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Illustrating Fate Wove a Rug

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Fate Wove a Rug

By C. DAWES APPLETON and EDWARD C. GOODWIN

Here are the three: a Parsee saint, a penniless American and a Persian boy; they follow a perilous course traced in glowing purple and green, designed on the loom of the gods; and they shall meet Satan in Iran

CHAPTER I

THE PARSEE SAINT

IT WAS a slight sound, grating, urgent. Vane's cigarette glowed deeply in the darkness as he stood frozen, listening, his nerves rasped by that faint, gasping whisper.

It might be flotsam rubbing against the piles of the dock of the Iranian Trading Company on which he stood, or rats scurrying among the crates—any normal night voice of the river.

But he knew that it was not. It was the gasp of something alive—barely alive. Animal or human, in dire extremity.

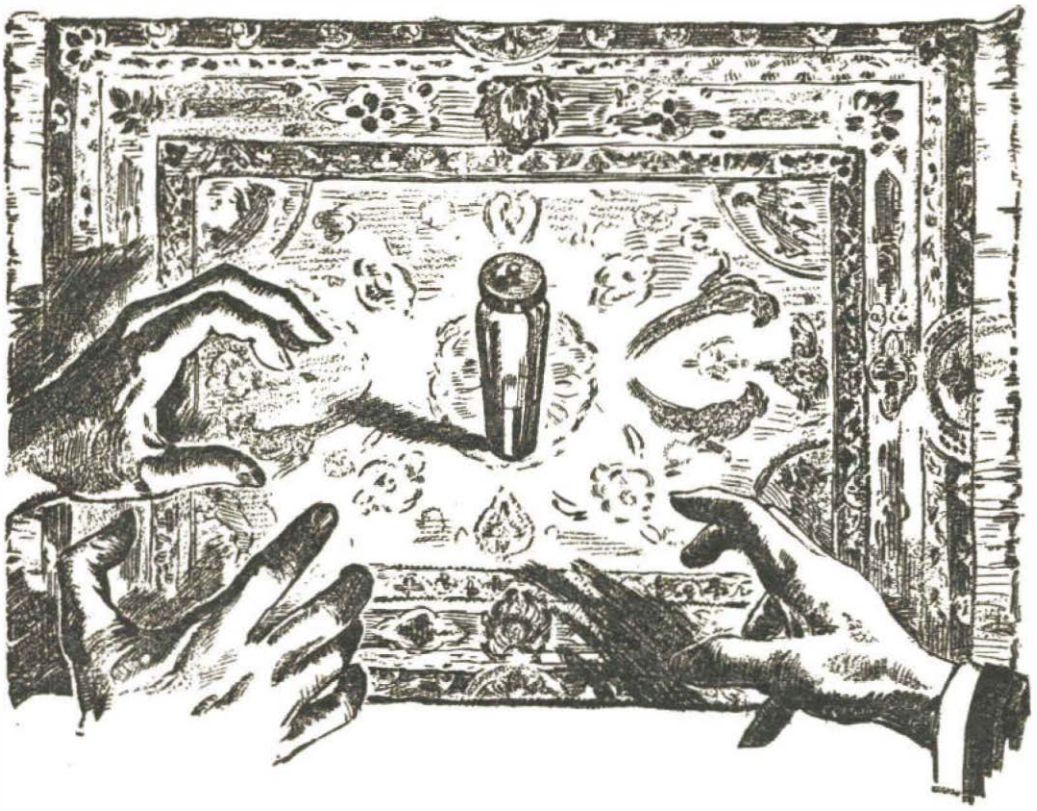
"Hey, what goes on here?" Vane said, aloud, unconsciously.

He could not place it at once. He obeyed an indefinable instinct. He swung about sharply, automatically, to confront a wall of crates and boxes dimly visible in the light of a distant street lamp filtered through river fog. A black gap yawned in the face of that wall. A gap through which that sound must have come.

Vane moved toward it instantly.

It was pitch black. A narrow tunnel in a mountain of packing cases, a passage half again as wide as a man's body.

Vane stooped his six-foot body and went in, reluctantly.



He didn't get far. A heavy figure, running low, hurtled into him in the darkness, bearing him backward, catapulting him into the open, knocking the wind out of him. Rallying quickly, Vane dived, wrapping his arms about a pair of beam-like legs that scissored rapidly and powerfully, breaking through his hold. The legs churned, pounding off down the dock, leaving Vane sprawled.

He thought, sheepishly: That's the same leg action that messed up my one big bid for fame on the gridiron—the tackle that lost our bowl game and turned me loose to browse in a laboratory.

It's always like that with me, Vane reflected, bitterly, picking himself up. It's always a beautiful tackle, but I never bring my man down. Maybe I ought just to blow up the ball and let the other guys play.

It was still in his ears, fainter now, that hoarse, agonized breathing.

Fainter, yet nearer as he advanced into the passageway between the cases. Nearer still, rising from the ground directly in front of him as he paused with a gust of wet, fog thickened wind in his face. He knew that he had come out close to the edge of the dock.

His foot struck something soft, heavy, motionless yet animate. He fumbled for his pocket lighter and thumbed the tiny yellow flame into life, bending over the form that lay on the rotten planking at his feet.

IT WAS an old man, lying in a welter of dark blood that poured from a gash in his neck, his sparse white hair and beard dyed with the stuff in a grotesquely piebald effect. A frail old man, spread-eagled, his thin fingers hooked into the broken wood, his slight body heaving, rising and falling with the immense effort of his breathing.

Vane held the minute flicker of light to his face and fell back on his haunches with a muffled cry of recognition.

"Parviz! Bahram Parviz!"

His stricken tongue balked at the fool

phrase that threatened to follow the name. Something about its being a small world. Fatuous, asinine. But true enough, because this was the man who had haunted his uneasy slumbers for nine long years. The one man in all the world whom Vane most wished to serve. The man who had trusted him and whom he had failed.

"Agha!" Vane said, hoarsely. *"Agha,* do you hear me? It is I, Richard Vane—your friend—"

The rolling eyes converged upon him for an instant in the yellow flicker from the lighter, and a brief, tortured smile twitched across Bahram Parviz' face.

He collapsed suddenly and lay still. His noisy breathing was muted, but it functioned still as Vane flicked off the lighter and gathered the old man's pitifully light body into his long arms and lifted him.

Anywhere out of this, Vane told himself, swinging sideways to enter the narrow passage between the crates, introducing his burden, feet first, and then himself. But where to? Where?

Vane had no lodgings to take the old man to. He had been sleeping around in singularly exposed and public places for several days, since his landlady locked his door on him.

A hospital. That was the best bet. But what'll I tell 'em?

Doctor, my venerable friend here was trying to shave when his razor slipped. Look how I found him! Sew him up, doc, he's the greatest philologist in the world. The greatest living authority on pehlevi writings, the greatest Zoroastrian scholar this side of Bombay, or the other, for that matter. And the saintliest damned fool . . .

But they won't accept that little spiel at any emergency ward. I'll spend the rest of the night under cover, all right. But I can't do much for this poor old coot in jail. I wonder where he lives?

Vane's brain was whirling and his body was bathed in sweat when he emerged onto the open dock space where he had been strolling when the sounds of Parviz' agony drew him to this incredible meeting. The old man was lighter than a child of twelve, but Vane was breathing hard himself when he had carried him fifty yards toward the street. I don't eat enough, Vane informed himself. Not half enough.

"Please," Bahram Parviz wheezed, rolling his head against Vane's shoulder, bathing his arm in a swift warm flood. "Take me to my home. I must—I must—" Then he muttered an address, over and over in his feeble, rattling whisper until Vane said:

"I've got it, sir. Just relax, will you? It's right around the corner. We'll have you home in a jiffy."

"I thank you," said Bahram Parviz, politely, and fainted.

VANE quickened his step through the quiet streets. The house to which Bahram Parviz had directed him was entered through a peeling door flanked by a row of push buttons.

Vane jabbed the one marked *Supt* and waited a nearly interminable period before a swollen Irishman appeared, yawning and cursing. But the yawns and curses suddenly ceased when his bleared eye fell upon the burden in Vane's arms.

"Is it dead he is?" inquired the superintendent. "You can't be bringing him in here! This is a quiet house and decent—"

"Get out of my way," Vane said. "And get a doctor. Quick."

"Okay," said the superintendent with alacrity, ready to prove himself a man of action.

"What floor?" Vane said, curtly.

"Top front. Have ye got a nickel on you?"

"No," said Vane, beginning the ascent.

He heard the man sigh gustily and a moment later the sound of a coin dropped in the phone box under the stairs. A shadow of a grin flitted across Vane's tight lips as he went on. It seemed a long, long climb.

He staggered against the cracked wall at the top, then went on. The hand that was under Bahram Parviz' knees fumbled for the knob of the narrow door at the front but it would not turn. Vane kicked the door open and entered.

He laid the old man on the lumpy iron-framed bed and stood looking down at him, mopping his own cold, wet forehead with his coat sleeves. All gone, Vane thought, somberly. Me. There's forty years between us and I'm nearer dead than he is.

For Bahram Parviz, unconscious, was breathing with great determination and regularity, although every breath expelled a new flood of the dark red substance that appeared to be his life blood.

The doctor would come too late, Vane decided. He felt a sick wave of apprehension, looking wildly about the small room for something that would serve as a bandage. He had an insane desire to thrust his fingers into the wound and staunch the bleeding. Not only to save the life of his old friend, but also because the blood was making him sick at his stomach. He couldn't stand much more of it.

He was dabbing at Bahram Parviz' saturated beard with a threadbare bathtowel when the doctor appeared, heavy eyed and annoyed.

The doctor snapped into instant action as soon as his eye fell upon his patient. Suddenly alert and dexterous, he shed his coat, giving brief orders to Vane; then he went to work on the dying man.

It was the doctor's own opinion that he had come too late. He said so. But he could stop the bleeding. Transfusions were indicated. Immediate removal to a hospital.

A feeble protest, thin as match smoke, came from the old Parsee.

"No—no," he whispered. "No!"

And Vane understood the significance of that plea. He said:

"Can't he stay here? He's afraid to die in a foreign hospital—afraid of being buried in the ground! It's against his religion. He's a Parsee."

The doctor stood rolling down his sleeves, his eyes lingering with completely professional detachment upon the face of his patient.

His glance moved casually around the bare, poverty stricken room, noting the curtainless window with its tattered shade half drawn against the leaden sky of early dawn, the peeling walls, the broken bureau on which lay a few poor toilet articles and the framed portrait of a dark eyed boy of twelve.

Then for a moment, considerately, yet appraisingly, the doctor inspected Vane. His worn clothing, his broken shoes, his thin, undernourished body and sallow, scholarly face.

"You want me to phone for nurses?" he said, doubtfully. "He'll need two—day and night. This man is old."

"Yes," Vane said. "I'll raise the money."

There was a flash of respect in the doctor's cool eye as he nodded. He went out, closing the door behind him.

The old man on the bed moaned faintly. Vane had an instant of pure panic. Maybe this was the end.

But Parviz appeared unchanged when Vane bent over him. His thin, stained white beard stuck out at a rakish angle from the fresh bandages about his throat. His twitching, crumpled eyelids, veined with blue, looked almost transparent. The delicate nostrils of the aquiline nose expanded and contracted spasmodically.

Vane stood at the foot of the bed, his hands rammed deep into his empty pockets. The situation called for money and plenty of it. And Vane hadn't a thin dime.

From the well of the stairs he heard the doctor dialing a number, giving a peremptory order for nurses, two, emergency. Then dialing again . . .

Now what, Vane asked himself, grimly, do we use for money?

CHAPTER II

LOST PURPLE OF IRAN

HE TRIED to focus his scattered wits. He needed food and sleep. Where could he make a touch?

Harden, at the University lab? Or Phelps of the De Longue interests who had induced his company to finance Vane's early experiments with dyes, or Bogert, who was in charge of Zoroastrian and *pehlevi* writings at the De Longue library? Any one of the three might ante up to

aid an aged Parsee scholar in distress. But Vane knew that the old man would never forgive him for subjecting him to such an indignity.

And if Vane asked for himself, they'd laugh in his face. Vane was a pariah, an outcast from the scientific field in which he had been acclaimed a prodigy ten years ago on the publication of his thesis on *The Decadence of Persian Natural Dyes.*

The De Longue Chemical Reserve Foundation had sent young Vane to the Near East on the trail of a fabulous "lost secret" of the dyer's art—the almost mythical Persian Purple, akin to the purple of ancient Tyre which the Phoenicians were believed to have extracted from the mollusks of their seas.

Vane was the one man, the Foundation believed, who could trace that formula and reproduce that dye artificially, for commercial use.

The expedition had ended in disaster—in ruin for Vane. Now, at thirty-three, he was a has-been, and worse.

He had supposed himself to be free of twinges on that old score. But now he felt a resurgent shame. He owed Bahram Parviz more than money, more than life itself. For Parviz had trusted him, and had forgiven him when that trust was betrayed. His own powerlessness in this emergency made Vane feel himself something less than a man.

"Vane, my friend—" It was a thin whisper from the bed. The sound of his name coupled with that word "friend" brought him to his knees beside the old man, his throat constricted.

"Yes, *agha,*" he said, huskily. "Are you in great pain?"

"Not too great," Bahram Parviz whispered presently, as if he had weighed the matter. His blue lips were nearly motionless, yet there was a shadow of a smile about them. His thin eyelids fluttered. He looked at Vane with dimmed eyes filled now with a questioning sadness. "But, Vane, what has happened to you?" Bahram Parviz said, more strongly. "You have been ill? You have looked upon the face of Death?"

It touched a chord of memory, that Eastern saying. Vane smiled, grimly, and shook his head.

"Death saw me first," he said. "And turned his head away."

Bahram Parviz sighed, almost impatiently.

"Once you asked my forgiveness," he said. Why? You do not forgive yourself!"

"How can I, *agha?"* Vane said, savagely. His face had whitened under that allusion to his defeat. "You trusted me. You stood as my sponsor with the elders of your faith, your priests and sages. Because of you they trusted to me a secret as holy to them, to you, as the words of Zoroaster himself. And I lost that secret."

"VERY well, you lost it!" The old man repeated, with pale scorn. "But it was not your intention to lose it! It cost you your career, your future. It laid upon you the blight of age in youth, my son." The old man's face twisted with a pain that was not of the body.

Vane said, bitterly: "I let you down. I disobeyed the few simple commands that you laid upon me. A fool, smart-Alec trick—I though I knew the short cut! Well, I found it. A short cut to dishonor."

"You count it so, I have no doubt," Bahram Parviz said, sadly. "At my age, my son, one has learned that a man may outlive dishonor if it does not stem out of his own wrongdoing. You did no wrong. You were robbed."

"That was my alibi, all right," Vane said. "I tried hard to put it across. I explained all that in my report to the Foundation, but they'd lost too much money to be very believing. I filed a protest with the State Department. But my own government, even, refused to back me up."

"A phenomenon," Bahram Parviz observed, "that has been remarked before in governments. But this alibi, as you call it—it was sufficient for my people. No man blames you in Bombay, Vane. Or me, for having trusted you. The loss they still deplore, because the ancient secret

fell into the hands of one who has used it unworthily."

The old man ceased abruptly. His bloodless fingers fluttered to his throat, touching the bandage there. His wrinkled eyelids fell, as if he were ashamed of the swift flame of passion that had blazed suddenly in his eyes, making them young again. When he spoke again it was as though he forced his lips to speak syllables that were anathema to him. Yet self-discipline, self-immolation required this of him—that he utter an abomination.

"The hands of an hereditary enemy of my people, and of my own house, in particular—the Emir Akbar—Iskender—"

"*Agha,*" Vane cried out in alarm. For the old man sank under the weight of that name.

But he rallied presently, and smiled again.

"I think," he said, "that I could sleep a little now."

"Sleep, then," Vane said, thickly. It was a long, long time since he had felt what he felt now. The swelling of the veins in his neck, the black, bitter rage rising in his throat, taking form in words that were not fit for the ears of a man as good, as nearly holy as this one.

Akbar Iskender . . . That name was wormwood in other mouths than that of Bahram Parviz. It was one of the most hated and feared in Moslem Iran. Last of the tyrant merchant princes, Akbar Iskender ruled his domain in the heart of the Iranian desert, enthroned in blood soaked magnificence, served by boy slaves who wove the exquisite carpets that had made his family's name famous, as its crimes had made it infamous, for a thousand years.

Akbar Iskender's personal and private infamies were brilliant and inspired compared with those of his less talented ancestors. He added a fillip of his own. And it was said in the bazaars of the East that no man lived who could boast that Akbar Iskender had dealt fairly with him.

Rug weavers earned only a pittance, Vane knew, and famine was only too common in Persia. But Iskender had contrived to evade payment of even that pittance, by importing child labor from India and setting up the Hindu prison system of rug production.

There were many conjectures as to how Iskender had come by such complete knowledge of this justly celebrated form of peonage. There were those who believed that he had learned it the hard way during that portion of his youth that was shrouded in mystery. There were others who shrugged and said that Satan himself knew such things without going to school.

"*Agha!*" Vane said, suddenly. "Who did this to you? If you still count me your friend—who did it? Tell me!"

DELIRIUM bertayed Bahram Parviz' wisdom and his holiness. Vane sat beside him and heard the strange voice of unreason, harsh, unnaturally brutal from those aged lips that had never uttered ill of any man. In his delirium Bahram Parviz cried out for vengenace that, conscious, he would have forbidden.

Vane, listening, bent over him with a sense of suffocation, shaken by such a wave of sick emotion as he had not known in years. It was no longer simple grief, it was fury at the outrage that had been done to the person of this aged man, his friend.

And he was powerless.

The tale that Bahram Parviz told like a man mesmerized belonged less to the Manhattan waterfront than to the dark and tortuous bypaths along the River Ganges.

"I think I was set upon at the door of my lodging as I entered. I was taken to a place without light—that smelled of spices and the brackish waters of a turgid river . . ." The thin voice trailed away.

"Yes, yes!" Vane urged. "But who—?"

"I do not know, for sure." said Bahram Parviz, dimly. "I only know he had the mark worn by a thousand of his kind. He had the ear—"

The nicked left ear that was the mark carved by a tyrant upon his slaves—the mark of Iskender. Slaves of the lamp,

Iskender's henchmen, from whom children ran screaming through the narrow streets of Baghdad and Damascus, of Tabriz and the Oasis of Yazd in Central Persia; ran as if they were servants of the Devil himself, *Shaitan.*

Involuntarily Vane glanced at the portrait of the boy on the bureau. Where was he? If Iskender had done this to the old man, where was this boy? He dared not ask.

Then he bent to catch the words Bahram Parviz was whispering.

"Is—is that you, Vane? You are still here? Do not leave me, my friend! For the sake of the boy, my grandson, Jansar—do not leave me!"

"I will not," Vane said, clearly. "Rest, *agha.*"

"I cannot!" Bahram Parviz said. "For the first time in my life I am afraid!"

Vane's throat closed on the words of reassurance he tried to speak. It had cost this man plenty to say that, for the first time in his life, he was afraid. Then he said, quietly:

"I will not leave you, *agha.*"

"Thank you," said Bahram Parviz again, and there was a sudden sinking of his whole body, a withdrawal, as if a light were dimmed within him. Yet he did not die. Actually he seemed to sleep.

Released, Vane got up and began to pace the small room restlessly, striking his fist against his palm. For the first time in many years he felt alive. Alive and on the road to pay off an old, old score. For it was Akbar Iskender who had robbed him of the Parsees' formula, robbed him of his work, his self-respect.

Now he had a still better reason for what he wished to do to the Emir Akbar Iskender—tear him apart with his bare hands and distribute him equally among the jackals that circled hungrily about the Oasis of Yazd.

But the immediate problem of cash outweighed even that pleasing prospect. The immediate problem was financial. And he had evolved no solution.

One was sorely needed.

HIS eye caught a small, battered tin trunk under the bed and stooping he dragged it out. It was locked. Vane kicked at it morosely.

Behind the trunk was a roll of burlap, a foot in diameter and some five feet long. It might be something he could pawn to cover the more urgent expenses of the old man's illness.

He sat on his heels and opened his penknife.

Then once more, unaccountably, his eyes were drawn to the portrait on the bureau. A haughty, patrician young face, with liquid dark eyes that seemed to dwell upon him accusingly.

Vane grinned ruefully at the picture "Okay by you?" he said, softly, and began to slit the stitches that fastened the burlap.

But some shadowy recess of his memory was stirred unpleasantly. He recalled a sloe-eyed child of three who had been brought before the old man in Vane's presence in the Parsee's home in Bombay nine years ago.

Vane paused, balancing the knife thoughtfully in his palm. Then suddenly a blind alley of memory opened and Vane remembered.

Kavadh, son of Bahram Parviz, and his only son. He had been murdered. His dismembered body had been returned to his aged father in the Parsee colony at Bombay, from the Oasis of Yazd in Central Persia—the victim of Eastern vengeance.

Iskender—again, Iskender!

A slight sound outside the door checked him. It was somehow furtive, instantly stilled. He glanced at the bed. Parviz was still sleeping.

If it's that guy with the legs, Vane thought, I won't miss. Not this time.

Crouched as he was on the balls of his feet, Vane felt the old power surge through his own legs, tensing them, lifting him, propelling him forward, his long body bent over at the waist, his long arms swinging. Soundlessly, in three long, padded steps he reached the door and flung it open.

The hall was empty.

CHAPTER III

GLOWING, GREEN PARROT

VANE stepped back into the room and closed the door. He shot the paint stiffened bolt. It offered little protection against intrusion, but some against surprise. Then he returned to his operations on the burlap roll, stripping off the covering.

It contained a rug.

He unfurled it quickly, glancing at the shaded window. The small, bare room was dim. But a beam of early morning sunlight came through a triangle directly beneath the roller, where the shade had been torn away. The ray of light fell upon the face of the rug as it unrolled upon the uneven boards of the rough floor.

Vane drew in his breath sharply, amazed.

It was alive with color, like an opal in the sun, brilliant, challenging. A hunting rug, evidently. In the center, Persian horsemen, fully accoutered, rode with lances levelled at gazelles and wild boar in full flight among dense foliage.

The coloring—Vane's gaze drank it in—was the lost purple. An intense, burning violet, flanked by green and rose and gleaming yellow, yellow heightened by threads of pure gold. Over all there was a rosy luster that faintly obscured the woven images.

It was a rug that a prince of Iran might have had woven for a favorite in memory of some triumph in an ancient garden of the hunt—a strange garden where roses and jasmine grew side by side with poisonous orchids, and where serpents twined their gleaming spotted lengths among the twisted boughs of camphor trees. A garden where wild things came down to drink, crushing fragrant herbage with stealthy, steel pronged paws.

As Vane turned the rug in the pale beam of sunlight, he saw something else.

A bird was hidden among the leaves and flowers of the central medallion. It was a small green parrot, vivid, full plumed, glowing with the deathless fire of an emerald.

He moved the rug for a closer look at this strangely arresting bird. But it had disappeared.

Vane exclaimed softly. He turned the rug, trying to find the bird again. But it continued to elude him. It had vanished into the background, masked by the rosy luster of the fabric. He knew then that the parrot had been visible only when light struck the surface of the rug at a certain angle.

"'The bird of time,'" Vane quoted, softly, "'has but a little way to flutter. And the bird is on the wing!'"

Vane knew enough of Oriental rugs to realize that he could borrow enough on this one to cover the present emergency and redeem it later. But it would be wise, anyhow, to get a couple of estimates before trying to do business, unless Bahram Parviz regained consciousness and told him what the rug was worth.

But the old man had shown no signs of a rally by the time the nurse arrived. From an exhausted slumber he appeared to have sunk into a coma.

Badly worried, Vane compelled himself to set out in search of some sort of deal on the rug.

"Keep this door locked," he told the nurse, gravely. "This old man has enemies or he wouldn't be in this fix. Don't let anyone in except the doctor."

HALF an hour later he stood in the dusty, gaudy display room of a carpet emporium on the lower East Side and watched the serpentine writhings of a plump Syrian whose cupidity was fighting his awe.

Vane had seen this man's kind, curled and scented, vaguely obscene, trading dolefully in the rug markets of Tabriz and Istanbul. But he had never seen greater suffering, real or assumed, than the Syrian's when at last he conquered his awe and emitted a faint, hysterical bid.

"Twenty-five dollars," the Syrian murmured hastily. "Take it or leave it!"

Vane laughed, rolling the rug into its burlap casing.

He went next to a Fifth Avenue establishment of great reputation and presented the rug for inspection to a bespatted Alexandrine Greek in morning coat complete with gardenia. There was the same mixture of cupidity and awe in his liquid, amber eye. And more—something that bordered on recognition.

