where Brad Galbert had posted a notice. Natalie bent to read it. She had never seen one.

"And that is all I have to do to win a fortune?" she cried excitedly.

"There will be assessment work," Wally said. "But you may be able to sell for a good price before you need to do any. If I were you, I would stake here, next to Brad."

Distances were paced off, monuments built and trees blazed, Juul decided to go farther up the valley.

"If you miss here, then maybe I hit good up there," he said to Natalie. "You get two chances."

"But I couldn't take yours!" she protested.

"It is all the same," Juul said stolidly. "If gold was like sand on the ground here, your mother would not come. You got to get something for her."

The big man walked quickly away. Wally strove for some excuse to stop him. The last notice up there was posted in the name of Jerry Stearns.

"He means that," Natalie said. "Father saved Juul's life that first year in Alaska. Ever since, Juul has believed he is indebted to us. He hasn't had wages for two years. He speaks of my father as if he were still alive. And for mother, he would do—"

She broke off, whipped a mittened hand to her mouth, and again there was terror in her eyes.

"Do you see?" she cried. "I can't get away from that horrible thing—ever!"

Wally stepped close and his arms went around her.

"It is horrible," he said. "But it shouldn't wreck your life. It can't. I won't let it. I'll take you away from here. Take you some place where you can forget it and be happy, where you can laugh—"

She was clinging to him, sobbing. Now their bodies stiffened. Their arms fell away. Each stepped back.

"There it is," Natalie said. "Laugh! The Laughing Lily! How can I ever laugh again?"

"You must!" he insisted fiercely. "You must be happy. I want to do that for you. It is all I ever want to do."

She smiled then, just a little.

"I hoped you would care," she said. "I want you to take me away. Only—to leave mother here. The whole thing is ghastly."

Wally knew how much more ghastly it was than she dreamed. He turned, and far up the narrow valley he saw Juul Wefald. The giant was kneeling in the snow before a monument, peering at the notice posted there.

It was a notice Wally Stearns had written when he staked that claim for his father.

V

WALLY took Natalie back to the cabin where they could write her own notices. He walked behind her and he did not speak all the way.

But once inside he placed his hands on her shoulders and looked steadily into her startled eyes.

"I meant to tell you," he said. "Later. I couldn't do anything else. My name isn't Kearns. It is Stearns. My father is Jerry Stearns."

She heard him, but the full significance of it did not come at once. Natalie only stared.

"Ghastly!" Wally exclaimed between clenched teeth. "Could anything be more so? I haven't any right to speak to you. I'll always be a reminder of what happened when we were kids, of something we had no part in but something we can never forget."

The horror of it came to her now. Her eyes widened as if she had been struck.

Then she began to smile, and in her smile were trust and pity, and a great hopelessness.

"It isn't you and me," she said. "We had nothing to do with this whole horrible mess. You would never remind me of anything except that you took me away from here. But mother! She could think of only one thing—always."

Wally turned to the table and arranged a sheet of paper.

"At least I can do this much," he said. "This will make you rich, Natalie. Perhaps you can get your mother to leave."

"I don't think she will ever leave so long as those two are alive."

"One of them will come. I am writing to my father that I have staked a claim for him."

"No!" Natalie cried.

"I am writing him the whole story," Wally insisted. "I don't believe he had anything to do with your father's death. I know him too well."

"But if he comes, Juul—"

"I don't think Dad even knows about your mother waiting on the Hungry. He has told me about her, about what a beautiful woman she was. He knew your father had been killed. But Dad went straight back to the States. He left San Francisco almost at once for Mexico for a mining company. He was there and in South America for years."

"You can't bring him up here!" Natalie protested. "If mother sees him—you can't understand what she is like underneath. Grandmother told me she never knew two people could be so in love as mother and Dad. Neither would consider his coming to Alaska alone in Ninety-eight. They would never be separated. Now nothing can move her."

"I knew that from looking at her," Wally said. "And she will know all about it as soon as we get back."

"You won't tell her!"

"Juul will. I saw him reading the notice on my father's claim."

Natalie did not seem to hear. She was staring out the window.

"You must not tell mother," she said. "Later she will have to know. Now I want time to think. Perhaps I will talk to her. But Juul—he can't read English. He has even forgotten the Norwegian he once knew."

THEY posted the notices and started back to Hungry River that afternoon. Wally was much stronger now and could run behind the sled. Natalie rode. They made fast time, but Juul did not stop until long hours after darkness had come.

"We must hurry," he explained when they had eaten supper the first night. "I have much work to do. Freighting will be hard, I have so far to go. I must kill many caribou and haul them in, and there are none near this winter."

"But we can't buy supplies," Natalie protested.

"I have some gold," Juul said. "Enough. Only I do not know how I can buy things. Grub is all right. But when I buy liquor people will talk. We must have liquor in a road house. And people must not talk until Brad and Wally get back."

Natalie did not understand. She looked from the giant to Wally.

"It will be a big rush," Juul said. "Men will come from everywhere. All kinds of men. It is not like in Ninety-eight. But there are bad men left in Alaska. The Moon Mountain country is a long way from the law. And the law starts slow."

"You mean you are afraid someone will steal claims?" Natalie demanded.

"Yump 'em. Beat a man up. Maybe shoot him. Maybe tear up notices if they get there first. We got to give Brad and Wally plenty of time to get back to the Moon Mountains."

Wally saw the girl watching him, and he knew what she was thinking. She was wondering if gold in any amount were worth the danger, worth the return of old memories.

"Many men will come," Juul said. "Most of them will be good. Some will be bad. Some—some will be very bad."

The giant sat staring into the fire. A new

light was in his eyes, cold and implacable. His great hands were spread to the blaze, and Wally saw them stiffen. The fingers became huge talons, crooked, of steel.

Natalie was watching and she arose suddenly and went to her sleeping robe. She did not speak again, did not even call "good night." Wally wondered if she knew all the story, knew how Juul's hands had cracked men's necks when her mother laughed. He wondered if this girl and he could ever hope for happiness when everything that was done or said, when even a man warming his hands at a fire, would bring the sorrow and the tragedy of the past tumbling about their heads.

Juul had them away long before dawn and they reached home at the end of the sixth day of their absence. Something that was almost a smile touched Lily Lane's face when she saw her daughter. She hugged the girl to her.

"It is the first time we have been separated since Natalie came North," the mother said, and all the glacial glint was gone from her eyes.

Juul stood watching them. His only greeting had been "Hello, Lily," but as he saw the two embrace his great angular face broke into a wide grin and his pale eyes were warm and tender. He loomed above them, huge, shaggy, not unlike a great Newfoundland dog beaming upon two children.

Wally Stearns turned away. The whole thing was incomprehensible. These people were not monsters. In Lily Lane and in Juul Wefald were love and devotion. They possessed tenderness and a sense of fairness. They sacrificed themselves without heed of consequences. And they waited for Jerry Stearns and Three-Toe Brown to return after eleven years.

Brad Galbert was up and impatient to be on his way.

"Dogs are fat, and I will be soon's I get away from Lily's pap," he snorted.

"Better wait a few days," Lily Lane said.

"Wait nothing! I've got work to do. Got to see some men, freight in stuff and hunt up an old pal or two that's entitled to a look-in before the hull Moon Mountains are staked solid. We start in the morning."

START they did. Wally had no opportunity to see Natalie alone. Once when he stared at her across the table he caught Lily Lane watching him, and later he saw her studying Natalie.

The girl was excited, talkative. Often her glance caught Wally's. She had courage now, and hope. He departed with only the message her eyes had given him.

Brad Galbert ran with the dogs the next morning until he was out of sight of the road house. Then Wally saw his knees grow rubbery and his feet stumble.

"Get on the sled," the younger man said as he halted the dogs. "If you don't I'll run away from you and you'll have to go back to Lily Lane's."

"I'm all right," Brad growled. "It's just that my eyes ain't used to the snow and I can't tell how far down the ground is."

"Get on the sled and rest your eyes then."

They camped the first night. Brad complained and Wally scolded him while supper was cooking. They ate in silence and after one pipe turned in. Trees popped like rifle shots in the intense cold, and ice in a nearby lake boomed like cannon fire.

"Nothing's going to keep Lily Lane from laughing once or twice more if she gets the chance," Brad called from his caribou skin robe. "I felt like shakin' her, she's that stubborn. And me with my mind made up that I'm going to have Natalie for a pardner-in-law."

"You didn't spill anything?" Wally demanded.

"Nor give her anything to suspect. But I sure crammed some ideas in behind that frozen mask she uses for a face. Told her Hugh Lane's been dead a long time, and while Thresher Macdougal and Yukon Yager and Squaw Pete wasn't enough to pay for Hugh's little finger, she couldn't be so free laughin' in men's faces any

more. Alaska ain't so wild, and besides the hull thing is outlawed anyhow."

"You didn't talk to her like that?" Wally asked incredulously.

"Why not? She's got no right to pen up as fine a girl as Natalie together with her own hate and that Norwaygan grizzly. Notice how Natalie's face cracks when she laughs? Ain't used to laughing, and she's the kind that would rather laugh than eat. I said to Lily, 'What if Jerry Stearns and Three-Toe never show up?' She says, 'They'll come, and I'll be here.' Said it as if she was reading something out of the Bible. You write Jerry not to come, kid."

"I'll write him to take the first boat."

"You're worse than Lily!" Brad snorted. "I told her she was wrong on the Stearns end of it, that if Jerry hired anybody to kill Hugh so's to steal Hugh's claim, he'da stuck around to get what he paid for. And as for him and Hugh having a fight, nobody saw it and nobody ever heard Hugh or Jerry speak of it."

"Wasn't there only the story Thresher Macdougal told?" Wally asked.

"And I reminded Lily of that. What's a crook's word? Anybody could see Thresher was laying his plans so that when Hugh was killed it would be thought Jerry Stearns did it. 'Only Thresher didn't tell that story just once,' Lily said. 'He told it again. To Juul. The last thing he ever told anybody. And Squaw Pete told the same thing. Told it to Juul.' That's what she said, kid. Talkin' like a cake of ice that's smokin' hot. And that's what the Laughing Lily is going to keep believing."

They reached a road house the third night, and after that their journey was easy. Brad rode most of the way. The sled was light, the trail traveled and in good shape. A week after they left Hungry River they reached Northern Light with its stores, hotels and constant communication with the outside.

"Some day they'll have these new flyin' machines in Alaska and a feller can move around fast," Brad said as they approached the town. "But right now the only fast thing in the territory is the smell of a new strike. You keep your mouth shut and let me do all the talking."

Wally Stearns did better than that. After he had cared for the dogs he shut himself up in a room and wrote to his father. Mail would leave early the next morning to connect with a ship for Seattle and Jerry Stearns should have the letter in ten days if he were in San Francisco.

The son wrote fully, giving even Brad's final conversation with Lily Lane. He repeated Brad's warning to stay away and gave his own impressions of the road house on Hungry River, of the brooding tragedy and the air of inexorable waiting that hung over the place.

Wally told about taking Natalie and Juul to the Moon Mountains and his sense of obligation. And at the end he wrote how he felt about the Laughing Lily's daughter and how he hoped to take her out of Alaska.

I am not asking anything of you that you cannot do. I don't believe that you had any connection with the killing of Hugh Lane. But I would rather see this cleared up, for Natalie's sake, than have all the gold in the territory.

Wally made two duplicates of the letter and sent them to different addresses. Now that he had written his father, he began to realize how difficult it would be to locate Jerry Stearns immediately. Mines and the excitement of finding gold were always drawing him to distant places and the son, without mail since the previous spring, had no certainty of his whereabouts.

VI

WALLY STEARNS took lessons from a master in the art of concealing a rich strike, and often Brad Galbert's devious ways fooled even his young partner.

First, Brad became alarmingly decrepit. He told of having had pneumonia and

starving. He admitted that he was too old to be knocking around the hills any longer and he paid daily visits to a doctor.

Brad borrowed money, pleading that he was broke, though he and Wally had a hefty poke and the samples they had brought out were worth several hundred dollars. But Brad refused to take the samples to an assay office and he did not make a move to file on the claims. He barked openly at Wally and hinted that good partners were no longer to be had. He wondered what the States could be coming to when the younger generation it sent to Alaska was so completely lacking in nerve and brains.

This continued for a week. By then the presence of the testy old prospector had become a commonplace in the hotels and saloons of Northern Light. Men ceased to listen to him, and suddenly all interest was centered in the arrival of a man from a creek only seventy miles distant. He had samples, and he filed on some claims, and he did not hesitate to talk.

"We didn't have to wait for that so long as I thought," Brad chuckled when he and Wally were alone in their room. "Now all we've got to do is stage a row and split. You load up the sled. You've got the list we made. You might even 'pear to be looking for a pardner to go to this new strike with. Only you can't find anybody to suit you, and you don't get away with the first rush."

"But we want that assay, and we've got to file," Wally protested.

"The assay runs better'n two thousand dollars to the ton, kid. I got it last night. That doc's office is in the same building with an assayer I can trust. And as for filing, I could go out in the middle of the street by night and yell my fool head off, and nobody'd hear me. Go get busy."

Wally found he was only a small part of a vast excitement. No one listened to anyone else, but everyone talked knowingly. Clerks in stores worked over time. The main street was filled with sleds and dogs. When a team pulled out, those who remained worked the more frantically to get away. Brad and Wally attended to the filing on the claims in an empty office just before closing time, and they pulled out of Northern Light unseen the next morning.

The return to Hungry River was not made in a week. The sled was heavily loaded, snow covered the trails, and often on long mountain grades they were compelled to leave part of the freight and make two trips.

Brad Galbert did not complain now. All this was a familiar part of Alaska and he was content. Two old friends in Northern Light had already started north and would be assured of good claims. Whatever wealth he and Wally had staked, and that of Natalie and Juul, was safe now.

"We'll be there in plenty of time," Brad chuckled again and again. "And what comes after can't hurt us."

"Maybe there won't be a rush," Wally said. "You worked things so well, no one will suspect."

"Huh!" Brad snorted. "There's men in Alaska can tell what a fellow at the South Pole's thinkin'. Bet there's dogs smellin' our trail right now."

Dogs were. Road house keepers had noted the passing of Brad's old pals, and Brad's own heavily loaded sled. Other travelers saw, and conjectured. Men bound south carried stories that grew with the miles. Northern Light discovered that Brad had filed for himself and others, and old-timers began to reconstruct Brad's stay in town.

Men drifted back from the new strike nearby and reported it worthless. Mails went out on long trails to far scattered camps, carrying letters to old cronies, tips from men who hoped for a share in possible gains. Before Brad and Wally reached Hungry River, half of Alaska was in motion. East, west and north, the black noses of straining dogs were pointed. The Moon Mountain rush was on.

NONE of this was evident when Brad and Wally reached Lily Lane's road house after thirteen days of weary trail

from Northern Light. Except that Juul Wefald was absent, hauling supplies, the place looked the same. Natalie and her mother stood waiting in the door as the men drove up.

One glance and Wally knew Lily Lane had not been told who he was. Her face remained expressionless but her eyes were warm and almost smiling.

"You won't have time to stand around gawking much longer," was Brad's greeting. "Be sittin' up nights tryin' to get ahead on cookin' for an army."

He went inside with Lily Lane and Natalie helped Wally with his dogs.

"I wrote father," Wally began at once. "Told him the whole story, even about you and me."

"Will he come?" she asked anxiously.

"I have no idea where he is or when he'll get my letters. I hope he comes. This thing must be cleared up."

"But if mother sees him—"

"Dad will be on his guard. And I'll be watching Juul."

"You mean you would—"

"I won't let Juul crack Dad's neck," Wally said. "I am not arguing against your mother being an executioner in this case, but she hasn't any right to be judge as well."

"You are as set as she is!" Natalie cried. "This whole thing is impossible. Unbearable!"

"But I can't be known as Kearns much longer. Men who know me will come. Men will see my notices. I'll get mail. It's all bound to come out somehow. I only want it to come out the best way for all of us."

"There can't be any best way," Natalie said hopelessly. "I wish you hadn't come to Hungry River. I wish you wouldn't come again."

Brad and Wally remained only over night. They were tired. The closed, warm house made them sleepy after their days in intense cold and a physical drowsiness masked the younger man's depression.

Natalie, being a woman, carried it off. Even her mother did not detect anything strained in the girl's laughter when they talked for a while after supper. And in the morning Brad and Wally were gone before the women wakened.

They spent five days reaching the claims in Moon Mountains. Brad's two old friends were there, had staked according to Brad's directions. As soon as they learned where prospect holes had been dug the previous summer they began cutting timber for fires to thaw out the ground.

Wally went hunting at once. Meat would be valuable in that isolated camp and all the surrounding country would soon be overrun with hunters. He killed several caribou many miles to the north, and before he had finished hauling them in, the vanguard of the rush arrived.

In the following weeks men swarmed into the Moon Mountain country. They were of all kinds, old-timers who had traveled light and fast, others who had toiled with heavy loads for fear they would starve so far from supplies. The usual hangers-on came, gamblers and speculators, men with cash or promises to offer for likely claims, men who boasted immediate facilities for organizing companies that could float stock in the States.

And there were some men who did nothing except walk about, listening, watching, estimating, men who waited for the excitement and population to increase and provide a screen for their activities.

The good and the bad had come to the Moon Mountain country.

It was all new to Wally Stearns. His two years in Alaska had been spent in lonely places with Brad Galbert. But to Brad the scene was long familiar, and now the old man was the hero and the center of the camp. Everyone he had ever seen in Alaska claimed friendship and sought advice and inside information.

The ridges were quickly denuded of timber as cabins, saloons and a store were built. Men talked and bought and sold. Only the old-timers went to work, and the results of their digging threw the camp into fresh excitement. Prices of the holdings jumped by the thousands. Soft-voiced and steady-eyed men followed Brad

and Wally everywhere, and each day they offered larger sums for the discovery claims.

UNDERNEATH the excitement and the uproar, the ceaseless talk of lodes and outcroppings and assays, there was a stream of comment and conjecture on the Laughing Lily and what the rush would bring her. Old-timers were first to notice that a choice claim stood in the name of Jerry Stearns, with Juul Wefald staking ground directly alongside, and that Natalie Lane's holdings were close to those of Jerry's son.

"Sitting there alone all these years, like a spider in its web, and now this busts for her," ran the comment.

"Only two left, Stearns and Three-Toe Brown, and this is drawin' every man in Alaska who can pick up a foot and set it down again."

"I'm goin' to be there. I never heard Lily laugh."

"More power to her. She's earned her giggle, waiting all this time."

"Three-Toe was in Candle last winter. Wonder if he'll figure he can dodge the Hungry gettin' here."

"And Hugh Lane was as fine a feller as came in Ninety-eight."

"Brown will get here. Too much chance for a small crook in a big strike like this."

"Juul looked strong as ever when I stopped there. And did he have a hungry glint in those fish eyes of his!"

No one spoke to Wally directly, but he heard comments in crowds, at bars, when he passed groups of men. It was impossible to escape this topic of second importance. He even knew there was betting on whether Jerry Stearns would come, whether Three-Toe Brown would muster nerve to slip past the Hungry, whether the Laughing Lily would get a chance to laugh in the face of a victim.

A mail route had been established but nothing came from Wally's father. Natalie did not write and there was no direct word of her. Wally heard only that the Lane road house was crowded, that a man had been hired to do the freighting and Juul Wefald was always there.

"Just waiting," a new arrival reported. "Waiting and working them big fingers of his."

Wally Stearns wanted to go down to Hungry River. He knew Lily Lane must have heard who he was after all these weeks and he knew how Natalie must be suffering. Not only had she given up hope of happiness, but with men streaming past on the trail, with the big room crowded at night, with the door opening constantly and fresh faces appearing, she lived in momentary expectation that Jerry Stearns would come, that the Laughing Lily would recognize him.

YET Wally could not see that he might accomplish anything. Lily Lane, knowing now who he was, probably would not let him speak to her daughter. He talked it over with Brad, and even Brad admitted the situation seemed hopeless.

"It's just one of them cases where you've got a bear by the tail and there ain't a thing to be done about it except hang on," the old prospector said one night as they prepared for bed.

"Natalie and I didn't have anything to do with all this," Wally protested. "She shouldn't be made to pay."

"After you've chalked up as many years as I have, you'll find life's organized pretty much along them lines," Brad said. "But it don't all run on the black side. See that little feller I was talkin' to today?"

Wally nodded.

"He's the best mining engineer in Alaska, Roy Thornton. There's people in the States that'll put millions on his say-so. Roy's been here three weeks now, pokin' into every hole and lookin' at samples. He's made me an offer, but he thinks you've got better ground and that the best of all is what you staked for Natalie."

"Then she's taken care of no matter what happens."

"If somebody tells her she ought to

grab Roy's offer. He'll pay fifty thousand dollars down and a royalty."

"I'm starting in the morning!" Wally exclaimed.

"You stay away from Hungry River, kid. Lily's heard who you are by this time. You can't—"

Men began yelling outside. Brad opened the door and saw a dog team dashing up what served as the camp's main street.

"Mail's in!" the old prospector shouted. "Roy Thornton will get word to pass out the checks."

Wally followed and joined the crowd in front of the store. The building was jammed. Some men laughed and gossiped, others waited in anxious silence for the mail to be sorted. Wally knew few of them. Strangers were arriving constantly from distant parts of Alaska.

"Hello, Kirby," a man beside Wally greeted another. "When'd you get in?"

"This afternoon. News was late getting to Candle."

"Everybody leave?"

"If they could walk. Even Three-Toe Brown got up nerve to try it with two old wrecks of dogs. I overtook him three hundred miles back."

"Leave word with the Laughing Lily?"

"Didn't come that way. And you can bet Three-Toe won't."

"She'll hear quick enough."

The mail carrier emerged from the store, pushed his way through the crowd. He began calling Wally's name.

"This came by cable and special," he said when Wally reached him, and he delivered a yellow envelope.

It was too dark to read. Wally started toward the window of a saloon, then turned and ran home. He knew the message had traveled by cable and ship and finally over hundreds of miles of slow trail, and he knew it was from his father.

When he reached the cabin his fingers fumbled the match as he lighted a candle. Then he read:

COMING ON FIRST BOAT

That was all the message said, but it was enough.

VII

WALLY was gone a half hour later. He did not even leave a message for Brad. A little food, his robe, an ax and rifle were on the sled. At the last moment he took Brad's old .45 revolver and a dozen shells and slipped them into a spare sock.

The dogs had been idle for several days and were glad to be on the trail again. Wally rode until the intense cold compelled him to run for two or three miles, and he made splendid speed all through the long night.

Several times he passed trail camps, saw the coals of dying fires and heard the excited barking of dogs. These, he knew, were the late arrivals from Kotzebue Sound, far to the Northwest on the Arctic Ocean, and Wally wondered if Three-Toe Brown were asleep in one.

He traveled all night and kept on through the day, passing several teams. After a few hours' rest, he went on the second morning. A fierce cold wind was blowing. It picked up loose snow, filled the air with it and drifted the trail. That afternoon the dogs dipped down a steep bank to a large stream. Shelter from the wind permitted better vision, and at once Wally called to his dogs to stop. He had never seen this place before. He was not on the trail to Lily Lane's road house.

Wally knew what had happened. Teams from Candle had kept that trail open. The trail from the south, following the Hungry River Valley, had been drifted over. The dogs had chosen the broken fork and in the flying snow their driver had not recognized the place.

Delay was maddening. Wally thought only of his father's arrival and his desire to be there first. The meeting of the trails could not be more than ten miles back and he turned his team. Out on the river he saw a large black spot and knew the ice had broken through over fast water. Then he caught the smell of smoke. Down-stream a red flame shone through the swirling snow. A dog barked, and at once came a shout. It was a cry for help.

Wally found a man sitting beside a small, smouldering fire. His feet were wrapped in his parka. Socks and *mukluks,* frozen stiff, hung near the feeble blaze. There was nothing else, no sled, no dogs, no food, weapon or robe. The man was shivering uncontrollably.

Without word or question, Wally went into action. He wrapped his caribou skin robe about the man, grabbed his ax and departed for wood. Not until he had a big blaze going and a kettle of snow melted for tea did he speak.

"Through the ice, eh? Lose everything?"

"Damned dogs got off the trail," the man snarled. "Crossed too far down. When they went through I tried to save the sled and went in enough to wet my feet."

"They frosted?"

"Some."

The man was surly. His face was covered by a heavy black beard through which two brown, greedy eyes shone. He would have died if Wally had not come, but he did not speak a word of gratitude or indicate by his manner that he felt any. His glance roamed furtively over his rescuer and the team.

Wally heated frozen beans and pork, made tea. They ate in silence. Food and the big fire warmed the man and after he had eaten he unfolded the parka to examine his feet.

He had three toes on one foot, none on the other.

WALLY sat still for a long time, sipping his tea. Suddenly he stood up. "I'll get some dry socks," he said, and he went to the sled.

He took Brad's revolver from the sock, loaded it, slipped it inside his trousers beneath the parka, returned to the fire. With a swift movement, he picked up the man's drying footwear and tossed it into the roaring blaze.

The fellow cursed and jumped to his feet. But he was helpless without socks or moccasins in that bitter temperature.

"Sit down, Brown!" Wally commanded, and he drew out the gun. "You're going to tell me who was mixed in the killing of Hugh Lane. You're going to tell just how it all happened."

Three-Toe Brown did not speak. He knew he was caught. The revolver did not frighten him. Fire-arms are not so deadly as bare feet in an Alaskan winter.

"Start!" Wally barked. "My team's ready. All I need do is leave."

"Who are you?" Brown demanded. "You were only a kid then."

"I want that story, the truth. I'm going to have it."

"You get me out of here if I tell?"

"I'll get you out."

Brown argued and evaded and tried to trap Wally into an admission, and the while he measured the distance to the gun and tried to estimate Wally's temper and strength. But Wally stepped closer, jerked the parka away. Brown sat now with bare feet on the snow, and when he rested his heels on a stick of wood near the blaze he knew that steel could not hold him more closely to that spot.

The story came then. Brown disclaimed any share in the planning or execution of the plot against Hugh Lane, but that was to be expected. The story he told rang true and withstood Wally's scathing cross-examination. Thresher Macdougal as leader of the gang of four men had conceived the whole scheme. Thresher and Squaw Pete had done the actual killing, though they had intended only to drive Lane from his claim.

"How much was Jerry Stearns going to pay you for the claim after you got it?" Wally asked.

Three-Toe laughed. "Thresher had brains," he said. "He knew Stearns made an offer to Hugh. He knew they met on the trail. It was when we saw Stearns drunk at Lane's road house that the Thresher got the whole idea. Only we didn't know Stearns was going out. We thought he was going back to Burnt Ridge Creek and we could hang the whole thing on him if anything slipped."

Wally did not speak. For a while he used all his will power to keep from leap-

ing, from shouting his joy. At last he arose and went to the sled. He unloaded the rifle, hid the shells, turned his team and stopped the dogs with the sled close to Three-Toe Brown.

"Get in," he said. "Wrap up in the robe. Your feet will keep warm."

"Where you takin' me?" the man asked in sudden terror.

"Get in or I leave you," Wally snarled.

Three-Toe got in, but his little greedy eyes burned.

It was almost dark when they started. The wind had gone down and the air was clear. Wally cut across southeast and picked up the Hungry River trail two hours later. The dogs knew where they were going and increased their speed. Wally rode the sled handles. At nine o'clock the lights of the Lane road house appeared ahead.

"You can't take me to her!" Brown screamed when he recognized the place. He struggled to get out of the sled.

"How far would you go?" Wally jeered. "Stay where you are—or else go on by yourself."

Juul Wefald came out when he heard the sleigh bells.

"This man frosted his feet," Wally said quickly. "Take care of my team."

He picked Brown up, robe and all, and carried him to the door, pushed it open. A great cloud of vapor rushed across the floor of the crowded warm room, and when Wally set his victim down, no one saw that Brown's feet were bare.

Men were drinking, playing cards, talking. The babble ceased instantly, for all knew an accident had happened. Then Wally drew the big revolver, shoved Brown into a corner behind a stove and stood in front of him.

Lily Lane was back of the bar. Wally saw her staring at him, and then glancing quickly around for Juul. Natalie opened the kitchen door, attracted by the sudden silence, and stood looking at Wally.

"Mrs. Lane," Wally said, "when Juul comes in, don't laugh. If you laugh, I'll kill him."

He waited, looking over the crowd. He knew none of the men well.

"Mrs. Lane," he began again, "you are better acquainted with these men than I am. Pick the six you would trust most."

"What do you mean, coming into my place like this?" she demanded. "If you are trying to get your father past here—"

"He is coming later," Wally said sharply. "Coming here. And I'm running this now. Do as I say. Pick six men—unless you want me to laugh."

Juul came in then. He glanced at Lily Lane, started toward Wally. The young man lifted the gun.

"Go stand in that corner," he commanded. "Where I can see you. I'll kill you if you make a move."

Juul only looked to Lily Lane for orders. She stared at Wally, and suddenly she turned.

"Do as he tells you, Juul," she said.

She looked over the crowd, weighing men, slowly naming six. Wally motioned them to the end of the bar and told them to choose a leader.

"There is going to be an investigation," Wally said. "This is not a court. Only a committee that's got to get the truth. Here is the witness."

He turned suddenly and pulled Brown from behind the stove. No one had recognized the man with his beard, not even the Laughing Lily. But everyone saw the bare feet. Lily Lane saw them, and screamed. Juul Wefald started forward.

"Get back!" Wally commanded. "I've got more at stake than Lily Lane and I'll kill you to win."

He saw Natalie move, and over her shoulder was Brad Galbert's grizzled face. The old prospector stepped inside the room. He carried a rifle, but he did not speak.

"This man knows all about the killing of Hugh Lane eleven years ago," Wally said. "Knows everyone implicated. Get the story from him. Try to trip him up. If Mrs. Lane or anyone else wants to ask a question, let it be put through the head of the committee."

LILY LANE had chosen old-timers, men not only familiar with the death of her husband but accustomed to the ways of primitive justice. They had little difficulty in beating down Brown's surliness and making him talk.

"All right," the leader growled once. "If you won't talk, get out. We don't care. Go on. Get out of here."

The investigation had gone only a little way when bells jingled and a dog driver called "whoa" to his team. The door was opened and a man stepped into the room.

He was tall, and his hair was gray, but he had a young face that was alight now. He did not look at anyone in the room except Lily Lane. A warm smile came as he bowed to her.

"Good evening, Lily," he said. "I came as soon as I heard you wanted to see me. I would have come long ago had I known."

Lily Lane had stared from the moment he stepped into the room. She shot one startled glance at Natalie in the kitchen door, and then her gaze swung back to the newcomer.

She was no longer beautiful. The frozen mask was twisted by hate and fury.

"Juul! Juul!" she shrieked. "They've tricked us! They've cheated us!"

She began to laugh then, not as men had ever heard her laugh before, not as she had laughed in the faces of Thresher Macdougal, Yukon Yager and Squaw Pete. Her laughter was wild, maniacal. Men shivered when they heard it.

Only Juul Wefald moved. He came gliding out of the corner, his great paws outstretched toward the man at the door.

Wally could not shoot. His father stood between. Brad Galbert leaped across the room, cocking his rifle. Juul did not turn his head, but an arm swept out and sent Brad and his weapon spinning. Then he clutched Jerry Stearns.

Natalie came swiftly, and was whirled away like a leaf before a locomotive. Wally leaped in and as the great fingers closed about his father's throat he brought the barrel of the long heavy revolver down on Juul's head.

Juul only clutched the more tightly. Jerry Stearns' eyes were popping from his head. Frantic, Wally struck again, and a third time, before the giant crumpled to the floor.

Suddenly the room was filled with excited, shouting men. Wally turned to his father, who had swayed back against the wall. Only old Brad Galbert had presence of mind to look for Lily Lane.

She was gone. The place was searched. Natalie went everywhere. Brad found her at last, lying behind the bar. She had fainted, and the white hair was tinged with red where her head had struck.

And Three-Toe Brown had disappeared. No one had seen him go, but the kitchen door was open. Men went out with lanterns and hunted until they found prints of bare feet in snow beyond the kennels. They returned at once.

"You can't go buckin' Providence," one said. "He's got the surest, quickest ways o' takin' care of some things."

"Three-Toe saw Juul start and thought it was him the big ox was after," Brad grinned. "Figured anything was better'n them fingers."

"But he can clear my father!" Wally protested. "I got the whole story from him and—"

"We don't need him, boy," Jerry Stearns said. "I have enough proof. But somebody ought to tie this grizzly before he comes to."

Juul's legs were bound together. Lily Lane was revived. She sat in a chair while Natalie bathed her face.

"How did you get here?" Wally asked Brad.

"Left with the mail team next morning. Didn't know what sort o' mess you'd get into. Where did Brown come from?"

Wally said:

"I'll tell that soon."

WALLY did, when Lily Lane pushed her daughter away and walked over to face him. He told how he had found Three-Toe and repeated the story he had heard. Lily Lane's eyes never turned from

his face while he talked, and at the end he knew he had not convinced her.

Jerry Stearns came forward then. He had an envelope in his hand and he gave it to Lily Lane.

"But wait," he said. "I want to tell you how and when that came to me. I left here, if you will remember, the day after I staged that big drunk. Went straight out. Stayed only over night at Northern Light. But when I was waiting three days for a ship down on the coast, the mail came from inside. This letter was addressed to me but I didn't have time to open it before I went aboard. I thought of acting on it and filed it away. But later I went to Mexico instead and it was several years before I learned Hugh was dead."

He stepped back. Lily Lane started when she saw the handwriting on the envelope. Her face was as white as her hair when trembling fingers drew out the letter.

"It's from Hugh!" she whispered, and the paper slipped to the floor.

Wally caught it and read aloud:

"Burnt Ridge Creek, April 27, 1901." Then the rest of the letter followed.

Dear Jerry: Since meeting you on the trail two days ago, I've been thinking over your offer. I came near taking it then but on account of Lily I'm always looking for the best of things. Now, if you'll pay $10,000 for a half interest in my holdings, I'll take it. You said you'd pay that for forty-nine percent but that would not be fair. I would only share alike with a square-shooter like you and I don't mind saying I would like to have you for a partner. Hope this catches you at Hungry River but if not you can send back word. I'll hold the offer open till I hear.

Your friend and (I hope) partner,
Hugh Lane

Lily Lane stood staring at Jerry Stearns as she listened. At the end, every man in the room was watching her. And they saw two things they had not seen for eleven years. They saw tears in the deep blue eyes and a warm smile on her face. They saw beauty again in the woman on Hungry River.

"Jerry, forgive," she said, and held out her hand.

"Because I understand you, as I always understood what you and Hugh were to each other," Jerry answered. "And as I hope Natalie and Wally will—"

He turned to look for them, and a puzzled expression crossed his face.

"Shucks!" Brad Galbert snorted. "They left before the speech makin' began. And I'll shoot the first man that goes near that kitchen door."

The stillness of the room was broken. Lily Lane's beautiful head went back and she laughed. It was a warm laugh, rich and joyous, and it brought happiness to the faces of the old Alaskan sourdoughs who heard it.

Down on the floor Juul Wefald opened his eyes and grinned through the blood that trickled from a split scalp.

Before her the magician's wand had become a hooded cobra

Cleopatra's Amulet

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Bluebeard's Closet," "The Yardarm Swing," etc.

The *ankh* is the age-old symbol of life, the emblem of the four winds; yet in Ptolemy's throne chamber the sage Achilles knew that it promised death to the Pharaoh.

A Halfway House story

ON THE last occasion I visited Halfway House, a very singular thing happened. Having an hour or so to kill, I dropped in at the old brownstone-front mansion which had been converted into a museum, freely open to the public, to house the occult collections of Sir Roger Balke. Those varied collections, which comprised everything from portraits of old necromancers to crystal gazing balls, always produce something of interest.

The people who roamed the place were interesting, also. The mystery about the founder of the place was interesting. Sir Roger was quite unknown; he spent most of his life in Asia, and shunned any kind of publicity. I had once met here an odd little bald man whom I conjectured to be Balke, but could never confirm the supposition.

When I walked in, on a chilly, blustery day, the place looked deserted. The guard at the door took my things with a nod and a smile.

"Sir Roger told me you might be in today, sir," he said to my amazement. "He said to tell you there's a new exhibit in the rear room."

I went on into the apparently empty

place, wondering. Queer things happened in this old mansion, whose entire lower floor was now a museum. How had Sir Roger, if he were actually here, known I was coming? I had not known it myself. Telepathy, perhaps. Sir Roger Balke detested fakery and trickery and false magic, but I knew he did entertain some belief in telepathy. Most of us do.

As I headed for the rear room, I discovered the place was not empty. One person was wandering about looking at the exhibits—a young woman in magnificent sables. And, when I caught a glimpse of her face, I was once more surprised. Recognize her? Of course. Anyone in the world would have recognized Charmian Gordon—"The Cleopatra of the Screen," they called her, famous alike for her beauty, her love affairs, and her misfortunes.

Not strange to find her here. First, she was making personal appearances in the city. Second, she was whispered to be a devotee of the occult, and on the sucker list of all the Hollywood mystics, who are legion. It was said that Charmian Gordon never began a new film without taking advice from numerologists, horoscope artists and palm readers galore. No wonder she was visiting Halfway House.

Not that her search for mystic guidance brought her luck. Money, yes, a great career, yes; but her private life, by all report, was most unhappy. No one knew why.

Thinking of these things, I made for the rear room. I found that it had been cleared out and redraped; now the walls were covered by tightly stretched hangings of a material so gorgeous that I caught my breath. A rich, deep golden hue, it was apparently a silk brocade so woven as to give the appearance of half-invisible figures in a shimmering pattern.

That no lights were visible except daylight, was rather surprising. Sir Roger Balke was a wizard, with lighting effects. Several chairs were in the room, and before one gold-hung wall was a little showcase, hip high. This, too, was unlighted. As I went toward it, Charmian Gordon came into the room, glanced about wonderingly, and also approached the exhibit.

This was puzzling. Under the curved glass top were some tattered fragments of woven material, dull and discolored but showing occasional glints of gold. Beside them rested a curious object which looked like nothing human; yet it was, in fact, human. It was a little, brown, dried-up human hand, tightly clenched and broken off at the wrist; the dry, claw-like fingers were fastened in the loop of what is sometimes mistakenly called a ***crux ansata***—a looped cross. This was really the ***ankh,*** the ancient Egyptian symbol of life. The one gripped in the mummified hand was apparently of glass, a materially intrinsically worthless nowadays, but in the time of the Pharaohs an enormous treasure. Only kings could afford glass in those days, and a glass bead out-valued a pearl.

"That's very odd, isn't it?" Charmian Gordon turned to me with a puzzled frown. "Have you any idea what it is?"

"None whatever," I replied. "It's queer that the lighting should be so poor, too. Sir Roger is usually up to tricks with his lighting—"

I STOPPED abruptly. Into the room was coming the small little bald man I had formerly met on one occasion, with his bright eyes and impressive manner. He came straight up to us, nodded to me, and spoke to my companion.

"Miss Gordon? I'm Sir Roger Balke, and I'm very happy that you could accept my invitation to a private showing here."

He then introduced me as though he had known me all his life, asked us to be seated, and took a chair himself. I was dumbfounded. A private showing? And he had asked her to Halfway House?

"Your telephone message," she said, with her fascinating smile, "rather intrigued me. You said you had some relics of Cleopatra, but—"

Sir Roger waved his hand, and pointed to the brocaded wall.

"I want you to look at this material."

he said. "It was made especially to my order; there's nothing quite like it anywhere. I've been conducting some rather interesting experiments with a combination of lights and textiles. Apparently no one has ever thought of such a thing before, but some of the results are quite astonishing. By the way, that's a handsome brooch you're wearing. Egyptian, I think?"

She had flung open her fur coat, disclosing on her breast a rather large brooch in gold and enamel, representing the looped cross or *ankh*.

"Yes," she responded. "It's the same as that thing in the showcase, a Tau cross. This one came from the tomb of an Egyptian pharaoh—you know, the old kings of Egypt! It's three thousand years old and has magical properties; I have to wear it every day, even on a movie set, if I want to keep the luck it brings."

Sir Roger's bright, glittering eyes touched her face as though seeking a smile there, but she was quite serious.

"It must have cost you a lot of money," he said.

"It did!" she exclaimed proudly. "It's one of the treasures of the ancient world. Magicians used it; you know, they had magic in ancient Egypt."

"Yes, I know," said Sir Roger rather grimly. "There's no such thing as a Tau cross. This one of yours was made by a man named Ibrahim Khalil, who lives at Qus on the Nile; he's a well-known forger of antiques. I can get you a gross like that for five or six dollars each, all of them as old as yours—perhaps two years old—and all of them with the same magical properties."

A little gasp broke from her, whether at his ruthless words or at the sudden change in the light around us. For it did change. Rather, the golden weave on the wall, with its vague pattern, became illumined as though lit up from behind. Upon us, upon the rest of the room, fell an absolute darkness. My two companions were barely visible.

With a thrill, I realized that this must be the dark light or black light, which Sir Roger was said to have discovered. I knew it had been long sought by all the lighting experts in Hollywood, but vainly. And this was it, this darkness around us! But the wall before us was gloriously golden in hue, and the almost invisible patterns in the textile began to take shape. A man's head became visible. My companion gasped again.

"Why—why, that's Prince Kassim Allah, the Egyptian mystic!"

Sir Roger's thin, ironic laugh sounded softly. "Not at all, my dear, not at all. It's Achilles of Alexandria. . . ."

THEIR voices failed and died, as a scene took shape. The man was handsome, indeed; neither young nor old, he had an air of thoughtful nobility in his strongly chiseled features, as he pored over the scroll of an old papyrus. He glanced up suddenly as a shadow fell across the scroll. A woman stood in the doorway—rather, a girl, a dark mantle wrapped about her and enclosing her head. His brows drew down in a frown.

"You again!" he said almost angrily. "Niobe of the palace, eh?"

A girl from the palace, a handmaid of the Princess Cleopatra, she had come to him in many an hour off, sitting at his feet, learning from him, discussing problems of philosophy with wit and acumen. But he was in no mood for her chatter now.

"Not on my own errand this time, Achilles," she said. "My mistress sends for you."

"Devil take your mistress, and you with her," he snapped. "I'm at work."

"Careful, master! You may be the wisest man in Alexandria, the greatest worker of wonders in the world, the sage and physician and magician whose name is renowned—but, by the gods, her father is king of Egypt! And she's capable of anything."

"So I've heard," said he, with a sneer. "I've nothing to do with any spoiled darling of the palace. I have troubles of my own, and heavy ones."

"What are they?" she demanded. He paused and regarded her with somber eyes.

"More than all my boasted skill and wisdom can solve," he said bitterly. "What neither medicine nor so-called magic can aid. What your princess, who surrounds herself with false wizards and necromancers, cannot cure. The curse of loneliness."

She knew his trouble, and having no answer for it, departed.

Loneliness; and not all his philosophy, his dabbling in the black art, his wisdom of the ancients, could help him. A war-chariot, careening down the street, had killed his aged mother and the sister whom he loved, both of them in an instant. Since that day, Achilles had withdrawn morosely from the world.

The world, this blazing world of Alexandria, vibrant with oriental life, home of the schools of learning where he had been a master, was all dead for him. He was alone, restless, embittered. He had, perhaps, worked too hard, studied too long, given himself too whole-heartedly to the pursuit of wisdom. He hated the great city, hated everything.

He left his room and moodily went out on the housetop. It was mid-afternoon. Before him swam in the hot sunlight such a vision as could be found nowhere else in the world: Alexandria, under its half-million towering palm trees. Temples both Greek and Egyptian, since here the two civilizations met and mingled. The Hippodrome and the stadium, the tomb of the Alexander who was now a god. The pink obelisks before the temple of Serapis glowed red in the sunlight. The sea, the harbor swarming with ships, the colossal Pharos with its smoke by day and its fire by night to guide mariners—all the glories of the world were centered here before him.

He contemplated them a long time in his lonely, heart-hungry mood; then, at a light step, he turned irritably. At first he thought Niobe was back—a girl dark-clad, face half hidden, silent. Then he saw it was another girl. The face attracted him, not with its beauty, but with its vivid glow of character and intelligence, its springing vibrant youth. Dark it was, with fine high-curved nose and thin nostrils, and a certain look of power in the eyes that caught his attention.

"Who the devil are you?" he rasped. She smiled slightly.

"They call me Wisdom. I've come from the palace to seek you."

He laughed harshly. "Wisdom, from a pigsty? Wisdom, from a place of debauchery and folly and luxurious evil? Clear out of here, girl, and leave me alone."

"No," she said quietly. "The princess got your message; she sent me to cure your trouble, Achilles, and to bring you to her."

"You, cure my trouble?" he repeated scornfully. She looked at him, and then spoke not in Greek, but in the ancient Egyptian which few persons knew and none spoke.

"Why not, Achilles? In the old gods there was wisdom. In the worship of the sun and the sun's light there was healing. Not the worship of Ra, the visible thing in the sky; but in the secret religion, the worship of Aten, the power that makes all life and that pervades everything—the god who makes the grass green and the brown dates sweet."

He was dumbfounded. Not alone by the fact that this palace girl knew Egyptian, but that she knew the secrets of the old religion, the hermetic secrets lost even to knowledge of the high priests. He studied her attentively, as she flung back the wrap and bared her head. Fresh astonishment grew upon him. A girl so young—how could she know so much?

"It's impossible," he muttered to himself, in the Hebrew with which he cloaked his thoughts. "She's a child. This is some dream."

She smiled again, and to his amazement made response in the same language.

"No dream, Achilles. Yes, perhaps I can cure your trouble, the lonely bitterness of your heart, the ache of your soul. I want you to talk to me. I want to hear more of that religion of Aten—that pure, beau-

tiful faith which died so long ago, that religion of love and beauty. I know a little of it, but not enough. I am hungry to know more."

Hungry to know more, this palace girl? Hungry to know of that glorious worship of the good and beautiful which had perished from Egypt fifteen hundred years ago? Achilles found himself talking freely, as they sat under the canopy and looked out over the city and harbor.

HE FOUND something more. Here was a brain, a keen driving intelligence, so remarkable that he felt a kind of awed humility. And somehow this girl's mind seemed a part of her beauty. He tried to probe, to learn about her, to find out who she was and what background she had; but she evaded his questions, and he was helpless before her.

An hour passed, another hour. Achilles felt the weight gone from his soul, he was himself once more, joyous and wise and confident. One thing about this girl bothered him a trifle; intelligent as she was, she had a leaning to superstition.

"And why not?" she argued gravely, when he spoke of it. "All men are not so sure of themselves as you, Achilles. Look at Timon of Sicily, the great master of magic who has come from Athens to cure the illness of King Ptolemy! He did it with his charms, with his great charm, the Tau cross."

They were speaking Greek again, the customary tongue.

"Tau cross!" ejaculated Achilles. "There's no such thing. Timon of Sicily, indeed! A trickster, a faker, a worker of false magic. If you want to know the truth about what you call the Tau cross, I can tell you. The king? All the old fool needed was a strong physic, and Timon gave it to him. A wonder he didn't give him poison, so that wildcat of a princess couldn't sit on the throne!"

The girl caught her breath, leaned forward, grasped his wrist and looked him in the eye.

"Achilles! You are right. She loves her father; she wouldn't do that. But—ah, by the gods, I see it now! Arbaces, the palace eunuch! Arbaces! If he could get the king killed, he could seize the throne in the name of the boy Ptolemy, the boy prince—"

Her brows knitted. Achilles was almost frightened by the vibrant power he felt in her.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "The princess needs you, we all need you. Arbaces has been very friendly with this Sicilian wizard, has given him huge gifts. The king is sick again; he has headaches, his liver is out of order. Tonight, Timon the Sicilian comes to invoke fresh magic and renew the power of the Tau cross he gave the king. Poison? Why not? No one would suspect him, after he had cured the king once. And the guards were changed today; the Nubian archers are on duty, instead of the heavy-armed Greeks—"

Suddenly she swung around; her fingers tightened on his wrist.

"Come with me—rather, come to the palace tonight!" she exclaimed. "Come in an hour, with darkness. I'll meet you and pass you through the guards. Timon of Sicily will perform his incantations in the Macedonian room, the private quarters of Ptolemy. I'll get you in there. Do you dare, Achilles?"

"Dare?" He laughed, curtly. "Don't be absurd. What is Ptolemy to me? Only another Egyptian."

"Egyptian?" Her eyes flamed angrily. "No! The first Ptolemy was a general of Alexander. My mistress Cleopatra says she is Greek, pure Greek!"

"And four hundred years in Egypt? Laughable!" exclaimed Achilles. Her indignant attitude delighted him. "As well say I'm Greek, because my ancestors came over with Alexander too! Ah, I've never met anyone like you. Wisdom, you call yourself? Here, give me your hand."

"My lips, if you promise to come in an hour," she said. And Achilles, looking into her eyes, swore the oath she demanded. She touched her lips to his, clung to him for an instant, then was gone like a flame.

The memory of her laughter remained with him, and the touch of her lips.

An hour had passed. The sun was gone now, as he sought the palace gates. Once more he was himself, folly departed; grave, girded to meet magic with magic, wisdom with a greater wisdom, jibes and scoffing with contempt. He knew well what sort of man was this Timon the Sicilian. He had met many such, and had put them to shame.

He knew, too, the magic of a different kind that had suddenly touched him, transforming all the emptiness of his life. It was incredible; he was startled, awed by it. This girl who so truly called herself Wisdom, had in a little hour or two captivated him, changed him, wakened new things within him. He studied himself mentally, and marveled. All the hungry desire of his soul reached out for her. Madness, he told himself angrily; madness!

And yet he could sense that he had evoked similar emotion in her, that she responded to his longing. The touch of her lips had told as much.

HE FOUND her waiting for him in the palace entrance, talking with a guard officer. She laughed, eagerly took his hand, led him along the corridors. Obviously she was well known here, for the guards saluted her and asked no questions.

"Ptolemy heard you were to be here; he is very anxious to meet you, to ask your skill," she said rapidly. "I'll take you to the Macedonian room, introduce you, and then I must leave you and attend my mistress. Be bold, Achilles! Be bold! If this Sicilian is really attempting some rascality, I count on you to stop him. Fear not, Cleopatra will back all you do and support you."

He laughed drily. "Fear? Don't be absurd. My only fear is that I may not see you again."

She pressed his hand quickly. "Then fear not at all! Careful—Arbaces the eunuch."

He was striding toward them; a tall, dark man, powerful of features, massively built, clad in gorgeous raiment. His eyes flashed upon the cloaked girl and the man in a simple white robe. He saluted them and passed on, but the power of evil in the dark face and the penetrating gaze lingered with Achilles. That man was to be feared.

So she took him to the Macedonian room, where a terrace opened to the stars and the cool sea breezes, and when she had presented him, she departed swiftly. The king was surrounded by several officials, and the wine-cup had evidently been freely passed.

A weary, obese, worn-out man, this thirteenth Ptolemy, known as Auletes. Once a man of extreme vigor, now drained by excesses and luxury, but of kindly eye. He greeted Achilles with assumed delight.

"Achilles! I have heard often of you, of your magical powers, of your wisdom and skill," he exclaimed. "More than once I've intended to send for you, but something always intervened. The world is so damned full of things—the palace world. I'm a sick man, Achilles. I'll give you a chance at me, if this Sicilian doesn't repeat his cure. He's promised me a magic draught that will renew my youth, if his invocations succeed. Nothing abstruse or mysterious about him. He'll perform the whole ceremony here before us—ah, he's coming now! Here, somebody, give the sage Achilles some of that Chian wine, make him comfortable."

Achilles waved aside the wine-bearer and took an obscure place against the wall, behind the others. Arbaces appeared, saluting the king obsequiously; with him was the magician Timon. Achilles studied this man and nodded to himself.

A bearded, impressive man was Timon, wearing a Persian cap and robe embroidered with magical emblems, followed by two Nubian slaves, his assistants. He had the singular deep eyes and arrogantly assured manner of the practised performer —the assured trickster who knows well how to command and enthral his audience, and who is equal to any emergency or any challenge.

During the hum of conversation, Achilles caught the name of Cleopatra, and turned to see the young princess. At this moment, however, the lights were being lowered, and he caught sight only of half a dozen female figures taking post at one side. Cleopatra, stretching out comfortably on a divan, seemed only a lissome shape wrapped in filmy transparent stuffs, her face impossible to discern in the half-light. Achilles looked at the women around her, hoping to make out Wisdom, but he could see nothing of her. The mocking, ironic thought struck him—how expect to find Wisdom in a palace, in an assemblage of fools and charlatans and dupes?

Then he forgot all else, giving his whole attention to the scene before him.

TIMON, in the deep, musical, hypnotic voice of his kind, was putting on a good show; it was no more than a show, as Achilles very well perceived. A single lamp burned fitfully near the king. The Nubians had lighted two braziers, from which incense ascended in slow spirals, and between these the dark Sicilian was stationed.

His patter, Achilles critically decided, was very good of its kind. He waved his wand, invoked the gods with spells and incantations, spoke of the feathers of Osiris, the winged bull of Assyria, and interspersed his oration with such simple tricks as producing a scorpion from the air, plucking eggs from the ear of a Nubian, and making the incense smoke form pictures before the beholders. It was all impressively done.

At length he flung his wand to the stones, and before every eye the stick turned into a long serpent, thick as a man's wrist—a great cobra, which lifted its head, puffed out its flat wings, and remained weaving half its length back and forth in air. Gasps of amazement arose. Here was the uraeus, the serpent-symbol of the pharaoh himself.

Timon uttered a sharp command. The serpent came down flat on the stones; twisted about, took the shape of a cross with a loop at the top, and stiffened. Timon lifted one end of the thing and let it drop with a metallic clang.

"Quickly!" he commanded. "Bring an empty cup, the cup of Ptolemy himself, and place it within the loop! The god Horus will provide the draught of life to cure the king. Watch well, and see that I have nothing to do with it."

A golden cup was brought, and laid within the loop of the cross.

"This emblem of the god Horus, this symbol of healing and of life," went on Timon sonorously, "has within itself all powers. It is the *crux ansata,* the cross with a handle, or the Tau cross of the Greeks, so called because it is shaped like the letter Tau. On the ancient monuments, we see it in the hand of a pharaoh as a symbol of power. Look well, Horus, upon the king who is to be cured! Hearken to us; give us a sign in the incense—"

The Nubians put fresh spices on the flames of the braziers. The ascending incense took on shape and form; each spiral of smoke became a Tau cross fluttering in the night breeze. The sorcerer redoubled his efforts. He performed more wonders; he laid a napkin on the stones, and beneath it upgrew a flower, a bush, a small tree, only to grow small and vanish again at his command.

Achilles alone, of all those watching, was not deceived. Long since, he had learned all these tricks—and what they hid. He alone saw when Timon of Sicily produced a tiny vial and deftly emptied it, unseen, into the cup. And he saw where that vial went when it was empty—to the well-trained Nubian slave on the right.

He turned to look again for Wisdom, but she was not in sight. The princess Cleopatra was watching intently from her shadowed perch on the divan, her hand stroking a pet kitten which purred in her lap. Suddenly she uttered a gasp, and spoke.

"The cup! The cup is filled!"

So it was, indeed. Flames leaped from the two braziers. The cup was filled to the very brim with liquid. Timon stretched

out his hand, and the Tau cross became a serpent again, darted to his hand, was changed into his wand, and he extended it triumphantly.

"Drink, oh king!" he cried vibrantly. "Give the cup to Ptolemy, that he may be healed of all his ills, that he may be cured by the magic of Horus! Take up the cup, one of you—"

"Do not," said a voice, quiet with commanding force.

HEADS turned, eyes rolled, the sorcerer stiffened with angry amazement. Achilles stepped out. Someone uttered his name, and all stared at the famous sage of whom so little was known. When it was seen that he was no old bearded wizard but a young-looking man of commanding dignity, a murmur of astonishment arose.

"What does this mean, presumptuous rascal?" burst forth Timon. Achilles ignored him and pointed to the Nubian on the right.

"Ptolemy, order two of your guards to seize that slave," he said.

The staring king could not find voice; Timon protested hotly; a Babel of astonished exclamations broke out, but the Princess Cleopatra leaned forward and spoke.

"Guards! Do as he says."

Two of the guards grasped the Nubian, and Achilles turned to the furious magician.

"Come, my friend! My name is Achilles, and it may be that I can assist your endeavor to heal the king. May the gods preserve him from all evil! Before he drinks the magic medicine of Horus, let's be sure that no one else touches it. Give me your wand."

"Give it to him," said Ptolemy, finding tongue at last. The Sicilian, raging, was forced to obey the command. Smiling a little, Achilles took the rod and flung it to the stone pavement.

"Protect the king's cup!" he ordered. "Let no one touch it until I give command."

The rod broke into two. It became not one serpent, but two, and a cry of amazement burst from the watchers. The two serpents approached the golden cup, took position on either side of it and lifted their weaving, hissing heads threateningly.

"Silence, Sicilian!" exclaimed Achilles, as the magician was about to speak. "I was quiet while you performed your tricks; now be the same while I perform mine."

"That is just! Obey!" said the Princess Cleopatra. Something in her voice drew the swift attention of Achilles, then he returned to the work before him.

"Let me show, very briefly, that all your talk about the looped cross was utter nonsense and ignorant prattle," he said, with grave contempt. "Any wandering sorcerer can perform your tricks; I disdain them. But here is the emblem of which you made so much. Pass it around."

He gave it to the nearest official—a little looped cross made of glass. It went from hand to hand with astonished murmurs following it. Glass! Such a thing was almost unknown. Rarer than orient pearls was a bead of glass.

Achilles gave the scowling Sicilian a scornful glance.

"All your boastful talk was ridiculous," he said. "This is not an emblem of the god Horus. It is not a *crux ansata* at all. There is no such thing as the Tau cross with a loop above it. Nor has Horus anything to do with it. I give you one chance to explain what it is. No evasions, Sicilian, no smoke-screen of words, but an explanation. Quickly!"

A safe challenge, as he was well aware. No one knew, these days, what the sign meant. It had various alleged meanings, but the secret had been lost for a thousand years. He had discovered it himself, not long since, in a papyrus taken from a tomb. He had this papyrus with him.