"This is a very interesting piece," he remarked. "I would be willing to buy it for a client of mine, a collector. What is your price?"

"I don't want to sell it," Vane said, shortly. "I'd like to have it appraised, though."

An appraisal, Vane thought, and out of here, quick. He wants this rug and wants it bad. But he met the dealer's eye with a bland look.

Vane was led into the private office, crossing a narrow threshold to find himself precipitately in Damascus or Tabriz.

There were rugs everywhere, glowing, hypnotic, lining the walls, overlaying one another on floors and divans. And everywhere he saw the glowing, vivid purple that sickened him with its stolen beauty—beauty woven on the looms of Akbar Iskender. This purple, holy to the ancient Persian tradition, had been defiled by the touch of Moslem hands.

The place was dim, lighted by a single metal lamp that shed a peculiar light that intensified colors and patterns unbearably. Vane's dazzled eyes took in the overpowering effect, and he studied the rug draped walls. The sequence was unbroken now. There was no sign of the door through which he had entered.

A man was crouched over a pile of rugs in a corner. He straightened and stood motionless, his attitude faintly menacing.

A queer type, Vane thought; a moronic type, with a lean, small head, more animal than human; a thick, short-waisted body and abnormally long arms and legs. The eyes were close-set, with a shallow glint like mica dust. That empty, glittering gaze was fixed on the rug dealer, who ignored the man.

"THIS rug is of interest to a collector," the dealer told Vane, "only because of certain irregularities in the weave. Flaws that would greatly reduce its value to the average purchaser, you understand."

"Clearly," Vane said, drily.

"For example," the dealer went on, smoothly. "Consider this valuable hunting rug, an Iran of about the same period—the nineteenth century."

He laid Vane's rug aside and ruffled a pile of carpets, drawing out one that was nearly identical in coloring and design.

"My rug is older," Vane hazarded, shrewdly. He was rewarded by a quick flare in the yellow eyes, instantly veiled.

"Possibly," the dealer said, coldly. "But a poor example of the art of the period."

"I have been led to believe otherwise," Vane said, smoothly.

He looked down at the two rugs, slightly overlapping now, so much alike. His mind balked at the resemblance between them. Which was Bahram Parviz' rug, he wondered.

He felt the other man's insolently appraising eye rove over him, his shabby clothing, his scuffed footwear. "You wish to obtain an advance on the rug, perhaps?" the dealer suggested.

"On the contrary," Vane said, blithely. "I have given an advance, myself. I wanted to be sure that I was not cheated."

"Then we cannot do business?" said the other man, regretfully.

"I'm afraid not," Vane said.

"Pardon," said the dealer then, "I will have your rug wrapped for you—"

"Don't bother," Vane said quickly. But too late. The manager had signaled to the man who stood awaiting his order and handed him one of the two rugs. He hurried away, dissolving neatly through the glowing, rug hung wall. Vane watched this disappearing act with misgiving.

A strong, acrid smell of coffee assailed his nostrils and he saw that the rug dealer was proffering one of two minute Turkish cups from a service on a nearby tabouret.

"While you are waiting," he said, graciously.

Vane hesitated. His years in the East made that traditional invitation hard to decline. He accepted, sipping the oily, saccharine stuff courteously. It was pretty bad coffee. But it was the first Vane had tasted in three days, of any kind.

His heart drove an accelerated piston against his side. For a moment he felt mildly drunk.

"My client," the Alexandrine said, sadly, "would, I am sure, offer you an acceptable price for this piece. You have undoubtedly heard of the—" he paused and allowed a tremolo of awe to flute his voice. "The Emir Akbar Iskender?"

IT WAS pretty nearly too much—the bombshell of that name, and its impact on Vane's heady, over stimulated sensibilities. He had not eaten, he had not slept. The coffee was whirring in him like a racing motor. And the smoldering rage that had been fanned to full flame in him by the stirring of the embers of memory rose to consume him.

He had to fight down the impulse to break into maledictions—curses. But he managed to maintain an imperturbable front and said, with only a slight constraint:

"Unfortunately no."

The Alexandrine shrugged incredulously. A man who did not know this, he indicated, knew less than nothing at all.

"The last of the great merchant princes of Iran," said the rug dealer, reproachfully. "A personage, sir. A personage! He is in New York even now, returning to his estates in Persia next week. It would give me pleasure to make an appointment for you—to show him this piece."

"Thank you," Vane said. And for one delirious moment he played with the idea. To meet this man face to face; to have his throat within the grasp of his hands . . . but it was a crazy notion. Retribution would be swift and sure, and it would descend not only upon him, but probably upon the old man lying stabbed and dying on the narrow bed downtown. And perhaps upon that boy with the gloomy, imperious black eyes. No, it would have to be later. When Vane was free of the charge that Fate had laid upon him.

"Thank you, no," Vane said. "Some other time."

The man had reappeared with the rug, a long roll wrapped in heavy brown paper and thick cord.

He presented it to Vane with a malevolent smile that disclosed his snaggle teeth

Vane took the corded roll with murmured thanks. A strange ripple of doubt ran along his spine. It was a highly sensitive and informative spine, subject to hunches. It had served Vane well in many emergencies. He obeyed its behest now, unhesitatingly, at whatever cost.

He drew out his penknife and said, regretfully: "You'll excuse me, I'm sure—" But he did not bother to wait for an answer.

He ran the sharp blade through the cords that bound the roll, stripping off the covering.

The proof seemed negative enough at first. The green parrot declined to appear. Then it showed a green plume and finally its whole brilliant self. But not in the rug that had been wrapped for Vane.

The parrot appeared in the other one, which lay nearby.

He rolled the parrot rug himself under the venomous glare of two pairs of eyes.

"A mistake," Vane remarked, "such as occurs constantly in the bazaars of the East. But the coffee—excellent!"

He bowed. The door, where in hell was the door?

At a word from the manager the man with the mica-dust eyes moved forward and held aside a narrow picture rug that concealed the low arched doorway through which Vane had entered.

But it was not easy for Vane to pass him. Not without betraying the fighting hate that possessed him. For as he stepped by the man with those strange eyes and the long limbed, misshapen body, Vane saw that his left ear had been neatly nicked. It lacked a triangular segment of the lobe.

CHAPTER IV

SEEK THE PLUMED EMERALD

DISCOURAGED, the essential problem still unsolved, Vane arrived at Bahram Parviz' lodgings, still carrying the rug. As he began to climb the long stairs he heard the voice of the nurse on the telephone, calling the doctor.

That was all Vane needed to send him up the stairs in nothing flat, panic in him. I told him I would not leave him, he reminded himself savagely, as he pivoted on the newel post at the top, to find the door of the old man's room open and Bahram Parviz lying across the threshold, moaning, nearly unconscious.

"Vane—my rug—where is it?" the old Parsee gasped.

"I have it, *agha,*" Vane said quickly. "I have it. But you should not be here!"

"I awoke and found you gone—the rug gone—" Parviz' weak voice shook. But he asked no questions, relaxing somewhat as Vane carried him back to bed.

When the doctor had come and gone, leaving the old man calm, though very weak, Vane sat at the bedside and listened to Bahram's broken explanation of his desperate concern for the carpet, which was, he said, priceless to him and to his family.

It had only recently come into his possession, after a lifelong search. It had been missing for two hundred years."

"My ancestor, General Parviz, was the Shah's most trusted lieutenant," Bahram Parviz said, his old voice thrilling to the tale. "Nadir Shah left him as Viceroy in Delhi after his conquest of India, and the defeat of the Grand Mogul. He removed the Peacock Throne to Teheran.

"In token of his love, he caused this rug to be woven for my ancestor. It is more than a rug; it is a map for the hiding place of a jewel—a small green parrot carved from a single emerald, having precisely the dimensions of this parrot you see here."

His thin, veined hand turned the fabric of the rug to the light and the emerald parrot winged forth, vivid, unearthly in its glittering beauty. Spellbound, Vane stared at it. An emerald of that size, carved in the semblance of a parrot! Imagination balked at that. Yet such things were. Men had seen them.

He remembered the descriptions of the Peacock Throne: ". . . set with an enormous profusion of rubies, emeralds, topaz and diamonds, including two peacocks made entirely of precious stones. Between the two peacocks stood a parrot of the ordinary size, cut out of one emerald." That was the throne of the emperor-builder, Shah Jehan, whose grief for his favorite wife took form against the opalescent skies of Agra, in the foambell tomb of Urjummund Bànu—the Tàj Mahàl.

"THIS emerald was buried in an ancient garden," Bahram Parviz went on. "This rug was woven as a map of its hiding place, and sent to my ancestor in Delhi. But on his return to Persia he was waylaid by a band of marauding Moslems, and the rug was stolen by servants of an outlaw merchant prince whose name was Iskender."

"You mean," Vane said, soberly, "that your rug had been in the hands of that tribe for two hundred years? The family of Akbar Iskender? That's why your son was—" He broke off sharply at the look of agony on Parviz' waxen face.

"My son, Kavadh, journeyed into Iran alone, to claim his heritage," said Bahram Parviz. "How he returned, you—know. No more was heard of the rug until very recently. A Parsee friend here in America wrote to me that it was in the collection of an American millionaire, who was willing to part with it at a low price, in order that it might be restored to its rightful owners."

From this point, Bahram Parviz went on to express his logical conclusion that all wealthy American collectors were actuated by purely philanthropic motives, and Vane, suppressing a sardonic grin, agreed with him solemnly.

"Agha, I took the rug to try and bor-

row money on it," Vane volunteered, uncomfortably.

The old man's penetrating gaze, warm with affection, lingered on Vane's troubled face.

"But there is money," he said, smiling. "Plenty of money. Here, in this small trunk. It is yours as well as mine."

The ache in Vane's throat paralyzed speech. He covered Bahram Parviz' cool, dry old hand with his.

"You have seen this woven parrot come and go," Bahram Parviz said, looking down at the rug that was spread in princely glory over his narrow bed. "So has its prototype disappeared, in the history of my family. It lies in a secret place in a garden near the Oasis of Yazd. We are going to Yazd, the boy and I, to find it!"

Vane was silent. It was madness. And the old man knew it.

"I pledged my word," Bahram Parviz said, "to Kavadh, my only son, that his son, Jansar, should follow in his footsteps wherever they might lead. And young as the boy is, he must make that journey now. I have not long to live, Vane. Such wisdom as I possess must be employed in this quest for his inheritance. And if he is to meet the same end, what difference can a few years make? Perhaps there may be pity for his youth—"

But you know better, Vane thought, bitterly. "Where is the boy, *agha?*" he asked respectfully.

"He should be here, even now. He has been in school here for a year," Bahram Parviz said, with pride. "He is a linguist, speaking even Arabic like a son of the Prophet—for which I offer apologies to my own deity in every oblation," he added with a wry smile. "Jansar is a dutiful lad, and intelligent, a master weaver of rugs and a lover of fine dyes, like yourself, Vane. I would tell you more of him if he were not, even now, outside the door, his ear a cup for all this honey—"

THE door burst open and a slim boy stood there, grinning. He might have been any American schoolboy by his dress and the engaging frankness of that smile. But his eyes were of the East, haunted, inward looking, curiously impenetrable.

He went to his grandfather's bedside, his young face suddenly white with anxiety. But he did not speak until he was spoken to, nor did he uncover his head, since in the Parsee tradition it would be disrespectful to uncover in the presence of an elder.

"My injury is slight," his grandfather told him quickly. The old man made the introduction to Vane, which the boy acknowledged with an out-thrust hand, taking off his cap with the other. It was a neat, smoothly executed transition from the Eastern custom to the Western and Vane gripped the small, firm hand with an appreciative smile.

"Mr. Vane," the boy repeated. "Glad to know you, sir." But his dark eyes were vaguely troubled, puzzled, Vane thought. It worried him. Did the lad know his story? He might not take kindly to his presence if he did. Jansar looked like a high-tempered, intolerant boy, in spite of his grin.

He addressed his grandfather in the smooth Gujarati vernacular of the Parsees of Bombay. Vane knew it well and the music of it stirred him to the strange nostalgia that the born wanderer feels for lands that are the more his own for being alien.

As he listened to the old man's brief account of his experience on the dock, and Vane's part in it, the boy flashed a grateful look at the American. But the shadow was still there, a question in his eyes.

Then the boy pounced upon the rug with an exclamation of joy, touching it with sensitive, exploratory fingers.

The boy is an expert, Vane thought. He had been inclined to think Behram Parviz had exaggerated about his grandson. But Jansar turned the fabric instantly to the correct angle at which the parrot appeared, and examined the bird with delight. The old man watched him with pride and anxiety.

"It is the true rug, *agha,*" the boy said. "But how—how can it be here? It is beyond price. How could it have escaped from the Evil One?"

"Is he not always served by traitors?" Bahram Parviz asked. By thieves and those who bear false witness? By murderers and false friends?"

Only then, apparently, did Bahram Parviz realize what he had said in the heat of his passionate denuunciation of the breed of Iskender. His eyes fell upon Vane's stricken face, and saw the American's big hands wrung tightly between his knees, as if he were in pain. His hot blue eyes were tortured.

The boy, too, was looking at Vane curiously, with something like recognition in his face.

Bahram Parviz said simply, unemotionally: "Vane, my friend, I have a favor to ask of you."

"You have only to ask it, *agha,*" Vane said. His stiff lips found it hard to form the words. Others were ringing in his ears. Words in the forthright Gujarati tongue which made them carry their full meaning—"traitors, thieves, false friends." Words that he knew were not meant for him. He knew the great heart of the man who had uttered them. But Vane's breast was bare to such thrusts, however accidental.

"It is this, Vane," the old man said, gravely. "I am—as you see me. This boy is young, a child. We journey alone into the desert of Central Iran—the Dasht-i-Lût—eight hundred miles long, from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. You know this region well, Vane."

"Yes, *agha.*" Vane looked at him quickly, his bloodshot eyes aflame in his gaunt, scholarly young face.

"Many hands will be raised against us," Bahram Parviz said, gently. "It may cost you your life, my friend—but will you come with us, Vane? To be our right arm?"

Vane drew a deep, shaken breath. His dry throat worked, his burning eyes were threatened by a stinging moisture that would have disgraced him utterly in the eyes of the boy who was watching him so alertly.

He must say less, infinitely less than he felt. This was like a cup of cool water set to the lips of a man who has been suffering from thirst—a thirst nine years long. He must take it deliberately, sip it slowly.

"I—if you think—I mean, I'd like—" Vane said, and stopped. It was no use. The voice died absurdly in his parched throat. How could he say that his life seemed a minute thing to lose; that he wanted to tender it, if need be, in payment of the debt he owed? His eyes clung to Bahram Parviz' eyes in mute, desperate appeal.

"You'd like to come?" suggested Bahram Parviz, smiling at him with the half humorous tenderness of great age. "Is that it, my son?"

"That's about it," Vane said, thickly. "Thanks. That's it."

CHAPTER V

THE PURPLE POPPY

THEY booked passage on an American Export liner as soon as Vane could obtain passport for himself and visas for them all.

Parviz would not be dissuaded; his illness only spurred him on. The only danger he could apprehend was that of dying before his grandson could come into his own.

It was not cupidity, Vane knew, but the strong deep roots of Oriental purpose, tenacious, vital, wound about the historic gem that lay buried in an ancient garden in the Oasis of Yazd, with only the rug to point the way to its hiding place.

We're completely insane, Vane thought morosely, to go raiding the territory of Akbar Iskender. That megalomaniac prince of Islam will have a thousand nick-eared henchmen and a couple of battalions of fanatical Arab tribesmen fixed up like cavalry.

Opposed to that array we've got a sick old man, a bright-eyed kid with the

courage of a dozen lions and the muscular development of one gazelle, and a broken down research chemist with a couple of strikes against him already! Which one of us plays the fife in this *Spirit of '76?*

All Vane's energies were concentrated upon planning the details of a journey over terrain he knew well, but that presented certain hazards new to him.

He knew that they would travel by motor bus from Beirut to Baghdad, via Damascus. But after that the long journey to Yazd had to be made by caravan, entailing forethought and wise trading in the bazaars of Baghdad.

What backing could they expect from the American government in the event of trouble with the marauding Arab bands that infested the caravan routes of the Dasht-i-Lût? How far could the wings of the Eagle be made to spread in protection of them all, because of his own citizenship, Vane wondered?

Not far, he knew. Those wings hadn't offered much protection to his own harried person nine years ago. "It's rattle brained young fools like you that make life difficult for us," the American deputy official at Baghdad had complained bitterly to Vane. "We're not running a constabulary to police your private interests in this country!"

Vane got along poorly with bureaucrats. He had reason to suppose that his personal record in American official quarters at Baghdad was not to his credit.

He said nothing of this to Bahram Parviz. The old man was very weak, but positively incandescent with purpose. Vane himself had taken fire from the old man's consecrated ardor. Before they had been three days at sea he knew the whole story backward.

NOT a pleasant story, either, as it unfolded. He wondered sometimes if Bahram Parviz was wise in letting the boy hear all this; but he had forgotten the Eastern palate's taste for strong flavors. Clearly, young Jansar was taking to this crazy enterprise like a duck to water.

The boy spoke of his own probable end at the hands of an expert torturer with the utmost equanimity, explaining in detail just what he, himself, meant to do to the person of Akbar Iskender if he managed to get his hands on him. But this nice blend of Eastern and Western schoolboy philosophies was kept strictly under cover when the lad was in his grandfather's presence.

It was Vane who got the full benefit of it in their long walks around the decks at night, while the old man rested in his cabin.

Vane was already edgy and irascible with the responsibility he had taken upon himself when Jansar, son of Kavadh, son of Bahram, suddenly became a problem.

Vane could not tell just why the boy changed. But the dark, limpid gaze that had been questioning, puzzled at first, turned definitely hostile. And the boy's confidences ceased abruptly.

Vane knew that Jansar had placed him.

He knew that Jansar remembered, perhaps only by piecing together the mosaic of many memories, that he was the foreigner whom his grandfather had sponsored with the *panchayat* at Bombay, the elective committee composed of six *dasturs* and twelve *mobeds*, priests of the higher and lower orders, who managed the secular affairs of the Parsees. And that Vane was the man who had betrayed the trust imposed in him.

When Jansar preferred to remain with his grandfather rather than walk the decks with Vane, Vane walked alone.

And yet never altogether alone. He had the constant uneasy suspicion that he was followed, watched. He felt eyes upon him, even when the decks seemed empty.

Sensing that invisible pursuit, Vane turned suddenly one night, reversing his steps. He rounded a corner of the bulkhead and ran headlong into a woman swathed from head to foot in dark silks.

He found his arms filled with warmth and perfume and silken stuff that whipped about him like a flowering jungle vine, scented, clinging, probably poisonous.

With his hands on her shoulders, steadying her, Vane had the chance to see that she was beautiful; skin like honey, amber eyes with coal black lashes, small white teeth that were a shade too sharp for perfection. She smiled at him faintly, enigmatically.

"I beg your pardon," Vane said. "But why—" He stopped. He couldn't very well ask her why she was following him.

SHE said nothing but stood there looking at him with the singular candor of the East, curiously, appraisingly, and it was somewhat embarassingly plain to Vane that he found favor in her eyes.

He had seen that look before in the eyes of Oriental women. Why did he find this startling, even slightly shocking? Then he knew. It was because those other eyes had peered at him over a *yashmak*. There was no veil here to cover the candid sensuality of this girl's face. It was Afghan, he thought; and women of Khorassan were always closely veiled—more closely veiled, more rigidly secluded than those of any other Moslem land.

And this girl—

She was of the type most admired by Moslems. Vane quoted silently: "Though I had ninety wives and of concubines twice ninety; were she but a pearl of my harem, I should wear but her upon my breast."

"You are wondering why I wear no veil," she said, suddenly. "I see it in your eyes!" There was more than resentment, there was pain in her voice. Vane was startled at this reading of his mind.

And only then he realized that they were not speaking in English, but in Arabic. It had come back to him like this—the tongue in which he had once been as well versed as his own! He felt a strange exultation, a resurgent power.

The girl glanced nervously over her shoulder. The long decks were dim, empty. The sea was very calm. The ship ploughed steadily through a deep, long swell, nosing into a light, salt flavored breeze that created the illusion of great speed.

A light silk scarf whipped out from the shelter of the girl's dark cloak and fluttered noisily, like a pennant. A vivid scarf, of a deep violet color edged with magenta, like a petal stripped from a giant opium poppy. The rich purple held Vane's eyes.

"If it were for me alone to say," the girl told him sullenly, "I would wear the veil. But my master—" She shrugged and caught back the purple scarf with a darting motion of her long white hand. "My master desires that the world look upon his possessions with envy."

"As all men must," Vane said, mechanically. That scarf, that purple. It was the first time he had seen that precise shade anywhere but in a rug. But he could be mistaken, of course, in this light. "Who is it," he said carelessly, "who calls himself master of so much beauty?"

But she did not bridle. She looked at him intently.

"One whom all men fear," she said gravely, "as you should fear him. You and the weak ones who travel with you."

She bent toward him swiftly, tearing open the silk at her throat. There was a string of gold about her neck—a serpent, tail in mouth, its flat head hanging low upon her breast, over the heart. A snake with eyes of glittering emerald.

Vane stared at it, curiously repelled. This was stranger even than the absence of the veil.

"You see?" she said, resentfully. "He is *Shaitan*, the Evil One himself. And I alone know what he wears upon his heart!"

She had retreated from him and stood poised for flight, looking back as if she would retract what she had said, if she could. Yet she added something more, reluctantly, as if the words forced themselves through protesting lips:

"Do not go into the desert!" she begged.

"Why not?" Vane said.

"You were warned," she told him somberly. "And now you are twice warned. Yet you will go. So be it. Remember only that what you seek you will not find until you find the *iman*—"

She was gone.

VANE turned to continue his walk, but broke into a run. He headed for the cabin occupied by Bahram Parviz and the boy, suddenly chilled with apprehension.

He found the cabin door open, fastened by the brass hook that held it some four inches ajar for air. The room beyond was dark.

He turned toward his own cabin across the corridor. He pushed open the door sharply. A yellow beam of light fell upon the figure of a man bent over the bed.

A man who whirled to face him, his right arm behind his back.

As Vane lunged he saw the flash of steel in that right hand raised high to strike. Vane's left hand closed over the wrist and wrung it as he brought his own right up in a short uppercut to the point of the chin. The knife dropped.

The punch landed flush, but the other man only shook his head slightly and came toward Vane with his arms low and wide spread, the hands open. Long arms, longer legs and an oddly short-waisted body—very familiar. That bullet head and queer, stretching grin, the glitter of pale eyes too close set—the man in the rug store!

Vane feinted with his left and brought his right over with everything he had behind it, but there was only a quiver when it struck, and Vane's own momentum carried him into the deadly circle.

The arms tightened slowly, inexorably, crushing his ribs, while he rained short, ineffectual blows on the swarthy face that went on grinning at him, only a few inches from his own. The blood was roaring in Vane's ears and the hoarse, gasping sounds that filled the small cabin were coming from his own bursting throat.

Vane gathered himself for a single, hopeless effort. He set the heel of his right hand against the jutting chin of his adversary—and pushed.

He pushed that bullet head back . . . back . . . until he thought the spine must snap. Then suddenly the steel bands about his body broke.

Vane dragged in an agonized, convulsive breath and threw his weight behind a punch that started from the floor. The man went down, and Vane went down on top of him.

There was a glare of light in his eyes now, and voices were humming excitedly. Bahram Parviz—the boy—somebody had summoned stewards.

"Vane, my son, are you all right? Vane!"

The old man's voice, quivering with anxiety. The boy's white face with wide dark eyes staring down at him; a stiff white duck sleeve under his head; and the inertness of the heavy, ape-limbed body on the checkered carpet . . .

Vane grinned, ecstatically. This time I won, he thought.

CHAPTER VI

THE DYER OF REDS

VANE knew now that the old man and the boy must not be left alone again for longer than might be absolutely necessary. He spent what was left of the night on the couch in Bahram Parviz' stateroom, lying stark awake in the speaking darkness of a ship under way.

The faint sounds of straining plates and rattling door hooks, the whisper of foam along the hull and the distant throb of the giant turbines, half felt, half heard, were all a running accompaniment to the thoughts racing through his overstimulated brain.

That girl on deck—he couldn't figure her out at all. Her warning, which had seemed pregnant with meaning, contained none at all when he took it apart. "You will not find what you seek until you have found the priest." But what priest?

Again he heard her hoarse whisper that her master was *Shaitan* himself and that only she knew the mark that was upon his heart. Why should she tell me that, Vane wondered, if she is an ally of my friend with the knife?

The strangely penetrating scent that had emanated from her silks, a scent that was half drug, half perfume—what was that?

Then, remembering the whip and flutter of purple silk on the damp, salt breeze, he connected that scent in with the image the scarf had evoked—a purple opium poppy. Opium! That was it. And that said it all.

Most of the opium-eating of the East was done in Persia and India, and it was a far more insidious habit than smoking the stuff, or drinking it, infused, as in Rajputana.

Iran abounded in the white poppy, best of all the earliest blooming. But this girl had made him think of the purple flower of the second grade, of its bizarre, deep-cut petals with a central band of purple flanked with rich magenta—like that scarf. The cloying scent of it was still in his nostrils, conjuring up the picture of her lovely, sensual young face, amber skinned, amber eyes, and the frank appraisal of her glance, the slow smile of complete approval which had seemed to him too candid altogether to go unveiled.

He remembered the sullen pain in her voice when she said that if it rested with her, she would wear the veil of her kind, but the master she served preferred that all men should look upon his possessions with envy. Who was this master whose yo[illegible] golden snake?

Suddenly frozen, breathless from the shock of his discovery, Vane knew that he had the answer.

Morning found him outside the purser's office when it opened.

"SORRY for the business last night, Mr. Vane," the purser told him. "The man is in the brig. He's the servant of an Eastern potentate we're carrying incog. The whole party leaves us at Naples to go on from there by hydroplane. You'll feel relieved."

"I'd like to have a look at your passenger list," Vane said, amiably. "Not that one. I've seen that. I mean the one you don't print. Which one is the fellow with the homicidal retinue?"

The purser chuckled and pointed to the name: *Tourneur, Paul V., Paris, and Party.*

"That's who he isn't," he said, in a low tone. "Confidentially, he's the Emir Akbar Iskender. But maybe you've met him in your travels, Mr. Vane?"

"Not yet," Vane said, closing the book. "But my luck is bound to change."

He went quickly back to Bahram Parviz' cabin and entered with only the briefest knock.

"Look, *agha,*" Vane said, abruptly, "we've got to talk this thing over. This panther and gazelle act has become really serious. It seems to me we ought to set up a four-hour watch between the three of us. And keep this door locked. Where's the rug?"

Jansar's cool laughter broke upon the silence before Bahram Parviz spoke, and the old man turned upon him with a sharp rebuke that silenced him. But the boy's enmity was apparent enough; and Vane wondered how many assassins he would have to tackle before he could win Jansar's confidence.

"You have news, Vane?" Bahram Parviz asked gravely.

Vane nodded. "He's on board," he said "The Devil, himself. But we're having the good luck to lose him at Naples. He's going on by hydroplane from there."

"To his palace in the Dasht-i-Lût," Bahram Parviz supplied, gloomily. "That is not good luck, Vane, for us."

"For the time being, it is," Vane said. "It gives us a chance to make some plans. All there is to do now," he added wryly. "is to decide what will be the best way to settle *Shaitan.* . . . Jansar, will you take over while I get some sleep?"

The boy's black eyes dwelt upon him coldly. "It's quite a while," Jansar Parviz said, in the accent-free speech that went queerly with his lambent Parsee eyes, "since I played soldiers."

"Jansar!" snapped his grandfather, warningly.

"Yes, *agha,*" the boy said, quickly. He turned to Vane. "I ask your pardon, Mr Vane," he said, reluctantly.

"Quite all right," Vane responded, not without a certain dryness.

THE Emir's mere presence on the ship constituted a menace that kept Vane constantly uneasy and on the alert.

It was not in the nature of a man like Iskender to remain in the shadow of obscurity. Vane had a strong hunch that he would not make the transfer from the ship to the amphibians that awaited him at Naples without some last gesture.

It was made, just as Vane expected. One night out from the Italian shore.

There was the shout, "Man overboard!" and the great ship turned about for the search that lasted until a boat picked up the body of a man with singularly long arms and legs.

A man from whose left ear a small triangular segment had been removed.

His hands and feet had been lashed together at wrists and ankles. The flesh was torn in his last, mad efforts to free himself as he drowned. To escape from the inescapable—from the judgment of Iskender upon a servant who had failed.

At dawn the Emir's party left the *Excalibur* for two amphibians and roared off in the direction of Asia Minor.

Landing at Beirut, Vane, Bahram Parviz and the boy took the bus immediately for Baghdad, by way of Damascus. A long road journey for the old man in his still weakened condition, in spite of air-conditioned transport and all modern conveniences of the road.

Bahram's condition depressed Vane, as did the boy's continued hostility.

Leaving them reluctantly at a hotel, charging them to lock the door until he returned, Vane paid a hurried call at the American consulate.

He ran into Hedges, the very man who had read him the riot act nine years before. Hedges was a little grayer, a little worse tempered, a shade more the Career Man than he had been when he lectured Vane on the evils of exploiting native industry.

"So it's you again," Hedges greeted him. "What kind of contraband have you got in your baggage this time?"

Vane flushed darkly. It hit home, that allusion to the small case of aniline dye samples he had carried with him when he went to Yazd with the Parsee formula in a canvas money belt next to his skin.

It was against the law to bring aniline dyes into Persia, and Vane had known it. The *panchayat* at Bombay, Bahram Parviz, himself had warned Vane to destroy his samples before entering Iran. But Vane had been so sure of himself!

He had been frantically anxious to get through to Yazd and try out his new toy —the mysterious "natural" purple that he had come so close to reproducing chemically.

The formula called for the solvent properties of the waters of Yazd, and Vane proposed to establish his laboratory in the Oasis. There he would experiment with the *pehlevi* formula which had been lent to him, attempting to reproduce it artificially. He knew that he lacked only a few steps of the completed process. Steps that would in all probability lead him to other discoveries, the elusive Persian blue, for example, another of the dyer's "lost arts."

He had cabled to the De Longue Foundation for sufficient funds to cover his installation expenses and to carry him for several months. They sent the money without a murmur. Proud of him! The publicity attending his master stroke of diplomacy in obtaining the Parsee *panchayat's* most treasured secret had been tremendous.

And so had been the laugh that rang around the world when he went slinking home like a kicked pup to report that everything was lost—because the dyers of Yazd had been too fast on their feet for him.

HEDGES reminded him of all that now. Just the sight of Hedges sitting there with his ten finger tips neatly joined, surveying him owlishly, brought the past back with painful clarity.

"What happened to all that money they sent you through the *Credit Lyonnais?*" Hedges wanted to know, with the easy

insolence of the man who measures off the red tape.

"I used it," Vane said, pushing his words through the fog of fury that smothered him. "I used it to endow a home for retired bureaucrats—with a special fund set aside for paper and blunt scissors."

"For what?" Hedges snapped.

"For to cut out paper dolls," Vane said.

But he felt no better for having said it. He was badly worried. There was no hope there, no matter how much of a mess they might run into.

It was Vane's idea to make the journey to Yazd by motor caravan. But Bahram Parviz was obdurate, the boy scornful. The old man had had enough of modern methods of transportation. He longed for a tall gray camel, and even, Vane suspected, the long, wrangling process of equipping an old-fashioned caravan in the bazaars.

And after the first half hour of bargaining in a harness shop Vane himself yielded to the fluctuant charm of the barter system and began to haggle loudly, with fire and feeling.

It was a Fair day and the bazaars were crowded with men from far places. White clad men from Bokhara with dangling *kashbags,* Tekkes from Merv, with twin pigtails, one on either side of the head, and bearded Kazaks from the Kirghiz wastes, Syrians, Anatolians, adroit Greeks and Persians. There were Tartars and Mongols from Central Asia, East Indians and Arabs, and here and there the gaunt, fierce faces of Afghans and Beluches, dreaming of bloodshed.

The men of Khorassan turned aside with aversion from the squatting form of a mumbling Saiva ascetic, an emaciated, fly-infested Hindu in loincloth and turban. He wore flung about his neck the traditional Brahminical string. Vane noted with sharp disgust that it was the thin dried body of a long-dead snake.

Vane's bitter blue eyes passed on hurriedly, raking the crowd for likely material for his caravan now in process of being assembled. Who was there in that motley crowd, Vane wondered, who would be wholly dependable if Iskender cracked the whip?

Suddenly, unaccountably, he thought of a man whose image was stamped on his memory as the most villainous he had ever set eyes on in his life—Mousstaffa Ali, a wool dyer from Afghanistan.

Yet it was Mousstaffa Ali's face that swam before his mind's eye as he bargained for camels and men; it was Mousstaffa Ali's presence that Vane desired. For while the Afghan could be relied upon to lie, cheat, murder and steal from blind beggars, there was likewise the assurance that he could recognize these traits in his fellow man and he was very useful in hiring.

Then, as if conjured up by his imagination, Vane saw that face through a gap in the crowd. He let out a roar:

"Mousstaffa—Mousstaffa Ali!"

A DOZEN Mousstaffas rallied about him instantly, some with and some without the Ali. But when the formality of shaking them off, only to have them settle again like flies, had been repeated several times Vane saw that the man he wanted had disappeared.

And so had Jansar.

"Agha!" Vane cried. *"Agha,* where is the boy?"

Bahram Parviz turned, his aged face suddenly ghastly.

"He was here but a moment ago," he said, greatly agitated. And he began to call the boy's name: "Jansar, Jansar!" in a voice frantic with apprehension.

The answer came to them over the heads of the milling crowd: "I am here, *agha!"* They found the boy standing before a seller of birds, carrying a pair of cages slung across his shoulders. In one of them was a small green parrot whose plumage blazed with a lambent emerald fire in the dusty sunlight of the bazaar.

The seller of birds was a man of thirty-six or so, with a rugged, savage face framed in an enormous turban. An amber colored face, half rascal and half child, wholly fanatical, lit by remarkably fine eyes that were yellow as topaz.

This was the Afghan, Mousstaffa Ali.

He greeted Vane with a shamefaced grin of recognition, flashing a double row of strong yellow teeth that were a shade too sharp, giving him an expression more animal than human, frankly sensual.

Those teeth, that expression—

Vane stared at him for an instant, startled, stirred by some slight associative memory. But he could not trace it. He forgot it in returning the Moslem greeting the bird seller rendered him, the brief touch of fingers to brow, lips and breast.

"Salaam aleikum," said Mousstaffa Ali in a voice singularly low and well modulated.

"Salaam," Vane replied. "It is strange to see you thus, Moustaffa. You, a master dyer. An *al boyaji*—a dyer of reds, beloved of the Prophet!"

A master dyer, yes—that other time. But now a seller of parrots in the marketplace. Vane was puzzled.

Mousstaffa Ali said nothing. But his eyes swerved away from Vane's and were lowered to the dust. For Mousstaffa Ali was ashamed.

The boy, Jansar, had forgotten his dignity and was clamoring for the parrot. For a mascot, he said, for it was the little brother to the parrot in the rug.

"We need no more parrot than we have in you!" Bahram Parviz rebuked him, sternly.

And Jansar was silent.

But Mousstaffa Ali put his hand in the cage and took out the small green bird and handed it to the boy, with a quick glance at Vane.

"Let him have it, *agha,*" Vane begged. "I know this man. It is a gift of friendship."

Bahram Parviz' gaze, normally benign, rested upon the barbaric face of Mousstaffa almost coldly.

"Your friend," he said to Vane in the Gujarati tongue, "has much hatred in his eyes."

He said no more.

"You go to Yazd?" Mousstaffa Ali asked Vane, very low. There was a flash of strong emotion in his eyes. It might very well be hate, Vane thought.

"Yes," Vane said.

"Then you will need someone—a camelherd, a body servant?" Mousstaffa said. "Take me with you, *agha!*"

VANE looked at him, amazed by the sudden eagerness, or hope, that flared in the Afghan's face, now paled and a little sunken at the temples, the mouth tightened as if by a great effort at self-control.

The old man and the boy had gone on ahead toward the camel market where the hoarse shouts of traders rose above the milling, sun gilded dust, punctuated by the strange, vindictive cries of the beasts themselves, as if they resented the values set upon them.

Vane averted his gaze from Mousstaffa Ali's painfully revealing face and from the threadbare hodge-podge of cast-off European clothing he wore, surmounted by that bravely flaunted turban.

He remembered Mousstaffa as he had seen him first, in all his glory, swaggering along the *boya khaneh,* or square of the dyers' shops, his white garments liberally stained with a hundred shades of red, a walking sampler of his art, arrogant and proud.

"Have you abandoned your trade, then?" Vane asked him with regret. Was this man an outcast, like himself? Had his own downfall at Yazd impaired the standing of this master dyer who had been in his employ?

"My trade has abandoned me!" the Afghan cried, tugging violently at one ear concealed under his turban, his sharp yellow teeth bared in a grimace. "Now I would serve you, *agha!* Take me with you!"

"Has it brought you good fortune to serve me, Mousstaffa?" Vane asked, significantly.

"No matter!" the man said, doggedly. "I would return with you to Yazd, though it should cost me my right hand."

He seemed sincere.

Vane looked at him keenly. The man

was seething with some inner torment that gave him no rest. He had no cause to think of Mousstaffa Ali as either honest or reliable. Yet he was strong and brave with the fierce, fanatical courage of the Afghan Moslem.

Neither friend nor enemy, Mousstaffa Ali, fired by some private grievance of his own, might be a valuable companion at arms on the long, bandit infested caravan route through the desert. Vane felt deeply the need of such a companion, and honesty seemed a negligible virtue in the circumstances.

"So be it," he said, quickly. "Come to the Grand Hotel tomorrow morning at nine. You are once more in my employ."

"You will be served, *agha,*" said Mousstaffa Ali.

Vane nodded and went on to rejoin Bahram Parviz and the boy.

The *afghan* stood motionless where Vane had left him, his bird-cages at his feet, his left hand tugging once more at his left ear.

That ear that had been neatly nicked and lacked a small triangular segment of the lobe.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Or An Old Lettuce Leaf

FASHION, boys and girls, is no longer spinach. Nor is it any longer facetious to state that a lightly clad lady appears in nothing but atmosphere and a winning smile. Chemistry is on the verge of bringing such garb into the realm of the actual.

Fashion is not spinach. Rather it may be considered a combination of coal tar, oxygen, and soy beans. Or water. Or, for those who enjoy polysyllabic technicalities, acetic anhydride and acetic acid.

Consider, now, an abbreviated bathing suit made out of a lump of coal, a pinch of salt, and a dash of air. Or sheer stockings spun from coal, air, and water (and you can salt them yourself). Or a tricky little daytime number, for shopping, whose fabric is the lineal descendant of a bucket of milk.

Not a gag, apparently. American manufacturers saw a demonstration of all these things, and a good many more, when the Congress of Industry met in New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel last month. From the proceedings at that time, it seems apparent that the nation's chemists are determined to dress us up in the stuff that we formerly breathed, ate, burned, and swam in.

Combs, brushes, nail files—the variety of things you see laid out neatly on a lady's dressing table (if you *do* see them)—are fascinatingly based on cotton, formaldehyde, sour milk, and carbolic acid.

Next step—fixing it so we can eat our shoes in an emergency.

—*Skippy McMullin*

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

• RIFLED FIREARMS •

Rifles are usually looked upon as a very modern development. Actually they were invented in the early part of the 16th. century, but found little favor with the military for over 200 years. The necessity for using a very snug bullet made loading so slow (a mallet had to be used to seat the bullet) that smooth bore guns retained their popularity despite the ballistic advantages of the rifled barrel.

•FIRST MODERN HOSPITAL•

The first military hospital built on modern pavilion plans was erected at Pooleville Md. by A.B.Crosby in 1861.

• TERM of ENLISTMENT •

The Duke of Marlborough set the term of enlistment in the British army at three years, and that is the usual U.S.army term to this day.

• FIRST MILITARY • ORGANIZATION *in* AMERICA

In 1638, Captain Robert Keayne was founder and first commander of this chartered organization, "The Ancient and Honorable Artillery."

The Game's on Ice

The puck is a little piece of rubber that gets pushed around with a stick. The manager is the guy that gets pushed around by the owner. But the star of this man's team is a handsome laddie who refuses to be pushed around by anybody

By CLARK BODEY
Author of "From Gold to Worse"

Complete Novelet

I

OUR new owner's wire had reached me on the train coming down from Montreal, where the Canadiens had just handed us a shellacking to the tune of 2-1 in an overtime game.

Already, in my first season at the Raiders' helm, those veteran puck chasers were giving me gray hairs. And if I'd known what was behind the owner's message, I'd have had plenty more right away.

REPORT WITH ENTIRE SQUAD WINTER PALACE IMMEDIATELY.
MAGUIRE

That was all the wire said.

I fingered that crumpled telegram in my pocket now as we stood across the desk facing this same Terence O'Reilly Maguire. He was a tall, poker-faced guy with a pair of the blackest eyes you ever saw, and a fog-horn voice that made you wonder when the patent-medicine sales talk was about to begin.

Honest, when he welcomed us I had a hard time not looking around to see where the calliope and sideshows were parked!

What made it funnier yet was that the office floor was alive with snaky electric light cables and sound-track equipment until the whole place looked as if Hollywood might have moved in.

"Would you like to rehearse your speech before we start to roll, Mr. Maguire?" the news-camera guy was saying.

"That won't be necessary," said Maguire in that dead-pan manner of his, "What I have to say won't take much time. Boys, I want you all to meet your new rookie, a valuable young man I picked up on the West Coast to strengthen the Raiders' front line, a young man you've all heard a lot about—Johnny Hardy!"

The door behind Maguire opened and a tall, handsome youngster came out. He must've stood six feet one in his socks. He was wearing a neat blue suit and his black hair was nicely brushed. There was a shy grin on his good-looking face; but the grin melted away when he saw the scowling surprise that met him.

And we had a right to be stunned—by Johnny Hardy, the glamour boy, the idol of feminine hearts—the toast of the talkies.

"Johnny," said Maguire, grabbing him by the hand as the cameras began to grind, "I'm proud to welcome you to the new home of the Raiders. I confidently expect that your joining the club will make hockey history."

"Thank you, Mr. Maguire," said Johnny, and looked a little uneasy.

YOU'LL get the picture when I tell you that the Raiders are the oldest puck-raggers in the whole National League, and there isn't a veteran among them who hasn't a flock of stitches in his hide: you can't go to the hockey wars for twenty years or so like most of the boys have done without collecting a few scars.

That was why we must've presented a picture resembling Beauty and the Beast when we stood there gaping at Johnny Hardy with his nice, clean-cut profile unmarred by even so much as a slash from

Suddenly I heard a crashing all over the ice. The fans were going after the team with dinner plates!

a stick. A movie star playing hockey with the Raiders—*wow!*

There were Doc Roamer and Speed King, wings, with the two-hundred-pound defense men, Butch Barrows and Pug Garvey, bulking in the background. Stubby "Thunder" Storm, our center, stood at one side with Slats Gaugin, the white-haired goalie, both of 'em chewing away on their gum in a dazed sort of way as if they couldn't believe their eyes. Nobody said a word because nobody could. We were that stunned.

"It's a real privilege to join your club," Johnny Hardy added modestly. "It's always been an ambition of mine to play with the Raiders."

The guy who was doing the interviewing laughed in that phoney way interviewers have and said, "Heh, heh—now we can expect the Raiders to climb out of the cellar, can't we, Johnny?"

"I can't say anything," said Johnny seriously, "except that I intend to do my part."

This sally didn't do anything toward promoting a cordial feeling among the boys.

In the first place, the Raiders' being in the cellar spot for the last three years had become sort of a standing joke in the National League. When old Jules Beaverwick, the ale king, died the estate stopped offering the club a bonus on winning the Stanley Cup; and since then the boys hadn't done so well.

That was why, when word reached us in Montreal that the heirs had sold the club lock, stock, and barrel to this Terence O'Reilly Maguire, each player pri-

vately figured it was the axe for himself. There has been a lot of loose talk going on in hockey circles of late about injecting new blood into the old line clubs.

So when Maguire ordered us to report immediately at the Winter Palace—on top of dropping an overtime game to the Canadiens, 2-1—there naturally were some misgivings. I could see all the boys thinking it was the end.

Fortunately, the newsreel men stopped grinding then. When they began shunting equipment and packing their stuff away I gave the boys the signal to clear out and get down below to the ice where we were scheduled to have a little practice session. This being at Maguire's own suggestion, I figured maybe he wanted to size up our playing.

"Okay, boys," I told them. "Be out on the ice in fifteen minutes."

WE WENT out into the corridor and found a pretty, fair-haired girl who'd been waiting for us there. It was Sunnie Storm, who'd been sort of a mascot of the club for the last ten years, ever since Thunder Storm came to the Raiders. Sunnie hadn't met us at the train when we arrived, which was unusual

She greeted us scornfully. "A fine bunch of bums. So you let the Canadiens lick you."

The redshirts crowded around her, all talking at once. There were about as many explanations as there were players as to why we'd dropped that game, but she didn't listen to any of 'em. She came over to me and put an arm through mine.

"I don't want to hear any of your alibis," she said. "I'll have Bill give me the low-down."

Johnny Hardy had been standing there in the background all this time, looking uncomfortable. Now Sunnie looked at him and smiled and her eyes brightened. I guessed that she hadn't heard about the new rookie.

"Sunnie," I said, "this is Johnny Hardy. He's just joined the Raiders."

Sunnie put out a frank hand for him to shake, and smiled at him with her level blue eyes. For some reason Johnny Hardy was flushed and gawky as a kid; and I saw Speed King glance from one to the other with a scowl. "I'm pleased to meet you, Johnny Hardy," she said.

Now that Sunnie and Speed were practically engaged, and the only reason they hadn't been married before this was to the uncertainty of the Raiders' future. Speed being a sulky, handsome sort of a guy, he felt very possessive about Sunnie and everything she did.

"Johnny," Speed told her, "is gonna show us some of those fancy ice-skating tricks of his."

At this, Johnny Hardy looked even unhappier. A couple of the boys snickered. It was kind of a mean thing to bring up that fancy skating then, because the last thing Johnny had filmed out in Hollywood two years ago was a little number called *Blazing Ice*. So help me, it even had a hockey game in it played to music!

This picture was so bad, honest, that you could smell it two blocks away. It was the thing that had finished Johnny Hardy's career as a Hollywood Tarzan, I suspected.

"I'm afraid I can't show you boys anything," he said.

"Don't let them kid you," Sunnie said. "You couldn't show these bums anything—they know it all already. Well, good luck, Johnny. I'll be seeing you."

The Raiders clumped off down the stairs to the locker room and I looked at Sunnie.

"Well," I said, "what do you think of the new rookie?"

"Johnny Hardy? I feel sorry for him in there with that bunch. But I'm worried about them. What's wrong, Bill?"

I considered that. "Your guess is as good as mine. For one thing, they're not going to like being sold to Maguire. If he'll just keep his hands off and let me handle them maybe we'll get along all right. But they're touchy. Don't forget, a guy who's been a hockey star for twenty years thinks he's pretty good. And you can't blame him."

"You mean—?"

"I mean, their puck ragging is just about as perfect as anything you ever saw on ice. But they never quite put it into the strings. They held the Canadiens to a stand-off until that overtime period; then they lost because the other boys slipped in a lucky one.

"They're not playing the same old sweaty, honest hockey they used to play. If I can build a fire under 'em we may reach the play-offs and get a crack at the Stanley Cup. If we don't—and if we stop being good box-office for Maguire—there's no telling what'll happen."

Her hand tightened on my arm. "You mean he'll sell the club?"

I patted her hand. "Don't worry. We'll make those play-offs. Then you and Speed can get married."

She gave me a grateful smile.

"You're a swell guy, Bill."

"You're pretty swell yourself, kid."

I LEFT her then and went downstairs to the dressing room which is nothing more nor less than a big barnlike room with a lot of steam pipes running overhead with some rusty lockers set against the wall.

There was a lot of grousing going on. It's funny how a guy will act as if the whole thing doesn't matter a hoot to him when you know his future is at stake.

"So this," grunted Doc Roamer as he struggled into his pads, "is what we get for giving old Jules Beaverwick the bloom of our hockey careers; sold down the river to an old snake-oil artist who buys us the way he'd buy a defunct circus."

"'Medicine Man' Maguire," mused Pug Garvey, sourly. "I wonder where he got that name."

Doc explained. "They say he used to be a barker for a carnival outfit, and bought it up when they went busted. Since then he's bought everything from defunct circuses to starving menageries."

Speed King, still feeling ugly, said, "What does *he* know about running a hockey club?"

"That," Doc promised him, "is what we're gonna find out!"

I saw Johnny Hardy sitting at one side, sort of bewildered by all this grousing that was going on. As casually as I could, I put in, "Okay, boys, let's go. Crab all you want to around me, but don't forget that even if the boss doesn't know a back check from a rubber check he still pays our salaries."

I happened to have my back to the door, so that I didn't see Maguire standing behind me until a funny sort of silence fell over the room. How long he'd been there, or how much he'd heard, I didn't know. His poker face didn't change a muscle.