The scowling Sicilian muttered something about the sign representing certain organs of the god Horus. Achilles burst into a peal of hearty laughter. The glass emblem had been handed back to him. Now he gave the papyrus to the nearest person.

"If any among you can read the ancient Egyptian, read and see if I speak the truth," he said, and held up the little glass cross. "What is this, magician? It was called *ankh*—that was its name. It had nothing to do with Horus. It is older than all the old gods. It means life, yes; and why? It's the oldest emblem in the world, Sicilian. The cross, the symbol of the four winds, of the sun-god, of power. A double-headed axe in the most ancient times, emblem of the royal authority.

"On the top of this was placed the hieroglyphic Ru, or in Greek, the letter O. This signified the gateway, the mouth, the creative power, the water of the Nile coming forth to renew the fertility of Egypt each year! So we see this an emblem of creative force belonging not to one god, but to all gods and rulers. Am I right? Has any of you here been able to read the ancient language?"

MOST of them laughed at the idea, for these Greeks knew little of ancient Egypt. But all eyes turned suddenly to the princess, who held the scroll.

"You are right, Achilles," she said. "So it is written here. I can read it."

Her voice startled him again. But now Timon stepped out in wrath and spoke.

"King Ptolemy, I came here to cure you, not to match wits with Alexandrian sages! If the mystic medicine of Horus be not taken quickly, it will not help you."

"It'll certainly cure all the king's ills," said Achilles drily. "But my magic tells me, Sicilian, that you're far from a well man yourself. You're very close to death, in fact. Therefore, drink half the cup yourself. I'm sure the king will permit it."

Timon started back. "Begone! You interfere with mystic things, you cheap rascal—"

"Cheap?" Achilles held up the glass *ankh*. Then, suddenly, he sent it crashing down on the stones and it flew into a thousand pieces. Shrill cries went up from those who watched, cries of dismay and of protest. "Well, prove your magic, Timon! Restore that *ankh* to itself."

The Sicilian raged. "I refuse! Your interference here will spoil everything."

"So it will, perhaps," said Achilles coolly. Stooping, he gathered up as many of the glass flinders as he could reach, and knotted them in a corner of his robe. This he shook repeatedly in the air. He unknotted it and produced the glass *ankh*, perfect, whole. At the whispers of amazement, he burst into a laugh.

"Nonsense! That's no magic. It's like all these things you have seen—a trick. But Timon pulled an unfortunate trick when he dropped poison into the cup, and slipped the vial to the Nubian slave. Search that Nubian, quickly!"

So unexpected was all this, so swiftly did Achilles speak, so sharp was his authority, that before a move could be made, the two guards were searching the Nubian. They produced an empty vial. And now, suddenly, the king himself stood up and in a flame of wakened anger took charge. Once roused, he was a king indeed.

"Achilles, whether you lie, whether Timon has lied, is easily proven. Timon, that cup holds your magic draught meant for me. Drink it!"

"I will not!" burst out the Sicilian. "If drunk by anyone except the man for whom the god Horus gave it, then it may be dangerous."

"A specious excuse," Ptolemy said coldly. "Guards! Take this Sicilian to the dungeons. Take that cup with him. Keep him there without food or drink until he has emptied the cup. That's all."

So the scene ended, and Achilles prescribed a few simple herbs of his own for the king's ills. And, as he was leaving, the Princess Cleopatra came to him. The lights were on now, full of force, and the filmy stuff was put back from her face, and he saw that she was the girl Wisdom.

Laughing, she took his hands and looked into his eyes.

"When I spoke, you knew me, eh?" she said. "Well, magician, tell my fortune!"

"No," said Achilles, and put the little glass *ankh* into her hands. "Here; take this symbol of the higher good, and re-

member it! You're a princess, my dear, and I'm a humble searcher after wisdom."

Perhaps it would have been truer wisdom to remember this fact, and not to forget the distance between them; yet, after all, Achilles was human. And Cleopatra, taken with a wild admiration and desire, forced him to bridge the gulf.

Together they sat out under the stars, through the long Egyptian nights, talking of love and of wisdom, of wise things and of silly, foolish things. Achilles was cured, as she had promised him. And all his wisdom ended there, when he became the lover of Cleopatra; for one night as he left the palace, a bowstring twanged.

They found him next morning, lying face down, the long shaft piercing him through and through; and in his hand a little fragment of the wondrous golden weave the Cyprians had sent the princess, Cleopatra. Arbaces, the palace eunuch, had taken his revenge.

THE figure slowly, slowly faded. The man's shape, with the arrow through him, died out. Only the face remained, the face as it had first shown there against the invisible weave of that glorious golden cloth. And it was gone, and I was back in Halfway House beside Charmian Gordon, with Sir Roger Balke smiling at us.

The wall-light had vanished, but now a light glowed in the little showcase. Sir Roger pointed to the objects there.

"Pieces of a gown, a wondrous weave of ancient times," he said. "They were found in a tomb outside Alexandria, and this hand with them. Nothing else. When found, the glass *ankh* bore painted characters, the name of Cleopatra. They've vanished. But there's the hand still—the hand of the loveliest woman of ancient times, Cleopatra herself."

I could not believe it. I still do not believe it, though Sir Roger has adduced some really remarkable proofs in the matter.

While I still inspected the hand, Charmian Gordon left. She departed without saying goodbye at all, though I think she did give Sir Roger a rather cool nod and a word. When she had gone, I turned to the little man.

"Do you think she'll learn anything from this—story, or picture, or what the devil you want to call it?" I asked. "Do you think she got anything out of it?"

Sir Roger passed a hand over his bald head.

"No. I think we got all the fun out of it, my friend," he said slowly. "It never pays to try to teach a woman anything, unless she wants to learn it. If I were a real magician, now, I'd predict that within six months this charming money-maker of the films will be secretly married to Prince Kassim What's-his-name, her favorite mystic."

And she was.

Two Patrolmen of Verona

THEY have a robot traffic officer in Verona, New Jersey. The mayor decided that his police force wasn't large enough to regulate things, and so he called Science in. The result is a six-foot, rather wooden-faced figure that waves its arms in the orthodox manner.

Patrolman Charles Marchant stood as model for the robot, and the manufacturers had instructions to be as realistic as possible. Patrolman Marchant is a jovial looking fellow, and the mechanical policeman—facially—tends toward a cold reserve. And yet the manufacturers need not ponder their monster with unrelieved gloom. For the first day it saw service more than one near-sighted native, driving by, called out, "Hi, Charlie," cheerily. The robot was too busy to answer.

—*John Nelson*

I looked—and pulled my head back, quick

Dead Storage

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

THE instant the foreman of the jury stepped through the door I knew I was as good as dead. I could hear, just as plainly as if he had already said it: "We find the defendant, Thomas Bates, guilty of murder in the first degree." And I had no more to do with the killing of that gambler outside the Royal Hibiscus Club than the man in the moon. I just happened to be too near it, and down on my luck at the time, and had unwittingly trampled on the patent-leather feet of Miami's most prosperous racketeers. Those things, and Izzy Moscowitz the slick New York lawyer with his lying witnesses, were going to send me—me, a decent, law-abiding citizen—down that grim Last Mile—for nothing. The hell they were: It was easier than you would think. There was a little door to the left of the judge's bench and I went out through it in a hurry, the element of surprise giving me just the break I needed. Outside, I yanked a guy from behind the wheel of a big car and was on my way. There were two prowl cars behind me by the time I hit the Drive along the Miami River. I tried to make the turn across the bridge—tried—and then the car and I were through the rail and in the water.

IT'S surprising what a man can do under the influence of hate and the grim will to live. It was night, and I'm a good swimmer, and the tide was running strong. Pretty soon I was paddling along beside the big storage sheds of the marine basin. I used to put my own boat away there summers, next to Moscowitz' 170-foot *Faith*. It was summer now, and that gave me an idea. Sometime Izzy would come to see about recommissioning the yacht, and sometimes I was going to get my hands on his throat. It was black as a pocket aboard the *Faith* and all of a sudden a flashlight was shining in my face. Behind it was one of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen. "You're Tom Bates," she said. "You picked a good hideout. I've been using it for days. Izzy Moscowitz wants to put me in an insane

This story began in the Argosy for November 5

asylum." She didn't have a chance to say more because overhead we could hear footsteps. A man walked in and it was Hole-card Eddie, the Moscowitz lug who had identified me as the killer. He made a grab for the girl, her name was Wendy Grayson. It wasn't really murder—I hit him and his head cracked wide open against a table. We hid his body in a locker and kept under cover until the other lug went away. Then we fixed up a hideout in a cubby behind the steering engine and I went back to see if we'd fixed everything. Everything was all wrong. Hole-card Eddie wasn't in the locker. He was lying on the bed, his hands folded across his chest as nice as you please. . . .

CHAPTER VII

MUTINY IN THE RANKS

I STOOD there staring at the corpse. No longer did Izzy Moscowitz's yacht seem empty. She seemed peopled with specters which might even now be watching us, waiting to pounce the instant our backs were turned.

I looked down at the carpet and saw a dotted line darkly stained against the gray pile. That had been it, the thing that had worried me. Hole-card, in macabre revenge, had left his mark behind him when I had carried him to that locker. And who ever had made one more inspection of this cabin while we were busy below decks, had been led inevitably to Hole-card's body.

But where was he now, the man who had lugged the gambler from the locker to the bed? Instinctively I grabbed at the butt of my gun as I spun around to search the cabin with my eyes. But I saw nobody. Nobody, that is, except Wendy, who was staring incredulously at the figure on the bed.

"He might still be around, the guy who moved him," I said. "If he is, we'll find him."

But if he was still around, we did not find him. Down both passageways, port and starboard, we hurried, opening every cabin door and looking carefully within. We went into the dining saloon, and the cocktail lounge, and the main saloon, but we saw nobody. And in the end we went out on the eerily lighted deck, with sunshine thinly strained through canvas that covered everything like a long, narrow circus tent.

Now we could hear things; a rivet hammer on some boat a dozen slips away, the calking mallets on the yacht in the next berth, the drumming of a diesel engine on a tow-boat going up the Miami River and even the steady throb of traffic on North River Drive beyond the immense shed itself. It was a queer thing; we were in the midst of activity, yet isolated from it by a single layer of canvas. A fragile shield, that canvas, yet somehow it seemed to do as well as the solid plates of the yacht's hull.

Ahead of us was the inboard end of the gangplank, slanting up under the protecting curtain of canvas which masked the break in the rail. I found myself walking on tiptoes as I approached it. Wendy, too, seemed to be trying to make no noise. I took one edge of that canvas curtain, pulled it gently away from the rest and applied my eye to the crack.

And pulled my head back instantly.

There, at the foot of the gangplank—not ten feet from me—was a man, all too obviously on guard. In a white linen suit, he was leaning negligently against a bollard, abstractly watching the workmen aboard the clipper-bowed yacht in the next slip. And this I saw in that one quick glance; the pressure of his body against the bollard was pulling his coattails tightly over his hips and where his right hip pocket should have been was the unmistakable outline of a gun.

I MADE a wordless signal to Wendy and backed away from that gangplank. She did not have to ask. She knew I had seen something. Not until we had retreated to the after end of the deckhouse did she put her fragrant head close to mine and whisper:

"What was it, Tom?"

"Not a chance to get off that way," I said in a low voice. "There's a man guarding the gangway."

"Then they know we're aboard," she said, slowly.

"They know somebody is aboard," I corrected her. "Or at least they're guessing somebody is aboard and are going to make sure that he—or she—doesn't get ashore until they've had a chance to search the ship."

I moved over to the other side of the deck, lay down flat and pried the lower edge of the canvas away from the lacings which secured it. Now I could see a thin slice of the storage shed on the side away from the clipper-bowed yacht—and from the guard at the gangway.

Twelve or eighteen feet away was another line of boats and yachts tied to the next catwalk. But there was no way to get across to the nearest craft—a houseboat battened down, as we were, for the season. Besides, a crew of painters was at work on the hull of a black steam yacht tied close astern of the houseboat. No chance at all to drop into the water without being seen by a dozen eyes.

And then Wendy, who had been standing uncertainly at the corner of the deck house, started violently. Her hand lifted as if she wanted to call me. Instead, she spun on her rubber-soled heel and came racing across the after-deck.

"They're coming aboard!" she said in a desperate whisper. "Mr. Moscowitz just came up the gangplank and I don't know how many others. I saw them."

She flew forward along the deck, with the comforting bulk of the cabin house between us and those who were coming aboard. She darted in the door we had unlocked as we had come out of the lounge and I was close behind her. Her tiny flashlight stabbed a thin segment out of the interior darkness as we fled down the passageways, down the steel stairway and back along the corridor which led to the tiny lazarette behind the steering engine.

What is there so humiliating to a man about running away from something? Perhaps his judgment, cold and appraising, tells him to run, yet when his back is turned and his feet are speeding him away, fear comes up from behind and catches him. Walk away, you can, and be unafraid. Run away and your heart comes into your mouth and on your tongue is a taste like bile. To one who thought himself afraid of very few things, that is humiliation.

We crept into our cubby-hole and I could hear my breath rasping in and out of close-set lips. Wendy, too, was panting beside me and when, trying to sit comfortably on that slanting surface behind us, her shoulder touched mine, I could feel her trembling like a thoroughbred before the barrier.

"I—I knew they'd bring him," she murmured.

I was almost too mad to reply. When I thought of myself galloping down that deck it—well, it made me ache all over.

WE SAT there in silence for minutes and minutes, with me brooding so I didn't want to talk at all. The only thing in the whole world I was glad about was that if someone had to come aboard this yacht, it would be Moscowitz. Every atom in me craved to get at that louse. And the nearer he was to me, the better my chances.

Suddenly, through the blackness, I could feel tenseness come over Wendy. She almost stopped breathing. She fumbled around and put a warning hand on my arm. I listened.

There was a trampling of feet on the decking over our heads. Several feet, maybe a dozen. That was bad, having so many aboard. But, hell, everything was bad—had been bad for a long time.

We listened intently as those feet moved forward, mentally following the men as they entered the deckhouse and began to search the cabins, one by one.

"They'll have found that—that man by now," Wendy whispered in a shaky voice.

"They must have found him when they first came aboard," I retorted. "The one who carried him out of the locker must have told them. Probably the monkey in

the white linen suit who was on guard at the gangplank."

We listened some more, straining our ears as we tried to spot any noises from the deck above—or from the engine room forward of our lazarette. It was harder when we could not hear anything. Then we had to imagine. And the thing we imagined most of all was footfalls sounding in the little room outside ours, where the steering engine was.

And then it happened. I suppose it was bound to happen. After all, a dozen men ought to be able to find a lost hairpin aboard a yacht of this size, there being only so many places to look. We had been silly even to think we had a chance.

The tiny door to our lazarette flew open. The head and shoulders of a man came poking through.

A shaft of light struck past him and showed us up as plainly as if we had been two beetles on a pin.

"All right," he said in a snarling voice. "Come on out, you two, come on out."

Even in that split-second of heart-stopping disappointment, I recognized the man. A trouble-man, they called him, at the Royal Hibiscus night club. He, and three or four like him, blended inconspicuously with the background of the place—perhaps standing behind palms, or mingling quietly with the patrons, until trouble started and then they were at your side, behind you, in front of you, with incredible celerity.

If a house player became too liberal with his friends, tipping them off when he was about to switch dice, sooner or later a trouble-man tapped him on the shoulder and took him for a little ride while they discussed the error of his ways. If the dealer at stud suddenly became too prosperous, moved into a new apartment, sported a new and expensive blonde—it would not be long until troublemen took an interest, often violent, in his source of income.

It was a trouble-man—*this* trouble-man—who had moved in on me when I had slapped the house player for switching dice on me. And it had been this same man who, mysteriously, happened to be close behind me when the gambler was murdered in front of the night club—he, too, who had thrown his beefy arms around me and had held me until the coppers came.

THESE things raced through my mind in the tiniest fraction of a second while I stared up into the hard face of the man who was bending over the knee-high combing. I heard Wendy moan beside me. And I knew that if I didn't do something right now I'd be on my way to the Little White Room before midnight.

"Okay, guy," I said in a tired voice.

But he wasn't taking any chance. He was already dragging at a gun in his side pocket.

I leaned forward, slowly at first, then with all the speed I had in me. There wasn't very much I could do from my sitting position, but I did the best I could, and that combing, extra-high because it was way back here in the stern, helped nobly.

I shot my arm forward and grabbed him by the skirt of the coat. And yanked with every bit of strength I had in my back, stomach and arm muscles. I heard the coat rip somewhere, but there was enough left of it to do me a nice piece of work.

The lug swayed forward, tried to take a step to recover his balance and the combing caught him right across the knees. It stopped his knees, all right, but it didn't stop the upper three-quarters of his body. He came into that little lazarette like an Olympic diver, only his landing wasn't too neat.

He fell on his face, chest and hands, all at the same time. And before he could even grunt I was on top of him, feeling with my fingers for his Adam's apple, finding it, and beginning to work on it. He wrestled around a lot at first; then all he did was to flap his hands on the floor as if he were clapping. And his feet began to drum helplessly against the combing which had tripped him.

Suddenly Wendy was upon me like a fury. She wrenched at my hands, trying to pull them away from that guy's throat. She dug her nails into my wrists and raked my arms. It was a full moment or two before I realized what she was saying.

"Stop it! Oh, Tom, stop it! You're killing him!"

The strength went out of me. Yes, I had been killing him all right. While I had my fingers pushing in his windpipe I forgot who he was. I thought he was Moscowitz. And he was only a poor plug-ugly, this mug, who just took orders.

I rolled off him and turned him over. He was still alive, but he wasn't pretty to look at. Well, he hadn't been pretty at any time, so that was all right. I got his gun. I seemed to be collecting guns, lately.

"Wendy," I rasped, "that linen dress of yours that we brought down. Tear it up. Give me some long strips to tie him up with."

"Oh!" she said. "What'll I wear when—"

Then she stopped. I heard her fumbling around in the half-darkness beyond the square patch of light let in by the open door. I heard the ripping of fabric. And pretty soon she was handing me some strips that were just what the doctor ordered.

I tied one around his ankles, one around his wrists, in back. Then I remembered what they had done to me while they were giving me the business. I pulled his elbows back and threw a running bowline behind him, from the biceps of one arm to those of the other. I ran this down under him and looped it around his ankles.

"Look, baby," I snapped. "Start thrashing around and that'll tighten up until you'll be giving a good imitation of a pretzel. Lie still and you'll be fairly comfortable."

He opened his mouth to yell and his eyes, big and round as two-bit pieces, rolled wildly up at me. I held his gun over his head.

"One yip out of you," I snarled, "and I'll slap your skull in."

HIS eyes steadied for an instant as he took in the expression on my face. Then he closed his mouth. He was licked and he knew it. Licked and scared as hell. I reached up and swung the small door shut, but without the same confidence I had had a little while before. If one could find that narrow, high-placed panel, others could.

The instant the door closed, blackness fell upon us, infinite, and without one ray of light.

"Know who I am, rat?" I said.

"Sure I know," came the reply, louder than I liked. I reached for his throat. The rest of his words were properly soft. "You're Tom Bates, who lammed out of court yesterday."

"And what's your name?"

"Muscles Genrich."

"You know who this girl is?"

"Yeah. She's Nick Grayson's cousin."

"How come you know that?" I snapped.

"I seen her with this Grayson one time," he replied, sullenly. "A guy told me who she was. And—and I heard about her going nuts, too."

Wendy caught her breath there in the darkness.

"And did you hear anything about Grayson and Moscowitz putting her over the road?" I asked, softly.

"No, and if I did do you suppose I'd tell you?" he snarled.

"Before we're through," I said, quietly, "you'll be begging for a chance to tell me anything you know."

I heard him thrash about. His leg struck mine and glanced away. I've been on the water long enough to know my knots, so I let him thrash. If he wanted it the hard way, that was his business.

But Wendy couldn't stand it. The blackness, together with the rasping of the mug's breath as he struggled in that tiny box of a place, were too much for her. She thumbed her small flashlight and a wedge-shaped slice of brilliance ate into the darkness, focussing full on the distorted face of our prisoner. He had fixed himself up, all right. The first couple of

kicks had put a strain on the running bowlines between his bent arms and his ankles and he had bent himself backward at an angle he wasn't going to like very long.

"Want me to loosen those up just a little?" I asked.

"Yes, yes!" he groaned.

"I'll be delighted to," I said, pleasantly, "if—"

"If what?"

"If you talk. There are two or three things I'd like to get straight in my mind. How did you and Hole-card happen to come aboard an hour or two ago?"

"Moscowitz sent us," Muscles Genrich said in a surly tone.

"What for? What did he tell you to hunt for?"

"He thought this doll might be aboard."

"What made him think that?"

"How would I know?"

"WELL, perhaps you wouldn't," I conceded. "Let's talk about something else. Who did that killing outside the Royal Hibiscus? The one I was tried for."

"Listen, guy," he said in a strangled voice, "if you think you can get away with this, you're wacky!"

"I am getting away with it," I informed him.

"Not for long, you ain't. Don't you know right now they'll be looking for me, with Hole-card dead in that cabin and me not showing up?"

"Who's going to look for you?" I asked, mildly. "The cops?"

"No, Moscowitz and—" He chopped his words off as if he had already said too much.

"Why wouldn't they call the cops?" I wanted to know.

"Because," he answered, grimly, "there are a couple of laws against what they'll do to you for killing Hole-card. They'll find you both, and when they do—"

Wendy moved suddenly.

"Sssh!" she whispered. "I hear somebody outside."

I heard it, too. The sound of people moving, talking, in the room just outside. I put Genrich's gun solidly against his temple.

"Now go ahead and yell if you want to," I whispered.

He didn't yell. He didn't do anything but breathe, and that not too loudly. The men outside sounded as if they just glanced around that room where the steering engine was and then went away. I waited a minute or two.

"We'll talk some more," I announced. "Who came aboard with you, sweetheart?"

"I'm not going to say another word."

I put my thumb on his cheek bone, slid it over a bit until it rested on the skin over the outside corner of his eyeball. I pressed a little, just tentatively. He groaned. I could hear the shocked intake of Wendy's breath.

"Tom!" she gasped. "Don't do that!"

I didn't pay any attention to her.

"Listen, mug," I said, coldly. "I've spent the last half-dozen years in Cuba, which is a tough country, and it sort of hardened me up. It's you who'll have to be wearing a glass eye if you don't talk, not me. So it's your worry. Your outfit was going to put me in the hot seat for something I didn't do. So talk if you like your right eye. Tell me what you know, and tell me fast."

He hesitated and I bore down a little.

"Go ahead," he said with a despairing sob. "Go ahead and push it out. I'd as soon be blind as dead."

"Tom!" Wendy cried. "How can you be so cruel! If you don't stop I'll get right out of that door and give myself up. And I'll tell them where you are, too."

"Cruel?" I flamed at her. "There wouldn't be any cruelty to you in putting you in an insane asylum, would there? And would it be cruel to put me all strapped up in a chair and then turn the juice on? Listen, this monkey knows enough to get both of us out in the clear, and I'm going to see he tells us! If you can't take it, shut your eyes and put your fingers in your ears."

And I bore down a trifle more on Genrich's eye. That was just as far as I got. Wendy threw herself upon me, a fighting fury of a girl. She bit and scratched and kicked. I got the palm of my hand on her face and pushed. I heard her thud against the bulkhead, but she didn't say anything at all.

SHE pushed herself away from the sloping wall and darted around behind me in the blackness. She fumbled at the catch on the door and in another moment a great patch of bright light flooded into that little lazarette.

I grabbed her by the arm just as she started to climb over the combing. I jerked her away from there and wasn't any too gentle about it, either. Only it surprised me how light she was.

She fetched up against the after bulkhead with more of a bump than I had expected. But I'll say this for her; she had plenty of what it took. She just steadied herself and stared down at me. Her small, set face was furious.

"All right," I snarled. "You win. But for two cents I'd bust you a good one."

She was trembling all over and if I had allowed myself I could have worked up a good case of feeling sorry for her—and apologetic for having pushed her around so.

"Are—are you going to stop trying to put his eye out?" she panted.

"Listen, toots," I said, trying to be patient. "If I had tried to put it out, it would be on the deck right now. I'm trying not to. All he has to do is talk."

"You're not going to do that again," she said. "Or I'll scream and scream and scream."

But I wasn't even listening. Not to her, that was. The little door was still open and I was listening to the sounds—or, rather, to the lack of sounds—outside. I was damn good and sore. I hitched my hand around to be sure my gun was still in my pocket.

"If I can't make him tell me without you going into a swoon, or something," I snapped, "I'll have to do the next best thing and find out for myself."

"How?" she breathed.

"How do you suppose?" I retorted angrily. "Now just you use your brain a little while I'm gone. This turkey isn't any too comfortable on account of the way he wouldn't take my advice and went thrashing around. No matter what he says, don't fool with his lashings. He may have some sore muscles tomorrow, but he won't die—not of being bent a little backward anyway. If he rolls around too much, give him a good swift kiss with the butt of that gun and he'll be quiet."

I glanced once more at Muscles Genrich. With his arms and ankles bound like that it was compressing his back and stretching his belly. He wouldn't feel much like laughing and playing while I was gone.

"I—I'm going with you," Wendy faltered, turning toward the little door.

"You're staying right here," I retorted. "If you tag after me, I'll take a chance of going overboard and getting under a catwalk, or something, where I can hide until dark."

That did it. All the resistance ebbed out of her. She looked heartbreakingly young and small as she stood there in her sailor suit, practically ready to cry. At any other time I'd have been so sorry for her I'd have stopped to comfort her. But now now. She could cry and be damned, for all of me. I had too many things on my mind. So I just patted her slender shoulder and went through that door like a rabbit out of its hole.

CHAPTER VIII

INTO THIN AIR

CROUCHING behind the steering engine, I peered forward along the two passageways. They weren't dark now. Whoever had been searching had turned on all the lights and left them like that. Which wasn't so good, for it indicated they weren't in any hurry to leave the yacht.

I could see all the way forward to the engine room and there was nobody in sight. I was too upset in my mind to do any fancy reconnoitering. The knowledge that Izzy Moscowitz, who had me framed for the chair, was aboard took all the cautiousness out of me. I went tiptoeing up the starboard passageway, gun in hand, as deadly as any coral snake.

I hesitated at the watertight door of the engine room, at last realizing that I couldn't go on butting my way around like a bull in a china shop. If I did, sooner or later I'd run plumb into one of the gang that was hunting me, and what then? We'd shoot it out then and there, for I wasn't going to let them take me alive; not by a damned sight. And even if I didn't die under the blast of their guns, the sound of the shooting would probably go booming to the ears of the workmen on the adjacent yachts—and that would be just about as bad, for it would be the cops, then, who would send their slugs tearing through my body instead of the gamblers.

Heads you win, tails I lose. If they even caught sight of me I was in a jackpot and the very thought of not being able to get even with Moscowitz sent panic through me.

Where were the searchers now? Wherever they were, and whatever they were doing, I knew they would redouble their activity—and be twice as careful—when they realized one of their number had disappeared, the second to come to grief within the past couple of hours aboard this yacht.

It was a bad break, having to tie up that trouble-man who had blundered into our hideout. If he hadn't spotted that little hatch behind the steering engine, the others might have continued their search for a while and then gone ashore convinced that whoever had killed Hole-card had already made his getaway.

But there it was. And there we were, Wendy and I. No bookmaker in the world but what would have laid one to ten on our chances. Not even for a few hours.

I eased that bulkhead door open, quarter-inch by quarter-inch. But there was nobody in that silent, brilliantly-lighted engine room. The twin diesels stood in their pits, clean and polished, and so did the auxiliary machinery, pumps, generator, compressor and the rest. I stood there, wondering how in hell I was going to get up to B and A decks without somebody spotting me right off the bat. I heard the trample of feet overhead.

Instinctively I looked up the big rectangular air well of the fiddley, extending above the diesels all the way to the skylights on the boat deck. I shrank back against the bulkhead, realizing that if anyone were searching beneath the tent-like canvas which protected the boat deck they could look down through the closed skylights all the way to the engine room and see me standing there.

And then my pulses quickened. It could work both ways. There was a ladder of steel rungs set into the forward wall of the fiddley. I looked around hastily. Yes, there, just aft of the compressor, was the brass wheel which operated the skylight opener at the upper end of the air well. A chance—but what wasn't?

I FOUND the switch which controlled the engine-room lights and plunged the big room into blackness. Then I made my way to the skylight opener. There was a little light at the top of the fiddley, straining through the canvas roof above the boat deck.

Holding my breath, I began to turn that wheel, and saw the skylight begin to lift on the boat deck high above me. The first few turns after the skylight began to rise —they were the worst, for with every passing second I expected to see someone stare down through the heavy glass to find out who was down there. With infinite care I turned that wheel so the skylight might rise imperceptibly.

And then, so unexpectedly that I realized I had not been listening, I heard the clatter of feet on the deckplates just forward of the engine room. And when I tell

you I took off in a zoom and went up that ladder under full throttle, brother, I mean just that. I went up those rungs like a monkey up a coconut palm and I must have been well past B Deck when the door in the forward bulkhead flew open. But the engine room below was still dark, and you'll remember I had shucked my shoes in the Miami River the night before, so I didn't make any noise as I went right on moving up that ladder.

Below me I heard a man's voice.

"That's damned funny," it said. "If he was looking down on this deck, why didn't he leave the glims on?"