"Bill," he said to me, "I'd like you to fix Johnny up with a set of those corset stays like you boys wear on the ice. I want to see how he can play hockey."

"Sure, Mr. Maguire," I said. "He'll get his chance like any rookie."

Maguire said, "Put him in there right away. I want to see him start the game Saturday night. I think we're going to have a sell-out.'

"Okay." I managed to say it without showing more than half the disgust I felt.

For a second after Maguire had left there wasn't a sound in that dressing room. Corset stays! And a rookie ordered into the front line to play with three men who'd been used to playing together for twenty years! I didn't dare look at any of my vets.

"Now you know who's running this club," I thought to myself. "And the guy ain't you!"

II

I YANKED a lot of stuff out of the bags and tossed it over to Johnny Hardy while the rest of the Raiders, dressed for the ice, clumped up the runway to the rink above. I noticed the kid had stopped and picked up a set of shin guards and was staring at them. He looked at me.

"You mean," he asked, "I'm to wear *these?*"

"Sure, what's wrong with 'em?"

He pointed to some indelible lettering on the webbing. "But they used to belong to Chambrun!"

For a moment I didn't say anything. It sort of got me to think that Johnny figured he wasn't worthy to wear the great Pierre Chambrun's rig. I knew he was thinking that because of the hushed way he spoke. All at once I decided Johnny Hardy was all right.

"Put 'em on," I said. "Maybe some day you'll be famous too, kid."

I looked back as I went out of the door into the corridor. Johnny had peeled off his shirt and was just putting on the Raiders red jersey over his pads. I could see a nice California tan over the hard muscles that tapered down his back into slim hips and a pair of powerful legs, the kind football players develop from driving into a football dummy.

He looked good, but I knew that up against some old veterans like Doc Roamer and Thunder Storm he'd look pretty slim and green.

Maguire was cracking peanuts in one hand and tossing 'em into his mouth as he watched the veterans gliding around down on the ice below. I climbed into his box.

"Look, Mr. Maguire," I said. "I'd like a word with you."

Maguire turned his poker face toward me. "Shoot!"

"Maybe you don't know it," I began, "but my contract with the Raiders gives me the right to hire and fire the players in this club. Just what do you expect me to do with this Johnny Hardy?"

"He plays hockey, don't he?"

That dead pan and that toneless voice were beginning to get me. I snapped, "In front of the cameras, yes. But what can he do on a real rink? Remember, there aren't any retakes out there. I'd like to know why you hired him in the first place."

Maguire grunted just one word.

"Boxoffice!"

I thought I could begin to see the light. It made me hot around the collar, too. Maguire had hired a nice, clean-cut kid and turned him over to a bunch of human buzz saws to maul around the ice—all for what it would bring in at the boxoffice.

"Listen, Mr. Maguire," I said patiently. "Johnny Hardy probably weighs about one seventy, stripped. He'll be up against guys like Butch Barrows and Pug Garvey who tip the scales at two twenty, and a lot more with their pads on. I can't afford to use the kid just as window dressing because we're short-handed with spares now. He'll have to play and he'll be murdered. He's up against the real thing now. The Raiders are a tough lot on the ice."

Maguire tossed another peanut into his mouth.

"They don't look so tough to me."

I spread my hands. "I know. We lost that game to the Canadiens. But it's early in the season. They'll snap out of it."

"They better," said Maguire, laconically, "or nobody'll want to come and see them."

I COULD see I was getting nowhere fast, so I started down below to the Raiders' bench. Sunnie was sitting there waiting for me. She linked an arm through mine and snuggled against my shoulder. She gave me a quick little smile, and I knew there was something on her mind.

"Bill," she said, finally, "why did Maguire hire Johnny Hardy?"

So that was what was bothering her.

"Don't ask me," I said, stalling. "Maybe he figures the boy can play hockey."

She puzzled over that a while, but I could see it didn't really satisfy her. There was a frown of worry between her clear blue eyes.

"I hope they don't treat him too rough," she said finally. "It means more than anything in the world: a chance to play big league hockey."

I turned and looked at her.

"Hey, how come you know so much about Johnny Hardy?"

She colored prettily. "I—I read it in a fan magazine somewhere."

Just then Johnny himself came up onto the ice and I banged on the boards and called Slats Gaugin over and gave him Maguire's orders to work Johnny into some of the plays. Since we don't have enough players to make up two teams on the practice ice, two of our spares being in the hospital, our second-string line usually took turns attacking the cage.

Slats grumbled, "What does he want us to do, play drop-the-handkerchief?"

But he skated back and told Toddy and Sloan, spares, to team up with Johnny Hardy. I leaned forward on the bench to watch what went on. It was plain that the veterans didn't like the way Maguire was shoving a rookie in there.

But you could see that they weren't too worried. There are ways of handling a rookie that'll take all the zing out of him the first ten minutes he's on the ice. I saw Doc Roamer give the boys a wink. "Take it easy on us, kid," he told Johnny. "We ain't used to the movie hockey you been playing."

"Want some incidental music?" Speed called out; and Johnny got red in the face, but he still grinned. For myself, I figured that maybe he'd do some of his fancy-Dan skating, or try to, and the Raiders would give him a couple of body checks and it would all be over just like that. So I wasn't prepared for what really did happen.

Sloan and Toddy were up on their toes now, probably because they figured that with Johnny Hardy in there they'd have to turn on the heat.

For the first ten minutes they stick-dazzled the puck back and forth between themselves, leaving Johnny pretty much out of it. They made a couple of tries at the strings, but Barrows and Garvey met them with heavy checks.

It sure made pretty hockey to watch them tearing down the rink and coming to a stop in a spray of shaved ice before they slammed a try at the goalie. Slats was batting down the puck with his bear-skin mitts as easily as you'd slap off a troublesome fly.

But it wasn't the kind of hockey that scored, and I found myself thinking that it was just this sort of business the Raiders had gone in for up there in Montreal against the Canadiens. It was pretty, but it wasn't hockey.

■

DURING all this, Johnny had been skating vainly around the ice and yelling for the rubber but never getting a crack at it. Now, all at once, he apparently decided that the only way to get into the game was to grab it, which he did.

He outmaneuvered the surprised Speed King at the boards and raced down at Barrows who stood there waiting with a goofy well-you-asked-for-it-son expression on his face.

Toddy and Sloan were yelling for the pass, but Johnny wasn't divvying up. All of a sudden he lifted the puck over Barrows' stick and took the body check going full tilt, on the opposite side. Butch slammed into the boards and spun down along the ice with the funniest look on his battered mug.

Skates digging ice, Johnny tore on at the goal just as Pug Garvey cut across to intercept. They whammed together at the cage just as the kid let drive with a terrific try, and Johnny spun full tilt into Slats. The three of them went down in a tangle in the strings.

"He's marvelous, Bill!" I heard Sunnie gasp.

"He's gone and knocked himself cold on the cage support. that's what he's done," I answered.

Sure enough, the kid lay still on the ice when Garvey and Gaugin pulled themselves together and crawled out of the net. They looked sore and disgruntled and shamefaced, all at the same time. When they pulled Johnny Hardy around to a sitting position, there was the rubber on the ice under him inside the cage.

"The crazy fool liked to of knocked a tooth out," said Pug, feeling gingerly of his jaw.

"What does he think this is?" growled Slats. "A real hockey game?"

I came up through the trail of havoc the kid had left in his meteoric try at the strings just as Sunnie reached his side. She dropped to the ice and took his head in her lap. The kid opened his eyes.

"What happened?" he stammered. "Did I—"

"You whammed into that cage going about forty miles an hour, that's all." I told him. "You've just been listening to the birdies. How do you feel now?"

"Okay."

He looked at Sunnie when he said that, and a flush crept into her cheeks. He was still dazed, but it was clear that he was thinking that Sunnie Storm was just about the prettiest girl he'd seen in a long time. His eyes told her that.

Speed saw that look, and he didn't like it. He leaned on his stick and said, "I wish you'd try that play again, kid. Just try it!"

"Yeah," said Barrows, huskily. "I'd like to know how that was done."

I knew Butch Barrows was sore about being slid along on his pants by a mere rookie. But this animosity between Speed and Johnny was something else again. It had to do with Sunnie; and that was bad. Johnny looked up with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Sure." He smiled tightly. "Any time, boys."

I knew now that he realized that he'd been given the old run-around by the rest of the Raiders. Probably he thought it was because he was chalked up as a phoney.

As a matter of fact, the Raiders were sore and ready to fight at the drop of a hat because Maguire was ramming a rookie down their throats—and spoiling all their pretty, non-scoring plays.

III

YOU'D probably guess that I had enough worries on my mind without taking Johnny Hardy's particular problem under my hat too.

But the way I look at it, a good hockey manager tries to get his squad to functioning at its best regardless of everything. Until they're hitting on all six cylinders no team is going to go out and burn up the ice in the play-offs. That was why I worried about Johnny.

The veterans had nothing against the kid, personally, except that Maguire seemed dead set on ramming him down their throats.

All during the next week the boss sat around watching the practice sessions for the Saturday night game with the New York Americans on home ice. Whenever he came around he wanted to know why Johnny Hardy wasn't in there ragging the puck—and I'd have to send him in. Of course, I could have cited my contract and refused to; but there wasn't any point to that, so I shoved Johnny into the plays.

As a game, the session with the Americans turned out to be not so hot: it ended in a standoff even with overtime. But for what happened afterwards, it was important.

In the first period there wasn't any score, but Speed King tangled with Anderson of the Americans at the boards. They both drew penalties.

Along about 9:30 of the second period Doc Roamer rammed the rubber in for the first tally and I began to think we'd hit our stride. But at 14:39 of the same period Lloyd Jackson of the Americans jammed in the evener past Slats, and it stayed that way to the end of the game.

Twice, during the first period and the third, I'd sent Johnny Hardy in along with the relief players. But he hadn't been able to do much. The reason was that whenever Speed handed him a sizzling pass he gave it to him just enough off line to make Johnny miss.

I noticed that Johnny came off the ice each time with a puzzled look on his face, though the fans—and especially the feminine contingent—always gave him a big hand.

There have been a lot of rookies queered with just such tactics. Speed, I knew, was sore. Maybe Sunnie had jumped on him

for riding the kid. I don't know. But when I saw Sloan feed him one at an angle too, where it was impossible to make a get, I knew that they were out to show up Johnny Hardy.

I began to boil. But there wasn't a thing I could do but just sit tight. After all, you can't accuse a player of selling out his team by feeding passes off line to a guy he doesn't like.

The overtime period started with Speed and Anderson renewing hostilities right in front of the American bench. They both drew the cooler and the short-handed teams ended it as a stand-off 1-1.

I SAW Sunnie afterwards, in the corridor outside my office. From the way her eyes looked, large and round in the white mask of her face, I knew she was angry.

"Bill, did you see what happened?" she asked. "They fed Johnny every pass just off line, so he couldn't get it. Why don't you talk with them?"

I shook my head sadly.

"And what good would that do?" I asked. "This is something you can't handle with a club. They figure Maguire gave them a raw deal when he handed them a rookie with a box-office following. It's their pride that's hurt."

Sunnie's lips trembled, and she looked away. "I didn't think Speed would be as small as that—or Thunder either!"

"Let things alone as they stand," I suggested. "They'll work themselves out. Maybe it'd be better if Johnny found out he wasn't meant to be a hockey player. He's got nice, even features that haven't been scrambled yet. They won't be so nice if he plays tag with a hockey stick very long."

She flared. "He's through with Hollywood. He's got to make good with the Raiders. He told me so."

There wasn't any use arguing with her; I could see that. But one important thing stuck out in her conversation: she had obviously been seeing Johnny Hardy outside. Maybe that accounted for Speed's actions in riling up the squad against him.

Whatever it was, it was playing fat jinx with my club and a chance to get into the play-offs for a crack at the Stanley Cup.

I admitted as much to Maguire later in his office when I went in to hash over the game with him. But he didn't seem too worried. He sat there with his hat cocked over one ear and no expression on his face—as usual. His left eyebrow was canted up, and he was chewing peanuts. He kept cracking them and tossing them into his mouth until I thought I'd go bats.

"Maybe you didn't notice we had a sell-out tonight," he said.

I grunted. "You mean because Johnny Hardy was billed to play with the Raiders?"

Maguire shrugged. "He's good box-office."

"Don't you realize," I said, "that by cramming Johnny Hardy down the throats of these veterans we may lose a chance at the Stanley Cup?"

"What's a fifty-dollar silver mug compared to a sell-out?"

I got a little sore.

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," I said. "But I feel sorry for Johnny Hardy when he realizes you hired him just as box-office bait, and not because he's a hockey player at all!"

Maguire droned, "Some guys don't need to play hockey to win games."

"In this league they do," I snapped, and went out.

THE blow-up, as I said, came quicker than I'd expected it would. I was sitting in a little restaurant a way down the street from our headquarters—a cheap hotel Maguire had picked out because it was near the Winter Palace.

The restaurant door opened and Johnny Hardy came in. It was eight o'clock, and Sunday morning, and I hadn't seen all the papers yet on account of the European situation being all over the front pages.

"Hello, Johnny. You're up early."

He tossed down a copy of the *Blade's* sports section in front of me and said, "Now I know why Maguire hired me—and why I didn't get any of those passes last night."

I looked up. His eyes burned at me. His face was white and set.

"Why?"

"Read that!"

I picked up the paper. Jack Dooley of the *Blade* hadn't pulled any punches when he told the customers what he thought of last night's exhibition. The veterans, he intimated, were on the skids and Maguire, realizing this, had gone out and copped off a Hollywood glamour boy to play tag with them on the ice. Dooley went on:

This rookie, Johnny Hardy, actually showed more fight than any redshirt all evening, but was unable to score because Bill Session's little boys refused to play ball with him.

Time and again, within scoring distance, the brilliant stick-handlers handed the rookie sizzling hot passes; but they were just enough off line to make Rookie Hardy look very, very bad. . . .

Can it be that the vets are slipping, and that they're jealous of this flicker rookie? Or is it merely another indication that the Raiders are dying on their feet from old age, jealousy and lack of fight?

I wished this guy Dooley an early hanging.

As casually as I could I put down the paper and began to butter a cake. "That's just Dooley, running off at the mouth," I said soothingly. "Don't pay any attention to him, Johnny."

The kid still looked white around the lips as he tried to smile.

"Evidently I'm boxoffice to Maguire, so he'll keep shoving me in there. He hired me to play hockey, and that's what I'm going to do."

I put down my knife and fork. He looked so wretched that I could only remember what Sunnie had said about this thing's being his biggest ambition—to play with a big league hockey team.

"Look, Johnny," I said. "Don't take this too hard. Even if the boys act sore, they'll get over it. Play ball with 'em and prety soon they'll forget they're sore. Just remember, they're probably as upset and jittery as you are, and nobody ever got anywhere playing a lone wolf game like you've been trying to do."

Johnny didn't answer that. He just turned on his heel and walked away, and I couldn't say as I blamed him. Somehow. I'd lost all my appetite for food, I was that sorry for Johnny. Because I figured he'd been given a raw deal all the way around: first by Maguire who'd hired him for what he'd bring in at the boxoffice, and next by the veterans themselves.

Right then and there I gave up all hopes of a look at the play-offs and the Stanley Cup.

IV

IT SEEMS funny that a lot of free dinner plates could be partly responsible for putting the Raiders on the map again. but that is the truth.

Sometimes I think it was a miracle that Maguire refused to pass out a flock of complimentary tickets to the city police department on the night we played the Toronto Maple Leafs. Because the chief of police got sore and called off all police protection at the Winter Palace; and only a battalion of ushers was left to handle the crowds.

If it hadn't been for this we'd never have had the free-for-all fight that put the Raiders on the map again with the fans.

I can still see the headlines that blossomed next morning:

RAIDERS SHOW FLASH OF OLD-TIME SPIRIT —ENTIRE SQUADS BATTLE ON ICE FOR TEN MINUTES!

There was a lot more to it that never reached print, and that the fans never knew about. They didn't know why the Raiders were fighting mad; they didn't know that the veterans' blow-up was due to a rookie wing that Maguire insisted on cramming down their throats.

During the interval between Dooley's blast in his column and the night of the Leaf game, I'd gone along exactly as if nothing at all was wrong. In practice I worked Johnny into the plays as often as I could, and he picked them up fast from the diagrams I'd given him.

He was grim and unsmiling now around the locker room, in contrast to the wide-eyed enthusiasm he'd shown at first. Since Dooley had tipped their hand, the rest of the Raiders had looked a little shamefaced. But when Johnny didn't mention that article and refused to respond to their kidding, they began to get a little sore.

It was in this mood that they came to the ice to begin their game with the Leafs. I saw Maguire on the way up to his box, and he stopped long enough to lean over the Raider bench and say, "Start young Hardy in the first period, and you'll see things."

I was seeing plenty already, but there was no use in trying to argue with Maguire. He was already sauntering away. So I banged on the boards and called the boys over to give them their orders.

A funny, grayish look spread over Doc Roamer's face when he found out that Johnny Hardy was starting in his place. He slid down on the bench beside me. "Did Maguire make you start that phoney puck-chaser?"

"I'm running this team," I said.

"You're supposed to be," Doc said meaningly. "Or maybe tonight being ladies' night you want to give the little stenographers a thrill."

"Maybe," I said.

Doc gave me a puzzled look and turned away to watch the action out there on the ice.

That mob of fans was already cheering for Johnny as if they sympathized with him, which of course didn't improve Speed King's temper. I saw him give Thunder Storm a look that meant *he* wasn't handing the rookie any passes tonight.

Johnny didn't even look at the Raiders. He just grabbed the puck at the melee of the face-off, did a spin-about and glued the rubber to his stick for a solo dash down into the Leaf danger zone.

Speed King hadn't counted on anything like this, so that he got away too late for Johnny to team up with him and Thunder Storm on a three-man rush. Maybe Speed was still sore at the way the mob had yelled encouragement for Johnny; maybe he was just surprised. But when Johnny got down there and looked around for somebody to pass to there wasn't a Raider in sight. Clancy and Day came out for him.

What the kid did then wasn't good hockey, but it jumped the fans up out of their seats in a way that the Raiders hadn't been able to do in three seasons of smart hockey strategy.

He whammed a desperate try at Hainsworth in the Leaf cage and the surprise of it all caught the goalie napping; the puck went in waist-high for the first score of the evening.

Sure it was a fluke play, and there probably wasn't a fan there who didn't know it. But it brought down the house like a ton of bricks.

ALL of a sudden, out of the Bronx cheers the customers were giving Speed and Thunder for their failure to assist, I began to hear a lot of popping and cracking on the ice in front of the bench.

Some of the Raiders began to duck and hold up their arms, and when I saw the whitewings start for the ice with their brooms as time out was called I realized what had happened.

The customers were firing dinner plates —yeah, dinner plates—down onto the ice to show their disapproval of the Raiders' tactics.

As quick as I could I jumped the rail and got up to the box where Maguire sat, calmly cracking peanuts and tossing them into his mouth.

"Where did they get those plates?" I yelled.

Maguire didn't change a muscle in his face.

"Free gift to the ladies. Maybe you didn't notice that we got a full house."

I got sore. "I notice that somebody's going to get killed out there if they don't stop heaving crockery at my players."

Maguire fed himself another peanut. "Maybe they'll start playing hockey now," he said.

I could see that I was getting nowhere fast. So I went back to the bench just as action started again.

This time Speed and Thunder started out like two playing fools to put that puck down there in the Leaf cage again. just to show how easily it was done. They weren't going to let any rookie outdo them. But Clancy and Day were on their toes and they broke it up.

A Leaf wing sneaked it away on a back-check and the rubber went back down into Raider territory in a three-man rush made up of Horner and Metz and Thoms. It drew another chorus of boos for Speed and Thunder.

That one solo try, fluke as it was, had won the fickle gallery over to Johnny Hardy. They began to razz the Raiders and cheer for Johnny every time he got the puck, which wasn't often. A Leaf grabbed it away almost as quick as he got it, but the kid was game.

He took every body check going full steam ahead. It wasn't smart hockey, and we weren't scoring. but the kid's fighting spirit had caught the fans' attention and there wasn't anything for the redshirts to do but speed up their playing too or take an awful lot of dinner plates out of the gallery.

Toward the end of the first period, Speed and Thunder managed to ram in a second counter. The Raiders were seething all the time they were down in the dressing room having a rubdown and a change of shirts. But they didn't say anything.

IN THE second period I yanked Johnny out of there a second time and sent Doc Roamer in. Right away the action began to taper down to something like normal. The veterans were doing a lot of plain and fancy stick-handling, and holding the Leafs nicely, thank you. But there wasn't any of the murder and sudden death in their playing that there had been while Johnny Hardy was on the ice.

The Leafs staged a three-man rush in the beginning of the third that drew a red light above our strings. Maguire signaled me to shoot in Johnny Hardy.

No sooner had the mob jumped up to welcome the kid than the Raiders began to speed up their game. Johnny was still sparking them into the old fight, and Speed and Thunder didn't dare to hand him a pass off line or they'd get a few plates sailed at them.

It was funny, and yet it wasn't funny either—because you can't have a Cup squad that isn't hitting on all six.

From where I sat I could see Speed King beginning to get sore. When he does that he gets red in the face, and starts playing nasty. He gave Horner the butt of a stick at mid-ice and Horner came back with a crack on the jaw that skidded Speed across the ice, thereby drawing them both a ten-minute penalty.

This smart move left the Raiders shot. I don't remember all the details of that last period. but it was plenty hectic. Twice. the Leafs almost made the evener; but Slats Gaugin was in the strings again and he was making brilliant saves.

Johnny Hardy was in there fighting and breaking it up as much as he could. Pug Garvey and Butch Barrows were playing as they hadn't played in years. I guess maybe the crowd began to catch fire from the excitement. Or maybe it was seeing that wild-eyed rookie, Johnny Hardy, in there playing like a fool.

Myself, I felt a little tingle go down my spine every time the Raiders turned on the heat. Man, they could play hockey!

Horner came out of the cooler with a blast at the strings that left it a tie and called for overtime

"Let me go in there. Bill," Doc Roamer begged beside me. "Take that fool kid out of there. We gotta win this game!"

I looked straight ahead. "Maguire's orders."

I'd relieved the kid with a spare now and then in that last grueling period. But now I sent him in. Overtime started with a bang.

Speed was skating as if he had a personal grudge against the Leafs, and he started down-ice with Thunder sharing the puck. Metz had gone in for Horner and he tangled with Speed at the boards in a hard body-check. They both went down.

Just what happened then I never knew. Speed and Metz came up fighting right in front of the Leaf bench. While this was going on, Horner reached over the rail and slammed Speed over the eye with his stick.

IN LESS time than it takes to tell about it the whole Raider squad was tangled up with the Leafs; Horner and Slats Gaugin were mixing it up in the middle of the melee and sticks and fists were flying like wild. The whole place was in an uproar.

And because Maguire had had his little tiff with the police department there wasn't a blue uniform in sight. I saw the chief usher trying to get the ushers to march down the ice and keep the hot-headed spectators from mixing it up with the players. But the ushers weren't anxious to get in there with all those flying sticks.

Just when things had apparently calmed down, Speed and Metz started swinging again. Jackson of the Leafs swung a wild one and clipped a fan on the chin. Johnny Hardy stopped a riot from spreading to the ten thousand fans by icing Jackson with a right to the button.

After a while things calmed down enough for playing to begin. On my way back to the Raiders' bench I happened to glance up and there sat Maguire, cracking peanuts and eating them as calmly as if nothing at all had happened.

The last seconds of that overtime period matched anything I'd seen in the Raiders' hottest moments. First off, Johnny Hardy, with a chunk of court plaster over one eye, grabbed away the rubber and tried to repeat his feat of ramming home a counter all by himself. Metz spilled him and it was Doc Roamer who came tearing in with a back check to give Speed King an assist to the goal that won the game.

We were headed for the play-offs now.

But the Winter Palace looked as if somebody had dropped a couple of howitzer shells in a china shop. Honest, that ice was covered with enough crockery to stock a department store. That baptism of broken plates was the thing that had made them fighting mad; and it was the thing that had won the game, too.

When I got down below I found the whole Raider squad in rebellion. They formed a ring around Maguire, who was looking as cool as ice. Johnny Hardy sat on a bench behind him, his nice, clean-cut face smeared with blood but with a happy gleam in his eye.

"How much longer are you going to handicap us with this guy?" Speed King asked, and jerked a thumb at Johnny Hardy.

Maguire's dead-pan face didn't change a muscle.

"I didn't notice you causing the goalie any trouble," he told Speed, and cracked a peanut shell.

Speed got red in the face.

"There isn't anything in our contracts that says we have to let a rookie bust up our plays."

Maguire took a long while to study Speed. I guess that by now he knew all about the trouble between Speed and Johnny, and he knew that when trouble came it would be Speed who was the ringleader. He popped a couple of peanuts into his mouth.

"Neither is there anything in your contract that says you have to keep on playing on this club," Maguire said.

Nobody moved while he turned and went out into the corridor and shut the door behind him. I began to feel a little sorry for that bunch of veterans. There

wasn't one among them who hadn't been hit by a dinner plate or a flying stick in the melee.

It was all very well for Speed King to talk about quitting. But most of them were paying off mortgages on farms or little businesses and they couldn't afford to quit. And they weren't so young any more.

Maguire knew that when he called their bluff, too!

V

OF COURSE the newspapers sided with Johnny Hardy, and rode the Raiders unmercifully. It was too good a chance to miss.

They made out Johnny Hardy to be quite a pitiable figure; they inferred that every time he missed a pass it was because Speed hadn't set it up, or because Thunder Storm had fed it to him a little off line.

I began to wish the sports writers would lay off that angle of it; they were giving me one awful headache. The minute I'd get the Raiders soothed down a little somebody would break into print eulogizing the kid, or Maguire would spout off above having found the most promising rookie in the National League.

The afternoon before we left for New York to play the Rangers somebody tapped on my hotel room door and when I yelled to come in Sunnie stepped across the threshold.

"Can I see you, Bill—alone?" she asked.

I waved a hand around the room. It was empty. Since I'd been obeying Maguire's orders by sending Johnny Hardy in, the veterans had cooled off toward me quite noticeably. They weren't stopping by my room for gab-fests any more.

"What's on your mind, Sunnie?" I asked.

Her eyes were a deep violet in the shade of the blue felt hat she wore tugged down low over one eye. Her yellow hair sparkled with life, and the cold winter air had whipped roses into her cheeks. I didn't have to ask to know that she was in love: it showed all over her.

"It's Johnny," she said.

"Well?"

She sat down on the edge of my bed, pulled off her gloves. "Bill, he can't go on this way, with a chip on his shoulder all the time. He's changed since he came to play with the Raiders. He's bitter, and suspicious and cynical."

I looked at her steadily. "Where does Speed fit into this now?"

Her mouth twisted, wryly. She looked out at the rooftops.

"It's all over between us. It was when they ganged up on Johnny, and I saw what sort of a person Speed really is: he'd play a cruel joke on anybody he didn't like. I hate people who'll do that."

I filled my pipe slowly, taking plenty of time tamping down the tobacco. Somehow I had a feeling that we were rushing along faster, faster to some kind of a climax in which the Raiders and Johnny Hardy and this sweet kid before me were all mixed up—how, I didn't know.

"I'll have a talk with Johnny before the Ranger game," I promised.

Tears glistened in her eyes. "Thanks, Bill, you're a pal."

"Love him?"

She twisted her gloves. "Terribly! And he loves me. But he won't ask me to marry him until he's made good with the club, until he's sure of the future."

"I'll do what I can."

BUT somehow an opportunity just didn't present itself to have a talk with Johnny before we went to New York. I hated to use him the way Maguire had told me to use him—as sort of a shot in the arm when the Raiders stopped trying. But I had my orders. And we won, 2-1.

Half the time during the Ranger game, Doc Roamer or Speed King was in the cooler for starting fights on the ice. Speed tangled with Shibicky in front of the Ranger strings and drew a ten-minute penalty for misconduct when he called the ref something besides his given name. Young Patrick and Doc went to it when the former claimed Doc had given him the

stick in a body check. It was wonderful.

"The veteran Raiders are on the march again," wrote Richards in his column the next morning. He went on:

Last night they staged a thrilling rally for the right to enter the play-offs by a victory over the Rangers. This assumes significance when you consider that the Rangers have been priding themselves on the extreme youthfulness of their line-up. Age and experience will tell, it seems.

However, to give credit where credit is due, we mustn't overlook the spirited playing of the former Beverly Hills rookie, Johnny Hardy. The stimulus of his playing undoubtedly was responsible for the Raiders' victory. Without his do-or-die spirit it is doubtful that the aging redshirts would have had the vim and vigor to push in the deciding counter. More power to you, Johnny!

This, coming on top of a hard-fought game, was like a pat on the head for the doddering veterans. They didn't like it at all.

Maybe I should have foreseen the blow-up, but I didn't. It came the following week when, back on home ice at the Winter Palace, we played the Boston Bruins.

In the first period Doc Roamer had slammed in the rubber at 11:15, and then the veterans settled down to playing pretty hockey, with the result that Maguire ordered me to send in Johnny Hardy.

The shot of rookie medicine worked like a charm. Thunder Storm handed Johnny a pass off line and got a big razzberry from the crowd. Playing like mad, Johnny got into the fracas in front of the Bruins' strings but Doc Roamer handed him a sizzling pass he couldn't connect with. Speed King grabbed it and went around behind the cage.

It was a sweet setup to hand the puck to Johnny, because the kid wasn't guarded. But Speed overplayed his hand. He flipped the puck so far off line that a Bruin wing got it and raced off into the clear for a quick scoring shot at the Raider nets—1-1.

Thirteen thousand fans started booing Speed. For a minute I was afraid they'd come right down there on the ice and tear him apart. But they didn't. In the last period, Doc Roamer saved the situation by a counter and the game was saved. But those fans were still sore.

They started a ruckus in the alley outside the Winter Palace, at the player's entrance, just as Speed and the veterans came up. What really happened, I don't know. But when I got there I found Doc Roamer stretched on the bricks with a nasty bruise on his skull.

"Take this man to the hospital," I heard Maguire order. "It looks like a concussion."

The crowd stood there, silent, while the cab with Maguire and Doc Roamer and the doctor pulled away. It didn't occur to me that the boss had done a lot of long-range diagnosing when he'd called it concussion. Right then I was so upset by the bad luck that was dogging our club that I wouldn't've been surprised if he'd called it a bad case of leprosy.

"Doc's hurt!" I heard Pug Garvey whisper. "Well, it's goodbye Cup this year."

I was afraid that he was right—and that it was goodbye job too.

THE bulletins that came out of Doc Roamer's room were few and uninformative. Nobody could see him—he was in a private nursing home just off the park—and the Raiders were told that there wasn't a chance of his being up and about for at least a month.

"I'll have to use you in the Detroit game, kid," I told Johnny Hardy. "I hate to do it, but we're short-handed now."

His eyes were hard and blue. "Why tell me this now?" he asked.

"Because the boys are still sore and don't like the idea of playing with you, that's why," I said. "If you were a real player, you'd stop trying to play a lone wolf game and feed the boys some passes. If you met them halfway they'd pretty soon get over their mad and maybe we'd win a game. But I suppose it's too much to ask you."

He looked white and tense. "They

haven't given me many breaks Bill. You know that."

I nodded. "Granted. But it so happens that Sunnie thinks you're a pretty swell guy. If you ask me, I think it would please her to see you make one more try to convince them you're willing to play the game."

He hesitated, and his blue eyes flickered away from mine.

"Is that all?" he asked in a husky voice.

I figured I'd failed, and my voice took on an edge.

"Yes, that's all!"

Well, when that game began and Johnny started out to warm up on the ice the fans went wild; you'd have thought he was the only player out there on the ice. I could see the rest of the Raiders didn't like it, but I'd had my orders from Maguire.

The Red Wings were all set for Johnny's headlong rushes down the ice, and stopped him.

Twice, during that hectic first period, I thought I saw Johnny try to set them up for Speed to try for a counter; but when Speed carelessly flicked him a pass way out of reach and the fans booed it Johnny's face got white. I guess he saw then that it wasn't any use.

He went back to his lone wolf tactics and we got no place at all in the first period. I finally yanked him and sent in a spare.

A note came down to me from Maguire in the interval. He wanted to see Johnny in there playing in the second period. And that second period was a riot: Johnny tried to play the whole Red Wing squad by himself.

He was all over the ice. He busted up pretty, non-scoring plays when Speed and Thunder shuttled the rubber and tried to ram in the counter unassisted. You can guess what happened. The Wings grabbed it away and ganged up on Slats to make it 1-0.

Rebellion crackled in the air when I got down below. Speed was red in the face.

"You can tell Maguire that we're through," he said, facing me. "We refuse to finish this game, and we don't care if the fans pull the Winter Palace apart!"

That last statement wasn't any exaggeration; that mob would have wrecked the joint.

"Take it easy, boys," I said. "You can't do a thing like that."

"We refuse to be publicly humiliated by a rookie who busts up all our plays," Speed snapped.

There was a sound behind us in the doorway. Maguire stood there, and if he'd heard that ultimatum he didn't turn a hair. His face was solemn.

"Boys," he said in a voice that carried to every corner of the locker room, "boys, I'm going to give you a message from Doc Roamer who lies back there in the hospital—in that dim borderline between darkness and light!"

That got 'em. The dressing room was still as a tomb. They all loved Doc Roamer.

"His message," Maguire went on, "was something like this: 'Tell the boys I wish I was in there playing with them. Tell them I know they'll win another Stanley Cup this year. The reason they'll win is that they'll go in there fighting, just the way that rookie, Johnny Hardy, fights.' "

They were holding their breath now, waiting. Even I felt a tingle go down my spine, just thinking of Doc Roamer lying back there in the hospital, still and white. Maguire's voice practically made you see it just that way.

He paused now, and added in a whisper, "So it's up to you, boys, to go in there and give Doc his request—to go in there and win!"

There was something in Maguire's voice that would have made a statue go out and play hockey.

It was Thunder Storm who spoke first.

"Let's give Doc his game, boys," he said. "What do you say?"

And then Butch Barrows added the clincher by putting a hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Set 'em up for us, kid, and we'll put 'em in."

Johnny Hardy looked up, sort of bewildered-like, as he had every right to be.

For myself, it didn't occur to me to gag over the melodrama of Maguire's speech. I'd heard one of Knute Rockne's pep talks to the boys between halves, when there wasn't a dry eye in the room; and Maguire's little message wasn't far behind that.

THE Raiders couldn't get back up on the ice fast enough. And then they set out to give an exhibition of hockey that they hadn't put on in years.

Instead of being handicapped by lack of Doc Roamer, the new rookie was in there doing a Johnny Gottselig with the puck all over the rink.

He wasn't trying to bull his way through now. He was back-skating, pivoting, and even using some of the fancy steps he'd done in the movies to get the puck away from a Wing check and set it up in front of the cage for Speed King to slam it in.

Three times before that last period ended Speed bulged the strings with the rubber. As a play-maker, Johnny Hardy was tops.

It ended in a riot of noise and torn programs that the fans showered down on the ice. I could see Johnny come skating over to the boards, sweaty and happy, to where Sunnie sat waiting for him with a proud light in her eyes.

"Well," said Maguire's voice beside me, "it was quite a game."

I said, "There hasn't been anything like it since the Raiders hit their winning streak ten years ago. If you ask me, we're headed for another Stanley Cup. Won't Doc be glad to hear the news!"

Maguire looked a little funny.

"He will be, after he's got over his mad. Doc only got a little crack in the noggin. I've had a hard time keeping him locked up in that room ever since."

"So it wasn't concussion, after all!"

"That," Maguire said in his wooden voice, "was strategy so those smart players of yours wouldn't go out and use them fancy plays that didn't score."

I stammered, "But that speech you made—"

Maguire closed one eye. "The old hokum. They still fall for it."

Well, I thought, there's more than one way to win a hockey game. I said, "You better break the news gently, then, or that bunch may wreck the joint."

Maguire lifted his left eyebrow.

"That's your job to tell 'em," he said. "I don't know anything about hockey."

Footsteps Invisible

It was a weird kind of a sound he heard; a shuffle-shuffle, then a click. Foxfire was apprehensive, excited

You hear it now? That unceasing tread behind you, following through measureless time and distance: implacable, invincible, until you have paid your last farthing for the breach of a law not made by man

By ROBERT ARTHUR
Author of "Blaze of Glory"

THE night was dark, and violent with storm. Rain beat down as if from an angry heaven, and beneath its force all the noises of a metropolis blended oddly, so that to Jorman they sounded like the muted grumble of the city itself.

He himself was comfortable enough, however. The little piano-box sized newsstand beside the subway entrance was tight against the rain.

The window that he kept open to hear prospective customers, take in change, and pass out papers let in a wet chill, but a tiny oil heater in one corner gave out a glow of warmth that beat it back.

A midget radio shrilled sweetly—a woman's soprano voice; and Foxfire, his toy wirehaired terrier, snored at his feet.

Jorman reached up and switched the radio off. There were times when it gave him pleasure. But more often he preferred to listen to life itself, as it poured past his stand like a river.

Tonight, though, even Times Square was deserted to the storm gods, who romped up and down its length, sportively deluging streets and sidewalks and shop fronts with water. Jorman listened and could not hear a single footstep, though his inner time sense—reënforced by a radio announcement a moment before—told him it was barely half past twelve.

Then beneath him he felt the subterranean rumble of a monster mole scurrying through earth's dark bowels. The subway—but Jorman had an imagination. The Seventh Avenue local, having halted, lunged onward again.

Jorman heard a few passengers scurrying up the concrete stairs just behind his cubicle, heard the pause as they prepared to brave the blast of the elements, heard their feet take them scurrying out to vanish into the rain and the night.

"Oooh, my hat!"

It was a woman's squeal of dismay. Then he had the streets to himself again.

He lit a pipe—a pipe had more taste than a cigarette—and puffed contentedly.

After a moment he lifted his head. Footsteps were approaching: slow, measured, familiar footsteps. They paused in front of his stand, and he smiled.

"Hello, Clancy," he greeted the beat cop. "A nice night for ducks."

"If I only had web feet," the big officer grumbled, " 'twould suit me fine. You're a funny one, now, staying out so late on a night like this, and not a customer in sight."

"I like it," Jorman grinned. "Like to listen to the storm. Makes my imagination work."

"Mine too," Clancy grunted. "But th' only thing it can imagine is my own apartment, with a hot tub and a hot toddy waitin'. Arrgh!"

He shook himself, and with a goodnight trampled onward.

Jorman heard the officer's footsteps diminish. There was silence for a while, save for the rush of the rain and the occasional splashing whir of a cab sloshing past. Then he heard more steps.

This time they came toward him from the side street, and he listened intently to them, head cocked a little to one side.

THEY were he searched for the right descriptive—well, odd. *Shuffle-shuffle*, as if made by large feet encased in sneakers, and slid along the pavement for a few inches with each step. *Shuffle-shuffle—shuffle-shuffle* they came toward him slowly, hesitantly, as if the walker were pausing every few feet to look about him.

Jorman wondered whether the approaching man could be a cripple. A club-foot, perhaps, dragging one foot with each step. For a moment he had the absurd thought that the sounds were made by four feet, not two; but he dismissed it with a smile and listened more closely.

The footprints were passing him now, and though the rain made it hard to distinguish clearly, he had the impression that each shuffling step was accompanied by a slight clicking noise.

As he was trying to hear more distinctly, Foxfire woke from his slumbers.

Jorman felt the little dog move at his feet, then heard the animal growling deep in its chest. He reached down and found Foxfire huddled against his shoe, tail tucked under, hair bristling.

"Quiet, boy!" he whispered, "I'm trying to hear."

Foxfire quieted. Jorman held his muzzle and listened. The footsteps of the stranger had shuffled past him to the corner. There they paused, as if in irresolution. Then they turned south on Seventh Avenue, and after a moment were engulfed in the storm noise.

Jorman released his hold on his dog and rubbed his chin perplexedly, wondering what there could have been about the pedestrian's scent to arouse Foxfire so. Sometimes, when a poodle out for an airing passed, he would bristle and bark. But he had never before acted so—well, so abject.

Foxfire, whimpering as if ashamed of himself, got up and began trotting back and forth in the confined space. And then

Jorman almost dropped his pipe. He barely caught it as it slipped from his suddenly open mouth. As he ran back and forth, Foxfire was making little clicking sounds almost identical to those that had accompanied the footsteps of the passerby of a moment before.

Making them with his claws, as they scraped against the wooden floor.

For a moment Jorman sat very still, his pipe clenched in his hand. Then with a rush of relief he heard Clancy's returning tramp. The cop came up and stopped, and Jorman did not wait for him to speak. He leaned out his little window.

"Clancy," he asked, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice, "what does that fellow look like down the block there—the one heading south on Seventh? He ought to be about in the middle of the block."

"Huh?" Clancy said, "I don't see any guy. Somebody snitch a paper?"

"No." Jorman shook his head. "I was just curious. You say there isn't anyone—"

"Not in sight," the cop told him. "Must have turned in some place. You and me have this town to ourselves tonight. Well, be good. I got to try some more doors."

He sloshed away, the rain pattering audibly off his broad, rubber-coated back, and Jorman settled back into his chair chuckling to himself. For a moment his imagination had gotten the better of him. What he had heard was some old man padding by, wearing unbuckled overshoes too big for him, the buckles rattling at each step.

But it was funny what tricks sounds played on you, especially in the rain. The ears could be fooled easily, as the radio was witness.

HE RELIT his dead pipe and was thinking of shutting up for the night when his last customer of the evening approached. This time he recognized the steps. It was a source of pride to him—and of revenue as well—that he could call most of his regulars by name if they came up when the street wasn't too crowded.

This one, though he didn't come often and had never come before at night, was easy. The step was a firm, decisive one. *Click*—that was the heel coming down—*slap*—that was the sole being planted firmly. *Click-slap*—the other foot. Simple. He could have distinguished it in a crowd.

"Good morning, Sir Andrew," Jorman said pleasantly as the steps came up to his stand. "*Times?*"

"Thanks." It was a typically British voice that answered, "Know me, do you?"

"Oh, yes." Jorman grinned. It was usually a source of mystification to his customers that he knew their names. But names were not too hard to learn, if the owners of them lived or worked nearby. "A bellboy from your hotel was buying a paper last time you stopped. When you'd gone on, he told me who you were."

"Damme!" Sir Andrew Carraden exclaimed. "That easy, eh? Don't know as I like it so much, though, being kept track of. Prefer to lose myself these days. Had enough of notoriety in the past."

"Had plenty of it four years ago, I suppose," Jorman suggested. "I followed the newspaper accounts of your tomb-hunting expedition. Interesting work, archaeology. Always wished I could poke around in the past that way, some time."

"Don't!" The word was sharp. "Take my advice and stay snug and cosy in the present. The past is an uncomfortable place. Sometimes you peer into it and then spend the rest of your life trying to get away from it. And— But I mustn't stop here chatting. Not in this storm. Here's your money. No, here on the counter . . ."

And then, as Jorman fumbled for and found the pennies, Sir Andrew Carraden exclaimed again.

"I say!" he said. "I'm sorry."

"Perfectly all right," Jorman told him. "It pleases me when people don't notice. A lot don't, you know, in spite of the sign."

"Blind newsdealer," Sir Andrew Carraden read the little placard tacked to the stand. "I say—"

"Wounded in the war," Jorman told him. "Sight failed progressively. Went entirely a couple of years ago. So I took up this. But I don't mind Compensations, you know. Amazing what a lot a man can hear when he listens. But you're going to ask me how I knew you, aren't you? By your footsteps. They're very recognizable. Sort of a *click-slap, click-slap.*"

His customer was silent for a moment. Jorman was about to ask whether anything was wrong when the Englishman spoke.

"Educated man, aren't you?" he asked.

Jorman nodded. "A.B. degree. Nothing more."

"But you're an intelligent man, which is more to the point," Sir Andrew Carraden said swiftly. "Look. I"—and his tone took on an almost hungry eagerness—"I've got to talk to somebody, or blow my top. I mean, go barmy. Completely mad. Maybe I am, already. I don't know. You—you might have a few minutes to spare? You might be willing to keep me company for an hour? With a pipe and a bottle? I—it might not be too dull."

JORMAN hesitated in answering. Not because he intended to refuse—the urgency in the man's voice was unmistakable—but because a queer thought had come to him. A man had once bought a paper from him, talked casually for a moment, then gone on. A hundred feet away he had been arrested. Later Jorman had learned from Clancy that the fellow had been a fugitive for weeks.

And there was something of the same tone of the hunted in Sir Andrew Carraden's voice now.

It was absurd—but Jorman's ears were seldom wrong. The Englishman, the archaeologist whose name had been so prominent a few years back, was a hunted man. Perhaps a desperate man. A fugitive—from what?

Jorman did not try to guess. He nodded.

"I have time," he agreed. "Don't believe blind men can't enjoy tobacco. And anybody can enjoy whisky."

He bent down and picked up Foxfire, attached the leash, threw an old ulster over his shoulders, and turned down his bright gasoline lantern. With Foxfire straining at the leash, he swung up his racks and padlocked the stand: was ready.

"This way," Sir Andrew Carraden said at his side. "Not half a block. Like to take my arm?"

"Thanks." Jorman touched the other's elbow. The touch told him what he remembered from photographs in the papers he had seen, years back. The Britisher was a big man. Not the kind to fear anything. Yet he was afraid.

"Foxfire isn't fully trained yet. His predecessor picked up distemper six months ago."

"Rotten luck."

They bowed their heads to the somewhat lessened rain. A woman passed them, her heels tap-tapping swiftly, the rain booming off the stretched silk of her umbrella.

"That woman," the man beside Jorman asked, "would you know her walk if you heard it again?"

"I might," Jorman told him. "I think I would. Everyone's footstep is distinctive, Sir Andrew."

"Don't!" The big man's voice was sharp. "Excuse me, I didn't mean to bark. But please don't call me by my name. Not out loud. It—well, it sets up vibrations."

Then he coughed, as a man who has said too much.

"I mean, I'm incog. Strict orders at the hotel to use my registry name of Malcolm Smith. Was rather upset when they recognized me. But they've kept it quiet. Threatened to leave if the papers learned."

Jorman made no comment. Sir Andrew Carraden's agitation was evident. It came like an electric wave from the other man through the slight contact of Jorman's fingers on his arm.

"If you can, try not even to think my name," the Englishman asked him in clipped tones. "An odd request. But—well, I can't explain it, I'm afraid. Here we are. Right turn."

They turned into a hotel lobby, their heels loud on marble. Jorman knew the place: the Hotel Russet. Respectable, but a bit run down. An odd place for Sir Andrew— He checked the thought. Nevertheless, an odd place for a prominent man to stay. But a good place, perhaps, to hide. . . .

As they passed the desk, a sleepy clerk called out.

"Oh, Mr. Smith. Pardon me. There's a message here for you. From the manager. Relative to some work we've been doing—"

"Thanks, thanks," Jorman's companion answered impatiently, and Jorman heard paper stuffed into a pocket. "Here's the elevator. Step up just a bit."

THEY had been seated in easy chairs for some minutes, pipes going, the first drink down and the second pouring, before Sir Andrew Carraden made any further reference to the thing that was obviously on his mind.

The room they were in was fairly spacious, judging from the reverberations of their voices, and since it seemed to be a sitting room, probably was joined to a bedroom beyond. Foxfire slumbering at Jorman's feet, they had been talking of inconsequentials—the weather, politics, the manner in which certain senses sharpened when others were lost—when the Englishman interrupted himself abruptly.

"Jorman," he said, "I'm a desperate man. I'm being hunted."

Jorman heard liquor gurgle, heard the clink as an unsteady hand let bottleneck rap against tumbler rim. Heard the gulp as the whisky was downed in a swallow.

"I guessed so," he confessed. "It was in your voice. The police?"

Sir Andrew Carraden laughed, a harsh, explosive sound.

"Your ears *are* sharp," he said. "The police? I wish it were! No. By a—a personal enemy."

"Then couldn't the police—" Jorman began. The other cut him short.

"No! They can't help me. Nobody in this world can help me. And God have mercy on me, nobody in the next!"

Jorman passed over the emphatic exclamation.

"But surely—"

"Take my word for it, I'm on my own," Sir Andrew Carraden told him, his voice grim. "This is a—a feud, you might say. And I'm the hunted one. I've done a lot of hunting in my day, and now I know the other side of it. It's not pleasant."

Jorman sipped at his drink.

"You—this enemy. He's been after you long?"

"Three years." The Englishman's voice was low, a bit unsteady. In his mind Jorman could see the big man leaning forward, arm braced against knee, face set in grim lines.

"It began one night in London. A rainy night like this. I was running over some clay tablets that were waiting deciphering. Part of the loot from the tomb of Tut-Ankh-Tothet. The one the stories in the papers you referred to were about.

"I'd been working pretty hard. I knocked off for a pipe and stood at the window looking out. Then I heard it."

"Heard it?"

"Heard him." Carraden corrected himself swiftly. "Heard *him* hunting for me. Heard his footsteps—"

"Footsteps?"