"Are you right," said a second voice. "Where is that switch? Maybe he quit before he got this far back."

I let my breath go out in a long, soundless sigh. Neither of those men was Moscowitz. I could tell by their voices. Hadn't I heard Izzy's voice go on and on, running the gamut of emotion from tears to rage, as he told the jurors what a rat Tom Bates was?

Well, that was a break for Izzy Moscowitz—and maybe for me, too. I give you my word I had hung there, poised, with every muscle twitching, waiting to identify Izzy's voice. And if I had heard it, I was waiting for just one more thing. For them to turn on the light there in the engine room. It's a funny thing; it didn't occur to me to reach for my gun. A bullet was too impersonal. I was going to drop right down thirty or forty feet of space and—if I could—land on him as a cowboy stunt man lands on his bronc. You know?

But Izzy's voice did not come up to me through that stuffy darkness, so I raced up that ladder and went through the thin space between the edge of the skylight and its seat like a worm. I left some skin behind, but I didn't even notice it.

I cast one hurried look around the boat deck. It was swathed in sort of a gray darkness, with what light there was filtering through the tent-like canvas which veered down from a heavy batten that extended from foremast to mainmast. Seeing nobody, I twisted around, got my head back under the skylight and stuck my neck way out.

THEY had found the switch, those two, and the engine room was plenty light. They were searching it, looking in the pits around the diesels and even trying to crawl into the bilges. They were talking, but from this height I couldn't hear what they were saying. Their voices came to me in an unintelligible blur. But from this angle I could see how the side pockets of their white linen coats bulged with the guns they were carrying.

That accounted for two. The lug Wendy was watching in the lazarette made three. How many of them were there? That gave me an idea. If not more than five had come aboard, that meant that Izzy had only one with him. The way I was feeling now I could handle two bare-fisted.

I swung away from the fiddley and ran on padding stocking-feet aft along the deck. There was a stairway just at the break of the boat deck and I had sense enough to pause at the rail and look down upon the quarter deck. It was bare. During the season, when the *Faith* was in commission, there would be gay awnings there, and chairs with bright upholstery and cocktail tables and a rolling bar tended by a suave steward. But not now. It was just a deck extending all the way back to the taffrail and nothing more.

I went down that ladder like a ghost, queerly conscious of the prosaic noises beyond the thin layer of canvas which shut us off from all the normal activities in the storage shed outside. It was odd to think of workmen just fifty or sixty feet away, ruminatively slapping on paint, or chipping rust, and wishing for four-thirty to come, not knowing that if they could only peek under the tent which covered the upperstructure of the *Faith* they could see things which would give them topics for conversation at home for the next six months.

It was darker on the main deck than on the boat deck above and that was just

dandy. I needed darkness, for the whole after end of the deckhouse was a sort of glassed-in veranda cafe and I was as conspicuous out there on the quarter deck as a fly on a white wall.

I drifted quietly to the nearest glass door, trying to swallow my heart as I waited for somebody to spot me—or for a gun to explode. But luck—wonder of wonders—was with me for the moment. That veranda cafe was empty. Moscowitz and whoever was with him, was not there.

I tried the nearest glass door. Locked. Well, they had gotten in somewhere. And I doubted if they had locked themselves in. Like a shadow I moved along the side of the deckhouse.

And then, at a window about midships, my luck came in again. Someone had swung that window inward for ventilation and I heard voices. And the very first one was Izzy Moscowitz's!

CROUCHING there beneath the half-open window, I listened. And that took discipline, for every nerve, every muscle, in me screamed to go in after that rat—to go in with a gun spitting lead, and blast the dirty heart out of him before he had time to draw breath.

Of course I'd be killed myself. But that was not, really, what stopped me. As before, when I had been climbing the ladder out of the engine room, I simply didn't want him to die that easily, that painlessly. Hadn't he killed me a hundred times during those endless days in the courtroom? Well, then, why should he get off any easier than I?

There is this about hate; it peels the veneer of civilization off you like the skin off an orange. Don't get me wrong, now. By hate I mean real hate. Not that feeling you have toward somebody who has gypped you out of a couple of century notes, or who has made vague passes at your girl, or slipped an ace off the bottom of the deck.

What I'm trying to describe to you is the kind of hatred that you can taste on your tongue, that makes you sweat all over with a longing to shut off his breath until his tongue comes out, and his face turns purple and his eyeballs bulge.

Unless you've felt like that you've never really hated a man. You've just disliked him and you couldn't possibly understand what hate feels like. You'll just have to take my word for it and pray you never come to hate a man like that. Like I hated Izzy Moscowitz, who had never lost a case in court—but was going to lose more than that very soon.

So I stood quite still there in the half-light, with the peaceful and familiar sounds of the shipyard coming through the canvas cover, straining my ears to catch the words of the man who, if I had any luck at all, I was presently going to strangle with my two bare hands.

"I tell you, King," he was saying in an angry voice, "I don't like any part of it. This Grayson doll gets away from us, and Bates is loose somewhere, and Hole-card is dead. Murdered, right on this yacht. Who killed Hole-card, tell me that! He and Muscles Genrich come aboard and a few minutes later Muscles finds him standing in a closet with his brains bashed out. A fine thing, that! Who killed him, I'm asking!"

There was a long silence, while my body quivered with anxiety to hear this King bird's answer. King? Now I had it. King Absecon, the owner of the Royal Hibiscus Club in front of which I was supposed to have done murder. I had seen him that night and he had testified against me at the trial, a slight, pallid-faced, white-haired man of about forty-six, whose black eyes looked like twin ink spots on a sheet of white paper. He had been standing near me when I had slapped down the house player, and I remember thinking then that I didn't like him and in another minute, if so many trouble-men hadn't appeared to give me the heave-ho, I'd have taken a crack at him just on general principles.

"Well," said this other voice, apparently King Absecon's, "since you're asking questions, I'll ask one. What are we going to do about Hole-card?"

"There's only one thing to do," Izzy's voice said, instantly. "If the police get in on this there'll be a stink, and we'll have more trouble covering up on this one than we did in the Bates matter. We—"

"We could wait until dark," King Absecon said, "and take him out on the Tamiami Trail, somewhere and dump him. They'd think somebody took him for a ride and—"

"NUTS!" said Izzy, scornfully. "And then we'd have the newspapers screaming for reform again, saying the gambling element was a shame and a scandal. You've gone all through that about once a year for five years, King. Every year you are sitting pretty at the beginning of the season, and running practically wide open, and then somebody plays rough and you all have to shut down during some of the best weeks of the year. We just did squeak by when Craps Maños was bumped and we pinned it on Tom Bates. But you're pushing your luck, King. You're slipping a few slot machines in again in spite of my advice, and I'm telling you the public is still sore at slot machines. You're trying to control the bolita and 'Buba' rackets. You're spreading yourself out too thin. And—"

"What's this got to do with Hole-card?" King asked, while I stood there hardly daring to breathe.

"We wait till dark, all right," Izzy said, matter-of-factly. "And then we tie a bunch of engine-room tools to Hole-card's neck and ankles—plenty of tools—and we drop him overboard. This isn't like New York, you know. If the tools keep him down four-five days, all that'll be left is a skeleton and the reformers are welcome to that. But what I want to know is, who killed him?"

At this moment I heard the sound of a hastily-opened door.

"Hey, King!" cried a voice which I recognized as belonging to one of the two men who had been talking in the darkness of the engine room while I had been climbing up the ladder toward the skylight. "Something funny around here. You seen Muscles since we began to hunt around this boat?"

"No," King Absecon snapped. "Why?"

"Well, it's just damned queer, that's all," said the other. "He was going to hunt in the back part of this boat and we were going to hunt in the front part, and we were going to meet in the middle. Well, he didn't meet us there, so we went looking for him. Twice we went the full length of every floor and he ain't anywhere. Not anywhere at all."

There was a silence you could have scooped up and dished out with an ice-cream dipper.

Then King Absecon said in a strained voice, "First Hole-card. Now Muscles."

Izzy spoke and his tone was crisp, incisive. "One of two things happened. Either he bumped Hole-card and slipped ashore to take it on the lam, or he didn't. And if he didn't, somebody else is aboard this yacht who bumped Hole-card and has maybe put the slug on Muscles, too."

"He didn't bump Hole-card," said King, shakily. "I've had 'em both on my payroll for ten years. Besides, if he'd wanted to lam, the time for him to do it would have been right when he did the killing. Why would he have called us up, all excited, and gotten us to hurry over here? Listen, I'm getting off this damned boat. I don't like it here."

"No," Izzy snapped. "We told Nick Grayson to meet us here instead of in my office, and he's probably on his way. He's in a jam now, and we've got to plan things. His cousin getting away puts him on a spot. King, have you a gun?"

"Have I got my pants on?" King countered. "I'd sooner go out without one as the other."

"Well, listen to me, all of you," Izzy snapped. "In ten more minutes it's four-thirty. The workmen will knock off around here. Then there'll be only the watchman and the people who are living on that house-boat at the other end of the shed. Then we'll start a hunt. Muscles, dead or alive, is still on this boat unless he walked

off himself, and I'm taking King's word for it that Muscles wouldn't do that. If there's any shooting, and it happens inside the yacht, nobody is likely to hear it after 4.30. Fifty men would hear it now. We—"

"You think," King cut in, uneasily, "that whoever killed Hole-card might be still aboard—and killed Muscles, too?"

"You, Fats," said Izzy, coolly. "Go to the gangway and ask those workmen on the next yacht if anybody's gone ashore since we came aboard—"

THAT was all I wanted to hear. To get to the gangway the man they called Fats would come out of a door almost within reaching distance of me. I could handle a couple at once, especially if one of them were Izzy. But I couldn't handle four. I went away from there like a frightened ghost.

Heading for that ladder which led up to the boat deck, I told myself that it was just about time for Wendy and me to get off this damned yacht. With Izzy directing the search they'd find our lazarette, all right, and then we'd be in a thin way, both of us. It would be pretty difficult for me to explain away Hole-card's death, so I couldn't go to the cops.

With a conviction for one murder behind me already, how could I sell them the idea that Hole-card was covering me with a gun when I gave him the haymaker that resulted in his death? No, there wasn't one thing the coppers could do for me—except to protect me from Izzy's mob so they could fry me in the electric chair themselves.

And it wouldn't help Wendy a whole lot to go yelling for the cops, either. They had legal commitment papers, Izzy and her cousin, so into the booby hatch she'd go the minute the law laid a hand on her. Then it would be up to her lawyer who was hurrying home from Europe, to get her out—if he could. And what was that age-old gag about possession being nine points of the law?

And he was starting behind scratch another way, too; he, presumably an honest man, was lined up against the smartest *criminal* lawyer in these United States. So how could he, who played the game according to Hoyle, expect to lick a guy like Izzy Moscowitz—who had as many brains and no conscience to handicap him?

I squirmed under the skylight which gave ventilation to the engine room and began to clamber down through the pit of darkness that was the fiddley. And with every downward rung I felt a little better because I would, in another couple of minutes, be back with Wendy. I could imagine her, young and sweet and brave, sitting patiently in the blackness of the lazarette, seeing that Muscles Genrich didn't wriggle out of his lashings. How many girls, I asked myself, would have set themselves against the world as she had, and found a hide-out for herself and managed somehow to get along in silence, darkness, and loneliness without ever a complaint?

I rushed back along the starboard passageway to the little room in the extreme stern which held the inert steering engine.

"It's O.K., Wendy," I called as I reached for the handle of the little lazarette door.

I pulled the thing open and stuck my head into that pool of darkness.

"You all right, Wendy?" I asked.

My voice came back to me in a muffled echo. It was like talking into an empty box. Or an empty room.

"Wendy!" I said, sharply.

There was no answer and an icy fist seemed to close itself around my heart, I went over the combing in a hurry. I waved my arm around, and found nothing.

I floundered across the tiny floor, lashing out with my feet, aiming for the spot where Muscles Genrich should be. But all they hit was empty air.

CHAPTER IX

ONE LOOK TOO MANY

I MUST have stood there at least half a minute, my heart pounding violently, trying to get things straight in my mind.

I even made another circuit of that circumscribed space, hoping against hope that my hands or feet would encounter one of them in the darkness. But it was no use. I had to accept the fact. There was nothing else to do.

My impulse, of course, was to get out of that place, to go stampeding, gun in hand, up and down every passageway in the yacht until I found Wendy. Instinct alone held me there. This business, I realized, needed something more than a flaming gun, something more than handy fists. It needed quick and accurate planning, or we were lost, both Wendy and I.

Oh, I could figure out what had happened, all right. Muscles Genrich had bellyached about the tightness of his lashings until soft-hearted Wendy had loosened them up—too far. A very little would have been too far. He had gotten free while I was listening to Izzy and to King Absecon and had taken Wendy up the main companionway while I had been darting across the boat deck and down the engine-room fiddley.

So what now? That wasn't hard to figure out, either. At just about this moment Muscles would be telling Izzy and the rest where he had found us and in a few minutes they would all be trooping down here to see if I had returned.

I almost laughed, as rotten as I was feeling, when I tried to imagine the expression on Izzy Moscowitz's puss when he heard that I was right here on his yacht. I remembered how he had squeaked and dived for cover when I had busted out of the courtroom, thinking that I was coming after him.

He could guess, all right, what I had in mind for him if I ever got him where I could handle him. He would never draw an easy breath until he knew, certainly, that I was dead. And he would have an easy excuse if he or his mob pumped me full of slugs "trying to capture an escaped murderer."

There was no use waiting around here like a sitting bird. I had my own life to think of, as well as Wendy's. So I went down the starboard passageway under four bells and a jingle.

I didn't know where Wendy would be, nor what I would do about it when I found her. I just wanted to know where she was. Then I could make my plans. All I knew definitely was that she mustn't be railroaded into an insane asylum.

Insane? Hell, she was twice as level-headed as I, except that she let her sympathy get the better of her. She should have let me have my way with Muscles Genrich. Ten more minutes of working on him would have told me enough to free both Wendy and me of the charges against us. I was sure of that—if I was sure of anything.

I could take it for granted, I thought, that Muscles would take her straight up to Izzy Moscowitz. I didn't dare go the most direct way to the lounge where he and his mob had been arguing. So once again I raced up the steel rungs of the ladder which led up the fiddley to the boat deck.

Two minutes later I was again crouching by that half-open window, but this time I wasn't careful. I was too anxious to peek inside that big room, too anxious to see if Wendy was in there. And I forgot something very important. I forgot, getting my ear as close up to the sill-level as I could, how conspicuous was my blood-stained turban. I never once thought how it would contrast against the gloom behind me as I unwittingly, heedlessly, pushed it up over the sill-line so I could hear better.

IT WAS Wendy's voice, really, that made all the trouble. If I hadn't heard her speak I might have been careful, might have kept that blood-stained bandage down. Or maybe I'd have gone barging in there, hell-bent for trouble. I don't know.

"I tell you," she was saying in that low, sweet voice of hers. "that if you'll turn Tom Bates and me loose, right now, I won't say a word. If you don't, my lawyer, Mr. Blackburn, will have you disbarred. The things I know! Mr. Moscowitz, I could tell them how—"

"Isn't it a shame," Izzy's voice cut in, sardonically soothing, "how a fine young girl like this could go off her nut? There, there, Wendy, your cousin will be here any minute now, and we will find a nice, comfortable place where you'll get well and—"

"Izzy," said a voice I recognized instantly as that of King Absecon, "about this Bates. I don't like his being aboard. We'll—"

Izzy's tone turned hard. "It isn't four-thirty yet, King. If he should get excited and start shooting, the whole place would be around our ears. After four-thirty, it'll be different."

Oh, I got that, all right. After four-thirty *they* could start shooting, and it would be different. I pressed so hard against the steel wall that it hurt, so anxious was I to miss no word. I didn't need to rush in just yet; at least they weren't actually harming her.

"Wendy," Izzy said, so soothingly that my stomach turned over inside me. "This lawyer, Blackburn. Get it out of your mind, my dear, about him. It'll only upset you. He's way up near Spitzbergen, somewhere. I read it in the New York papers. I'm your friend, baby, so trust me and—"

"He *was* near Spitzbergen on a North Cape Cruise," Wendy flashed back at him. "But he isn't any more. I cabled him. He's catching the Queen Mary home."

A thin rasp came into Izzy's tone. "You cabled him?" he asked, incredulously. "And he's coming home on the Queen Mary?"

"He is," Wendy said. "And if you don't believe it, I'll take you down into one of the cabins and find you the cablegram he sent me in answer."

"Thanks," Izzy said, dryly. "I'll take your word for it but—" There was an instant's silence. Then his voice went into a whisper I could not hear.

That in itself should have warned me, but it didn't. My first warning came when Wendy screamed.

"Tom!" she cried. "Tom, look out. They—"

Her voice was chopped off and ended with a loud slapping sound as if someone had clapped the flat of his hand across her vivid red lips. I spun around, all my muscles tightening. I reached into my hip pocket for my gun. But already I was too late.

Behind me a hand darted out of the half open window. It grabbed me around the neck and yanked me, off-balance, back against the deckhouse wall. It jammed my right arm between my body and the wall, effectually preventing me from drawing that gun.

I opened my mouth. I don't know what for—certainly not to yell. What good would that have done? I recoiled to spring back.

Almost at the same instant three men bolted out of the nearest doorway, Muscles Genrich in the lead. Before I could spin around and drag free of that hand that was throttling me, the others were upon me.

"His gun!" called King Absecon's voice behind me. "Get it!"

I PULLED my feet up and let the weight of my body break King Absecon's hold. He had to let go or break his arm on the window sill. I dropped to my hands and knees just as Muscles reached for me.

Dimly I heard Izzy's voice warning the others. "No shooting, boys, no shooting."

Hands reached for me, began to maul me. I felt my gun being dragged out of my hip pocket, heard it hit the deck. I worried myself to my hands and knees and threw my weight, low, at Muscles' legs like a football tackle breaking up the runner's interference.

It spilled Muscles in fine fashion. But it dropped the next guy full on me. The third one, moving in fast, caught my bandaged head with his knee, nearly knocking it off my shoulders. Great, sick, waves of pain rolled over me. But I couldn't stop now.

Clawing my way to my feet, I knew my only chance was to break free and fight my way to the rail. Maybe then I could get overboard. With what I knew now—and with Wendy to bear me witness—I wasn't

afraid of the cops any more. I had enough on these lugs to put them in the hoosegow, maybe in the electric chair. But I had to get somewhere where I could use it. It was no good just in my head. If I could get overboard I might be able to swim under water—get under one of the catwalks —and sooner or later find a cop or telephone.

But Muscles was back on his feet now. I was still half-way up, trying to fight free so I could make it the rest of the way. But one of the mugs leaped upon me, straddling my shoulders and beating down on my split head with ham-like fists. He was starting the blood to flowing again and with those rocking blows he was putting me in a hell of a shape.

I floundered back, my face aching and wet with my blood, my fists heavier than two pigs of iron. Even then, I don't think I was really scared. There wasn't room in all that pain for any kind of emotion.

I reared up, carrying him with me, and he hit the deck with his back, head and shoulders. For an instant I was free and with a desperate hope I tried to get up. I got as far as one knee. Then I saw Muscles' face right before me and he was grinning as if he had me already in a bag.

I lurched to my feet, swayed forward and put my whole weight into a right to Muscles' belly that sank my fist in wrist-deep. The breath exploded out of him and he seemed to come apart at the waist. He folded over like a rag doll and a second or two later I heard a soft thud as he hit the deck. But I didn't see him hit.

By that time I was going down to join him.

I didn't notice that mug who swung a rabbit punch to the back of my neck. He got around behind me in the mêlée and he did a good job. My brain seemed to blow up inside my head and all my muscles turned into water. They went numb and I started to fall. An odd thing, to feel your knees buckling, and you falling, and not be able to do a damned thing about it.

I was conscious, entirely aware of everything that was going on, yet when I told my legs to straighten up, to do their share of the work, nothing happened except that I went right on falling. I couldn't even get my arms out in front of me to break the fall before I hit the deck.

I hit plenty hard. I knew I was stretched out there on the deck, and I tried to push myself up, but neither my arms nor my legs moved.

When I opened my eyes, what I saw was dyed in scarlet. Everything was spinning; and the funny sound I heard was my own breath ripping harshly through my lungs.

"What are we waiting for, you guys?" A husky voice coming out of the sky, words echoing in my woozy ears with a metallic clang. A foot prodded my ribs. I winced. "What are we waiting for?" the voice from the darkness said again.

So they began to give it to me then and there. My eyes were all right, except things weren't as clear as they should have been, and I could see them swing their feet back, take one step forward and then drive their shoes into my body.

I could hear myself grunt as they kicked me, but I give you my word that after the first three or four I hardly felt a thing. I knew my body was rocking with the force of their kicks, and I remembered thinking vaguely that they were going to kick me to death—and not caring a hell of a lot.

Oh, I tried to get up, but they'd never have known it by watching me because I don't think I moved a muscle. I guess I was just thinking about getting up.

I heard Wendy scream once, but that stopped as suddenly as it had before, when she had attempted to warn me they were coming.

After quite a long time a voice cut into my dimming consciousness.

"That'll be all, you guys," someone—I think it was King Absecon—said. "Stop that fooling around and bring him in here. Stop it, I tell you, before I get sore!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

MEN of DARING

(by) STOOKIE ALLEN

LEATHERNECK!

IN 8 YRS. OF SERVICE WITH THE MARINES HE SAW PLENTY OF ADVENTURE. IN NICARAGUA IN 1912 HE WAS IN CHARGE OF A DETACHMENT OF SHARPSHOOTERS SENT TO INVADE THE BANDIT COUNTRY, TO ARREST THE BANDITS AND DISARM THEIR MEN. THIS WORK WAS SO DANGEROUS HIS GANG BECAME KNOWN AS THE SUICIDE SQUAD! THE SQUAD EXTERMINATED 362 BANDITTI, INCLUDING TWO LEADERS, IN 6 WEEKS!

CAPT. EDWARD W. HOUCK

HE HOLDS 7 DECORATIONS — WAS WOUNDED 3 TIMES. HE WAS ONCE BODY-GUARD TO WOODROW WILSON. THE PRESIDENT, TRAVELING INCOGNITO, USED TO SLIP OUT OF THE WHITE HOUSE TO GO ON SLUMMING TOURS WITH HOUCK.

IN 1914 WHILE DOING OUTPOST DUTY AT VERA CRUZ, HE SAW 2 FIGURES CREEPING TOWARD THE TRENCHES. HE FIRED AND WOUNDED ONE, THE OTHER SURRENDERED. THE WOUNDED MAN WAS JACK LONDON, THE OTHER WAS RICHARD HARDING DAVIS!

RICHARD HARDING DAVIS

HE TRAVELED ABOARD THE U.S.S. MINNESOTA AND THE U.S.S. VERMONT, PARTICIPATED IN TWO THRILLING RESCUES AT SEA. HE WAS ABOARD THE VERMONT WHEN A "GHOST" SHIP WAS FOUND. A SWEDISH FISHING VESSEL — ALL ABOARD IT WERE DEAD!

WHOA!

HE'S NOW WITH THE NEW YORK POLICE DEPARTMENT, DETECTIVE DIVISION, AND HAS BEEN IN SOME OF THE CITY'S MOST SENSATIONAL CASES.

HE SHOT AT A COUPLE OF BIG SHOT ADVENTURERS, DAVIS AND LONDON!

STOOKIE ALLEN

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

"I have instructions to claim this island for England, sir"

Peabody's War

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "Death Had a Pencil," "The Pig Was in the Parlor," etc.

The bigger they come, the harder they fall: was Bill Peabody's motto. And so he twisted the lion's tail, and shot hell out of the rising sun . . .

IF YOU will examine closely a map of Asia and mark a spot about fifty miles southeast of Shanghai, you will see a small island called by the somewhat Polynesian name of Mandoa. It is hardly a dot in your gazeteer, and on the charts of that area, navigation charts that is, it is little more than a small plum. But it is an important little island. It is rich and fertile and entirely self-sufficient, has twentieth-century conveniences, and is, in short, a tropical paradise with running water.

Being the attorney for the Peabody interests in New York City, I have been watching the fate of Mandoa with anxiety and interest these past months. When the Chinese-Japanese undeclared war broke out, I was certain that Mandoa would become a romantic memory. By that I mean, I was quite sure the Japanese would step in and take over the island for themselves. Surely, I argued, old Peabody couldn't turn the trick twice. What had been quite a defeat in the nineteenth century might become quite a farce in the twentieth.

Accordingly, when the Japanese Government dispatched a pair of first-class battleships to Mandoa in March, I assumed the game was up and I waited for old Peabody to cable me.

After all, Mandoa was ideally situated as a naval base and an air base for the Japanese. There was an island within striking distance of the Chinese mainland, as far as aircraft were concerned. But more than that, Mandoa could provide Japan with a supply base for her ships in the event of war with either France or England.

You remember the furore in Japan when England announced the completion of her Singapore base? Mandoa was Japan's antidote for Singapore. Mandoa would allow the Japanese fleet to stray a long way from home safely, to supply and refuel and be in a position to attack Singapore. It was a spot for the Japanese to fall back to. Its area was enough to permit construction of a huge floating drydock. Its harbor was perfect for military purposes, as old Peabody realized decades before.

But nothing happened. I scanned the newspapers for a couple of days and soon found an item which read: "Mandoa, March 13. Two Japanese warships paid a call at this island this week and have sailed for Shanghai. British consular authorities at Hong Kong had thought that Japan was attempting to seize the island which would make an excellent base. The Foreign office warned Tokyo that it would regard the seizure of Mandoa as an unfriendly act. Premier Hashito of Japan issued a denial, today, that Japan had any intention of seizing Mandoa."

I KNEW there was a lot more behind the story than just that. In the first place, I knew damned well that Japan had had her eye on Mandoa and would have taken it without a qualm and with only another of her many and profuse "So Sorry" apologies. I knew that the mere fact that England would consider the seizure an unfriendly act would fail to deter Japan from committing the act. The relations were already strained and seizure of Mandoa would strain them little more.

Japan had not seized Mandoa for one reason: the ace which old man Peabody always left concealed up his sleeve.

For Mandoa wasn't German, and Mandoa wasn't French, nor was it British. It was Peabody. In these days of republics and totalitarian states, where kingdoms are few and far between and stumbling where they do exist, Mandoa is unique. Mandoa is an American kingdom. The king is Bill Peabody. The crown prince is Bill Peabody, Jr. The rest of the family makes up the subjects. There are ten young and intelligent Chinese servants on the island to make up the ranks of labor. But they do not have sit-down strikes of any kind. They are paid twice as much as they are worth, and they're worth a good deal.

I cabled old Peabody that afternoon and said, READ OF WARSHIPS VISIT STOP WHAT HAPPENED STOP YORK.

I had a reply that night from Mandoa which read: THEY CAME IN THE RIGHT MONTH STOP ARRIVED LIKE LIONS AND LEFT LIKE LAMBS STOP REMEDY FOR PREVENTION OF AGGRESSION MUST REMAIN SECRET STOP SORRY BILL PEABODY.

They wouldn't even let me in on it.

But I have since had a letter from Bill, Jr., who told me most of what happened and insinuated enough for me to guess the rest. And when today, young Peabody telephoned me from Hong Kong to tell me that the old man had died in his sleep and that Mandoa was to be given to the United States as a base for commercial airplane flights in a big transpacific way, I thought, perhaps, the time had come to tell the whole story.

For after all, old man Peabody was probably the only man (and the only nation) in the world who ever defeated two major powers without firing a shot. And no matter how invincible they say they are, and how neither of them have ever met defeat, the fact remains that both Great Britain and Japan lost major battles when they lost Mandoa. . . .

BILL PEABODY was born in Hinsdale, Ohio. on April 4, 1852 of poor parents, farmer family at that. He was

quite a bit ahead of his time and apparently he was a real genius. He was only thirteen years old, in the midst of the War Between the States when he constructed a contraption that could actually fly.

He called it a flying machine and his father wrote to the War Department about it, but nothing ever came of it. It was only a model, built somewhat like a box kite, but having wheels and a small steam engine. Lord knows how it worked, but it got off the ground and impressed Peabody's father who, up to that time, had thought he had sired a young madman.

Young Peabody, as you can plainly see, didn't want to be a poor farmer. Inventions were more his style. And although he dropped his flying machine and other things when he grew old enough to study chemistry and electricity and engineering, he went on to invent other things which the public of the time thought more valuable.

Today, you pay Bill Peabody a royalty every time you wake up in the morning and start to live for the day. He's dead, of course, but you keep pushing up the value of his estate without knowing it. You pay him tribute for the brilliance of his mind.

When you turn on the light, a turbine designed by Peabody gives you your juice. When you heat your toast, that toaster was invented by him. Your subway, the brakes on your car, bulbs, refinements in your engine, radial airplane motors, gyrocompass, anti-aircraft guns, radio-controlled airplanes, developments in your radio set, phonograph, recording of the voice . . . all these things make money for Bill Peabody's estate. He had a hand in all of them and some of them were exclusively his.

The British war tanks that broke through on the Somme in 1916 were Peabody's. Your electric shaver was patented by him so long ago, I can't remember the date. Long enough to be far ahead of its time. They couldn't be sold in those days. Nor could your outboard motor, which he designed and built first for his own convenience at Mandoa. All his.