"Yes. In the pitch-black night. Heard him tramping back and forth as he tried to locate me. Then he picked up my trail and came up the garden path."

Sir Andrew paused, Jorman heard the bottle gurgle again.

"My dog, a great Dane, scented him. He was frightened, poor beast, and with reason. But he tried to attack. *He* tore the dog to pieces on my own doorstep. I couldn't see the fight, but I could hear. The beast held him up long enough for me to run for it. Out the back door, into the storm.

"There was a stream half a mile away. I made for that, plunged into it, floated two miles down, went ashore, picked up a ride to London. Next morning I left

London on a freighter for Australia before he could pick up my trail again."

Jorman heard the archaeologist draw a deep breath.

"It took him six months to get on to me again, up in the Australian gold country. Again I heard him in time. I was listening for him now. All the time. I got away on a horse as he was forcing into my cabin, caught a cargo plane for Melborne, took a fast boat to Shanghai. But I didn't stay there long."

"Why not?" Jorman asked. He fancied that Carraden shuddered slightly.

"Too much like his own country. Conditions were—favorable for him in the Orient. Unfavorable for me. I had a hunch. I hurried on to Manila and took a plane for the States there. Got a letter later from an old Chinese servant that *he* arrived the next night."

JORMAN sipped slowly at his Scotch and soda, his brow knitted. He did not doubt the man's sincerity, but the story *was* a bit puzzling. Absently he reached down to pet Foxfire, and as the little dog turned in its sleep he realized that he had really wanted to touch something warm and familiar.

"This fellow, this enemy of yours," he commented slowly, "you said the Orient was too like his own country. I assume you mean Egypt."

"Yes. He comes from Egypt. I incurred his—well, his enmity there."

"He's a native then? An Egyptian native?"

Carraden hesitated, seeming to choose his words.

"Well, yes," he said finally. "In a way you might call him a native of Egypt. Though, strictly speaking, he comes from another—another country. One less well known."

"But," Jorman persisted, "I should think that you, a man of wealth, would have all kinds of recourse against a native, no matter where he might be from. After all, the man is bound to be conspicuous, and ought to be easy to pick up. I know you said the police could not help you, but have you tried? And how in the world does the fellow follow you so persistently? From London to Austraila to Shanghai—that's a thin trail to run down."

"I know you're puzzled," the other told him. "But take my word for it, the police are no good. This chap—well, he just isn't conspicuous, that's all. He moves mostly by night. But even so he can go anywhere.

"He has—well, methods. And as for following me, he has his own ways of doing that, too. He's persistent. So awfully, awfully persistent. That's the horror of it: that blind, stubborn persistence with which he keeps on my trail."

Jorman was silent. Then he shook his head.

"I admit you've got me curious," he told Carraden. "I can see easily enough there are some things you don't want to tell me. I suppose the reason he's hunting you so doggedly is one of them."

"Right," the Englishman admitted. "It was while the expedition was digging out old Tut-Ankh-Tothet. It was something I did. A law I violated. A law I was aware of, but—well, I went ahead anyway.

"You see, there were some things we found buried with old Tothet the press didn't hear of. Some papyri, some clay tablets. And off the main tomb a smaller one holding the mummy of Tothet's daughter. She was—had been—a beauty. I—

"Well, I can't tell you more. I violated an ancient law, then got panicky and tried to escape the consequences. In doing so, I ran afoul of this—this fellow. And brought him down on my neck. If you don't mind—"

There was desperate note in his host's voice. Jorman nodded.

"Certainly," he agreed. "I'll drop the subject. After all, it's your business. You've never tried to ambush the fellow and have it out with him, I suppose?"

He imagined Carraden shaking his head.

"No use," the other said shortly. "My only safety is in flight. So I've kept run-

ning. When I got to 'Frisco, I thought I was safe for a while. But this time he was on my heels almost at once. I heard him coming up the street for me late one foggy night. I got out the back door and ran for it. Got away to the Canadian plains.

"I planted myself out in the middle of nowhere, on a great, rolling grassy plain with no neighbor for miles. Where no one would even think of me. much less speak to me or utter my name. I was safe there almost a year. But in the end it was—well, almost a mistake."

Carraden put down his glass with a clatter. Jorman imagined it was because the tumbler had almost slipped from shaking fingers.

"You see, out there on the prairie, there were no footsteps. This time he came at night, as usual, and he was almost on me before I was aware of it. And my horse was lame. I got away. But it was a near thing. Nearer than I like to remember. . . .

"So I came to New York. I've been here since, in the very heart of the city. It's the best place of all to hide. Among people. So many millions crossing and recrossing my path, muddy up the trail, confuse the scent—"

"Confuse the scent?" Jorman exclaimed.

CARRADEN coughed. "Said more than I meant to, that time," he admitted. "Yes, it's true. He scents me out. In part, at least. He—well, say that when he runs across my trail he can pick up my actual spoor and the—

"It's hard to explain Call it the intangible evidences of my passage. That's why I don't use my own name, don't like it spoken, asked you not to even to think it. Those things set up vibrations that he can—can catch."

"I see." The man's voice pleaded so for belief that Jorman nodded, though he was far from seeing. He was decidedly perplexed. Either Sir Andrew Carraden, hiding there in a second-rate hotel in the heart of New York, was a bit mad, as he himself suggested; or—Well in Heaven's name, what kind of man could his enemy be?

"I've been here almost a year now," the Englishman told him. "Almost a twelvemonth with no sign of him. I've been cautious; man, how cautious I've been! Lying in my burrow like a terrified rabbit.

"Most of that time I've been right here, close to Times Square, where a million people a day cut my trail. Where the emanations from a million individuals fill the air in a potpourri that makes almost hopeless the task of tracing down any one of them.

"I've huddled in my two rooms here—there's a bedroom beyond—nights, going out only by day. He is usually active most by night. In the day people confuse him. Massed humanity sets up currents inimical to him. It's the lonely reaches of the late night hours he likes best. And it's during them I huddle here, listening wakefully. . . .

"Except on storm nights like this. Storms make his job more difficult. The rain washes away my spoor, the confusion of the winds and the raging of the elements dissipates my more intangible trail. That's why I ventured out tonight, because the gale was blowing so."

He paused. Jorman was silent, waiting for him to continue. In the momentary quiet Foxfire woke up. Jorman felt him stir. Then, with a puppy's curiosity, he began to patter about the room, investigating. Somewhere he came across a mouse scent.

Jorman heard the little whimper of excitement, heard the dog pause to sniff, heard his claws scratch the floor as he moved forward a foot or so, heard him pause again.

"Some day, even here, he'll find me," Sir Andrew Carraden said at last, his voice tight with strain. "I'm prepared. I'll hear him coming—I hope—and as he forces this door, I'll get out through the other one, the one in the bedroom, and get away. I early learned the folly of holing up in a burrow with only one exit.

"Now I have always at least one emer-

gency doorway. The bedroom opens onto another corridor, close to the fire stairs. As he comes in, I'll slip out and down, reach the street, rush by taxi to the airport, take off for South America. From Rio I'll fly to Europe, then back to London. There I'll hole up again until he unravels my trail and I have to take to my heels again.

"Believe me, man, it's a ghastly existence. The lying awake in the quiet hours of the night, listening, listening for him; the clutch at the heart, the sitting bolt upright, as a stray sound resembles his step; the constant and continuing terror—I tell you, there are times when I'm tempted to end it all. But I don't dare. Because I'm afraid—"

He did not complete the sentence. Instead he leaned forward and with a patently shaking hand refilled Jorman's glass. The siphon slipped, and a spray of charged water struck Jorman's hand. Carraden apologized hastily.

"Sorry," he said, his voice a bit thick now. "This time of the night, between two and daylight, I sometimes get the wind up. He usually comes about now, and . . ."

Jorman heard him set down the siphon and settle back into his chair; heard a match scratch ineffectually several times before it snapped into flame, and realized that his own pipe had burned out. He tamped in tobacco and lit it again.

Carraden had been silent for several minutes, fighting, Jorman imagined, for self-control. Then the springs of his easy chair squeaked as he leaned forward.

"Look," the Englishman said then, in such desperate earnestness that his voice trembled a bit. "You must wonder whether I just brought you up here to tell you this tale. I didn't. I had a purpose. I told you the story to see how you reacted. And I'm satisfied. Anyway, you didn't openly disbelieve me; and if you think I'm crazy, maybe you'll humor me anyway. I have a proposition to make."

Jorman sat up a bit straighter.

"Yes?" he asked, his face expressing uncertainty. "What—"

"What kind of proposition?" Carraden finished the sentence for him. "This. That you help me out by listening for him."

JORMAN jerked his head up involuntarily, so that if he had not been blind he would have been staring into the other's face.

"Listen for your enemy?"

"Yes," the Englishman told him, voice hoarse. "Listen for his approach. Like a sentinel, an outpost. Look, man. You're down there in your little stand every evening from six on, I've noticed. You stay until late at night. You're posted there not fifty yards from this hotel, night after night.

"When he comes, he'll go by you. He's bound to have cast about a bit, to unravel the trail—double back and forth like a hunting dog, you know, until he gets it straightened out.

"He may go by three or four times before he's sure. You have a keen ear. Furthermore, you've trained yourself to listen to footsteps. Among a number you can pick out one familiar to you. If he goes by while you're on the job, you're bound to hear him."

Carraden's voice quickened, became desperately persuasive.

"And if you do, you can let me know. I'll instruct the doorman to come over if you signal. Or you can leave your stand and come up here; you can make it easily enough, only fifty paces. But somehow you must warn me. Say you will, man! I'll pay you, of course: a pound a day. Two if you insist. But you must take it on. Even if you don't believe me, you must agree. I'll feel safer, that way. From him. And from madness, too."

Jorman hesitated in his answer. Sir Andrew mistook his silence.

"If you're frightened," he said, "there's no need to be. He won't attack you. Only me. He attacked my dog, because the beast was mine, and went for him. But he'll be oblivious of you."

"That part's all right," Jorman told him honestly. "What you've told me isn't

altogether clear, and—I'll be frank—I'm not absolutely sure whether you're sane or not. But I wouldn't mind listening for you. Only, don't you see, I wouldn't have any way of recognizing your enemy's step."

Carraden gave a little whistling sigh that he checked at once.

"Good man!" The exclamation was quiet, but his voice showed relief. "Just so you'll do it. That last bit is easy enough. I've heard him several times. I can imitate his step for you, I think. There's only one thing worrying me.

"He—not everyone can hear him. But I'm counting on your blindness to give your ears the extra sensitivity— No matter. We have to have a go at it. Give me a moment."

Jorman sat in silence and waited. The rain, beating against the panes of two windows, was distinctly lessening. Somewhere distant a fire siren wailed, a banshee sound.

Carraden was making a few tentative scrapings, with his hands or his feet, on the floor.

"Got it!" he announced. "I've put a bedroom slipper on each hand. It's a noise like this."

With the soft-soled slippers, he made a noise like the shuffle of a large bare foot—a double sound, *shuffle-shuffle*, followed by a pause, then repeated.

"If you're extra keen," he announced, "you can hear a faint click or scratch at each step. But—"

Then Jorman heard him sit up straight, knew Carraden was staring at his face.

"What is it, man?" the Englishman cried in alarm. "What's wrong?"

Jorman sat very tense, his fingers gripping the arms of his chair. He could hear his Scotch-and-soda dripping noisily onto the rug, where the glass had overturned with his start. And his heart was pounding with a queer, uneven, constricted beat.

"Sir Andrew," he whispered, his lips stiff, "Sir Andrew! I've already heard those footsteps. An hour ago in the rain he went by my stand."

IN THE silence that followed, Jorman could guess how the blood was draining from the other man's ruddy face, how the knuckles of his clenched hands were showing white.

"Tonight?" Carraden asked then, his voice harsh and so low that Jorman could scarcely hear him. "Tonight, man?"

"Just a few minutes before you came by," Jorman blurted. "I heard footsteps—*his* steps—shuffling by. The dog woke up and whimpered. They approached me slowly, pausing, then going on, like—Sir Andrew! Like Foxfire just now, when he was sniffing out a mouse trail!"

"I know," the Englishman breathed. "Go on, man! What then?"

"They turned. He went down Seventh Avenue, going south."

Sir Andrew Carraden leaped to his feet, paced across the room, wheeled, came back.

"He's tracked me down at last!" he said in a tight voice, from which a note of hysteria was not far absent. "I've got to go Tonight. Now. You say he turned south?"

Jorman nodded.

"But that means nothing." Carraden spoke swiftly, as if thinking out loud. "He'll find he's lost the track. He'll turn back. And since he passed, I've made a fresh trail. The rain may not have washed it quite away. He may have picked it up. He may be coming up those stairs now. Damme, where's my bag? My passport? My money? All in my bureau. Excuse me. Sit tight."

Jorman heard a door flung open, heard the man rush into the adjoining bedroom, heard a tight bureau drawer squeal.

Then Carraden's footsteps again. A moment after, a bolt on a door pulled back. Then the door itself rattled. A pause, and it rattled again, urgently. Once again, this time violently. Jorman could hear Carraden's loud breathing in the silence that followed.

"The door won't open!" There was an edge of fear in the Englishman's voice as he called out. "There's a key or something in the lock. From the outside."

He came back into the sitting room with a rush, paused beside Jorman.

"That message!" The words came through Carraden's teeth. "The one the bloody clerk handed me. I wonder if—"

Paper ripped, rattled. Sir Andrew Carraden began to curse.

"The fool!" he almost sobbed. "Oh, the bloody, bloody fool. 'Dear sir'— Carraden's voice was shaking now—'redecoration of the corridor on the north side of your suite necessitated our opening your door this afternoon to facilitate the painting of it. In closing and locking it, a key inadvertently jammed in the lock, and we [illegible]uld not at once extricate it. Our locksmith will repair your lock promptly in the morning. Trusting you will not be inconvenienced—'

"God deliver us from fools!" Sir Andrew gasped. "Luckily there's still time to get out this way. Come on, man, don't sit there. I'll show you down. But we must hurry, hurry."

Jorman heard the other man's teeth chattering faintly together in the excess of emotion that was shaking him, felt the muscular quivering of near-panic in the big man as he put out his hand and took Sir Andrew's arm to help himself rise. And then, as he was about to lift himself, his fingers clamped tight about the Englishman's wrist.

"Carraden!" he whispered. "Carraden! *Listen!*"

The other asked no question. Jorman felt the quivering muscles beneath his fingers tense. And a silence that was like a hand squeezing them breathless seemed to envelop the room. There was not even the faint, distant sound of traffic to break it. Nor the rain, which had stopped.

Then they both heard it. In the hallway, coming toward the door. The faint padding sound of shuffling footsteps.

IT WAS Foxfire, whimpering piteously at their feet, that broke the spell momentarily holding them.

"He!" Carraden's word was a gasp. "He's out there!"

He left Jorman's side. Jorman heard him shoving with deperate strength at something heavy. Castors squeaked. Some piece of furniture tipped over and fell with a crash against the inside of the door.

"There!" Carraden groaned. "The desk. And the door's bolted. That'll hold him a moment. Sit tight, man. Hold the pup. He'll ignore you. It's me he wants. I've got to get that other door open before he can come through."

His footsteps raced away into the bedroom. Jorman sat where he was, Foxfire under his arm, so tense that his muscles ached. But he could not change position. Outside the door, so close to him, an eager little shuffling noise was audible. Then the bolted door squeaked, as if a heavy body had leaned against it.

In the bedroom there was a crash, as of a man plunging against a closed door that stubbornly would not give. Then sounds to indicate that Carraden was kicking at the unyielding portal, scratching at it, swinging a chair against its panels.

But above all the noise from the bedroom, Jorman could hear the barricaded door—the door beyond which *he* was—start to give.

Nails screamed as they came forth from wood. Hinges groaned. And the whole mass —door, lintels, desk—moved inward an inch or so. A pause, and then the terrible, inexorable pressure from the other side came again. With a vast rending the door gave way and crashed inward over the barricading furniture.

And in the echoes of the crash he heard the almost soundless *shuffle-shuffle* of feet crossing the room toward the bedroom.

In the bedroom Sir Andrew Carraden's efforts to force the jammed door ceased suddenly. Then the Englishman screamed, an animal cry of pure terror from which all intelligence was gone. Something threshed about mightily for a moment. Shod feet pounded. The window in the bedroom crashed up with a violence that shattered the glass. Leather scraped on the sills.

After that there was silence for a mo-

ment, until Jorman's acute hearing caught, from the street outside and five floors down, the sound of an object striking the pavement.

Sir Andrew Carraden had jumped. . . .

SOMEHOW Jorman found the strength to stumble to his feet. He dashed straight forward toward the door, and fell over the wreckage of it. Hurt, but not feeling it, he scrambled up again, Foxfire still clutched under his arm, and felt his way around the obstacle into the hall.

Then he stumbled down the corridor.

Somehow his questing hands found a door that was sheathed in metal, and he thrust it open. Beyond were bannisters. Stairs. By the sense of feel he rushed down recklessly.

How many minutes it took to reach the lobby, to feel his way blindly past the startled desk clerk out to the street, he did not know. Or whether he had gotten down before *he* had.

Once outside on the wet pavement, cool night air on his cheek, he paused, his breath coming in sobbing gasps. And as he stood there, footsteps, shuffling footsteps, passed close by him from behind and turned westward.

Then Jorman heard an astounding thing. He heard Sir Andrew Carraden's footsteps also, a dozen yards distant, hurrying away from him.

Sir Andrew Carraden had leaped five floors. And still could walk . . .

No, run. For the tempo of the man's steps was increasing. He was trotting now. Now running. And behind the running footsteps of Carraden were *his* steps, moving more swiftly too, something scratching loudly on the concrete each time he brought a foot down.

"Sir Andrew!" Jorman called loudly, senselessly. "Sir An—"

Then he stumbled and almost fell, trying to follow. Behind him the desk clerk came hurrying up. He exclaimed something in shocked tones, but Jorman did not even hear him. He was bending down, his hand exploring the object over which he had stumbled.

"Listen!" Jorman gasped with a dry mouth to the desk clerk, jittering above him. "Tell me quick! I've got to know. What did the man look like who followed me out of the hotel just now?"

"F-followed you?" the clerk stuttered. "Nobody f-followed you. Nobody but you has gone in or out in the last hu-half hour. Listen, why did he do it? Why did he jump?"

Jorman did not answer him.

"Dear God," he was whispering, and in a way it was a prayer. "Oh, dear God!"

His hand was touching the dead body of Andrew Carraden, lying broken and bloody on the pavement.

But his ears still heard those footsteps of pursued and pursuer, far down the block, racing away until not even he could make them out any longer.

Mark's eyes glared defiance, even while the smoke curled up from his chest

Minions of Mars

By WILLIAM GRAY BEYER

Start now this sparkling and exciting fantastic by the author of "Minions of the Moon"

MARK NEVIN, a young twentieth century American sportsman and engineer, is given an overdose of a new and powerful anaesthetic, and wakes to find that centuries have passed while he slept. He meets Omega, a disembodied intelligence, given to prankishness but genuinely interested in the fate of man. Approving Mark's intelligence, character, and physical fitness, Omega decides to make Mark the father of a new and finer race. The anaesthetic had endowed Mark's blood with radioactive elements that made him impervious to hunger and fatigue and assure him a reasonably long life. Mark chooses the lovely Nona as his mate and Omega treats her blood to a shot of the radioactive element, too.

On their way home from a successful war against twin malevolent intelligences, Mark and Nona are separated. Mark falls overboard and a blow on the head causes him to lose his memory.

He swims to shore and makes his way to Scarbor, where he is captured by the native Brish. Mark's memory returns in fits and starts; he recalls Nona and his own name and becomes gradually aware of his remarkable strength and endurance. Most of the rest eludes him.

Believing that perhaps association with people will bring back more knowledge about himself and his past, Mark joins forces with Murf, a clever, red-headed rebel whom he meets in prison.

Using his prodigious strength, Mark engineers an escape for both of them. When they save the life of Duke Jon and his wife, they obtain complete pardons. Murf persuades Mark to become the figurehead of the rebellion, describing the misery of the people, the cruelty of the nobles, and the helplessness of the kindly and intelligent Duke Jon to aid them.

Mark is a little uneasy at the idea; but his quick sympathies are won. Due to Mark's popularity, new members are won to the cause, and still more are added when Mark carries out a wholesale jailbreak, delivering all those imprisoned for political treason.

This story began in last week's Argosy

MEANWHILE, Omega turns up on shipboard, appearing first in the form of a repulsive, spiderlike being and then in the guise of the ancient sage he believes most suited to his nature, comforts Nona and tells her that Mark could not possibly have drowned, that he will be found forthwith, and returned to her.

But Mark's loss of memory makes it impossible for Omega to establish contact with the thought-pattern that he knows as Mark. He is forced to use his power to travel through time—a feat which he has performed once before. On that occasion, though, Omega had bumped into himself, merged, and been forced to live out his life again until he reached the original point of departure. As Omega had found this remarkably tedious, he had sworn never to run the risk again. But his concern for his contemplated new race overcomes his cautiousness.

He goes back in time to the moment when Mark fell overboard, traces him to Scarbor and then, observing the dangerous path Mark is treading, decides to watch and wait before revealing himself.

"The young jackanapes," he muses, "is bound to get into trouble the way he's going on. Maybe I ought to let him learn his lesson before I interfere. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

LORN LADY

A VIKING ship of the eightieth century, while a model of efficiency for its day, was no speedboat. And so it was that after two weeks of sailing, Nona's ship was still plowing earnestly but sluggishly through the North Sea. It had been a long voyage, especially without the companionship of Mark. Even at his noblest and most irritating, Mark was more fun than any other man. And she missed him. She fretted too; knowing Omega's capacity for getting Mark into trouble, she almost wished he wouldn't find Mark. Omega, you see, was the typical friend of the family, only instead of luring Mark off on disgraceful benders, he was more apt to drag him into perilous crusades to save the world.

Most of Nona's life had been spent so far from the sea that her only knowledge of it had come from books. And the few months that she had traveled on the water had been in Mark's company. Without him, she found she didn't like the sea so very much. It was too unruly, too desolate—and too darned big.

Her mind kept returning to the morning when she had found that he had been washed overboard. She experienced over and over again the wild grief of that moment, and the hopelessness of the subsequent search.

Long days had passed without hearing further from Omega and the strength of her hope was wearing thin. So omnipotent were the powers of Omega that if her husband still lived, the Selenite should have found him long ago. Daily the conviction was becoming stronger in her mind that the visit of Omega had been a figment of her overwrought imagination.

On the fifteenth day land was sighted:

Among the Norsemen there came a stir of excitement. Sven, the captain, climbed the mast and took his place beside the lookout. It was up to him to determine their position. For although they had set their course to bring them to their home port at Stadtland, there was no guarantee that the land sighted was within a hundred miles of that point. Norsemen navigated by instinct—they were very proud of their intuitive sea bearings. But in point of fact, instinct seemed to be merely another name for trial and error.

Sven, who did know every jutting cape and twisting inlet along the coast of his own land, even if he was pretty blank on other coasts, quickly discovered that the ship had made an extraordinarily lucky landfall and lay within one day's northward travel of its destination.

Nona watched listlessly as the crew bent enthusiastic backs to the long oars, aiding the feeble wind that refused to belly the great sail. The sight of land had brought no stir to her breast, in spite of the weary weeks that had made her utterly fed up with the sea.

For although an honored place in Norse society would be hers, by reason of Mark's attainments, the prospect seemed savorless without him to share it.

Of late she had spent most of her time shut in her cabin. The cheerful faces of the crew irked her. They felt none of the doubts that were making her miserable. She had told them, as Omega had suggested, that she had been the recipient of a message from Thor the Thunder God, who had told her that Mark was engaged in fulfilling a mission that would take him several weeks, but that he would return to them when it was accomplished. The Vikings, who revered Mark as the chosen of Thor, found the deception quite believable, and felt no more anxiety for Mark's safety.

This gullibility gave Nona a low opinion of their intelligence, and she found it impossible to endure their light-hearted conversation. She was not by any means certain that she would ever again see the face of her husband.

Another thing that made her visits on deck become shorter as the days went by, was the fact that they made her miss Mark all the more. Invariably he had been with her when she left the cabin. As a pastime he had taught her the use of the axe and short-sword. Garbed in the heavy leather trapping of the Norsemen, to protect them from cuts that might spill too much of their radio-active blood, they would spend hours cutting and slashing at each other, in mock combat.

AT FIRST they had been very careful not to hurt each other, and had used axes and swords with dulled cutting edges. Mark, during this phase of her tuition, had concentrated on the finer points of the art, teaching her to fend off axe slashes with deft parries of the short-sword held in the left hand, and to deliver effective counter-slashes.