When Bill Peabody was forty-six, he was a multi-millionaire and you'd never have known it. He kept that Ohio drawl, the farmerish aspect, and the hayseed look to his hair. When the Spanish-American War broke out, he went with the infantry and got his bellyful of war.

"Al," he said to me when he got back to New York with nothing more than a bullet wound and a touch of malaria, "Al, I reckon I'm fed up with this sort of livin'."

"You mean the war?" I said. "You were very foolish to go, Mr. Peabody. Certainly you didn't have to. The War Department could have used you to great advantage designing—"

"Naw," he said. "Naw, it's not only the war. It's the world. The war is only part of it. A man goes and spends his life inventin' a lot of things to make life easier to live, and then people go and complicate the whole business. Albert, life isn't what it used to be. If you want my opinion, civilization is in a bad way and as time goes on, it's going to get worse. Personally, I'm pullin' out."

"I don't see what you mean," I said. "Another war?"

"Sure, there'll be another war. There'll be a big war. Trouble is, folks aren't satisfied with what God gave 'em. Not even the United States. This country is gettin' to be as big a land-grabber as England. Everybody likes imperialism, these days. Everybody but me. Me, Albert, I want to live nice and quietly and go on workin' and I don't want to be depressed by the way human bein's make fools out of themselves without cause. Roughly, how much money have I got on tap?"

"Roughly, forty million dollars," I said.

"THAT'S a tidy sum," Peabody said. "Well, I reckon I'll leave the details to you then, Albert. Buy me an island. Don't argue with me. Just buy me an island. I don't want it near the United States anymore than I want it near Eu-

rope. Look, I always had an idea I'd like to live in the South Seas. You know, like Tahiti and the Marquesas and New Zealand and those places. Buy me an island down there and don't spend too much for it."

"Mr. Peabody," I said horrified, "you couldn't pack up your family and move down to a South Sea Island."

"Lock, stock and barrel," he said.

"But it isn't as easy as that," I said, stunned. "You have contacts, you have your work—living down there would be barbaric—"

Bill Peabody sighed, put a stick of chewing gum in his mouth and looked as though he were sorry for me. "Me? I'm only the inventory around here, Albert. You do all the contactin' as is. I could give you power of attorney, no worry about that. And as for barbaric livin', I don't call the way folks live now very comfortin', do you? Matter of fact, I'm an inventor and I invented a lot of things which will make any kind of island very comfortable indeed. I got the money to do it and I intend to do it. What else is money for?"

"But good heavens—"

"Buy me an island," he said, "and make it a good deal."

Did you ever try to buy an island? It's not the simple task it sounds. I wrote to the French, asking if they would sell any island among their numerous Polynesian Sporades. They must have thought I was crazy. They never even replied. I wrote to the German's and asked them about their Caroline Islands and could they spare one for a tidy sum. *Nein*, said Germany. I wrote to Great Britain and Great Britain replied that the sun never set upon the dominions beyond the seas and what sort of nut was I to think I could buy a piece of real estate upon which the sun never set.

I finally found an island called Yaavi off China. The China Seas, this was, and not the tropical South Seas. But it was the best I could do. It belonged to, of all people, Denmark, and Denmark didn't care anything about it. They maintained an island consul there to keep sovereignty but most of the population consisted of Chinese who were wanted on the mainland for assorted crimes like robbing pearl-beds, fisheries, piracy, and sundry items.

The place went cheaply enough, eight hundred thousand dollars cash. We didn't buy it sight unseen, of course, but had agents look it over, and they reported a very decent climate, much flora and small fauna, natural mineral deposits in rather small quantities and plenty of fresh water. There was a perfect land-locked harbor, but the island was undeveloped because there was absolutely no necessity of its development.

The East was not what it is today.

Bill Peabody was disappointed that he didn't get a South Sea retreat, but he changed the name of Yaavi to Mandoa, at least, to keep a little Polynesian flavor, and in very little time (and after he had had his first improvements made) he and his entire family went off to stay there. I saw the plans of the house he had constructed and it was magnificent. It cost a huge sum, cheap labor notwithstanding, and was a gorgeous place. You think air-conditioning is new? Bill Peabody had that house air conditioned and that was in 1900.

The entire population of the island was delivered to the mainland. So went the criminals who had had refuge on Yaavi, now Mandoa, for so long.

Two years later, England tried to take Mandoa away.

I WAS at Mandoa in 1902 when the trouble occurred. It was the only trip I ever made to the island, so what happened then, I saw with my own eyes.

I became aware at once how utterly impregnable the place was except from one spot—the harbor. The rest of the island was precipitous and the possibility of soldiers making a landing and coming across the island from the back was out of the question. Any expeditionary force would have to come by way of the harbor and the beach.

Early in the year, Bill Peabody had scented what was coming. He was uncanny that way. He could smell trouble being brewed. The British were well into China and casting eyes around the horizon for all manner of bases and spots for cable stations and coaling stations. And there, only eight hundred miles southeast of Shanghai lay Mandoa.

So early in the year, Bill Peabody cabled me to buy him an obsolete warship.

I thought he was crazy. I cabled him so and said nothing doing.

His reply had been vehement. He wanted an obsolete warship of any kind or country and he wanted it badly. For experimentation, he said. Something to do with control by wireless.

Chile finally sold us an old torpedoboat which Germany had sold Chile ten years before. It was a crate, iron-hulled, in poor shape and it didn't look seaworthy. I paid half the balance and the other was to be paid C.O.D. Mandoa. They delivered it at the risk of their lives. I saw the ship and I know.

Bill Peabody wasn't so crazy. He'd read the signs and he knew that sooner or later, the British were going to want to acquire his island. England was riding pretty high in those days, South Africa, India, China. She was getting a toe-hold and money wherever she laid her hands. Mistress of the seas and what not. A lady to be reckoned with.

So I was there at Mandoa that September morning when a British man-of-war put into the bay. It was early, around nine o'clock and she looked gray and huge against the waters. The red jack was floating from her masthead and her guns were uncovered and ready for action. She dropped anchor in the bay about a mile away from the old torpedoboat which lay out to sea, anchored in the ground swell, and flying a homemade flag with a white background and a golden P on it. There was the Peabody navy, along with Peabody's lovely black-hulled ninety-foot yacht in the harbor.

Bill Peabody and his son and I stood up on the bluff by the house and we all had binoculars. Soon, Bill said, "Well, Albert, I reckon it's comin' now. They're puttin' a boat over. You, son, you get them Gatlin' guns uncovered and train 'em on the beach in case we can't reason with these men. It's just the effect I want. Don't fire 'em at any cost."

"Can't," said young Bill. "You never got ammunition for them."

"When I make my demonstration of the ray," Bill Peabody said, "don't forget your duties, son."

"Trust me, Pop," young Bill said. "Just trust me." And he grinned from ear to ear.

THE warship was the *Terror* and her boat put in at the beach ten minutes later. She landed three officers, and four tars stood by with rifles and fixed bayonets.

Bill Peabody stepped forward and said, "Well, gentlemen, welcome to my island. Only, to tell the truth, it doesn't look like a friendly visit."

"Permit me," said the senior officer. "I am Captain Blake, of His Majesty's Warship *Terror*. You are William Peabody?"

"Yes, sir," Bill said politely.

"Rear Admiral Jurgen has instructed me to land and claim this island for His Majesty, Edward of England. You will be permitted to remain, of course, but Mandoa will come under the British flag at once." The captain glanced up with a half-smile at the Peabody flag which floated from a flagpole near the beach. "I'm afraid we shall have to haul down your colors, Mr. Peabody."

"Look here," said Bill Peabody genially, "this island belonged to Denmark and I bought it from King Gustaf and now it belongs to me."

"I'm terribly sorry, old man," said Captain Blake, "but it now belongs to Great Britain."

Bill shook his head. "Only if I say yes. And I'm not sayin' yes. I'm sayin' no."

Captain Blake frowned. "Surely you're not asking us to employ force?"

"War, you mean? Between England and Peabody? Well, all right. But you started it. Remember that, you started it. Now don't tell those sailors to bristle their bayonets and look mean. You can't make us prisoners. You're covered by Gatlin's on the bluff. You make one move and them Gatlin's will talk."

Bill was more of a farmer than ever, right then. His hayseedy hair bristled into angry wisps; his cheeks burned red with anger. Sure, he was a farmer protecting his south fifty acres of clover from an urban trespasser.

The captain looked annoyed. "Mr. Peabody, you're acting a bit of a fool. Don't you realize we could blow your island to pieces?"

"Captain Blake," said Bill Peabody, "if that battleship of yours fires one shot at Mandoa, I promise you she'll leave her bottom in the bay and there won't be enough left of her for a souvenir."

"You're mad, sir."

"No, sir, I'm not. My name is William Peabody and I'm an inventor. I probably designed the screws that drive your ship. Perhaps you've heard of me."

"We have," said Captain Blake. "We were well aware of your identity. But the Empire needs this island as a base and I'm sure you will be admirably recompensed for its seizure—"

"Look, Captain," Bill said. "There isn't goin' to be a seizure. I want you to go back and bring your admiral ashore. I'm goin' to show him a little machine I invented." He lowered his voice so that only the captain could hear. "It throws a ray, Captain, that'll send the iron in your battle-wagon sky high."

THERE was more talk and ultimately, Rear-Admiral Jurgen came ashore, red-faced and angry. Bill Peabody talked to them in private. "Now listen, boys," he said, "I don't care if the King himself said for you to grab Mandoa, I say no and it sticks. I'm goin' to show you why. This gadget I'm goin' to show you is not for sale, understand that right now. And if I were you two, I'd keep quiet about it or you'll have foreign spies droppin' in here and tryin' to steal it. But understand me: if you don't think it's good after you see it, you go off and fire one shell at this island, and I'll sink you."

"What nonsense is this?" the Rear-Admiral began.

He didn't exactly look down the end of his nose at Bill, but as Bill phrased it to me later, his voice did something like it.

"Quiet," Bill Peabody said. "I'll show you what nonsense this is." He brought out a long box and lifted the lid. In the box was a long torpedo like object with a barrel like a cannon and a glistening trigger. He lifted it out and cradled it in his arms. It was a rifle, only a very fat and metallic rifle which did not shoot bullets. "This is a disintegrator," he said. "I'm not goin' to draw you a blueprint of its operation, but it discharges a ray in which millions of acid atoms are active. The second these atoms strike metal—iron, steel, copper, brass—hell breaks loose. These atoms break down metal and it all happens so darn fast it makes an explosion."

"Tommyrot," Rear-Admiral Jurgen said. "Stop acting like a fool, sir. We're taking over this island whether you like it or not."

"No, you're not," Bill grinned. "You see that old torpedo boat out there. I bought her for this demonstration. She cost me a pretty penny but I've been savin' her for the day your warship showed up and tried to dispossess me. I'm goin' to show you, just once, what this ray will do to a warship. And after that, if you want to take a shot, all right. But remember, you was warned and I'm a peace-lovin' man. If you get me mad, I'll use this thing to wipe every British man-of-war off the high seas."

"The man's mad," Captain Blake said.

I did a little down-the-nose looking then, myself.

"The man," I snapped, "is a genius. Just watch."

Bill Peabody moved the gun around and drew a careful bead on the old Chilean torpedoboat. "You don't have to aim so carefully either," he said. "The ray spreads on discharge like a load of buckshot. All right, boys. Here she goes. And hold your ears. The concussion'll play hell with them when that metal goes."

He pressed the trigger and there was a buzz as though a red-hot shot of electricty were loose in the disintegrator.

Simultaneously, a terrific concussion of sound burst. One moment I saw the Chilean tub and the next instant there was only a gigantic puff of black smoke shooting mile-high into the air and I was flat on my back with sound beating at me and pulling my ear-drums out of my head.

I don't know how long that roar lasted. I do know it all but blasted Mandoa out of the China Sea. I saw the others, including Bill Peabody, all prone on the sand too, knocked flat by the mushrooming blast. I saw the warship *Terror* careening in the harbor when the wash struck her. I saw flying wreckage drop everywhere. And then a dreadful silence fell upon the scene and we got slowly to our feet.

The admiral turned purple, then alabaster. Bill cleared his throat and then adopted the sheepish grin that Will Rogers later made famous all over the world.

"Well," Bill Peabody said laconically, "she sure went, didn't she. The bigger they are, the better they blow up. I'll bet the *Terror* would make a fine blast. Gentlemen, I warned you, and you've seen what it can do. And now I'll ask you to get off my island and out of my harbor. And if you're still inclined to fire on me, let me tell you one last thing. The range of this ray is indefinite as yet. I think it might be over fifty or sixty miles. It outranges your guns. So don't do anything foolish."

"Good God in heaven, man!" Rear-Admiral Jurgen whispered in cold horror. "Be careful with that thing. If some—Blake,—think what would happen if some hostile power laid hands on that—it spells the end of navies in the world—"

"Gentlemen," Peabody said, "nobody, includin' you, is ever goin' to lay hands on it. You two are the only ones who know what it is and what it does. It stays here at Mandoa for my own protection. And I'd advise you to forget about it because if you ever send spies down here to try and steal it, I'll sell it to the first nation that comes along. Now you'd better go."

And believe it or not, His Majesty's Warship *Terror* sailed out of Mandoa that morning and never returned. . . .

YOUNG Bill Peabody came back to the States after his father died. Old Bill was eighty-eight when he passed away in his sleep. Young Bill told me about it. Seems funny to call him young Bill when he's fifty-four himself.

"He went to sleep that night feeling very good," young Bill said. "You couldn't blame him for feeling good, Albert. He'd put the Japanese navy to rout a day or two before. He just never awakened and there was a smile on his face when we found him."

I was quiet for a moment.

"Well," I said, "he deserved a rest, Bill. I don't think any man ever worked as hard and turned so many miracles for civilization as he did. What happened to that death ray he was working on?"

"He perfected it," Bill said. "He was killing rabbits with it. He was frightened by the thing himself. Said it was a ghastly machine. He could have killed men with it. When he perfected it, he destroyed it. He never showed me the plans. Said he just wanted to know he could build it, and having done it, he killed it. He said the world would be better off without it around."

"Bless him," I said. "But if he had killed anything, I should think it would have been that metal disintegrator he used on the old Chilean gunboat that day for the benefit of the British Empire. I'll never forget that explosion. Did you know the workings of that one, Bill?"

Bill smiled. "Yes, I did."

"Did he use that on the Japs, too? I wondered whether it worked twice."

Young Bill sighed happily. "Albert, you'd have given a year's pay to have seen it. Two first-line battleships flying the Rising Sun. Right there in the bay where the *Terror* had ridden at anchor thirty-six years before. Yes, he used the disintegrator again. This time he used it in a modern way."

"Tell me."

"He invited the Japanese officers ashore and proceeded to explain to them how the *Terror* had tried to occupy Mandoa years before. They looked skeptical at his story. He went on to explain that he did not have a spare battleship around to show them how it worked, and that he did not want to sink one of theirs to show them, as that would be an unfriendly act. They enjoyed it as if it were a joke. Then Dad said he had the very thing. He'd been experimenting with radio-controlled airplanes, and he had one take off, directing its course solely by radio, of course. His work in that field was excellent as he had developed target planes for the British in this manner. When he had the plane riding along, he fired the disintegrator."

"And?"

"The Japanese battleships sailed for safer hunting grounds."

"The plane blew up?"

"The plane, Albert, vanished as if a fairy had waved a wand. The concussion all but flattened them. It should have."

I sighed. "I know it's uncivilized," I said, "but I shudder to think of the amount of money any country would pay for that machine." I shrugged. "But I suppose that was destroyed too?"

YOUNG Bill Peabody laughed quietly and then shook his head. "That machine, Albert, was the biggest hoax of my father's career. It was made up from parts of an old blower. Dad had been experimenting with the idea of a vacuum cleaner, but it didn't work for him. So he made the disintegrator gun out of the vacuum cleaner parts. It fired no ray at all. He fixed it to sound electrical and the rest was pure bluff."

"Bluff?" I said in astonishment. "I was there when the Chilean boat blew up. It knocked me flat. It went to atoms!"

"It should have," he said. "It was loaded with dynamite from stem to stern. Tons of dynamite. Dad ran a cable contact to the explosives out from the bottom of the ship to the shore, all under water and earth, to a control board up in the house. When he fired his 'disintegrator' I set off the charge and blew the ship up."

"But the plane—"

"With the plane, it was different. We had to put on just as good a show, which meant a terrific explosion despite the small size of the aircraft. So we loaded the plane with polnol, the most violent explosive known."

"And you set it off?"

"By remote control. If you can control a ship by radio, you can set off sensitive polnol by radio." Young Bill sighed. "It went a long way, Albert. Dad got the thrill of his life when he bluffed them both down. Even democracies, you see, can bluff their way sometimes; the element isn't confined to totalitarian dictators." He chuckled.

"Bill," I said, "tell me the truth. There never was a disintegrator really?"

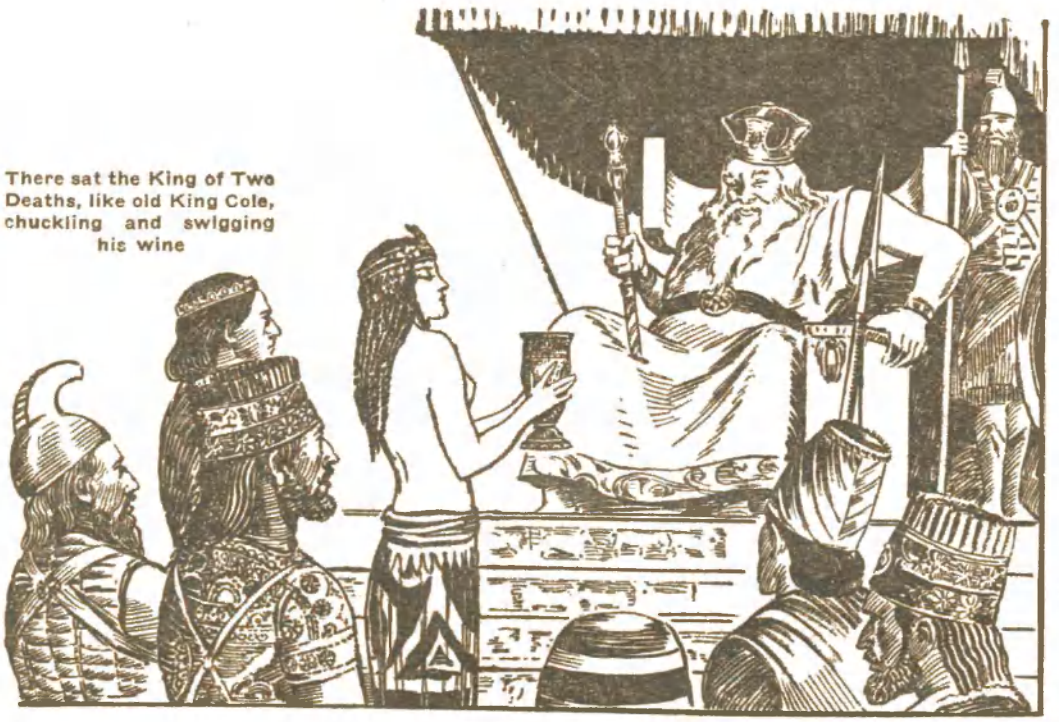
His eyes twinkled. "Dad would have destroyed it, had he perfected such a terrible thing."

"Then where is it now?"

"Somewhere," he murmured, "at the bottom of the Pacific. I dropped it overboard on my way East."

And even then I didn't know what to believe. One was logical and the other fantastic. But if the machine were a hoax, it seemed to me that young Bill had taken great pains to rid the earth of it forever. I told him this.

But young Bill looked noncommittal and just smiled at me and there was something of his father in his face when he curled up his lips. . . .



There sat the King of Two Deaths, like old King Cole, chuckling and swigging his wine

The Ship of Ishtar

By A. MERRITT

THERE before John Kenton stands the model of a ship, carved from crystal, hidden for centuries in a Babylonian block of stone. And while he studies this ship-symbol, he hears the whisper of a magic sea, the roar of distant winds; sleep is upon him —and when he awakes he is voyaging on the Ship of Ishtar.

For thousands of years the Ship has carried on its decks an endless conflict—the battle between Ishtar, Mother of the Heavens and Nergal, Lord of Death. The beautiful woman called Sharane is the handmaiden of Ishtar, dwelling on the white deck with her warrior girls; and on the black deck lives Klaneth, minion of Nergal, surrounded by his dark-robed priests. But none can cross the boundary between black and white.

PERIODICALLY some mysterious force carries Kenton back to his own world; but each time, he returns to the Ship, passionately in love with Sharane. She, believing him an emissary of the evil Nergal, casts him to the priests of Klaneth, and Kenton is made a galley-slave. At the oar he gains new strength, determines to master the Ship —and learns that he will have allies.

Gigi, the satyr-like giant, Zubran, the Persian, and Sigurd, Kenton's oar-mate, swear to aid him. At last, freed of his chains, Kenton leads them into battle with the black priest—and to victory. Only Klaneth himself manages to escape. And then Kenton in his new power takes Sharane, and she confesses that she has always loved him.

BUT Klaneth strikes again, all too swiftly. A great bireme sweeps down upon the Ship of Ishtar; in the fierce battle Sharane is captured by Klaneth, and Kenton, wounded and helpless, is suddenly transferred back into his own world. But he is able, at length, to return to the Ship and to his companions; they learn from a vessel they capture that Sharane is a prisoner in the city of Ematkhtila. So toward that city the course is cast. . . .

This story began in the Argosy for October 29

CHAPTER XX

THE ISLE OF SORCERERS

LUCK clung to them. The silver mists hung close about the ship, shrouding her so that she sailed ever within a circle not more than double her length. Ever the mists hid her. Kenton, sleeping little, drove the slaves at the oars to point of exhaustion.

"There is a great storm brewing," warned Sigurd.

"Pray Odin that it may hold back till we are well within Emakhtila," answered Kenton.

"If we but had a horse I would sacrifice it to the All-Father," mourned Sigurd. "Then he would hold that storm till our needs called it."

"Speak low, lest the sea horses trample us!" warned Kenton, half laughing, half serious.

He had questioned the Viking about that interruption of his when the captain of the captured galley had said that Sharane was Priestess of Bel's House. The Viking had been subtly evasive.

"She will be safe there, even from Klaneth—so long as she takes no other lover than the god," Sigurd had said.

"No other lover than the god!" Kenton had roared, hand dropping to sword and glaring at Sigurd. "She will have no lover but me—god or man, Sigurd! What do you mean?"

His face flushed with rage, he had stood quivering before the Norseman; in that instant friendship forgotten.

"Take hand from sword, blood-brother," Sigurd had replied. "I meant not to offend you. Only"—he hesitated—"gods are gods! And there was something in that galley captain's talk about your woman walking in dream, memory withdrawn from her—was there not? If that be so, blood-brother, you were in those memories she has lost!"

Kenton winced. He had not forgotten. Insistently the same thought had gnawed at him since their journey's beginning; was, perhaps, prime reason for his desperate haste. Another thought, that also since then had comforted him, prompted his tongue.

"Nergal once tried to part a man and a woman who loved," he said, "even as Sharane and I. He could not. I do not think Nergal's priest can succeed where his infernal master failed."

"Not well reasoned, comrade." It was Zubran who had come quietly upon them. "The gods are strong. Therefore they have no reason for subtlety or cunning. They smite—and all is done. It is not artistic, I admit; but it is unanswerable. But man, who has not the strength of the gods, must resort to cunning and subtlety. That is why man will do worse things than the gods. Out of his weakness he is forced to it. The gods should not be blamed, except for making man weak. Therefore Klaneth is more to be feared by you than Nergal, his master."

"He cannot drive me out of Sharane's heart!" Kenton cried. "He cannot!"

The Viking bent his head down to the compass.

"You may be right," he muttered. "Zubran may be right. All I know is that while your woman is faithful to the god Bel, no man may harm her!"

VAGUE as he might be on that one point, the Viking was direct and full of meat upon others of vital importance to them all. The Norseman had been observant while slave to the priests of Nergal. He knew the city thoroughly and the Temple of the Seven Zones intimately. Best of all he knew a way of entering Emakhtila by another road than that of its harbor.

This was indeed all important, since it was not within the bounds of possibility that they could enter that harbor without instant recognition. In fact it had never been thought of. Their loose plan had been to find some lonely secret place, hide the ship and go overland to the city.

And it turned out that Sigurd knew exactly such a place. It was not far from Emakhtila itself as the crow flies, yet a long sail for galleys out of the harbor.

"Look, comrades," Sigurd scratched with point of sword a rude map on the planks of the deck. "Here lies the city. It is at the end of a fjord. The mountains rise on each side of it and stretch in two long spits far out to sea. But here"—he pointed to a spot in the coastline close to the crotch where a left-hand mountain barrier shot out from the coast— "is a bay with narrow entrance from sea. It is used by the priests of Nergal for a certain secret sacrifice. Between it and the city a hidden way runs through the hills. That path brings you out close to the great temple.

"I have traveled the hidden way and have stood on the shores of the bay. I went there with other slaves, bearing priests in litters and things of the sacrifice. While it would take two good sleeps for a ship to make that journey from Emakhtila, it is by that way only half so far as a strong man could walk in my own land between the dawn and moon of a winter day. Also there are many places there where the ship can be hidden. Few galleys pass by and none lives near—which was why the priests of Nergal picked it.

"Also I know well the Temple of the Seven Zones, since long it was my home," went on Sigurd. "Its height is twenty times the ship's mast."

Kenton swiftly estimated. That would make the temple four hundred feet—a respectable height indeed.

"Its core," said the Viking, "is made up of the sanctuaries of the gods and the goddess Ishtar, one upon each other. Around this core are the quarters of the priests and priestesses and lesser shrines. These secret sanctuaries are seven, the last being the House of Bel. At the base of the temple is a vast court with altars and other shrines where the people come to worship. Its entrances are strongly guarded. Even we four could not enter there!

"But around the temple, which is shaped thus"—he scratched the outline of a truncated cone— "a stairway runs thus"—he drew a spiral from base to top of cone. "At intervals, along that stairway, are sentinels. There is a garrison where it begins. Is this all clear?"

"It is clear," said Gigi, "that we would need an army to take it!"

"NOT so," the Viking said, unruffled. "Remember how we took the galley, although they outnumbered us? This is my plan. We will take the ship into that secret harbor. If priests are there we must do what we can—slay or flee. But if the Norns decree that no priests be there, we will hide the ship and leave the slaves in care of the black-skin. Then the four of us, dressed as seamen in the clothes and the long cloaks we took from the galley, will take the hidden way and go into the city.

"When we are there we will separate, having first selected some meeting place. Separately we will study that stairway up the Seven Zones Temple, meet and make a plan to get past that garrison that is at its foot.

"For as to that stairway, I have another plan. It is high-walled, up to a man's chest. If we can pass without arousing the guards at its base, we can creep up under shadow of that wall, slaying the sentinels as we go, until we reach the House of Bel.

"But not in fair weather could we do this," he ended. "There must be darkness or storm that they see us not from the streets. And that is why I pray to Odin, blood-brother, even as you, that this brewing tempest may not boil until we have reached the city and looked upon that stairway. For in that storm that is surely coming we could do as I have planned and swiftly. Let Odin All-Father hold it off to our need!"

"But in this plan I see no chance of slaying Klaneth," growled Zubran. "We creep in, we creep up, we creep out again with Sharane—if we can. And that is all. By Ormuzd, my knees are too tender for creeping! Also my scimitar thirsts to drink of the black priest's blood."

"No safety while Klaneth lives!" croaked Gigi, playing upon his old tune.

"I have no thought of Klaneth now," rumbled the Viking. "First comes Kenton's

woman. Sigurd swore to be his shield. My sword as his sword. His fortune Sigurd's fortune. His bane Sigurd's bane, and his desire mine to help him gain it. Brothers by the blood runes. He gets his woman. After that—we take up the black priest."

Tears were in Kenton's eyes as he gripped the Norseman's hands. And Gigi grinned and slapped Sigurd's back.

"I am shamed," said Zubran. "You are right, of course, Sigurd. I should have remembered. Yet, in truth, I would feel easier if we could kill Klaneth on our way to her. For I agree with Gigi: while he lives, no safety for your blood-brother or any of us. However—the Lady Sharane first, of course."

The Viking had been peering down into the compass. He looked again, intently, and drew back, pointing to it.

Both the blue serpents in the scarlet bath were parallel, their heads turned to one point.

"We head straight to Emakhtila," said Sigurd. "But are we within the jaws of that fjord or out of them? Wherever we are we must be close!"

HE swung the rudder of oars to port. The ship veered. The larger needle slipped a quarter of the space to the right between the red symbols on the bowl edge.

"That proves nothing," grunted the Viking, "except that we are no longer driving straight to the city. But we may be close upon the mounts. Check the oarsmen, bid the overseer drive slowly."

Slower went the ship, and slower, feeling her way through the mists. And suddenly they darkened before them. Something grew out of them slowly; it lay revealed as a low shore, rising sharply and melting into deeper shadows behind. The turquoise waves ran gently to it, caressing its rocks. Sigurd swore a great oath of thankfulness.

"We are on the other side of the mounts," he said. "Now somewhere close is that secret of which I told you. Bid the overseer drive the ship along as we are."