And for some time he had dealt his blows lightly, afraid of hurting her. But as her skill increased and it became apparent that she was as proof against injury as he, her strength and agility made him extend himself more and more.

The time soon came when they battled with such skill and fervor that the crew looked on aghast at the apparent intensity of the conflict.

Both of them tireless, they could maintain their strenuous exercise at fever pitch, long after the hardiest of the Norsemen would have fallen, exhausted. The battles invariably ended in one way. Mark would lead her to swing for his helmet while his guard was down, then in the instant she was off balance, he would drop his weapons, make a lightning lunge and swing her high in the air, unable to touch him with either axe or sword. Laughing and bowing, they would acknowledge the wild applause of the conflict-loving Vikings.

But now that Mark was gone, the very things which had brought so much happiness made her heart ache. Her misery had to remain locked within her, for there was no one in whom she could confide. The cabin was her only refuge from the carefree cheerfulness of these simple men. And it was to the cabin that she turned after Sven came down from the rigging with news of their location.

She opened the door, froze for an instant into rigid immobility, then abruptly stepped inside and closed the door after her.

There, reclining on a cushioned divan, in a pose that would have done credit to a member of the seraglio from which the divan had been pilfered, was Omega. He was presenting himself in the same antiquated body that she had last seen. With his bony chin cupped seductively in the interlaced fingers of scrawny hands, he treated her to a toothless grin—a grin which might have been bold and dashing if the body he had acquired had been about fifty years younger. As it was, he just looked silly.

"Hullo, babe," he said.

"Where's Mark?"

"Let's not go into that right now," he urged. "I was just thinking maybe I could take his place for a while. You're not a bad-looking wench, you know." He ogled her shamelessly.

Nona looked sour. "You're not very funny," she stated. "Where *is* Mark?"

Omega allowed a tear to trickle from the corner of his left eye. The right one still retained a twinkle. It was a special delight of his to create human bodies and then make them do hideously inhuman things.

"Whatever that is you're doing with your eyes, stop it. It's disgusting. And so, you Selenite lecher, are you. Where's Mark?"

"So you still want him?" His voice quavered with emotion. "When you could have a fine specimen of vigorous manhood like me, for the asking. A sad case . . . Yes, a very sad case." At this point Nona showed signs of becoming violent. Omega sobered abruptly. "All right, all right. I found him."

"Take me to him," she demanded.

"Not so fast," he counseled, waving her to a seat. "I found him, all right, over a week ago. And a tough job it was. But I don't think it would be a good idea to take you to him just now."

Nona's face fell, "Doesn't he want . . . Has he forgotten me?"

OMEGA stroked his chin. "That's the funny thing about it. He struck his head when he went overboard. He remembers you, but he's forgotten everything else. When I finally found him, I took the liberty of delving into his mind, a thing I seldom do—don't consider it ethical. But I had to learn what had happened.

"And it turns out that he remembers your name, and can visualize you in his mind, but he doesn't even know who you are! He has only a dim conviction that you belong to him, but that's all."

"But can't you restore his memory? Or bring him here? He'll remember if you do that."

"Wouldn't be advisable," Omega said. "His brain is healing and it would be better to let his memory return by itself. Besides, he's started a job that he must finish . . ."

"Now, Omega, you listen to me," she began. "If you encourage Mark into any more crazy adventures, I'll—I'll scratch your eyes out! Or whosever eyes those unmatched horrors are." Omega paid no attention.

He went on to explain how Mark had swum, after falling overboard, to the shore of the land that had once been ancient England; how he had become embroiled in the cause of the rebels, and that after seeing the privations suffered by the lower classes—the undernourished children, the fear of parents for their daughters—he wouldn't stop his campaign for anything, even the return of his memory.

"Then you can take me to him," said Nona. "I can help him. I think it's crazy—but if I can't stop him, I'm going to be with him."

"No!" Omega emphasized the word by jumping up and down in fury.

"Why not?" asked Nona, using her most beguilingly reasonable tone.

"It wouldn't be safe."

"Nonsense! I'm the equal of any five men. Mark taught me to fight, you know."

Omega grinned ruefully. "Yes, I know. Mark trained you. I don't get any credit for providing the blood that made it possible, do I? But I wasn't thinking of your safety. I wouldn't worry about you in a cave full of snarling tigers. It's Mark. Right now Mark is doing very well, and he's slowly getting an inkling of his past. But if you were suddenly to pop up, he would be torn between a desire to look after you, and the necessity of finishing what he has started. And he'd probably wind up in the hands of the enemy, who aren't at all nice to rebels."

The battle was joined. Nona insisted she would be more help than hindrance, while Omega was determined that she finish the journey to Stadtland and prepare a home for Mark on his eventual return to the land of the Norsemen.

Finally Omega, wearying of the yammer, abruptly deserted the form of the aged man and became the spiderlike creature which represented his original body. He then made a noise which could have been made only with human lips, and followed it with the remark: "Phooey

to females!" This was taking a nasty advantage but ethics had never been Omega's strong point. Nona shrieked in terror, sank back on a divan, and Omega disappeared entirely. "Come back here, you—you thing," she raged. "That's not fair!" She began to heave cushions about the room.

She tired of this in a few minutes, and sat up to stare at the wall of the cabin. Then, after a few deft touches to her wavy ebon hair, she stepped out on the deck.

Shortly after, she and Sven were poring over his inaccurate maps of the islands of the North Sea. Nona had invented a plan. It appeared that Thor had sent her a second message . . . .

CHAPTER VII

THE FAT SATAN

MARK STRODE along a cobbled street a full mile to the west of the misleading route he had taken when the soldiers were pursuing him. He was doubling back now, heading in the general direction of Smid's haberdashery shop. He was walking slowly and smiling happily to himself. The smile was not occasioned by the success of the jail delivery. Nor was it a result of his coup in drawing the pursuit away from the rebel headquarters. Both things had left his mind entirely.

He was remembering!

From the instant his party of disguised rebels had entered the prison courtyard he had felt a vague stirring in his brain. It had congealed into concrete thought when he had hammered on the door.

Two weeks before he had experienced a return of certain portions of his memory when he had stood on that very spot. The association had brought it back. On the other occasion his thoughts had been driven away by his sudden surge of anger at the foul blow of one of the night watchmen. But this time, even though events had been happening with bewildering rapidity, the train of his thoughts had continued, falteringly but unbroken.

First as he had hammered at the huge portal, had come the memory of days of intense abdominal pain.

Coupled with the recollection he could see a face, a somber face which he knew belonged to Dr. Kelso. Old Chisel-chin, he had called him. The doctor was going to remove the pain. It had been vague and disquieting, at first, this memory.

But it had strengthened suddenly as the party waited at the door.

In a matter of seconds he had experienced the return of memories covering thousands of years. Dr. Kelso had develloped a new anaesthetic which had apparently worked admirably on guinea-pigs. He had wished Mark's signed permission to use it during the appendectomy which must be performed. The permission had been granted, with surprising results. Mark had slipped quietly into a state of suspended animation from which he had been awakened six thousand years later by the former inhabitant of the moon, Omega.

Good old Omega. Mark's grin broadened. He wondered where that moon-imp was now. Probably considered his work on Earth finished, now that he had safely established Mark and Nona as the new Adam and Eve of a new and finer race. and gone cavorting about the other planets. Mark frowned. Everything had gone wrong; Omega wouldn't like it. Mark and Nona were separated and here he was all mixed up in some insular revolution that might very well be considerably less altruistic than its ringleaders made it out. Wherever Omega was, Mark fervently hoped that Omega wasn't paying any too much attention to what he, Mark, was up to.

Then suddenly Mark knew that the thing he wanted most in life was Nona. Remembering the howling storm which had washed him overboard he felt sudden anxiety for her safety. But it was allayed immediately by the thought that the stout Viking ship would have weathered the dying fury of that tempest with ease. And Nona had been safe in their cabin. Still, the thought of her safety was not enough.

ABRUPTLY he was cursing himself for becoming so engrossed in his thoughts as to lose awareness of his surroundings. In his preoccupation he had been totally oblivious to the fact that his movements had been observed and that he was being slowly but completely surrounded by a body of soldiers.

In the darkness of the night they managed to get quite close before he noticed them. It is likely that one of them would have stolen close enough to strike an unexpected blow, if Mark hadn't been warned by the clanking rattle of a breastplate. As it was, when he did sense their presence they were on all sides.

Viciously he snatched his axe from its holster and leaped for the nearest warrior. The surprised soldier went down without even making an attempt to defend himself.

The next few minutes tore the silence of the night into shattered fragments. With a whirling attack that dazzled the soldiers with its speed and ferocity Mark plied his axe in a dozen directions at once. So baffling was his footwork and so vicious his handling of the axe that it was some minutes before they were able to so much as touch him with a weapon.

The first cut he received, a shallow one on the shoulder, was a poor retaliation for the seven men he had laid on the ground.

But there was one among the soldiers who evidently had more intelligence than the others. That man was their sergeant. In the hectic moments that Mark was striking down one after another of his men, he realized that unless a lucky blow brought him down, this amazing fellow might very well wipe out his whole command. The sergeant had been carefully drilled, but clearly this was no time to be too picky about regulations. Standing well back out of Mark's darting lunges, he waited for his opportunity. It came when he saw Mark deliver a smashing blow to the man directly in front of him and then whirl to face those at his back.

In that instant the sergeant dove, catching both of Mark's legs in his crushing embrace. Mark toppled to the ground.

WITHOUT hesitation they all jumped at the chance to climb aboard. Mark felt as if the Notre Dame eleven with a full complement of substitutes were jumping up and down on his midriff. For a few minutes Mark heaved beneath the weight of their bodies, but he became more docile when the point of a knife pricked his throat and a stern voice commanded him to be still.

The soldiers brought stout ropes and bound him. Several grumbled because they wanted to slice his throat right then and the sergeant wouldn't let them. To the survivors fell the task of carrying Mark as well as their fallen comrades.

Mark was seething as he was carried roughly through the city streets. Like a bale of dirty laundry. Occasionally the men holding his feet would lower him enough that he bounced for several steps on the cobbles. This seemed to give them considerable satisfaction, though they stopped it when they noticed that Mark didn't seem to be paying any attention. Even though he was in the throes of an intense rage, Mark wasn't oblivious to his surroundings. He wouldn't make that mistake again. And he noticed, wonderingly, that his captors weren't carrying him in the direction of the jail.

He noticed further that none of the soldiers were familiar. They certainly weren't of the same group that he had encountered earlier that night. For although the light had been poor, he surely would have recognized at least one of them. These men were all strangers.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked the sergeant.

"You'll find out soon enough," came the growled answer. Another one laughed in a sinister sort of way and Mark didn't feel like asking any more questions, for a while.

"Where did you fellows learn to tackle like that?" he inquired a little later.

The sergeant expanded. "Never learned it anywhere," he said. "It seemed to be the only way to bring you down. When they want to promote a man to be a

sergeant, they always pick the one who can figure a way to meet any circumstance." He cast a disdainful glance at the men around him. "That's why these nitwits aren't sergeants. They're only butchers, and bad ones at that."

Mark nodded. "Your master knows men," he observed. "Who is he?"

"Erlayok," said the sergeant, proudly. "The greatest of them all. He's the real boss around here."

Mark mentally translated this into "Earl of York", and tried to remember what he had heard of the man. Murf had informed him of the status of the various nobles with whom they would have to contend, and as he remembered, the Earl of York was the most powerful of them all. His army was the best equipped, and his lands were the richest.

And he was the most feared, for he maintained a corps of spies who kept him informed of the actions of his enemies, who were legion.

Once again since setting foot on this land of the Brish Mark found himself spending the night in a dungeon. This time, however, he wasn't incarcerated in an ordinary prison. His cell was one of a dozen in the lower basement of a pretentious palace. Though situated in the confines of the city of Scarbor, it was guarded and fortified with all the elaborate contrivances of a medieval castle. There was no moat, but its lack was well compensated by a high stone wall, its top patrolled by guards.

Nor was Mark left alone to utilize his strength in an effort to break out. A guard with a long, sharp-pointed pike was stationed outside his cell. At Mark's attempt to communicate with him, he obligingly opened his mouth and displayed the place where his tongue had been torn out. Mark shuddered and held his peace.

But Mark had never been much of a hand at just sitting still. He decided to try an experiment. He grasped the bars of the door and began to exert pressure. The guard grinned at the attempt and spat contemptuously. Then he blinked and passed a hand over his eyes. The bars were slowly bending, warping the door.

Instantly the guard sprang into action. Holding his spike like a billiard cue, he jabbed at Mark's hand. The point sunk deep in the flesh of its heel, but his amazing prisoner waved his hand in the air and resumed his prodigious labor. Frantically the guard jabbed at the knuckles. Mark, afraid that the heavy pike would break a bone, stepped back.

The bars were warped appreciably, but not nearly enough to let him through. The guard, mouthing sharp querulous sounds, stood ready to repel any further attempt. His eyes were expressing the amazement he couldn't voice. They were glued unbelievingly on Mark's hands, which showed no signs of a wound.

THE night wore on, Mark alert for any relaxing on the part of the guard. But that astounded individual kept rigidly prepared to use his pike on a moment's notice. When the throbbing gongs announced the termination of curfew, the man was ready to drop from exhaustion.

Mark still watched him, sympathetically.

Shortly after curfew there was a commotion in the corridor, and a squad of soldiers made their way to Mark's cell. They wore enameled armor with the crest of the Earl's private guard. Each carried a drawn sword and seemed willing, even anxious, to use it.

The face of the guard eloquently spoke his relief at getting rid of his prisoner.

The soldiers surrounded Mark and marched his away. Two of them were pointing knives directly at his throat. Word of his prowess had obviously gotten around.

The way led upward, and several flights of stairs were climbed. Each of these seemed to be of smoother material, the last flight being constructed of beautifully polished marble. The upper floors were evidently the living quarters of the earl and his retinue.

A door was opened, a corridor ornamented with carved woods and tapestries

was traversed, and Mark was thrust into a richly decorated room. The soldiers stopped and stood at attention.

The room, which was furnished to a king's taste, had one occupant, Erlayok. The man was of massive physique, layered with pounds and pounds of fat. Yet he gave an impression of having tremendous power. One could guess that some years before he had been a commanding figure. For even with all his gross bulk there was an air of proud austerity about him, demanding respect from any and all. Mark found himself studying the man carefully.

"At ease," said the Earl. "You may go."

A soldier in the trappings of a captain stuttered and finally found his voice. "Excellency," he said. "This man is as dangerous as a wild boar. It would be better . . ."

Erlayok silenced him with a glance, a glance that had a deadly threat in it. "You would advise *me*?" he said, softly and slowly. "When you know that these hands have strangled even the beast of which you speak."

The captain blanched visibly, then bowed and withdrew, his men following. A gargantuan roar of laughter tumbled from the Earl's gaping mouth.

Mark flexed the muscles of his shoulders. The more he saw of Erlayok, the less he liked him. But dislike did not breed contempt. The softness of the layers of fat was not reflected in his face, Mark noticed. The face was one of unusual hardness, an inflexible hardness that seemed to reveal the power that was inherent in the man. And it revealed intelligence as well. In the wide-spread, level eyes there was reflected a self-assured wisdom that gave Mark the impression that the man was learned beyond the average of his times. But if there was intelligence, it was a cruel intelligence, not sympathetic, not tolerant of any form of weakness.

"You are the man of whom my spies speak," began Erlayok, contemptuously. "The man who would be king! Do you not know that we have a king, and that he is but a puppet? And that we are satisfied to have it so?"

MARK said nothing. He was meditating, trying to decide if it wouldn't be smart to kill Erlayok while he had the chance. Mark had intended that the eventual rebellion be as bloodless as possible. His plans were already laid whereby the nobles and their families would be made useful citizens, and not slaughtered out of hand, as some of his allies favored.

But this man was undoubtedly their most dangerous foe; and to kill him now would save bloodshed later. His death would tend to cripple the nobles by removing their greatest support. And certainly this man could never be either an ornament to or a useful member of any well regulated society.

"Speak, man!" cried Erlayok, his voice rising a note.

Mark smiled disarmingly. "You seem very confident of your ability to handle me," he observed. "Overconfidence has filled many a cemetery."

Erlayok laughed again. Mark wondered uneasily if there might not be a touch of madness in him. His laughter had a horrible quality, a sort of bubbling, that made Mark's ordinarily steady nerves jitter.

"How true," agreed Erlayok, the laughter subsiding. He sobered. "And it will probably hold good in your case too."

That about decided Mark. Erlayok was just asking for it. Killing him would not be murder. It would be only the execution of a criminal who deserved it many times over. Only five feet separated him from the hideous grossness that was the Erlayok, and Mark poised on the balls of his feet for the leap.

Then abruptly he realized that Erlayok's eyes were beating him back! His feet were solidly on the floor and he had no will to leap.

Mark had experienced this same thing once before, but on that occasion he had been expecting it and had fought back.

Now he was beaten down, his senses reeling, before he knew that he was facing a master hypnotist.

Dimly he heard the soft voice: "And you thought I was a creature of physical force only!" It mocked him, and with its dying sound he felt consciousness go.

CHAPTER VIII

DUEL OF TWO CENTURIES

WHEN he awoke he was sitting on the floor, heavy manacles and chains binding his hands and feet. Nothing else had changed. Erlayok sat motionless in his cushioned chair, his heavy chin resting on a heavy fist, and there was no other person in the room.

Mark glanced curiously at the chains and found them to be thin but strong looking. Erlayok was gazing at him, apparently with keen interest, and perhaps with even a touch of amiability.

"You can break them, I don't doubt," he said. "But before you could accomplish it, I would have you unconscious again. So let's be friendly and talk. Perhaps you would like a bit of this wine?"

He gestured toward a bottle and glasses on a small table at his side. Mark shook his head. Turning on the charm, was he?

"You are a man of intelligence," stated Erlayok. "While I held you in a trance I probed into your mind, plumbing to the earliest of your memories, I was astounded. Truly astounded. I could scarcely believe the things I found. That you have lived for many thousands of years; of this mental creature, Omega; and of your adventures in the north country. Yes, there are many things of which we must talk."

"Why?" growled Mark, concealing his own astonishment that this man of modern Britain should possess such power.

In an age when humanity was slowly accomplishing its weary climb back to the heights it had attained in his early youth, it was almost unbelievable that there could exist a man of such mental attainment.

Yet all through history there had been evidences that here and there existed super-intelligences. Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome had all their oracles, their necromancers, their prophets, all men of undoubted genius. Men who had astounded the peoples of their times. And today, the phenomenon could happen again, could it not? There was no sense conjecturing. It *had* happened.

"Why?" repeated Erlayok, uncertainly. "But of course, I had forgotten. You are the leader of the rebels. You disapprove of our form of government. My boy, you are being silly. I see I underrated you. With some common ground upon which to meet, you and I could be of great help to each other."

Mark thought that highly unlikely. "How?" he asked.

"First let us discuss the meeting ground," said Erlayok, amiably. "You must know that I am a great scholar. That I have read of the troublous times in which you lived. Certain books are preserved even to this day, and others have been copied. So that scholars, such as myself, have a fair idea of how people lived. And I think that I can show you that things are not so very different right now."

A short burst of sardonic laughter passed Mark's lips.

"Don't laugh too soon," admonished Erlayok. "Of course there are no carts that roll at lightning speed without oxen or horses. Nor are there ships which sail without sails, or machines that fly in the air. But there are still taxes collected that the government may maintain public works, such as an adequate army. That is the same, and I think that is the very thing to which you object."

"Of course I object," Mark retorted. "The bulk of that wealth is not used for public works, but only so you can keep your power, and live in ease and luxury."

"Not the bulk, my boy; only about the same proportion that was used for the purpose by your own governments. Didn't the ones in power in your day divert some of the public funds to their own ends?

Didn't they invariably cause legislation to be passed which would benefit themselves? And was this practice frowned upon to the extent that people would take up arms and risk their lives to stop it?"

MARK was stumped for a minute. This wise-eyed noble had placed his finger on a sore spot. "Yes," to that he suddenly answered. "People did rebel at times."

"So they did. But when the rebellion was won, did conditions change? Did the new crowd conduct themselves in an exemplary manner? Or did they change things about a little, and then drift back into the old rut?"

Mark saw his argument thrown back in his face. Erlayok was right. The thing had happened many times. "But in my time people didn't work from dawn to dusk and then half starve to death."

"Perhaps not, but then your fine machines enabled you to produce goods in a shorter space of time. The only way to ease things today for the common herd would be to abolish our armies. And we can't do that or our enemies would conquer us and we would be worse off than before.

"So you see that mankind's most expensive luxury is not the ruling class, which charges enough for its services that it may live in ease and comfort, but rather its own belligerence and greed. Man's own vices keep him slaving to satisfy them."

"I don't see how the expense could be so high that your people should have to work every minute of their waking hours to earn a mere existence."

"But it is. Our armies must be large. There are the Macs on the north and the Mics to the west, besides a long coastline to defend against possible attack from your friends, the Norse. I think that just about takes care of our differences of opinion. You can readily see that any change must obviously be for the worse."

Erlayok's suave amiability, his utter logic, and the neatness with which he compared present-day practices with the injustices of Mark's own time, had Mark losing ground fast. But a few of the things he had seen for himself in the past two weeks came to his rescue.

"I suppose you can condone the rape of peasant girls by members of your army," he suggested. "Or perhaps the barbaric treatment of accused prisoners, and the medieval punishments you mete out for minor offenses. Not to mention your delightful practice of torture to obtain confessions."

Erlayok shrugged his massive form deprecatively. "Just standards of the times," he said. "Deplorable, I'll admit, but nothing can be done about it. These people are barbarians. You must have seen that."

"How could they help but be—and nothing can be done as long as you don't wish it," flared Mark. "You coddle your army by letting it ride rough-shod over the rights of the very people who work to feed it. The other tear-'em-and-teach-'em stuff goes because you're afraid that if you ever showed the velvet glove inside the steel fist you'd have a swell rebellion on your hands."

Erlayok's eyes hardened for the merest instant. But so flickerlingly that Mark wasn't sure that any change had taken place.

"Tut tut," Erlayok replied. "You are wrought up over nothing. Our people are hardy, used to long hours of labor and poor food. They don't think anything of serving a few months imprisonment for an anti-social act. If we instituted soft punishment, crime would run wild. Punishment must be severe. We nobles are not inherently cruel. Our harshness is forced upon us."

"I notice that you let your soldiers do pretty much as they please," Mark pointed out.

ERLAYOK spread the fingers of his pudgy—but curiously powerful—hands, in a gesture meant to convey his helplessness in the matter. "Our enemies are powerful," he said. "And it was a recognized fact even in your civilized times

that the more bestial a man was, the better soldier he made.

"There was a great general called the Duke of Wellington who said that he preferred men who were bestial and unruly. He said that they made the best soldiers just because their passions were primitive and unbridled. And because they lacked imagination. Such men don't picture their own blood wetting the battlefield. In their fighting rage they think of nothing but the damage they are going to inflict on the enemy. And so they are the more ferocious. We must have that kind of man if we are to survive, and the women know what to expect.

"But let's not discuss it any more. I have shown you that conditions are not essentially different, whatever the age. People must pay for the services their own folly requires. When they elevate themselves to the point that they no longer wish to war on each other; when they become so civilized that they no longer commit crimes against each other; then they will reap the rewards of their own virtue.

"They will no longer have to do ninety percent of their labor in support of expensive armies and police forces. So let us get the most out of our fortunate meeting, and exchange the knowledge that each of us has acquired. We are too wise not to be friends. Am I not right?"

Mark grinned at the term "fortunate meeting." But his eyes narrowed as he remembered his first estimate of the man who now seemed so amiable and friendly.

"If I should agree," he inquired, "just what do you want me to tell you?" Warning bells jangled a persistent alarm in his brain.

"Oh, there are many things I would like to know of your era. Our knowledge, unfortunately, has been gleaned from histories and stories. Legend. It is too general to be of much use. No technical books have ever been found. We don't even know what caused such a loss of knowledge. There must have been thousands of libraries. We have found none."

"War," Mark supplied. "But just what sort of technical knowledge are you after?"

Erlayok was taken off guard by the matter-of-fact way the question was asked. "The thing we need most is a knowledge of the manufacture of guns. Another valuable thing would be the engines which were used to drive armored tanks. We have men skilled in the manufacture of machines, gears and other equipment of the sort. But we have no power to drive machinery; only man and horse power. I've seen a picture of the armored tank of the ancients, and a few of them would drive our enemies off the face of the earth."

ERLAYOK had a faraway expression on his face as he pictured the destruction he could create with these weapons. But he snapped alert when he noticed the gleam in Mark's eyes.