He swung the rudder sharply to starboard. The ship turned; slowly followed the shore. Soon in front of them loomed a high ridge of rock. This they skirted, circled its end and still sculling silently came at last to another narrow straight into which the Viking steered.

"A place for hiding," he said. "Send the ship into that cluster of trees ahead. Nay—there is water there, the trees rise out of it. Once within them the ship can be seen neither from shore nor sea."

They drifted into the grove. Long, densely-leaved branches covered them. The bow muzzled the shore.

"Now lash her to the tree trunks," whispered Sigurd. "Go softly. Priests may be about. We will look for them later, when we are on our way. We leave the ship in charge of the women. The blackskin stays behind. Let them all lie close till we return. Let the slaves sleep. And if we do not return—"

"There would be better chance for you to return if you cut off that long hair of yours and your beard, Sigurd," said the Persian, and added. "Better chance for us, also."

"Wait!" cried the Viking, outraged. "Cut my hair! Why, even when I was slave they left that untouched!"

"Wise counsel!" said Kenton. "And Zubran—that flaming beard of yours and your red hair. Better for you and us, too, if you left them behind, or changed their color."

"By Ormuzd, no!" exclaimed the Persian, as outraged as Sigurd. The Viking laughed.

"The fowler sets the net and is caught with the bird! Nevertheless, it *was* good counsel. Better hair off face and head than head off shoulders!"

"And better change color of beard and hair, I suppose, than change this world for another I know nothing of," agreed the Persian grudgingly.

THE maids brought shears. Laughing, they snipped his locks to nape of neck, trimmed the long beard into short

spade-shape. Amazing was the transformation of Sigurd Trygg's son brought about by that shearing. The maids looked on him, admiration in their eyes.

"There is one that Klaneth will not know if he sees him," grunted Gigi. "But you must pay your price, Sigurd. See how the maids look at you! And they are all of them dark girls! Beware, Sigurd—or hide from them until your hair grows long again."

Now the Persian put himself in the women's hands. They dabbled at beard and head with cloth dipped in a bowl of some liquid. The red faded, then darkened into brown. Not so great was the difference between him and the old Zubran as there was between the new and old Sigurd. But Kenton and Gigi nodded approvingly; at least the red that made him as conspicuous as the Norseman's long hair was gone.

Kenton and Gigi remained. Little could be done for either of them. There was no changing Gigi's frog slit of a mouth, the twinkling beady eyes, the bald pate, the immense shoulders.

"Take out your earrings, Gigi," bade Kenton.

"Take off that bracelet on your arm." replied Gigi.

"Sharane's gift! Never!" exclaimed Kenton, as outraged as had been at first the Norseman and the Persian.

"My earrings were put there by one who loved me as much as she does you." For the first time since Kenton had known Gigi there was anger in his voice.

The Persian laughed softly. It broke the tension. Kenton grinned at the drummer, somewhat guiltily. Gigi grinned back.

"Well," he said. "It seems that we must all make our sacrifices—Sigurd of his hair, Zubran his red and you and I—" He began to unscrew the earrings.

"No, Gigi!" Kenton stayed his hands; he could not bring himself to break that golden band upon which Sharane had graven the symbols of her love. "Leave them be. Rings and bracelet—both can be hidden."

"I do not know." Gigi paused doubtfully. "It seems to me to be better. That idea of sacrifice—it grows stronger."

"There is little sense in what you say," said Kenton stubbornly.

"No?" mused Gigi. "Yet many men must have seen that bracelet of yours that time you fought the black priest's men and lost Sharane. Klaneth must have seen it. Something whispers to me that token is more perilous than mine."

"WELL nothing whispers to me," said Kenton abruptly. He led the way into what had been Klaneth's cabin and began stripping to clothe himself in the sailors' gear they had taken from the captured galley. He slipped on a loose shirt of finely tanned, thin leather whose loose sleeves fastened around his wrists.

"You see," he said to Gigi, "the bracelet is hidden."

Next came loose hose of the same material drawn tight by a girdle around the waist. He drew on high, laced buskins. Over the shirt he fastened a sleeveless tunic of mail. On his head he placed a conical metal-covered cap from whose padded sides dropped shoulder-deep folds of heavy-oiled silk.

The others dressed with him in similar garments. Only the Persian would not leave off his own linked mail. He knew its strength, he said, and the others were new to him. But over it he drew one of the shirts and over that a tunic from the galley. And Gigi, after he had set the cap upon his head, drew close the folds of silk so that they hid his ears and their jet pendants. Also he fastened around his neck another long fold of silk, binding the others fast and hiding his mouth.

And when they had covered themselves with the long cloaks they scanned each other with lightened hearts. The Viking and the Persian were true changelings. Little fear of recognition there. Changed enough by his new garb, it seemed to them, was Kenton. The cloak hid Gigi's stumpy legs and the cloths around his face altered it curiously.

"It is very good!" murmured the Viking.

"It is very good!" echoed Kenton.

They belted themselves and thrust into the belts both their own swords and short ones of Sigurd's forging. Only Gigi would take neither that nine-foot blade the Norseman had made for him nor the great mace. These were too well known and too cumbersome for their journey. He took two swords of average length. Last he picked up a long, thin piece of rope, swiftly spliced to it a small grappling hook. He coiled the rope around his waist, hanging the grapple to his belt.

"Lead, Sigurd," said Kenton.

One by one they dropped over the ship's bow, waded through shallow water and stood upon the shore while Sigurd cast about for his bearings. The mists had grown thicker. The golden leaves, the pannicles of crimson and yellow blooms were etched against them as though upon some ancient Chinese screen. In the mists Sigurd moved, shadowy. The trees were motionless. The whole air was motionless.

"Come," the Viking joined them. "I have found the way."

Silently they followed him through the mists, under the silver shadows of the trees.

CHAPTER XXI

PAGEANT OF THE PAST

THAT was a hidden way, in truth. How Sigurd followed it in the glimmering fog, Kenton could not tell. But the Viking walked along, unhesitant. Close behind him waddled Gigi and from time to time he saw Sigurd point here and there as though he were explaining the way. Soon he was sure of this, for frequently the Ninevite would pause as though to have instructions repeated. What they whispered he could not hear. Six feet behind them strode the Persian, with Kenton the same distance behind him.

Between high rocks covered with the golden ferns the narrow road ran, and through thickets where the still air was languorous with the scent of myriads of strange blossoms; through dense clumps of slender trunks which were like bamboo stems all lacquered scarlet, and through groves where trees grew primly in parklike precision. Their steps made no sound on the soft moss. They had long lost the murmur of the sea.

At the skirt of one of these ordered groves the Viking paused.

"This is the place of Nergal's sacrifice," he whispered. "I go to see if any of Nergal's black dogs are about. Wait for me here."

He melted into the mists. They waited, silent. For each felt that something evil, some hideous malignity lay sleeping within those trees and if they spoke or moved it would awaken, reach out, draw them to it. That wood was saturated with evil. And out of it, as though the sleeping evil breathed, pulsed the sickly sweet and charnel odor that had hung in Klaneth's cabin.

Silently as he had gone, Sigurd returned.

"No black robes there," he said softly. "Yet something of their dark god dwells in that grove always. Eager am I to pass this place. Go softly and quickly. Speak not again to me, Gigi, until I bid you."

Softly, quickly they went, skirting that place of evil with cold sweat on Kenton's brow and hands. At last Sigurd paused, exhaled a vast sigh of relief.

"I like not that grove," he said. "And you would like it even less than you did if you knew what Nergal's priests do therein. Even you, Zubran, would lose some of that weariness of which so often you complain."

"Good!" replied the Persian blandly. "Viking. I thank you. Now when I am Lord of Emakhtila I will save some of Nergal's priests that they may come there and perform before us."

"Thor shield us!" the Viking made the sign of the Hammer. "Talk not like that, Zubran—not here. Quick!"

HE led them with increased speed. Soon Gigi and he were whispering as before. And now the way began to climb

steeply. On they went and higher and higher. They passed through a long and deep ravine in which the glimmering, misty light was hardly strong enough for them to pick their way over the bowlders that strewed it.

They passed out of it between two huge monoliths and halted. For abruptly the silence that had enveloped them was broken. Before them was nothing but the wall of the mists, but from them and far, far below came a murmuring, a humming as of a great city, came, too, the creaking of masts, the rattle of gear, the splashing of oars and now and then a shouting, darting up like a kite from the vague clamor.

"The harbor," whispered Sigurd, and pointed downward to the right. "We are high above it. Emakhtila lies beneath us—close. And there, blood-brother"—he pointed again downward and a little to the left—"there is the Temple of the Seven Zones."

Kenton followed the pointing finger. A mighty mass loomed darkly in the silvery haze, its nebulous outlines cone-shaped, its top flattened. His heart quickened.

"On, Sigurd," he bade, trembling.

Down they went, and ever down. Again the way was hidden, by trees and rocks, but as they went through what must have been open spaces, the murmuring of the city came to them ever louder and louder.

Abruptly they came to a high stone wall. Here Sigurd swiftly turned and led them into a grove of trees, thick, heavily shadowed. Through the trees they slipped, following the Viking who now went on with even greater caution than he had shown at the place of sacrifice.

At last he peered out from behind an enormous trunk, beckoned them. They clustered about him. Beyond the trees was a deep-rutted, broad roadway.

"A road into the city," he said. "A free road on which we can walk without fear."

They clambered down a high bank and took that road, walking now side by side. Soon the trees gave way to fields, cultivated as far as the mists would let them see; fields filled with high plants whose leaves were shaped like those of the corn, but saffron yellow instead of green and instead of ears long pannicles of gleaming white grains; rows of bushes on whose branches shone berries green as emeralds; strange fruits; tree-stemmed vines from which fell curious star-shaped gourds.

They saw houses, two-stories invariably; blocklike with smaller cubes for wings, like those a child makes with its nursery blocks. They were painted startlingly; facades striped with alternate vertical bands of blue and yellow, facades of dull blue through which darted scarlet zigzags like the conventionalized lightning bolt. Broad horizontal bands of crimson barred with stripes of green.

The road narrowed, became a thoroughfare paved with blocks that felt beneath the feet like volcanic rock—*tufa*. The painted houses became thicker. Men and women passed them, brown-faced and black, clad alike in one sleeveless white garment cut short just below the knees. On the right wrist of each of these was a bronze ring from which fell a half dozen links of chain. They carried burdens—jugs, baskets of the odd fruits and gourds, loaves of bread colored ruddy brown, flat cakes a foot across.

"Slaves," said Sigurd.

NOW the painted houses stood solidly, side by side. These were galleried and on the galleries were flowering trees and plants like those upon the rosy cabin of the ship. From some of them women leaned and called out to them as they went by.

They passed out of this street into a roaring thoroughfare thronged with people. And here Kenton halted in sheer amazement.

At the far end of the thoroughfare loomed the huge bulk of the temple. Its sides were lined with shops. At their doors stood men crying out their wares. Banners fell from them on which in woven silk ran the cuneiform letters that told their goods.

Past him walked Assyrians, men of Nineveh and of Babylon with curled heads and ringleted beards; hook nosed, fierce eyed Phoenicians; sloe-eyed, muslin-skirted Egyptians; Ethiopians with great golden circlets in their ears; almond-lidded, smiling yellow men. Soldiers in cuirasses of linked mail, archers with quivers on back and bows in hand strode by him, priests in robes of black and crimson and blue. Stood in front of him for an instant a ruddy-skinned, smooth-muscled warrior who carried upon one shoulder the double-bladed ax of ancient Crete. Over his other shoulder lay the white arm of a sandaled woman in oddly modern pleated skirt, snake-girdled and with high, white breast peeping from her opened blouse. A Minoan and his mate he knew the pair to be, two who had perhaps watched the youths and maids who were Athen's tribute to the Minotaur go through the door of the labyrinth to the lair where the monstrous man-bull awaited them.

And there went a cuirassed Roman, gripping a wicked short sword of bronze that had probably helped cut out the paths the first Caesar trod. Behind him a giant Gaul with twisted locks and eyes as coldly blue as Sigurd's own.

Up and down along the center of the thoroughfare rode men and women in litters borne on the shoulders of slaves. His eyes followed a Grecian girl, long-limbed and lithe, with hair as yellow as the ripened wheat. They followed, too, a hot-eyed Carthaginian girl lovely enough to be a bride of Baal who leaned over the side of her litter and smiled at Kenton.

"I am hungry and I thirst," grunted Sigurd. "Why do we stand here? Let us be going."

And suddenly Kenton realized that this pageant of past ages could be no strange thing to them who were also of that past. He nodded assent. They swung into the crowd and stopped at last before a place wherein men sat eating and drinking.

"Better for us to enter two by two," said Gigi. "Klaneth seeks four men and we are four strangers. Wolf, go you in first with Sigurd. Zubran and I will follow, but speak not to us when we enter."

THE shopkeeper set food before them and high beakers of wine. He was garrulous; he asked them when they had made harbor; if their voyage had been a good one.

"It is a good time not to be at sea," he said. "Storm comes—and a great one I pray to Nabu, Dispenser of Waters, that he hold it until Bel's worship is ended. I close my shop later to see that new priestess of Bel's they talk so much about."

Kenton's face had been bent over, his cap veils hiding it. But at this he raised it and stared full into the man's face.

And the shopkeeper, blanched, faltered, stared back at him with wide eyes.

Had he been recognized? His hand sought stealthily his sword.

"Pardon!" gasped the shopkeeper, "I know you not—" Then abruptly he peered closer, straightened and laughed. "By Bel! I thought you were another. Gods! How you look like him!"

He hurried away. Kenton looked after him, puzzled. Was his departure a ruse? Had he really recognized him as the man Klaneth sought? It could not be. His fright had been too real; his relief too sincere. Who was it then that Kenton looked like to bring forth this fright and relief? They finished their food quickly, paid from the gold they had taken from the galley; passed out into the street.

Almost at once Gigi and the Persian joined them.

"To the temple," ordered Kenton. Two by two they sauntered down the street, not hurrying, like men just in from a long voyage. But as they went Kenton, with an ever growing puzzlement and apprehension, saw now one and now another glance at him, pause as though in wonder and then, averting eyes, go swiftly by. The others saw it, too.

"Draw the cap cloths about your face," said Gigi, uneasily. "I like not the way they stare. And yet if they thought they knew you, would they not set the soldiers

on you? But they do not; they go by as though afraid."

Briefly he told him and Zubran of the shopkeeper and what he had said.

"That is bad." Gigi shook his head. "It draws attention to us. Now who can it be you so resemble that those who look at you grow frightened? Well, hide your face as best you can."

And this Kenton did, keeping his head bent as he walked. Nevertheless folks still turned to stare at him.

The street entered a broad park. People were strolling over its sward, sitting on benches of stone, gigantic roots of trees whose trunks were thick as the sequoioa and whose branches were lost in the slowly thickening mists. And when they had gone a little way Sigurd turned off the highway into this park.

"Blood-brother," he said. "Gigi is right. They stare at you too much. Now it comes to me that better for you and for us will it be if you go no further. I know no better hiding place for you than this. Therefore sit you here upon this bench. Bow your head as though asleep or drunken. There are few here and they will be fewer as the temple court fills. The mists hide you from those who pass along the street. Here you should be safe. The three of us will go on to the temple and study that stairway. Then we will return to you and we will all take counsel."

He knew the Viking was right. Steadily at the turned heads and whispering his unease had grown. And yet it was hard to remain here, not to see for himself that place where Sharane lay captive.

"Courage, brother," said Sigurd gently as they left him. "Odin has held off the storm for us. Odin will help us get your woman."

CHAPTER XXII

TEMPLE OF THE SEVEN ZONES

NOW for a long time, it seemed to him, he sat upon that bench with face covered by hands. Stronger and stronger grew that desire to see for himself Sharane's prison, study its weaknesses. And at last the desire mastered him. He arose from the bench, made his way back to the thronged street. But when it was a few steps away, he turned and went along through the park.

And in a short while he came to the end of the park and stood, half hidden, looking out.

Directly before him, not fifty yards away, arose the immense bulk of the Temple of the Seven Zones.

It blocked his vision like a colossal barrier. How great its base must be he could not tell; he estimated that it must cover ten or more acres. It was conical, smooth built of some material whose character he could not even guess. The great stairway coiled round it like a serpent. And now he saw why it was called the Temple of the Seven Zones. For a hundred feet up from its base it shone like burnished silver. There a circular terrace bit into the cone. Above that terrace for another hundred feet the cone was covered with some metal of red gold color, rich orange. Came another terrace and above that a facade of jet black, dull and dead. Again the terrace. Above them the mists hid the walls, but he thought that through them he could see a glint of flaming scarlet and over it a blue shadow.

His eyes followed the girdling stairway. He stepped forward that he might see a little better. Broad steps led up from its base to a wide platform on which stood many men in armor. That, he thought, was the garrison which they must either trick or overcome before they could climb these steps. His heart sank as he counted the soldiers that guarded it.

He looked beyond them and stood, thoughts racing. The rise of the stairway from the platform, of the guards was gradual. About a thousand feet away the park came close to the side of the temple. There was a clump of high trees whose branches almost touched the stairway at that point. Gigi's rope and grapple! Ah, wise was the Ninevite anticipating some such chance, he thought. Kenton was the

lightest of the four; he could climb those trees, drop to the stairway, or if that were not possible, cast the grapple over the wall of it, swing in and climb up the rope and over.

Then he could drop that rope for the three to swarm it. It could be done! Exultation swept him. Some sixth sense woke him from it; whispered warning. He started, saw that the space between him and the temple was empty of people; saw an officer of the garrison standing at the base of the steps, watching him.

Swiftly Kenton turned; swiftly skirted the street until he was back to where he had first gone from his bench; found that bench and seated himself on it as he had been before, bent over, face in hands.

HE COULD not see that same officer beckon another, speak quickly to him, then run across the deserted stretch, and enter the wooded park close behind him. Nor did he see that officer stealing along a hundred paces in the rear, keeping him in sight until he had reached the bench.

But as he sat there, he felt some one drop down beside him.

"What is the matter, sailor?" came a voice, roughly kind. "If you are sick, why not go home?"

Kenton spoke huskily, keeping his face covered.

"Too much of Emakhtila wine," he answered. "Leave me be. It will pass."

"Ho!" laughed the other, and gripped his arm about the elbow. "Look up. Better seek home before the tempest breaks."

"No, no," said Kenton, thickly. "Never mind the tempest. Water will help me."

The hand dropped from his arm. For a space, whoever it was beside him, was silent. Then he arose.

"Right, sailor," he said heartily. "Stay here. Stretch out on the bench and sleep a little. The gods be with you!"

"And with you," muttered Kenton. He heard the footsteps retreating. Cautiously he turned his head, looked in their direction. There were several figures walking there among the trees. One was an old man in a long blue cloak; another an officer dressed like those he had seen on the great stairway; a sailor; a hurrying citizen. Which of them had sat beside him?

He wondered idly for a moment, then his mind filled again with plannings to reach Sharane. Abruptly another thought came: the man who had sat beside him had gripped his arm, gripped it where Sharane's bracelet bound. And that officer —the soldier from the garrison! Was it he? Had he followed him?

He sat bolt upright, clapped his right hand on the sleeve of the leather shirt under which was the bracelet. His hand touched the bracelet. The sleeve had been slit by a knife to reveal it. It *had* been the officer! Gigi had said that a sacrifice was demanded of all four. He had not made that sacrifice—and the bracelet had betrayed him.

He leaped to his feet to run. Before he could take a step there was a rustling behind him, a trampling. A heavy cloth was thrown over his head like a bag. Hands clutched his throat. Other hands wound strand after strand of rope around his arms, pinioning them to his sides.

"Take that cloth off his face, but keep your hands around his throat," said a cold dead voice.

His head was freed. He looked straight into the dead eyes of Klaneth.

THEN from the double ring of soldiers around him came a gasp of amazement, a movement of terror. The officer stepped forward, stared at him incredulously.

"Mother of the gods!" he groaned, and knelt at Kenton's feet. "Lord, I did not know—" He leaped up, set knife to his bonds.

"Stop!" Klaneth spoke. "It is the man! Look again!"

Trembling, the officer studied Kenton's face, lifted the cap veils; swore.

"Gods!" he exclaimed, "but I thought it was—"

"And it is not," interposed Klaneth,

smoothly. His eyes gloated over Kenton. He reached down into his belt, drew from it the sword of Nabu.

"Hold!" The officer quietly took it from him. "This man is my prisoner until I deliver him to the Sultan. And till then I keep his sword."

The phosphorescence in the pupils of the black priest glowed.

"He goes straight to Nergal's House," he rumbled. "Best beware, captain, how you cross Klaneth."

"Cross or no cross," replied the officer, "I am the Sultan's man. His orders I obey. And you know as well as I do that he has commanded all prisoners to be brought before him first, no matter what even high priests may say. Besides," he added slyly, "there is that matter of the reward. Best to get this capture a matter of record. The Sultan is a just man."

The black priest stood silent, fingering his cruel mouth. The officer laughed.

"March!" he snapped. "To the temple. If this man escapes—all your lives for his!"

In a triple ring of the soldiers walked Kenton. On one side of him strode the officer; on the other the black priest, evil gaze never leaving him.

Thus they passed through the wooded park, out into the street and at last through a high archway, and were swallowed up within a gateway of the temple.

CHAPTER XXIII

LEAD ME, ISHTAR

DARK it was within the Temple of the Seven Zones; darker still was the corridor into which they wheeled after they had left the gateway behind them; and as they marched on darker and ever darker it became. Now Kenton could no longer see the pair who flanked him nor the triple ring of armored men that girded them. He wondered how they could find their way through this lightless place. And the sound of the triple ring's marching feet—why had that grown so faint?

There was no longer sound of marching feet, no longer sound of any kind! Nothing but soft, blind, darkness—

Wait! Far, far away, piercing the dark silence, he heard the shrieking of winds—mighty winds roaring out of the farthest corners of space. Closer they came. They clamored and circled about him.

And now he too was circling, swinging in wide arcs through the blackness—falling.

Panic realization shook him. He strained at his bonds, trying to break them, to stretch out hands, clutch something, some one, to stay his headlong flight—flight from Sharane's world into his own.

"Not back!" he wailed. "Not that! Gigi! Sigurd! Help me! Ishtar! Nabu! Hold me!"

The mouths of the winds closed; the sickening flight came abruptly to end. Had they heard and answered?

Gasping, he slowly opened eyes. Opened them—and felt cold fingers of despair close round his heart.

Again he was within his own room!

A CLOCK began to strike. One—two—his numbed mind counted the strokes. Eleven o'clock. Then only an hour had gone by since he had last stood here, his life blood running out of his wounds. Why, that blood was not yet dry upon the rugs! And here he stood, the sword bites from which that blood had run long healed; old scars.

A glance only he gave himself in the long mirror; one glance at the haggard white face, the despairing eyes that were his own; the thongs that lashed his arms to sides. He looked down on the jeweled ship. The oars were in; the peacock sail was furled. He saw the slaves in the galley pit—toys crouching, flung lengthwise, on the benches, asleep. The overseer, a toy of jet, leaned forward, chin cupped in hands. At the door of Sharane's cabin a girl looked forth, head raised, her eyes scanning an unseen sky.

A ship of toys—and still the only key to a world that held for him all realities.

He knelt, sobbing.

"Ishtar! Great Mother! Take me back! Nabu! Lord of Wisdom! Show me the way! Lead me—"

He stopped, the cold fingers around his heart clutching tighter. What if he did get back upon the ship? How could that help him? Never, he knew, could he retrace that hidden path along which the Viking had led them. And if by any miracle he might, still it would not help. Long before he could reach the city, long before he could search out the others, the dice would have been cast.

And if he did not leave the ship and they returned to find him lurking there—what would they think of him? That he had abandoned him, had fled like a craven, had left them to bear the burden of rescue of the woman he loved.

But they would not return. They would not leave the city, would not return to the ship without him. Not Gigi, not Sigurd nor Zubran, not Sharane. There they would stay, searching for him. And they could not search long before they were taken—marked men and women as they were.

That thought was even harder to bear.

Yet, if he did not get back to that unknown world, all was lost to him. Sharane—lost to him forever!

He groaned, in agony of despair, of shame and longing.

A wild hope swept him. Whatever power it was that sent him swinging like a pendulum between these two worlds—could not that power set him otherwhere than on the Ship of Ishtar? Aye! But what of that mysterious factor of time—the time that rushed so much more swiftly there than here? Could not the Powers that ruled there hold back that world's time at their will; turn it back?

Upon the mercy of those powers he would throw himself.

Kenton leaned forward until his forehead touched the side of the shining ship.

"Ishtar! Goddess! Mother!" he prayed. "Nabu! Holy ones! I ask no freedom. I ask no strength from you. I ask but one thing—to set me back! Not to the ship but from whence I came. Give me again to Klaneth. Set me among his men even as I was. And if that means torment, if that means death—I am content! Set me there as I was, bound and helpless, and whatever may happen, whatever torment may fall to me, still will I worship and give praise to you. Ishtar—Nabu—praise to you until my last breath! Grant me this Nabu! Ishtar!"

UNDER Kenton's feet the floor rocked. Darkness fell within the room, shutting out all sight both of room and ship; a darkness such as that through which he had fallen, out of the Temple of the Seven Zones. Within that same blind, silent darkness he felt himself whirled round and round, like stone on string's end. The whirling ceased; he shot out through the blackness like the stone released; shot out; was encompassed by roaring, mighty winds.

The blackness grayed. He hovered between two worlds. Beneath him he saw the Ship of Ishtar.

"No!" groaned Kenton. "Not the ship! Mother Ishtar! Lord of Wisdom! Not the ship! Sharane! My soul for hers! Set me within the temple! Ishtar!"

Inexorably, misty outlines of hull and mast contracted into solidity. Now he was poised close above the mast, was falling gently down it, hovering over the deck—

Something like a vast, white, radiant wing flashed out of the cabin of Sharane. It caught him, cradled him, enfolded him. The ship vanished from his sight.

He had sense of flight swift as lightning stroke; felt jarring fall.

"Up slave!" he heard Klaneth snarl; the black priest's toe was in his ribs.

"Gently, priest," came the voice of the officer who had trapped him.

As one awakening from a dream Kenton stared about him. He was in a broad, well lighted passageway; the triple ring of soldiers circling him, waiting for command to go on. All was as it had been before the blind darkness had whirled him back to his world.

Ishtar and Nabu had granted his prayer.

Kenton threw back his head and laughed. "On!" he cried. And laughing still took up the march.

The burden of his despair had been lifted; come what might, now he need feel no shame.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE KING OF THE TWO DEATHS

THE Lord of Emakhtila, King of the Two Deaths, sat, legs crooked, on a high divan. He was very like Old King Cole of the nursery rhyme, even to that monarch's rubicund jollity, his apple-round, pippin-red cheeks. Merriment shone in his somewhat watery blue eyes. He wore one loose robe of scarlet. His long, white beard, stained here and there with drops of red and purple and yellow wine, wagged roguishly.

The judgment chamber of the Lord of Emakhtila was some hundred feet square. His divan rested on a platform five feet high that stretched from side to side like a stage. The chequered floor raised in a sharp concave curve to build it. The curved front was cut through by a broad flight of steps ascending from the lower floor and ending about five feet from the divan of the king.

Two and ten archers in belted kirtles of silver and scarlet stood on the lowest step, shoulder to shoulder, bows at stand, arrows at strings, ready on the instant to be raised to ears and loosed. Four and twenty archers knelt at their feet. Six and twenty shafts of death were leveled at Kenton, black priest and the captain.

Out from each side of the steps and along the curved wall to where it met the sides of the chamber another file of bowmen stretched, scarlet and silver, shoulder to shoulder, arrows alert. The twinkling eyes of the king could see the backs of their heads ranged over the edge of his stage like footlights.

Along the other three walls, shoulder to shoulder, arrows at strings, eyes fixed on the Lord of Emakhtila, ran an unbroken silver and scarlet frieze of archers. They stood silent; tense as automatons tightly wound and waiting for touch upon some hidden spring.

The chamber was windowless. Pale blue tapestries covered all its walls. A hundred lamps lighted it with still, yellow flames.

Twice a tall man's height away from the king's left hand a veiled shape stood, motionless as the bowman. Even through its thick veils came subtle hints of beauty. At the same distance from the king's right hand another veiled shape stood. Nor could its veils check the hint of horror seeping forth from what they covered. One shape set the pulses leaping. One shape checked them.

On the floor, at the king's feet, crouched a giant Chinese with a curved and crimson sword.

Close to each end of the divan girls stood, fair and young and naked to their waists. Six to this side; six to that. They held ewers filled with wine. At their feet were great bowls of wine, red and purple and yellow, in larger bowls of snow.

At the right hand of the King of the Two Deaths knelt a girl with golden cup on outstretched palms. At his left hand another knelt, a golden flagon on her palms. And the king to drink used equally well his left hand and his right, raising cup or flagon, setting them to his lips, putting them back. Whereupon at once they were refilled.

The King of the Two Deaths was quite drunk.

And now he drank deep, set down his cup and clapped his hands.

"The Lord of Emakhtila judges!" intoned the Chinese, sonorously.

"He judges!" whispered the bowmen ranged along the walls.

KENTON, black priest and captain stepped forward until their breasts touched the foremost arrow points. The king leaned, merry eyes twinkling on Kenton.

"What jest is this, Klaneth?" he cried in a high, thin treble. "Or have the Houses

of the God Bel and the God Nergal declared war upon each other?"

"They are not at war, Lord," answered Klaneth. "This is the slave for whom I have offered great reward and whom I now claim since I have taken—"

"Since *I* have taken, Mighty One," interrupted the captain, kneeling as he spoke. "And so have earned Klaneth's reward, O Just One!"

"You lie, Klaneth!" chuckled the king. "If you are not at war, why have you trussed up the High Priest of Bel like a chicken?"

So! High Priest of Bel was he for whom Kenton had been mistaken. So that was why the people on the street had stared at him, why the soldiers had murmured and the captain been at first afraid. And Sharane was Priestess of Bel—prisoner of Bel's priests!

"Look again, lord," said Klaneth. "I do not lie."

The watery eyes peered closer.

"No!" laughed the king. "He is not the high priest. He is what the high priest would be were he as much a man. Well, well; all this has made me thirsty."

He raised the flagon; before he had half lifted it to his lips he paused and looked into it.

"Half full!" giggled the king. "Only half full!"

He looked from the flagon to the girl who stood closest to the kneeling girl at left. His merry round face beamed on her.

"Insect!" chuckled the king. "You forgot to fill my flagon!"

He raised a finger.

Twang-g! A bow string sang along the left wall, an arrow shrilled. It struck the trembling girl in the shoulder on the right side. She swayed, eyes closed.

"Bad!" the king cried merrily, and again held up a finger. Another arrow whistled across the room; the shaft cleft the heart of the first archer. Before his body touched the floor the same bow sang once more, and a second shaft sank deep within the left side of the wounded girl.

"Good!" laughed the king, and wiped away a merry tear.

"Our lord has granted death!" chanted the Chinese. "Praise him!"

"Praise him!" echoed the bowmen and the cup maidens.

BUT Kenton, mad with swift rage at that heartless killing, leaped forward. Instantly the bow strings of the six and twenty archers before him were drawn taut, arrow shafts touched ears. Black priest and captain caught him, threw him down.

"Not so easily do you die!" Klaneth rumbled and set heavy foot on his throat.

The Chinese drew a small hammer and struck the blade of his sword. It rang like a bell. Two slaves came out on the dais and carried the dead girl away. Another girl took her place. The slaves dragged off the dead archer. Another slipped through the curtains and stood where he had stood.

"Let him up," crowed the king cheerily and drained his filled flagon.

"Lord, he is my slave." All the black priest's will could not keep the arrogant impatience out of his voice. "He is my slave to do with as I will. He has been brought before you in obedience to your general command. You have seen him. Now I claim my right to take him to his place of punishment."

"Oh-ho!" the king set down his cup, beamed at Klaneth jovially. "Oh-ho! So you *won't* let him up? And you *will* take him away? Oh-ho!

"Toenail of a rotting flea!" he shrilled, body rocking. "Am I Lord of Emakhtila or am I not? Answer me!"

From all around the king's chamber came the sigh of tight-drawn bow strings. Every arrow of the silver and scarlet frieze of bowmen was pointed at the black priest's great body. The captain threw himself down beside Kenton.

"Gods!" muttered that soldier. "Hell take you and the reward! Why did I ever see you!"

Came the black priest's voice, strangled

between rage and fear: "Lord of Emakhtila you are!"

He knelt. The king waved his hand. The bow strings dropped loose.

"Stand up!" cried the king. The three arose. The Lord of Emakhtila shook a finger at Kenton.

"Why were you so angered," he chuckled, "by my boon of death to those two? Man, how many times, think you, will you beseech death to come and pray for my swift archers before Klaneth is done with you?"

"It was wanton slaughter," said Kenton, eyes steady on the watery ones.

"My cup must be kept filled." The king laughed. "The girl knew the penalty. She broke my law. She was slain. I am only just."

"The lord is just!" chanted the Chinese.

"He is just!" echoed the archers and the cup maidens.

"The bowman made her suffer when I meant painless death for her. Therefore he was slain," said the king. "I am merciful."

"Our lord is merciful!" chanted the Chinese.

"He is merciful!" echoed the bowmen and the cup maidens.

"Death!" the king's face wrinkled jovially. "Why, man—death is the first of boons. It is the one thing that the gods cannot cheat man out of. It is the one thing that is stronger than the fickleness of the gods. The gods give and the gods take away. But one thing they cannot take away—death. It is the only thing that is man's own. Above the gods, heedless of them and stronger—since even gods in their due time must die!

"Ah!" sighed the king, and for a fleeting instant all King Cole's jocundity was gone and in its place the face of a weary, a sad, a very wise and three-fourths drunken old man— "Ah! There was a poet in Chaldea when I dwelt there, a man who knew death and how to write of it. Maldronah, his name. None here knows him—" And then softly, as though he were quoting the words:

'Tis better be dead than alive, he said—
But best is never to be!

KENTON listened, interest in this strange personality banishing his loathing. He knew Maldronah of ancient Ur; had run across that very poem from which the king had quoted while going through some of the inscribed clay tablets recovered by Heilprecht in the sands of Nineveh—back in that old life, half forgotten. He had translated for his own amusement; even turned the lines into verse of his own tongue. And involuntarily he spoke the beginning of the last stanza:

Life is a game, he said;
Its end we know not—nor care,
And we yawn ere we come to its end—

"What!" the king cried. "You know Maldronah! You—"

Old King Cole again, he shook with laughter.

"Go on!" he ordered. Kenton felt the bulk of Klaneth beside him tremble with wrath, impatient. And Kenton laughed, too, meeting the twinkling eyes with eyes as merry; and as the King of the Two Deaths beat time with cup and flagon he finished Maldronah's verse with its curious jigging lilt entangled in slow measure of *marche funerale:*

Yet it pleases to play with the snare,
To skirt the pit, and the peril dare,
And lightly the gains to spend;
There's a door that has opened, he said,
A space where ye may tread—
But the things ye have seen and the things ye have done,
What are these things when the race is run
And ye pause at the farthest door?
As though they never had been, he said—
Utterly passed as the pulse of the dead!
Then tread on lightly with nothing to mourn!
Shall he who has nothing fear for the score?
Ah, better be dead than alive, he said—
But best is ne'er to be born.

Long sat the king in silence. At last he stirred, raised his flagon and beckoned one of the maidens.

"He drinks with me!" he said, pointing to Kenton.

The archers parted; let the cup maiden pass. She stood before Kenton; held the flagon to his lips. He drank deep; lifted head and bowed thanks to the Lord of Emakhtila.

"Klaneth," said the king, "no man who knows Maldronah of Ur is a slave."

"Lord," answered the black priest, and plainly he was uneasy, "Yet this man belongs to me."

The king sat silent, drinking now from cup and now from flagon; eyes now on Kenton, now on Klaneth.

"Come here," he ordered at last, and pointed with one finger at Kenton, with another at the side of the Chinese.

"Lord!" said Klaneth, more uneasily yet stubbornly. "My slave stays beside me."

"Does he?" laughed the king. "Ulcer on a gnat's belly! Does he? Or does he come to me as I command?"

All around the chamber the bow strings sighed.

"Lord," said Klaneth, with bowed head, "He goes to you."

AS HE passed him, Kenton heard the black priest's teeth grate; heard him pant as does a man after a long race. And Kenton, laughing, stepped through the opened space of archers; stood before the king.

"Man who knows Maldronah," chuckled the king. "You wonder how I, alone, have greater power than these priests and all their gods. Well, it is because in all Emakhtila I am the one man who has neither gods nor superstitions. I am the one man who knows there are only three realities. Wine—which up to a certain point makes man see more clearly than the gods. Power —which being combined with man's cunning makes him superior to the gods. Death—which no god can abolish and which I deal at will."

"Wine! Power! Death!" chanted the Chinese.

"These priests have many gods, each of them jealous of all the others. Ho! Ho!" laughed the king. "I have no gods. Therefore I am just to all. The just judge must be without prejudice; without belief."

"Our lord is without prejudice!" chanted the Chinese.

"He has no beliefs!" intoned the bowmen.

"I am on one side of the scales," said the king. "On the other side are many gods and priests. There are only three things that I am sure are real. Wine, power, death! Those who try to outweigh me have beliefs many times three. Therefore I outweigh them. If there were but one god, one belief opposite me—lo, *I* would be outweighed! Yea, three to one! That is paradox—also it is truth."

"The Lord of Emakhtila speaks truth!" whispered the bowmen.

"Better three straight arrows in your quiver than threescore crooked ones And if there should arise one man in Emakhtila with but one arrow and that arrow straighter than my three—that man would soon rule in my place." The king beamed.

"Archers, hear ye the lord!" chanted the Chinese.

"And so," the king said, briskly, "since all the gods and all the priests were jealous of each other, they made me Lord of Emakhtila, to keep peace among them and hold them back from destroying each other! And this, since I now have ten bowmen to every one of theirs, and twenty swordsmen to each swordsman of the priests, I do very well. Ho! Ho!" laughed the king. "That is power."

"Our lord has power!" cried the Chinese.

"And having power I can get drunk at will," chuckled the king.

"Our lord is drunken!" whispered the archers, all around the chamber.

"Drunk or sober, I am King of the Two Deaths!" tittered the ruler of Emakhtila.

"The Two Deaths!" whispered the archers, nodding to each other.

"To you—man who knows Maldronah —I unveil them," said the king, grinning at Kenton.

"Bowman at sides and back, bend your heads!" shouted the Chinese. The heads

of the archers along three sides of the living frieze dropped immediately upon their breasts.

The veils slowly fell from the shape upon the left hand of the king.

THERE, looking at Kenton with deep eyes in which were tenderness of the mother, shyness of the maid, passion of the beloved mistress stood a woman. Her naked body was flawless. From her breathed all springtides that ever caressed earth. She was the doorway to enchanted worlds, the symbol of everything that life could offer both of beauty and of joy. She was all the sweetnesses of life, its promises, its ecstasies, its lure and its reason. Looking on her Kenton knew that life was something to be held fast. That it was dear and filled with wonders.

And that death was very dreadful!

He had no desire toward that woman's shape. But she fanned to roaring flame desire for life in full continuance.

In her hand she held a strangely shaped instrument, long, with sharp fangs and rows of tearing claws.

"She is not entirely human; I invented her," said the king, complacently. "For I, too, was once a great sorcerer, before I learned that only in simplicity lay true strength."

"Strength!" intoned the Chinese.

"To her," chuckled the king. "I give only those whom I greatly dislike. She kills them slowly. Looking upon her, they cling to life; fiercely, terribly they cling to it. Each moment of life that she draws from them with those claws and teeth is an eternity through which they battle against death. Slowly she draws them out of life—wailing, clinging to it, turning stubborn faces from death! And now—look!"

The veils fell from the shape at his right hand.

THERE crouched a black dwarf, misshapen, warped, hideous. He stared at Kenton out of dull eyes that held every sorrow and sadness and disillusionment of life; held all life's uselessness, its weariness, its empty labor. And looking at him, Kenton forgot that other shape, knew that life was dreadful, not to be borne.

And that death was the one good thing man had!

In one hand the dwarf held a slender sword, rapier-thin, needle-pointed. He had increasing desire to hurl himself upon that sword and die upon it.

"To him," laughed the king, "I give those who have greatly pleased me. Swift is their death and a sweet cup to their lips. Him also I made."

"You there—" The king pointed to the captain who had trapped Kenton. "Not too pleased am I with you for taking this man who knows Maldronah, even if he be Klaneth's slave. Go up before my left hand death!"

Face bloodless white, the captain marched to the steps; right he marched through the archers, marched without pause until he stood before the death. The Chinese struck his sword. Two slaves entered, heads bent low, carrying a lattice of metal. They stripped the captain of his armor, strapped him naked to the grate. The woman shape leaned over him, tenderness, love, all life's promise in her deep eyes, her wondrous face. She thrust the fanged instrument against his breast, lovingly.

From his lips came shrieks, anguished, despairing; prayers and curses; the wailing of the newly damned.

Still the woman shape leaned over him, smiling, tender, her eyes brooding upon his.

"Let be!" giggled the king. She lifted the thing of torment from the soldier's breast. Bent to her veils and threw them over her again. The slaves unbound the captain; dressed his shaking body. Sobbing, tears streaming, he staggered back, sank on knees at the black priest's side.

"I am displeased," said the king, merrily. "Yet you did your duty. Therefore, live for a while, since that is your desire. I am just."

"Just is the lord," echoed the chamber.

"You—" He pointed to the archer who had slain cup maiden and fellow bowman. "I am much pleased with you. You shall have your reward. Come to my right hand death!"

Slowly at first the archer stepped forward. Faster he moved as the dull eyes of the dwarf met his and clung to them. Faster and faster he raced up the steps, hurling the archers aside and leaped upon the slender sword.

"I am generous," said the king.

"Our lord is generous!" intoned the Chinese.

"Generous!" whispered the bowmen.

"I am thirsty," laughed the king. He drank deep from left hand and right. His head nodded; he swayed a bit; quite drunkenly.

"My command!" he opened and closed one twinkling eye after the other. "Hear me, Klaneth! I am sleepy. I will sleep. When I awaken, bring this man who knows Maldronah to me again. Let no harm come to him before then. It is my command. Also he shall have a guard of bowmen. Take him away. Keep him safe. It is my command!"

He reached for his cup. It dropped from his lax hand.

"By my deaths!" he whimpered, "if I could but hold more wine!"

He sank down upon the divan.

The King of the Two Deaths snored.

"Our lord sleeps!" chanted the Chinese, softly.

"He sleeps!" whispered bowmen and cup maidens.

The Chinese arose, bent over the king. He raised him on his shoulders like a child. The two and twenty archers upon the lowest step turned, marched up and circled the two. The four and twenty turned, marched up and circled them. The bowmen beside the curved wall swung round and six abreast marched up the steps. The living frieze of scarlet and silver swung six by six out from their walls and followed them.

The double ring within which were sleeping king and Chinese stepped forward, passed through the curtains at the rear. After them strode the bowmen.

Six fell out of the ranks, ranged themselves beside Kenton.

The cup maidens picked up ewers and bowls. They tripped through the curtains.

Upon the stage were now only the Two Deaths, veiled, silent, motionless.

The bowmen pointed to the lower floor. Kenton walked down the steps. Black priest on one side of him, white-faced captain on the other, three archers marching before them, three after them, he passed out of the judgment chamber of the king.

CHAPTER XXV

COUNSEL OF NABU

THEY took Kenton to a narrow, windowless room. Its heavy door was solid bronze. Around its sides ran stone benches. In its center was another bench shaped like a sarcophagus. The bowmen sat him on it, tied his ankles with leathern thongs, threw cloaks on its top and pressed him down upon them. They seated themselves two by two on three sides of the room, eyes fixed on black priest and captain, bows ready.

The captain tapped the black priest on the shoulder.

"My reward?" he asked. "When do I get it?"

"When the slave is in my hands and not before," answered Klaneth, savagely. "If you had been wiser, you would have had it by now."

"Yes, and much good it would be doing me, with an arrow through my heart or"—he shuddered—"wailing even now at the feet of the king's death!"

The black priest looked at Kenton evilly; bent over him.

"Put no hope in the king's favor," he muttered. "It was his drunkenness that was speaking. When he awakens he will have forgotten. Give you to me without question. No hope there, you dog!"

"No?" sneered Kenton, meeting the dead malignant eyes steadily. "Yet twice have I beaten you, you black swine."

"But not a third time," spat Klaneth. "And when the king awakens I will have not only you but that temple drab you love! Ho!" rumbled the black priest as Kenton winced, "that touches you, does it? Yes, I will have you both. And together you shall die—slowly, ah, so slowly, watching each other's agonies. Never before has man or woman died as you two shall!"

"You cannot harm Sharane," answered Kenton. "Carrion eater whose filthy mouth drips lies! She is Bel's priestess and safe from you."

"Ho!" grunted Klaneth; then bent, whispering close in Kenton's ear so softly that no one but him could hear. "Listen, here is a sweet thought to carry you while I am away. Only if the priestess is faithful to the god is she beyond my reach. Now listen—before the king awakes your Sharane shall have taken another lover! Yea!"—devilish mockery was in the whisper—"your love shall lie in the arms of an earthly lover! And he will not be you!"

Kenton writhed helplessly, striving to break his bonds, tear at the evil face.

"Sweet Sharane!" whispered Klaneth, leering. "Holy Vase of Joy! And mine to break as I will before the king awakes!"

He stepped back to the soldier who had taken Kenton.

"I go to await the king's awakening," he said. "Come."

"Not I," answered the soldier, hastily. "By the gods, I prefer this company. Also, if I lose sight of this man, priest, I might forever lose sight of that reward you owe me for him."

"Give me his sword," ordered Klaneth, reaching toward the blade of Nabu which the officer had retained.

"The sword goes with the man," answered the officer, setting it behind him.

"That is true." The bowmen nodded to each other. "Priest, you cannot have the sword."

Klaneth snarled; his hands flew out to clutch. Six bows bent, six arrows pointed at his heart. Then, without word, the black priest strode out of the cell. An archer arose, dropped into place a bar, sealing the door. A silence fell. The soldier brooded; now and then he shivered as though cold, and Kenton knew he was thinking of that death who with smiling, tender eyes had pressed her mark upon his breast. The six bowmen watched him unwinkingly.

And at last Kenton closed his own eyes fighting to keep back the terror of Klaneth's last threat against his beloved; fighting against despair. What evil plot had the black priest set going against her, what trap had he laid, to make him so sure that soon he would have her in his hands? And where were Gigi and Sigurd and Zubran? Did they know he was taken? A great loneliness swept over him.

How long his eyes were closed, or whether he had slept, he never could tell. But he heard as though from infinite distances a still, passionless voice.

"Arise!" it bade him.

HE OPENED his lids; lifted his head. A priest stood beside him, a priest whose long blue robes covered him from head to foot. Nothing could he see of that priest's face.

Suddenly he knew that his arms and ankles were free. He sat up. Ropes and thongs lay on the floor. On the stone benches the bowmen leaned one against the other asleep. The officer was asleep.

The bar on the door was still in place!

Then how had the blue priest entered? Kenton got upon his feet, tried to look beneath the hood. The priest pointed to his sword, the sword of Nabu lying across the sleeping soldier's knees. He took it. The priest pointed to the bar that held the door. Kenton lifted it and swung the door open. The blue priest glided through the doorway, Kenton close behind. Again the priest pointed to the door and now he saw that on the outer side was a similar bar, fastening the cell from without. Softly Kenton dropped it into place.

The blue priest nodded, beckoned. Quickly he drifted along the corridor for a hundred paces or so and then pressed against what, to Kenton's sight, was black

wall. A panel opened. Through it went the priest with Kenton following. Now they stood in a long corridor, dimly lighted, but how lighted he could not tell, since no lamps nor other lights were there. Along it they went, in a great curve. It came to Kenton that this hidden passage followed the huge arcs of the temple, that it must run close behind the temple's outer wall.

Now a massive bronze door closed the way. The blue priest seemed only to touch it. Yet it swung open; closed behind them.

Kenton stood in a crypt some ten feet square. At one end was the massive door through which he had come; at the other was a similar one. At his left was a ten-foot slab of smooth, pallid stone. And now the blue priest spoke—if indeed it were he speaking, since the passionless, still voice Kenton heard seemed, like that which had bidden him arise, to come from infinite distance.

"The mind of the woman you love sleeps!" it said. "Remember that. She is a woman walking in dream, moving among dreams that other minds have made for her. Evil creeps upon her. It is not well to let that evil conquer, since then an ancient feud will surely blaze afresh consuming ere it ends both gods and men. Greater far is the issue here than the lives of this woman and of you. Yet that issue rests on you—on your wisdom, your strength, your courage. Now when your wisdom tells you it is the time, open that farther door. Your way lies through it. And remember—her mind sleeps. You must awaken it before the evil leaps upon her."

Something tinkled on the floor. At Kenton's feet lay a little wedge-shaped key. He stopped to pick it up. As he raised his head he saw the blue priest beside the far door.

"Father," he said, and humbly. "Father! Strength I have and courage. But whether enough of wisdom—ah, that I do not know. But my heart is filled with thankfulness to you who have so helped me. May I not know whom to thank?"

He bent his head.

"Nabu!" sighed the faraway voice.

Nabu—God of Wisdom! He had freed him, counseled him! Kenton raised his head, bent knee—

The blue priest seemed but a wisp of wind-drawn smoke that, even as he looked, faded through the great bronze door and vanished.

CHAPTER XXVI

BEFORE THE ALTAR OF BEL

NOW Kenton heard the murmur of many voices, muffled, vague. He slipped from door to door, listening. They were not within the passage. They seemed to seep through the slab of smooth stone. He placed an ear against it. The voices came to him more distinctly, but still he could distinguish no words. The stone must be exceedingly thin here, he thought, that he could hear at all. He saw at his right a little shining lever. He drew it down.

A three-foot-wide, misty disc of light began to glow within the stone. It seemed to eat through the stone; it flashed out, dazzlingly. Where the disk had been was a circular opening, a window. Silhouetted against it were the heads of a woman and two men. Their voices came now as clearly to his ears as though they stood beside him; over them came the wavelike murmur of a multitude. He drew back, fearing to be seen. The little lever snapped back into place. The window faded; with its fading the voices muted. He stared again at the smooth, pale wall.

Slowly he drew down the lever. Once more he watched the apparent burning out of the solid stone; saw the three heads reappear. He ran his free hand over the visible wall to the edge of the circle; higher he lifted it, into the disk itself. And ever he touched cold stone. Even that which was to his eyes an opening was to the questing fingers stone.

He touched the whispering heads—and touched stone.

Now he understood: This was some device of the sorcerers, the priests. A device to give them a peeping place, a listening

post, within the crypt. Some knowledge of the properties of light these priests must have, not yet learned by the science of Kenton's own world; control of a varying vibration that made the rock transparent from within but not from without. Keeping his grip upon the handle, he peered out between the heads and over the shoulders of those so close to and still so unconscious of him.

The mists had lifted. They had become dense lurid clouds pressing down almost upon the top of the Zones Temple. In front of him was a huge court paved with immense octagons of black and white marble. Trooping down upon this court, halting in a wide semicircle around it, were hosts of slender pillars, elfin shafts all gleaming red and black whose tapering tops were crowned with carven, lace-tipped fronds.

Hardly a hundred feet away was a golden altar, guarded by crouching cherubs, man-headed, eagle-winged, lion-bodied, carven from some midnight metal. They watched at each corner of the altar with cruel, bearded faces set between paws and as alert as though alive. From the tripod on the altar a single slender crimson flame lifted, lance-tipped and motionless.

IN A vast crescent, a dozen yards in the van of the columns stood a double ring of bowmen and spearmen. They held back a multitude; men and women and children pouring out of the ordered grove of pillars and milling against the soldiers like wind-driven leaves against a wall. Score upon score they fluttered and whispered behind the double ring.

"The new priestess—they say she is very beautiful." One of the men in front of Kenton had spoken. He was thin, white-faced, a Phrygian cap over his lank hair. The woman was of a bold comeliness, black-tressed, black-eyed. The man at her right was a bearded Assyrian.

"She is a princess, they say," the woman spoke. "They say she was a princess in Babylon."

"Princess in Babylon!" echoed the Assyrian, his face softening, homesickness in his voice. 'Oh, to be back in Babylon!"

"The Priest of Bel loves her, so they say," the woman broke the silence.

"The priestess?" whispered the Phrygian; the woman nodded. "But that is forbidden," he muttered. "It is death!" The woman laughed again.

"Hush!" It was the Assyrian, cautioning.

"And the Lady Narada—the Holy Dancer—loves the priest!" the woman went on, unheeding. "And so, as always one must speed to Nergal!"

"Hush!" whispered the Assyrian.

"Will it be the dancer?" asked the Phrygian.

"My little bed with the ivory feet that it will not," laughed the woman. The Assyrian's hand closed over her mouth.

There was a rumbling ruffle of drums, the sweet piping of a flute. He sought the sounds. His gaze rested on half a score of temple girls. Five crouched beside little tambours upon whose heads rested their rosy thumbs; two held pierced reeds to red lips; three bent over harps. Within their circle lay what at first seemed to him a mound of shimmering spider-web spun all of threads of jet, in which swarms of golden butterflies were snared. The mound quivered, lifted.

THE sable, silken strands had meshed a woman, a woman so lovely that for a heartbeat Kenton forgot Sharane. Dark she was, with the velvety darkness of the midsummer night; her eyes were pools of midnight skies; her hair was mists of tempests snared in nets of sullen gold. Sullen indeed was that gold, and in all of her something sullen that menaced the more because of its sweetness.

"There is a woman!" The bold eyes turned to the Assyrian. "She'll have what she wants—my bed on it!"

There came a voice from beside her, wistful, dreamy, worshipping: "Ah yes! But the new priestess—she is no woman! She is Ishtar!"

Kenton craned his neck, looking for the speaker. He saw a youth, hardly more than

nineteen, saffron-robed and slight. His eyes and face were those of a beautiful dreaming child.

"He is half mad," the dark woman whispered. Ever since the new priestess came he haunts this place."

"We are going to have a storm. The sky is like a bowl of brass," muttered the Phrygian. "The air is frightened."

The Assyrian answered: "They say Bel comes to his house in the storm. Perhaps the priestess will not be alone tonight."

The woman laughed slyly. Kenton felt swift desire to take her throat in his hands. There came a low clashing of thunder.

"Perhaps that is he, rising," said the woman demurely.

There was a little throbbing of the harp strings; a complaining from the tambours. A dancing girl sang softly:

Born was Nala for delight,
Never danced there feet so white;
Every heart on which she trod,
Dying, owned her heel its god;
Sweet her kisses day or night,
Born was Nala for delight.

The brooding eyes of the butterfly woman they had named Narada flashed angrily.

"Be quiet, wanton!" he heard her whisper. There was a ripple of laughter among the girls; the two with the pipes trilled them softly; the drums murmured. But she who had sung sat silent over her harp with downcast eyes.

The Phrygian asked: "Is this priestess then really so beautiful?"

The Assyrian said: "I do not know. No man has ever seen her unveiled."

The youth whispered:

"When she walks I tremble! I tremble like the little blue lake of the temple when the breeze walks on it! Only my eyes live, and something grips my throat."

"Peace!" a brown-eyed girl with kindly face and babe in arms spoke. "Not so loud, or what you will feel at your throat will be an arrow!"

"She is no woman! She is Ishtar! Ishtar!" cried the youth.

THE soldiers near by turned. Through them strode a grizzled officer, short sword in hand. Before his approach the others drew back; only the youth stood motionless. Right and left the sword-carrier peered beneath bushy brows. Ere he could fix gaze on the youth a man in a sailor's cap and tunic of mail had walked between the two, gripped the youth's wrist, held him hidden behind him. Kenton caught a glimpse of agate eyes, black beard—

His heart leaped. It was Zubran.

Zubran! But would he pass on? Could Kenton make him hear if he called?

The sword-bearer scanned the silent group, uncertainly. The Persian saluted him gravely.

"Silence here!" grunted the officer at last, and passed back among his men.

The Persian grinned; pushed the youth from him; stared at the dark woman with eyes bolder than her own. He jostled the Phrygian from his place; laid a hand upon the woman's arm.

"I was listening," he said. "Who is this priestess? I am newly come to this land and nothing I know of its ways. Yet by Ormuzd!" he swore and thrust his arm around the woman's shoulders. "It was worth the journey to meet *you!* Who is this priestess that you say is so beautiful?"

"She is the keeper of Bel's House." The woman nestled close to him. "They say her name is Sharane!"

"But what does she there?" asked Zubran.

"The priestess lives in Bel's House upon the top of the temple." The Assyrian spoke. "She comes here to worship at his altar. When her worship is done she returns."

"For beauty such as you say is here," remarked Zubran, "her world seems small indeed. Why, if she is so beautiful, is she content to dwell in so small a world?"

"She is the god's," answered the Assyrian. "She is the keeper of his house. If the god entered he might be hungry. There must be food for him in his house and a woman to serve it. Or he might be—"

"And so there must be a woman there," interrupted the bold-eyed wench, smiling up at him slyly. "A fair woman. Therefore the priestess dwells within his house."

"We have something like that in my country." The Persian drew her closer. "But there the priestesses seldom wait alone. The priests see to that. Ho! Ho!"

WOULD the Persian ever come close to the wall? So close that Kenton might call to him. And yet if he did, would not those others hear him also?

"Have any of these priestesses who wait," Zubran's voice purred, "have any of these *waiting* priestesses ever—ah—entertained the god?"

The youth spoke: "They say the doves speak to her—the doves of Ishtar! They say she is more beautiful than Ishtar!"

"Who?" asked the Persian.

"The Lady Sharane," sighed the youth.

Sharane! The name of his beloved pulsed through Kenton like flame.

"Fool!" whispered the Assyrian. "Fool, be still! Will you bring bad luck on us? No woman can be as beautiful as Ishtar!"

"No woman can be more beautiful than Ishtar," sighed the youth. "Therefore she is Ishtar!"

The Phrygian said: "He is mad!"

But the Persian stretched out his right arm, drew the youth to him.

"Have any of these priestesses ever beheld the god?" he repeated.

"Wait," murmured the woman. "I will ask Narodach the archer. He comes sometimes to my house. He knows. He has seen many priestesses." She held the Persian's arm fast, leaned forward: "Narodach! Come to me!"

An archer turned; whispered to the men on each side of him, slipped from between them. They closed up behind him, grinning.

"Narodach," asked the woman. "Tell us, have any of the priestesses ever beheld the god?"

The archer hesitated, uneasily.

"I do not know," slowly he answered at last. "They tell many tales. Yet, are they but tales? When first I came here, there was a priestess in Bel's House. She was like the crescent moon of our old world. Many men desired her."

"Ho, archer," rumbled the Persian. "But did she hold the god?"

Narodach said: "I do not know. They *said* so: they said that she had been withered by his fires. The wife of the charioteer of the Priest of Ninib told me that her face was very old when they took away her body. She was a date tree that had withered before it had borne fruit, she said.

"There was another who followed," said the archer. "She said the god had come to her. But she was mad, and being mad, the priests of Nergal took her."

"Give me men. I would not wait for gods," whispered the black-haired woman, eyes on Zubran.

Said Narodach the archer, musing: "One there was who threw herself from the temple. One there was who vanished. One there was—"

The Persian interrupted: "It seems that those priestesses who wait for Bel are not fortunate."

There was a nearer clashing of thunder. Above Kenton, in the ever darkening sky, the clouds began a slow churning.

"There will be a great storm," muttered the Phrygian.

The girl the Lady Narada had rebuked thrummed again her harp strings: sang half maliciously, half defiantly:

Every heart that sought a nest,
Flew straightway to Nala's breast;
Born was Nala for delight—

SHE checked her song. From afar came the faint sound of chanting; the tread of marching feet. Bowmen and spearsmen raised bows and spears in salute. Behind them the milling multitudes dropped to their knees. The Persian drew close to the wall. And his was the only head in the circular window whose pane was stone.

"Zubran!" called Kenton, softly. The Persian did not stir.

"Zubran!" shouted Kenton. The Persian

turned startled face to the wall, then leaned against it, cloak tight around his face.

"Wolf!" There was relief and joy in Zubran's usually weary voice. "Are you safe? Where are you?"

"Behind the wall," shouted Kenton. "Whisper. I can hear you."

"I can barely hear you," whispered the Persian. "Are you hurt? In chains?"

"I am safe," cried Kenton. "But Gigi —Sigurd?"

"Searching for you," the Persian said. "Our hearts have been well-nigh broken. Soon we meet—"

"Listen," shouted Kenton. "There is a clump of trees close to the stairway above the garrison—"

"We know," answered Zubran. "It is from them we make the steps and scale the temple. But you—"

"I will be in the House of Bel," cried Kenton. "Soon as the storm breaks, go there. If I am not there, take Sharane, carry her back to the ship. I will follow."

"We will not go without you," whispered Zubran.

"Go quick! Do as I say! Find Gigi—Sigurd!" shouted Kenton.

"I cannot go now. Patience, wolf! There is time!" answered Zubran.

"I hear a voice, speaking through the stone." It was the Assyrian, kneeling. Zubran dropped from Kenton's sight.

The chanting had grown louder; the marching feet were close. Then from some hidden entrance of the temple there swept out into the open space a company of archers and a company of swordsmen. Behind them paced as many shaven, yellow-robed priests; swinging smoking golden censors and chanting as they walked. The soldiers formed a wide arc before the altar. The priests were silent upon a somber chord. They threw themselves flat on the ground.

Into the great court strode a single figure, tall as Kenton himself. A robe of shining gold covered him and a fold of this he held on raised left arm, completely covering his face.

"The Priest of Bel!" whispered the kneeling woman.

There was a movement among the temple girls. The Lady Narada had half risen. Kenton watched her, forgetting to breathe. Never had there been such yearning, such bitter-sweet desire as that in her midnight eyes as the Priest of Bel passed her, unheeding. Her long and slender fingers fiercely gripped the cobwebs that meshed her; their webs were lifted by her swelling breast; shuddered with the signs that shook her.

The Priest of Bel reached the golden altar. He dropped the arm that held the shrouding fold. And then, prepared though he had been, Kenton's stiff fingers almost loosed the shining lever. For here indeed was the explanation of the stares.

He looked, he thought, as in a mirror into his own face.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

That terpsichophobian jinx was leering at him

First Classman

By PAUL R. MORRISON

Author of "Second Classman," "Third Classman," etc.

Time: Spring
Place: West Point
Weather: Increasingly warm

IF YOU haven't heard of terpsichophobia, you haven't heard of Terry Hudson. That's what Parker Freem dubbed Terry's morbid fear of dancing. And Parker, confirmed social addict, should know. He'd been Terry's roommate four grinding, West Point years.

Terpsichophobia? The dictionaries don't help much. You have to know Terry Hudson.

Or Marion McKee, who, long before she graduated from Vassar, came down to West Point's Saturday night hops. Maybe others of that brilliant assemblage, girls from Wellesley and Smith and Bryn Mawr. Marion was Parker's fiancee. Their engagement dated from the day that Parker, completing his sophomore year at Harvard, got his appointment to the military academy. Marion was then Vassar's most unorthodox freshman.

This Saturday evening Terry stirred uneasily about his room, casting furtive glances at Parker, who hummed tranquilly while he rubbed a last-minute polish on the brass buttons of his full-dress blouse. Terry hadn't yet deduced how Parker had trapped him into going to the dance tonight at Cullum Hall.

Parker turned his satisfied humming into song, a flighty interpretation of the chorus of "Army Blue":

Army Blue, Army Blue,
Hurrah for the Army Blue,
We'll bid farewell to "Kaydet Gray."
And don the Army Blue.

And, thought Terry, less than two hours ago that kaydet was in the messiest sort of tangle. With women, of course. Inviting Marion to the hop when he had already asked that fiery Rosita Parquey, the Brazilian ambassador's niece, a-hunting out of Washington. Not nice. But tangles weren't anything new to Parker Freem. Being one of the corps' most popular hopoids, he was much stalked by the women. The result was crossed wires.

Parker, still singing, nodded at the clock. "You'd better dress."

As Terry's gaze struck the timepiece, tiny chills dropped down behind his ears and chased each other across his throat. He shuddered.

"Doggone you, Parker! You know I can't dance! If it weren't for Marion, I'd—" He chewed the rest of his words into gibberish.

Parker's broad grin wrecked his singing.

Terry reviewed in a painful flash the horrible moment, two years ago, when he stepped on an L. P.'s toes. The "Lady of the Post" had screamed—discreetly, but screamed—and the music had died to a weak moan, only, at the orchestra leader's frantic gestures, to swell again with inexcusable vigor.

A Tac—army officer, omnipresent shade of the tactical department—had suggested that Mister Hudson report to the dancing master for private lessons. It was a year before Terry tried Cullum Hall again.

Not that he didn't want to dance. He couldn't. Entering the academy as a raw country lad, he had been a living thorn in the little dancing master's reputation. That patient one had finally shrugged and sighed and become resigned.

Terry could still hear the dancing master's nasal voice, in dogged cadence, "Step—Step-step! Step!—Step-step!"

It hadn't done any good, all his patience, all Terry's patience. Terry felt, even now, a first classman only a few weeks from graduation, that he was still a clumsy Humpty-Dumpty in reverse; all feet and legs and a humming-bird's egg for a head.

Terry contemplated Marion's photograph in Parker's locker, as often he had looked upon it before. Just this afternoon he had thrilled to the loveliness of that strong-willed, blue-eyed face. As always—when Marion visited the Point.

With abstract movements of experienced fingers he buttoned his blouse taut over what little stomach four years of inexorable discipline had left him. Marion—he could remember every small detail of the moments he had spent with her. Sometimes there had been an hour or two, when Parker was in one of his everlasting tangles. A few whole afternoons, when Parker got hooked with duty. Terry had pinch-hit for Parker until it was a habit.

Like this afternoon. Terry had P. S.'d—escorted her around the Post, and they had sat a long, long time on the steps of Battle Monument. An afternoon, like those others, he would never forget. The little puffs of wind off the spring-warmed Hudson had toyed lightly with a stray wisp of that crinkly, brown hair.

"MARION *is* swell, isn't she?" Parker was watching him with amused interest.

Terry continued to look at the photograph. "Believe me, Parker, *I'd* never allow other women's pictures in there."

"But, mine kaydet, variety is—"

"Sure! But Marion stands out like a thoroughbred in a field of mustangs!" Terry jerked his head around, nodded. "Found two more today—under the dictionary."

"Mustangs? Tsk! Tsk!"

"Just let a Tac find the rest of your said variety! In your laundry bag, for instance. You'll adopt enough demerits to fill a gig sheet."

Parker rolled his eyes. "Evidently the kaydet didn't look under the cape of my raincoat."

He pursed his lips into a whistle, imitating the fourth roll for reveille. Terry recoiled at the insinuation, unconsciously comparing the short time till the dance with that insidious tailend of the Hell-cats' overture.

"The time grows short, mine kaydet." Parker wormed into his blouse.

Terry ambled across to his comb and brush and knocked down what stray blond hair the Post barber had spared—the famous cadet scalplock, concerning which girls thought the least said the better. He wriggled into his own blouse, and straightened out of the contortion in front of Parker's locker.

"Parker, the next time you deploy those other dizzy females in there, Marion's picture goes in my locker."

Parker brushed an imaginary something from his sleeve. "About ready?"

Terry swallowed.

"Police that shaking!" Parker fished a pair of white gloves from his locker and blew the fingers open. "You can sit out except when you're hopping with Marion. Hop cards are all fixed."

He grinned. "We'll be okay."

"Fixed? Not that I'm suspicious, Mister Freem, but just who're 'we?' "

"Marion and I."

"Then maybe miracles will happen."

"That's the old pep spirit!" Parker stuck his head out into the hall. He shouted, "Mister Ryan!"

"Do we *have* to go through with that?"

"My unfailing ritual, mine kaydet! Before all hops. I would be reminded!"

Terry sighed and sat down, carefully holding aside the brass-buttoned tails of his full-dress blouse. One just didn't, after four years of West Point, plop onto ball-bearings that size.

Rapid footsteps—Fourth Classman Ryan on the run. The plebe swung through the doorway, skidded to a halt and clicked his heels together. He executed the precise West Point salute, an astronomical nightmare of exact forty-five and ninety degree angles in multiple planes.

"Mister Ryan, B. J., reporting, sir!"

"Tuck your chin inside your collar, Mister Ducrot!" Parker's instructions were clipped. "More yet! Heave up the flabby chest! In with the ponderous stomach! Get the sway out of your backbone! Bend forward! Down with your shoulders! Roll your hams in under you, and drag those thumbs behind your trou stripe!"

Parker backed away and eyed the result. "Not bad! For a plebe. Hold it!"

He cupped both palms behind his ears, leaned intently forward. "Now, Mister Dufficket, how are they?"

"They are all fickle, sir!"

"Who, Mister Dufunny?"

"The femmes are all fickle, sir!"

"Beat it, Mister Ducrot!"

The perspiring plebe snapped a salute, about-faced, and tore from the room at a gallop.

Parker paraded past the mirror, palming his dark hair. He paused to test the close shave on his swarthy cheeks.

Terry groaned, closed his eyes and averted his head.

Parker marched toward the door, head high in imitation of a newly-made colonel at an embassy ball. "The hotel! The ladies are waiting!"

With great reluctance Terry hauled his tall, husky form from the chair and followed.

His jaws set and his lips were grim sculptured lines. He had screwed up courage to attend only a few hops during his entire three upper classmen years. And on those occasions, as if Parker's silly terpsichophobian jinx grinned over his shoulder, terrible events always happened. He had a queer presentiment that tonight would be no different.

Still, with Marion? Parker was a lucky guy. More than lucky. There had been moments when Terry would have pawned twenty years of the army to be as popular as Parker, as poised, as refined.

It came so naturally to Terry's good-looking roommate. When you wanted to find him, between dances, you just looked for the biggest clump of beautiful girls. An aristocrat, Parker Freem, of a long line of aristocrats. Wealthy, too.

Terry breathed deeply of the spring night; he could smell the newly-mown grass on the Plain—the fragrant odor of curing hay. He grinned wryly; it took a farmer to notice that.

Officer and gentleman! Well, West Point might make an officer of sorts out of him, but never a gentleman like Parker Freem.

THE music had already begun when they, the four of them, the Brazilian girl and Parker leading, approached Cullum Hall. Terry was glad of this, though every high wail of the violins created the impression of circular saws racing each other around his legs.

Again the terpsichophobian gargoyle perched on his shoulder and leered down at his feet. Terry writhed.

Marion's fingers pressed into his arm. His cue; he relaxed. Marion's soft little laugh rippled above the moan of the saxophones. She didn't say anything; didn't have to. Marion had developed that signal for him long ago, during those few hops he had driven himself to attend.

They started up the steps, and Terry sucked in an extra cubic foot of air. The faint fragrance of curing hay. Farmer! Humpty-Dumpty in reverse! His feet clumped heavily on the stone steps.

"Marion? Remember last winter?"

"You mean—Terry! What *are* you thinking?" She dug her fingers deep into his arm. "Stop it!"

Iced chills crept down his spine and curled up for the night in the ends of his toes. How could a fellow get rid of the memory of that dance? Marion had seen it all; she was the only one who didn't giggle.

He could still see his white glove caught in the metal trappings of the girl's evening gown. How desperately he had clung to her, after the music stopped, until he managed to shuck his right hand free! How helplessly he had stared, face a boiled red, while the misunderstanding woman sparrow-hopped for the nearest seat, dignifiedly unaware of his glove dangling down her back by its limp forefinger!

He was thankful tonight of Marion's consideration for his raw nerves; she disposed of her wrap almost by the time he rid himself of his hat, that headache known to civilians as a cap. The stagline swayed back to let them onto the dance floor, several of the stags making an ostentatious business of getting their feet out of Terry's path. He supposed that was funny to them, and therefore grinned.

Marion turned, smiled up at him. He took her into his arms and obeyed the slight pressure of her fingers.

They mingled with the gay crowd, were lost in the swift swirl of stately uniform and brilliant evening gown.

Not so bad, so far. Only why did musicians always bury the big heavy beats under ten thousand non-followable pig squeals of melody! *Ripple-ripple-ripple!* There he went!

Trying to keep step with every one of those high notes. "Step!—Step-step!" Damn all dancing instructors! Why couldn't they train a fellow to hear those elusive underbeats? He could hear all the millions of trills and frills and clatter-fast melodies in the treble, but down in the Annapolis bass—no.

The gargoyle lighted on his shoulder.

"A daisy-chain for your thoughts?" Marion was smiling close to his face. He hoped a Tac didn't see that he held her closer than regulation distance.

The gargoyle flopped off into the air, soared away, its bill crossed in a smirk.

"I'm going to miss you," he told her. "After graduation."

She didn't reply. They swung out of the path of a visiting major general and his blond partner. The two silver stars on each of his shoulders were in significant contrast to the bronze of his tropic-baked complexion.

They always came back to the academy, the cadets of the past. When they had the chance. A short visit to re-live the scenes they had known. Terry noticed, a bit shocked, that the grizzled veteran's eyes were bright with moisture.

Marion saw, too. Her voice was a throaty whisper: "I'm going to—miss you, Terry—after graduation. Always a far distant post, isn't it? For young officers?"

He nodded. "You and Parker—" He didn't go on for several seconds. Finally,

"You'll be married as soon as Parker's service permits?"

The music stopped and he didn't get an answer.

Smiling, she piloted him to a side-bench, and he raged inwardly at this necessary discard. "Right here, Terry! Till our next dances together—two in a row. And don't let anybody tell you that you can't dance! Don't you love it!"

"Sure, when I'm with you! But when—"

Parker, having delivered the *señorita* over to another cadet, glided up twanging an imaginary guitar The music started. He whisked Marion away.

And so through the evening, until the third dance from the last.

TERRY had just begun to enjoy the colorful throng, had even forgotten his terpsichophobia, when with a whir of wings the gargoyle lit squarely on his back.

A Tac was saying, "Mister Hudson, I've noticed that your card is not filled for the evening. There's a young lady over there who arrived late from Boston. She hasn't a full schedule. Would you mind?"

"No, sir! Thank you, sir!"

And he lumbered the long way around the floor on the steam roller that was his feet. He thought once he'd steer the juggernaut out the door. But as he turned a corner, he saw the Tac watching him, cupping the knuckles of one hand into the palm of the other.

The happy general went whirling past, as light on his feet as a fawn. Marion, executing a difficult step with a second classman, swirled round and round some ten yards distant. Terry had one fleeting glance of her strong, serious face, intent upon the eerie job, and then the crowd closed in.

Terry bowed to the girl from Boston, and the gargoyle cracked its bill with delight.

He led off with the wrong foot. The girl's plaster-paris lips opened, closed. Terry changed step, forgetting that he was not in his own squad. He scuffled a bit on the glassy floor.

"Excuse me!" she purred.

Since it wasn't her fault, as he could see from her face, Terry replied sprightly, "Oh, that's all right!"

Again the plaster-paris lips opened, closed.

Somebody dug him in the ribs with an elbow. A grinning first classman saw him bearing down and sang out, "Fore!" Swinging his girl as if from the path of a tank, the fellow left a vacant place on the floor.

That, thought Terry, was a bit of fortune; he breathed easier. And remembering the dancing master, began to toll off, "Step!—Step-step! Step!—Step-step!"

But with horror and a damp forehead he found that he was actually thinking, "Hep! Hep! Hep-hep!" and executing generous portions of "Left! Left! Left-right-left!"

"Have you," Miss Boston sweetly inquired, *"really* been four years at the academy?'

"Lacking a few more days till June." And thought hard, "Step!—Step-step!"

He had another glimpse of Marion whirling past. He thought she saw him, but he scraped the Boston femme's off-ankle and gave himself over to intense concentration. Left! No, dammit, step! Hep-hep! Step right—left! Hep!

He tested his fingers on her shoulders. The glove wasn't stuck. What a relief! What an odd expression on her face!

The fawn-footed general frisked by. And so did General Grant's portrait staring dourly from the wall, for Terry had seen a lead in the pack-ice and was making for it at regulation double-time. He forgot completely that the plaster-paris lady was traveling backward, but even so all would have been well had it not been for the tropical general charging Terry's left flank with the fervor of the Light Brigade.

JUST before the impact, the general tried to deploy his blonde to safety. Alas! Terry drove his girl dead-center in the general's ranks. He found himself stepping on three feet at once, one of his own and two of the general's. They went down trying to help each other stand.

The blonde gasped, "Well, I never!" The Boston plaster-paris opened her lips, closed them.

The music stopped.

The terpsichophobian jinx, winging toward the ceiling in hysterical spirals, shrilled with mirthless laughter.

Terry rose. He offered to aid the general, but received a silent sneer. The general rose. The general was angry.

An undulating sea of blurred faces, grinning faces. Terry snapped to attention, saluted. "I'm terribly sorry, sir!"

The general returned the salute, and a pleasant grin replaced his anger. Maybe, thought Terry, he was remembering the days when he, too, was a cadet? He gave Terry's feet an odd glance.

Terry's chin clicked up a full degree. He saluted again, about-faced, and—marched straight for the door. Scarcely musical measures pulsated through his brain: "One! Two! Three! Four!" and "Left! Left! Left-right-left!"

Cadets, army officers, women drew out of his path. He forgot his hat.

Nearing the door, he had a hazy impression of the Tac angling firmly through the crowd in his direction. But the general signaled to the Tac. The Tac halted, jerked his head toward the orchestra leader.

The music swelled. The dancers began to scuff across the floor. Dozens of couples shoving in cadence. "Step! Step-step!"

Terry swung through the doorway.

The night was sweet with spring. Behind the hills across the Hudson, the unseen moon radiated a silver aurora. The subtle aroma of dew-drenched hay lifted from the Plain.

Of all these things, Terry was vaguely conscious, though he could not shift the focus of his mind, still boring mercilessly upon a single, horrid thought. The general's glance at Terry's feet had been queer, almost incredulous.

He cut right from the sidewalk, acutely aware of the myriad noises of Cullum Hall behind him. Parker would be there. All evening long Terry had watched him, envying his poise.

He bent forward a little, lunged on.

A swift clattering behind him. "Terry!"

He wheeled, defiant, angry.

"Wait, Terry!" Marion ran close, touched his arm. He listened through several thundering seconds to her fast breathing. She hooked her right arm around his left. "We're going to dance, Terry."

It wasn't a request. It wasn't an order.

All anger drained from him; his defiance wilted. They went back to the hall.

Up the steps. Across the polished floor. Marion spun to face him, lifted her arms.

"Marion!" His voice was a hoarse, pleading whisper.

A hint of tears brightened her blue eyes. Vexation, probably. Some emotion tugged at her lips. Anger, or grim determination to force him, like an airplane pilot, to try again immediately after a crackup.

They glided away in a half-turn. She smiled, and her fingers dug hard into his arm. "Terry? You couldn't step on my toes if you tried."

"I—I—couldn't what?"

An impish sort of smile crossed her face. "Try it!"

He peered around for the terpsichophobian jinx.

"I mean it, Terry!" Her voice was insistent, firm. I'm asking that you try!"

He laughed, an uneasy gurgle.

"Do you hear me, Terry Hudson?"

"But, Marion—"

"Terry!"

HE wanted to mop his forehead or stick a finger inside his collar. But as they swung round a corner of the hall he glanced into her eyes and saw an unwavering faith there that made him suddenly reckless. He tested a forward thrust of his foot toward her toe.

"See?"

She laughed; he tried again, with the other foot.

"Relax! Forget that you're a West Pointer, Terry! Wilt! That's it! Pretend you're a rag doll!"

Her words were exultant. Something kindred fired him from head to foot. He stepped, and stepped. He wasn't counting, he didn't need to count.

For the sport of the thing, he tried once more to reach Marion's toes. Her feet weren't there.

"Some women, Terry, think they can dance, but really can't. They can only follow, which isn't the same thing."

He smiled. "You can't excuse me that way."

"I mean it! Some men dance well in spite of their partners."

"Sounds good."

A mad whirl. Folks wheeled about them, the general frolicked past. He was smiling, and he didn't look at Terry's feet.

Parker jogged up in a series of corkscrew teeter-totters. He cocked his head on one side like a robin, and winked. He stared then, straight at Terry's feet. Terry replied with the only fancy step he knew, a step he had never dared to use before. He got away with it.

Down the length of the hall.

"Marion?" But before he could go on he had to swallow a choke in his voice. "I could always dance with you."

She looked down at the brass buttons of his blouse, and he was painfully reminded that he talked to another man's fiancée, Parker Freem's fiancee, his friend.

The music died a lingering finale. "Take me home, Terry. Let's not wait for the last dance."

They walked to the hotel in silence, but the pressure of her fingers on his arm had his heart hammering. He could not have spoken without a stammer. He'd made enough of an ass out of himself as it was; why aggravate his misery?

They paused on the hotel veranda, moved aside to allow another pair of dancers to enter the lobby. The moon, now risen in its own radiance, edged Marion's evening wrap with bright silver. Down the walk a group of girls and cadets halted in some excited discussion. The femmes converged upon a single cadet, whose voice drifted gayly up to the veranda. Parker Freem. Laughing, bowing, gay.

After observing the group a short time, Terry turned to Marion. "I could never be that popular," he said slowly. "Be a Parker Freem."

"Don't try!" Then, low and serious: "Listen, Terry, I've heard you say that before. But whatever love I may have had for Parker Freem was killed a long time ago—by popularity. I'm not marrying Parker."

Terry rocked and his heart thumped faster. Finally, "Marion!"

She canted her head at the girls surrounding Parker, a grim little smile on her lips. Hazily Terry saw the group amble forward in a slow, reluctant movement.

MARION'S words jolted his already confused senses: "The woman who marries Parker Freem will always have to share him with the world. Maybe that's a selfish attitude, but it's the way I feel. If I were Parker's wife, I'd be—just one of the bunch."

"Marion!"

"I mean it! Popularity can be its own defeat."

Terry opened his mouth to voice protest, but, like the plaster-paris lady, closed it.

The group, still chattering around Parker, strolled slowly on toward the veranda.

"He's a fine guy, Marion. I—I don't know just what to say!"

"Don't, then!" She perked her head around toward him. "Terry?" A moment of charged silence. "I'm in love with somebody else."

The moonlight was upon her face.

"I guess, Marion—guess I'd better go. I'm glad—if you're happy, Marion."

With a sharp little laugh, she grasped both his cheeks between her palms and pulled him down to her. "Terry," she said. "Terry."

Impulsively she kissed him, and wheeled through the doorway. There, in the mellow gold light of the lobby, she paused, flung back, "Someday, Terry Hudson, after you've served your apprenticeship in the army, I'm going to propose to you!" And

before he recovered, "After some Chinese mud-river or tropical swamp has taught you how important it is to be a good dancer!"

He stepped quickly toward her, but someone came out the door. When he could again see, she was gone.

He swung about.

"Good evening, Mister Hudson!" Parker Freem bowed with over-emphasis.

The dusky Brazilian beauty giggled. She had a charming, musical voice.

Terry lunged toward the barracks, but, looking back, he saw Parker, that most popular kaydet, exchanging repartee with a periphery of beautiful women.

Terry hurried into his room. Alternately he paced the floor and stood, eyes shut, trying to think.

Parker was a long time returning.

Terry wheeled, still trying desperately for something to say. Parker grinned, held up a hand in fascist salute. "Wait!"

"Parker, I'm—"

"Desist!"

Parker dug down into his laundry bag and from beneath a store of contraband rescued the *señorita's* photograph. He set it on a shelf of his locker. With a flourish he presented Marion's photograph to Terry.

"Don't look so horrified, mine kaydet! Things happen, you know! Marion delivered my ring via the desk clerk and the solitaire's already on Rosita's finger. Congratulations!"

He pumped Terry's free hand.

"But wait!" He loped down the hall and pounded on a door. Shortly he returned, trailed by a very sleep-eyed plebe, Mister Ryan, B. J., clad in pajamas.

Inside, Parker got the plebe in proper and traditional form. Then: "Mister Ducrot, how are they?"

Yawned the plebe, "They are all fickle, sir!"

LOOKING AHEAD!

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By all odds, the Easters were the strangest clan of the Valley; in their crazy mansion, painted the colors of Joseph's coat, they lived in open warfare. "King Isaac" Easter always claimed his Elixir would bring him back from the grave; and after he died, the terrified Easters swore that it really had. A short novel of Four Corners under a reign of nightmare, by
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The Readers' Viewpoint

WHEN the last installment of *Ship of the Line* appeared, we heard from a good many of you, as you will remember, in no uncertain terms. You were pretty indignant at C. S. Forester for having left a fine fellow like Captain Hornblower in such a spot. At the time we promised to see, by threats or cajolery, that Mr. Forester did something about it. We have hinted from time to time that he was doing something about it. Now, at last, we can assure you that you have but two more weeks to wait—for *Flying Colours,* the sequel to *Ship of the Line,* begins in the December 3rd ARGOSY. It starts where the latter story left off—with Hornblower in a Spanish prison—but we'll tell no more. However, in case you don't want to take our word alone that it's a rattling good yarn, we'll add that we've just received the news that it has already been made the Book Society choice for the month in England—the English equivalent of a Book-of-the-Month Club choice over here.

In the bright glare of self-commendation, sweetness and light which such news casts over us, it seems not at all surprising to receive such a letter as has been written by

HARVEY L. FICHTER

Although I have been reading ARGOSY for several years, I never have developed the initiative to write to you. However, the last issue of ARGOSY was so excellent that I could not resist writing to you and telling you so.

The story that made a particular impression on me was, "The Captain's Cup." This story was so different, so interesting, that I read it approximately six times before I put the magazine down. The very plot of the story was so unusual that I have spent several hours attempting to figure out a way for the members of the crew to get back on board the ship.

May I compliment Mr. Surdez for one of the best short tales in several years, and may I also compliment the magazine on putting out the finest issue in five or six months.
New York, N. Y.

A GENTLEMAN from Pennsylvania writes in to cheer a gentleman from India. Also to offer some suggestions. And to quiz us sternly on some of our plans that haven't, as yet, become any less nebulous than they were when we thought them up.

RICHARD FRANK

Swell stuff, this Babu Chullunder Ghose, F. B. A. Get Talbot Mundy to write more tales about him; also get him to do a serial or two like he did in the old days . . . Where is the Gillian Hazeltine yarn promised about a year ago, and the tale by Otis Adelbert Kline? . . . Thanks for having more than one illustration for "Backfire" by Detzer . . . All in all, this Sept. 17 issue is one of the finest round-up of tales and authors in many an ARGOSY moon . . . How about giving us forecasts for the coming month in the first issue of that month?
Millheim, Pa.

Add Scientific Notes: Mr. Ross Allen, whose intriguing profession is the study of alligators (or maybe crocodiles) and who recently was the hero of one of the Men of Daring series, has let us know that he found Artist Allen's drawings admirable, his restraint from nauseous ballyhoo praiseworthy, and his accuracy comforting. We have complimented Mr. S. Allen on his many virtues; and we sent Mr. R. Allen (is this getting confusing to you, too?) the original of the drawing, which is now on display in the Florida Reptile Institute where Mr. R., or "Alligator," Allen does his perilous stuff.

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