"Don't misunderstand me," he hastened to explain. "I want these things because they would relieve our people of the constant fear of invasion which threatens them. Think, man, if we had such things we could drive the Mics back to their island in the west. We could defeat the Macs in the north.

"They would never dare attack us again, and our people would be freed of the burden of taxes required to maintain our present tremendous armies. A skeleton force would be sufficient to keep our enemies at bay."

Mark laughed a short, bitter laugh. "It would never occur to you to defeat your enemies and then use the weapons for further conquest, of course." The irony was not subtle.

Erlayok tried hard to look like a man who has been grossly insulted. He leaned back in his chair and shook his head sadly.

"Friend," he said, "you malign me. But I can understand. You have been here for only a few days and you have seen only one side of our life. And so you have judged harshly. But see this map."

Lightly, for a man of his tremendous weight, Erlayok strode to one wall and ripped aside a tapestry. Beneath it was a large map of the British Isles. Mark, chains clanking, heaved himself up off the floor and examined it closely. He deduced from the accuracy of its meridians that it was a copy of some ancient map that had been found in the ruins of one of the old cities. But there was nothing ancient about its other markings. It was a modern map in every respect.

Erlayok had said something about driving the Mics back to their island in the west. This had been Mark's first inkling that any of the land formerly known as England had been encroached upon. Now he got a new surprise from the map.

It depicted the area held by the Mics as being larger than that of the Brish. The Mics' eastern border made a curved line through the sites of the ancient cities of Manchester and Birmingham, touching the town of Weymouth at its southern extremity. All this in addition to their native isle. And just as surprising, was the southern border of the Macs. It crossed the island diagonally from Lancaster to Stockton. Truly the land of the Brish had shrunken.

"You will note," Erlayok pointed, "that the boundaries we must protect are long, and hard to defend. The Mics, who are naturally combative and quite numerous, have been pushing forward, a little piece at a time, for hundreds of years. And the Macs as well. It requires constant vigilance and a large army, or they would engulf us."

"You say they are numerous," observed Mark. "Certainly not as numerous as the Brish. I remember England as a thickly populated island. Far more people to the square mile than your enemies. In fact, that is probably the reason why the Brish were originally able to take over the rule of these peoples."

"Today," claimed Erlayok, "we are outnumbered three to one." He paused, and a gleam came in his eyes. "You say the Brish once controlled these people who are now our enemies? Then their lands are rightfully ours!"

"No more than your lands belong to them," said Mark. "If you go back far enough all three peoples were independent, each occupying separate territories." He remembered about the Germans in East Prussia, about Alsace and the Sudeten and the Austro-Italian Tyrol, and knew that that argument was hopeless.

MARK wondered why the Brish should be so outnumbered. Then he thought of the wars which had smashed the civilized world he had known. England, with its railway centers and important industries, had probably been the scene of the most devastating battles. Its large cities, housing millions, had been the targets of far more bombings than the less important and less thickly populated centers of the Mics and the Macs. Then too, the initial attacks had very likely come suddenly, killing millions in the key cities of England. Other population centers, sufficiently warned, could have been evacuated.

"And so you want weapons," said Mark, gravely. "Anything else?"

Erlayok looked searchingly at him Mark's face revealed nothing.

"Yes. There is one other thing," said the Earl, seriously. "As you can see, I am a man with a mentality far above the people around me. Now this benefactor of yours, Omega, has ambitions to populate the earth with a superior race. He has chosen you, and rightly, to carry out this purpose. Naturally then, it would further his purpose and yours, if I were also chosen to carry on my strain of genius. Am I not right?"

"I don't think so," Mark replied. "I wasn't chosen because of any streak of genius, for I have none. And besides, I have no knowledge of the way my blood is made. I couldn't give it to you if I wanted to. And I don't particularly want to."

Mark thought he saw the expression of unabated hardness come again to Erla-

yok's piglike eyes, but again it had passed too quickly for him to be certain.

"Then of course you could prevail upon this Omega to furnish it for me," he said, with assurance. "Such genius as mine should be allowed to survive more than the ordinary life-span. He will surely agree."

Once, Mark had met an oil magnate, an alumnus of his college. Fat, pompous, predatory. He had talked in much the same way of his enterprise and astuteness, terms which, frankly rendered, would have meant greed and rascality. Erlayok at least had more on the ball than that.

"I doubt if Omega will think you're quite the type," Mark said. "You see, Omega is not much impressed by any human intellect. Nothing our race has ever produced can compare with his own intelligence. He is only interested in good character traits. And he doesn't find many of them in humans. I don't think you'd get a very good report card on that score."

"But he is certain to recognize that I am superior to other humans," protested Erlayok. "And it is a superior race he proposes to start, so I must surely qualify."

Mark laughed. "Well, maybe. If you read my mind as thoroughly as you say, then you must know that a human with my type of blood requires no sleep. Twenty-four hours a day, his mind is active. Nor is his mind troubled by any physical disorders. The radio-active element in the blood not only heals wounds with lightning speed, but kills all disease germs. Therefore, the brain operates free of distractions of that sort.

"During the long nights when everyone else is asleep, he is awake. As a result he thinks, and thinks deeply. The average human never gets time to think. He is too busy making a living, or relaxing to build strength for the next period of work.

"Therefore, you see, the man with my sort of blood becomes a mental giant in time, even though he may have been only of mediocre intelligence in the beginning. So I don't think Omega would weigh your mental attainments very heavily. I, myself, will eventually surpass you. Right now I doubt that you could hypnotize me again. You caught me unware the first time."

Erlayok laughed his offensive laugh. But Mark noticed that it had an uneasy note in it.

"WHY should I hypnotize you?" Erlayok asked. "Let us leave the matter of blood to your Omega. You can suggest it to him, when he appears again. Right now let us talk of the weapons we need to free our people of the terrible yoke of taxes which oppresses them. I shall provide writing materials for you. My artisans can work from your designs."

The huge noble started to cross the room toward an elaborately carved escritoire.

"Don't trouble yourself," Mark advised. "I couldn't draw plans for a gun or a tank if I tried all day. In my former existence I dabbled in electricity and radio, but armament is out of my line. If you read my mind so clearly, you should know that."

Erlayok's face hardened. He became the man he had been when Mark was brought into the room. Inflexible, cruel and ruthless. "You lie!" he charged. "In your mind I saw all sorts of technical knowledge about guns."

"Then why didn't you record that knowledge in your own brain?" Mark taunted. "Or isn't your mind as powerful as you would have me believe?"

Erlayok took a step forward. Mark poised on the balls of his feet, his hands stretched as far apart as the chains would permit. Once those hands encircled that fat neck it would be the end of Erlayok, chains or no chains. But the Earl stopped.

"Fool. You know that this age is ignorant of technical things. I could see the knowledge in your brain, but I couldn't translate it." He paused and the expression of hardness left his face. Once again he was the amiable fat man.

"But what are we arguing about? We are friends. In exchange for the knowledge I wish, you have my promise that when our enemies are conquered, the people will benefit immediately. How much better is the solution of removing the necessity for our great army, than the bloody revolution that you rebels are planning. Bloodshed which will accomplish nothing, for the army will still be necessary, and consequently the taxes."

Mark, looking into the eyes of Erlayok, felt the logic of his arguments. In the friendly expression on the big man's face there was only an earnest desire to convince Mark of the truths that would lift the intolerable burden from his people.

Mark felt suddenly ashamed of his own cheap cynicism. Erlayok was so obviously interested in the welfare of the Brish, so little caring for his own personal gain. Why had not Mark seen this before? Such a man would not use a knowledge of deadly weapons for the purpose of conquest.

Even Nona had always accused him of being too wary and too suspicious. And she was right. Mark was convinced that in the face of his new opinion of Erlayok, he should reveal his knowledge of guns and tanks. First impressions should not be trusted. The plans for the guns . . .

Suddenly Mark remembered that he knew little of the actual designs of guns. And nothing of the chemical formula of gunpowder. He had shot guns; he was, in fact, an expert marksman. That was why Erlayok had thought he could build one.

ABRUPTLY a new thought struck home. He had just decided to design guns for this man, who was now such a fine fellow. And yet he knew it was impossible for him to do it. That decision hadn't originated in his own brain!

With the realization he looked searchingly into the eyes of Erlayok. In them he sensed a bafflement, a sort of frustration. Erlayok was finding his subtle form of hypnotism running against a stone wall.

Mark felt a probing force beat against his brain, and the expression of the fat man changed to sudden bestial anger, mingled with a fierce determination.

The Earl was marshaling all his mental force to break down Mark's stubborn will. The waves of mental energy hammered and surged against Mark's brain. But he didn't lose consciousness as he had before. This time he was warned and prepared. He got angry and steeled himself.

The nerve of that pudgy ape tinkering around with the inside of his mind! Why, it was outright indecent. Mark was furious.

The mental suggestion of friendliness and virtuous intention was the sort of thing that could sneak up on him before he knew he was being hypnotized. But now that he was warned and alert, he was safe from the most powerful mental force. His brain, as well as his body, was automatically feeding itself upon the radiations of his peculiar blood, and was tireless.

He could maintain his resistance indefinitely, while Erlayok was tiring fast. Serve him right. Mark hoped he'd break a blood vessel. The hammering grew weaker and finally stopped abruptly. The big man slumped in his chair, his eyes glazed.

"Satisfied?" Mark grinned. "I can't design guns because I haven't the knowledge. Even if you could break me down you couldn't get the answer."

Mark's voice served to revive the Earl. Life came into his eyes and he sat erect. Suddenly he picked up the decanter of wine and threw it directly at Mark. Speedy reflexes bobbed Mark's head out of its path and the glass decanter shattered against the door.

"There are more ways than one of breaking a man down," snarled Erlayok.

His face, twisted into a savage grimace, warned Mark of what might be in store for him. He strained to pull the chains apart. The decanter hadn't been tossed at him after all. Erlayok had known that he would duck and it would strike the door. The guards, who had retired no further than the other side of that door, would be summoned by the crash. And the Earl, gloat-

ing, could be planning only one thing. Torture.

The frantic tugging was useless. Before he could do more than stretch the tough links, the guards rushed in and pinned him.

"Now, my sanctimonious friend," Erlayok gloated. "We shall see whether or not you will speak. My torturers have something of genius in them, too. They have never failed. And if it will make you feel any better, I'll teach you this:

"When I equip my men with guns, I shall do more than drive the Mics and the Macs out of our land. I shall enslave them! And your people—your Vikes who consider themselves the world's greatest warriors; who refuse to dignify the might of the Brish by waging war, but merely raid us when they so desire—they shall pay for their arrogance. I'll descend upon them with every fighting man our ships will hold! I'll wipe them off the face of the earth!"

Mark glared defiantly. He knew the Earl would do none of these things. And his steady gaze did little to pacify the rage of Erlayok. The man was seething, his face working with the madness that gripped him, as he herded the party down the marble stairs toward the dungeons.

CHAPTER IX

THE FRIGHTENED TAILOR

THE guards kept the razor-edged swords poised menacingly at Mark. If he was to have an opportunity to turn the tables on his captors, the time was certainly not now. The slightest move would find several of the swords sheathed in his body. And while he now knew of the miraculous healing powers of his blood, he certainly wasn't going to risk injury to vital organs.

The party didn't stop at the level of the dungeons, as he had expected. A stone door revealed a flight of steps going even lower.

A smelly oil lamp, carried by one of the guards, revealed a sight that caused Mark to feel a crawling horror. Here was a place that might have been transported bodily from an era, thousands of years past, when the good church fathers of Spain used terrible methods to extract confessions of heresy from unfortunates who were so foolish as to have incurred their enmity.

A charnel odor assailed his nostrils, competing with the effluvium of the smoking oil lamp. Mark was oppressed by a feeling of unreality as he surveyed a conglomeration of the cruelest instruments of torture ever conceived by twisted human minds.

Some of these contraptions were familiar, the sort which might be found in any age of any land where torture was a usual practice. Such things as thumb-screws, foot-crushers and racks were universal, evidently requiring little imagination to devise. But there were other instruments, some of them designed for unguessable purposes, that were obviously the products of some modern genius of this brutal age. Mark shuddered again.

. . . The secret cellar of Smid's haberdashery housed a serious conference. The night had passed, interminably long for the rebels gathered here. Murf had insisted that Mark would return, for he was confident that his superior strength and cunning would enable him to escape from his awkward position at the prison door. But Mark had not put in an appearance.

As the hours progressed and hope that he would return grew dimmer, Murf organized the men into an information-gathering crew. Each man was given a separate line to follow in an effort to trace the disappearance of their leader. One of them was sure to uncover a lead.

Immediately after the ringing of curfew they sallied forth.

In a surprisingly short time two of the men returned, each with information. One of them, with a brother-in-law in the service of Erlayok, told of the terrible fight Mark had given the Earl's soldiers. He guessed that Mark was being held prisoner in Erlayok's palace.

The other, who insisted that his story was for Murf's ears alone, had even more.

His sister, it appeared, was a menial in the service of the Earl. Last night, he related, a bit shamefaced, she had not returned to her home, but had stayed in the palace. He suspected that she had a sweetheart among the guards. Her mother, who had worried about her, had presented herself at the palace gates immediately after curfew, to inquire of her daughter's whereabouts. The daughter was there, all right, and explained to her mother that she had been delayed in the palace until after the beginning of curfew. She gave the cause, in strictest confidence, as being the excitement due to the capture of the leader of the rebels.

Murf summoned Smid and told him the news. Smid's eyes widened in an ague of fear. Questioning by Erlayok meant only one thing. Mark would be tortured until he was forced to reveal the identities and whereabouts of every rebel he knew anything about. Smid had no belief in the fortitude of any man subjected to the Earl's diabolic attentions.

Murf, apparently, held the same idea. "We must stop it," he muttered. "Jon, Duke of Scarbor, is the answer!"

"But who shall seek his aid?"

"Who but myself?" asked Murf, starting for the stairs that would lead him to the street.

"But you can't!" Smid protested. "Think of the risk!"

"Think of the risk if I don't," retorted Murf. "All our work could be wrecked in less than a day. I'm going."

"But if Erlayok knew that Mark was connected with the rebellion, then he is sure to know you are. You practically started it. And he'll trace you back to here." As he said this, Smid's voice rose to a screech.

"Fool." Murf made a swipe at him with open hand. "If he knows me, then he already knows of this place. The point is that we must stop Erlayok from questioning Mark. Once I get inside, with the help of Jon, I can prevent it. If it was any other man, I wouldn't take the chance. But Mark knows all our hidden ramparts. He mustn't talk! Now, my friend, can you suggest anyone to take my place? If you can't, give peace to your puling tongue and let me go."

SMID was cuffed into silence. Nobody but the outrageous Murf would have the courage to enter the stronghold of the enemy. Only Murf, who had some driving urge to see the rebellion an accomplished fact—an urge that seemed far stronger than that of any of the other rebels—would have the audacity to do the awesome thing that was so necessary.

"You will make sure his lips are sealed?" Smid inquired, hesitantly, as Murf again started up the stairs. "You will remember our safety and not be weak?"

Murf paused, ran a thumb along the keen edge of his knife, and replaced it in his belt.

"If necessary," he muttered. "The cause is more important than any one man." There was a laughing light to his eyes as he spoke that made Smid's bony knees clack together in apprehension. Murf was either a wild fanatic or—or a very clever actor.

Smid watched him disappear in the direction of the palace of the Duke of Scarbor, and shook his head.

Smid remembered when he had harbored his first doubts as to Murf's sincerity, his first, uneasy suspicion that Murf might be an emissary of the Mics, who coveted the rich farm lands of the Brish. His red hair, and the fact that he had no past that anyone could trace, added fuel to these suspicions. His glib tongue, and his genius for organizing had served as sufficient reason for thinking that he was just the sort of man who would be sent by the Mics on such a mission. He had tried to trip Murf up, to no purpose. Never once had Murf slipped in his masquerade—if it really was one.

On the other side of the ledger was the fact that Murf *had* red hair, and Smid couldn't conceive of the Mics sending a man upon whom suspicion would so readily fall even at sight. And if he was an agent

of the Mics, he would certainly be furnished with a very plausible background in the form of a carefully fabricated past. In addition, his zeal and willingness to take terrible risks in furthering the cause, were evidence in themselves to allay any doubts of the man's sincerity.

So Smid didn't know and he was unhappy. But then if he wasn't worried about Murf, he was harassed by fears of a possible rise in the price of cloth or by a deep-rooted foreboding that one day his shop would burn to the ground or by almost anything else that popped into his head. Smid saw disaster everywhere, and he knew it, and so he couldn't disentangle his suspicions of Murf from his apparently groundless terrors about everything else under the sun. It was all very distressing.

. . . At the palace gates Murf demanded an audience with Jon. He demanded it in the name of Mark, the savior of the Duke's life. Had he used any other name, he might well have been kicked into the moat. But he knew that the story of the rescue was well known and would gain him admittance. The guardians of the gate were acquainted with the generosity of the Duke, and knew that he would be displeased if they sent Murf away. Accordingly the redhead was led inside.

Jon, Duke of Scarbor, was seated at breakfast with his wife. Without ceremony, Murf was brought into the room. Jon, recognizing him, waved a hand toward a chair at the table. Such democratic treatment surprised the redhead, but he dropped into the seat and dove into his story.

Jon slowly laid down his fork and wiped his fingertips. "But why, man?" he asked. "What can Erlayok want of him? He wouldn't imprison and torture a man without some reason."

"I don't know, Highness. I only know that this is true. Won't you intervene? Our laws, stringent as they are, still protest us from such things. Mark, if he is accused of a crime, is entitled to imprisonment in a public jail while awaiting trial."

Jon looked across the table toward his wife. Her eyes mirrored a sudden fright, but her words belied it. "You must, of course," she said, calmly. "Our decision has been made."

"You are quite right, my dear," he answered. "The gods favor our course."

The Duke stood erect and pushed back his chair. Clapping his hands, he summoned a guard and issued terse orders. A servant appeared with a black cape, which he buckled at his neck. In short minutes he and Murf were mounted and surrounded by armed horsemen of the guard. They galloped off in the direction of Erlayok's palace.

CHAPTER X

THE DUKE GOES TO TOWN

ENTRANCE to the grounds was easily accomplished. The men at the gates swung them wide at the sight of the Duke. But once inside they met delay after delay. No one seemed to know where Erlayok could be found. His servants displayed decided reluctance to talk. The Earl's quarters were deserted, they quickly discovered, and a guard at the gate told them that Erlayok had not left. But no servant or other person connected with the household would give any further information. They were all in abject fear of Erlayok's wrath.

"The dungeons!" said Murf. "These jackals are afraid to tell you that he has already started his horrible tortures." The r's of the adjective came rolling out like the chatter of the forgotten machine-gun.

But when the guard stationed in the gloomy corridor beneath the palace allowed them to look in the cells, they found no trace of Mark.

"You have led us a merry chase," Jon accused. "What idiocy did you hope to work?"

"Believe me, Highness. Mark is somewhere in this palace. Find Erlayok and you'll find him."

The absence of the Earl *was* strange, thought Jon. Perhaps it would pay to find him before passing judgment on this excited scamp. With the idea of again going

through the upper floors he led his men back to the stairs. They passed the stone door leading to the chamber below, again failing to see it in the semi-darkness which prevailed in the dungeon corridor.

Murf, almost at the rear of the party, caught a whiff of the odor of stale wood smoke, mingled with a fetid stench of putrefaction. He turned to locate its origin.

"Wait!" he cried. "I've found him!"

Behind the door were two of Erlayok's guards. They raised their swords to stop the intruders, and were forthwith struck down by the foremost of Jon's soldiers.

Stepping quickly past his men, the Duke entered the grim chamber. What he saw brought a sickly anger to the pit of his stomach. His eyes flashed a single gleam, then he straightened and spread his hands behind him to prevent the sudden rush of his soldiers into the room. The men gathered around Mark were so intent on what they were doing to him that they had not heard a sound.

Strapped tightly in a stone chair, Mark was glaring defiantly at his tormentors. With enormous deliberation a man in the livery of Erlayok was pressing a white-hot iron against Mark's fleshy chest. While open wounds didn't bother Mark much, the searing heat of the iron was exquisite agony. And Mark couldn't let them know what they were doing to him. His flesh might be as good as invulnerable to the destructive, blasting touch of the metal, the delicate little nerves that transmitted the scourging pain to his brain were not. But he had to make them go on thinking he was a wizard, insensible to mortal dolors, and so he kept his face a stiffened mask, and held the light of defiance in his gaze. He didn't see how he could keep the mask from shattering though when they rubbed salt on the place where the iron had been.

Each man bent closer to look at the ravaged flesh. A quick hiss of indrawn breaths. This was not the first time the iron had been applied. But when the man rubbed his hand across Mark's chest, the charred spot brushed away, leaving no sign of a burn! There was only a small spot, the size of the end of the iron, which was lighter in color than the sun-bronzed surrounding skin.

"The gods favor him!" said one of the soldiers with an awed voice. The others nodded.

Erlayok made a strangled sound as he tried to control his rage. "Fools!" he said. "The man is a demon, but I'll make him talk, just the same. His eyes won't heal like that. Jab a hot iron in one of them!"

THE Duke, himself astonished, nevertheless thought it time to interfere. He stepped into the room. Erlayok, seeing him out of the corner of an eye, turned, snarling.

"Explain this!" the Duke demanded.

Erlayok made a visible effort to control himself. It was an heroic task and he accomplished it. He almost achieved the genial expression he had worn a short while before. Almost, but not quite.

"I'm not in the habit of explaining anything which happens in the privacy of my own house. Perhaps you will explain your intrusion."

The Duke's face hardened. "It's useless to argue, Erlayok," he said. "In matters of policy you can overrule me with your control of the votes of the lesser nobles, but in matters of law I am still supreme magistrate in the Duchy of Scarbor. Why are you holding this man and subjecting him to torture?"

Erlayok hesitated, scratching his chin. Mark spoke up, before he could formulate an answer. "He's trying to make me tell him of some ancient weapons he thinks I can design for him. He wants to use them to conquer the Mics and the Macs and make them pay tribute to him."

"Nonsense," Erlayok said. "One of my men recognized him as being a member of the insurgent organization. We are trying to make him tell of his associates."

Jon looked at Murf, who didn't change expression.

"You can prove this?" he asked.

"Certainly! There among your party is

another rebel. A little torture will make *him* talk." Erlayok pointed to Murf, who still remained impassive.

"We don't use such barbaric methods," said Jon, flatly. "If you have no evidence against the redhead, we can't even hold him. And two weeks ago I pardoned him of all former crimes. Have you evidence he has committed any since?"

Erlayok shook his head. "No," he said. "But this other man *can* be held. You have said you are chief magistrate. You can stand in judgment right now." He turned to two of the men among the torturers. "Tell the good Duke where we found this man. And when!"

The soldiers told of capturing Mark several hours after curfew, walking the city streets, not omitting the terrific battle it took to subdue him. Erlayok smiled triumphantly at the Duke.

"He has had his trial now," Erlayok pointed out. "If he's guilty, then pass your sentence."

The Duke looked at Mark. "You have heard the testimony of these men. Do you wish to deny the charge?"

"No," said Mark, to the Duke's surprise. "I *was* walking the city streets after curfew." The sweat was still streaming from his pores and he was breathing jerkily through lungs that felt as thin as paper.

"But man!" the Duke exclaimed. "Don't you know the punishment for that offense?"

Mark nodded. "Drawing and quartering, I've heard. A fit punishment for such a hideous crime." His eyes accused Jon of being no less a barbarian than Erlayok, and Jon was suddenly uncomfortable. He had always tried to be a good man, yet here was a stranger who challenged him to be a better one than he knew how to be. And from somewhere inside, Jon found a deeper courage than he had ever thought he had.

The Duke shook his head sadly. "I didn't make such laws," he muttered, defending himself involuntarily. "It's only my job to enforce them." He paused, and a gleam came in his eyes. He surveyed the splendid physique of the bound man. "I have seen you in action," he said thoughtfully. "And I've listened to the story of your fight with Erlayok's men. And legally there *is* an alternative sentence I can impose."

This much he felt strong enough to do in defiance of Erlayok, whom he had always feared. But fear didn't stop him this time.

Jon paused again and smiled at the expression of anger that crossed the face of the Earl. "This is the third week of the harvest festivities. Tomorrow, and every day until Saturday, there will be games and exhibitions in the central arena. I sentence you to participate in them. Perhaps you may survive. It depends on you. . . ."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Purring Cat

By SINCLAIR GLUCK
Author of "Red Sky Over China," "The Dreaming Death," etc.

The masked Japanese pointed his gun into that turmoil

May the God of Luck ride on your shoulder this day, O Friend of China. For you will need all his heavenly protection to elude the feline claws of Nippon's Colonel Sinister

Complete Novelet

I

IT WAS bitter cold up here in the night sky above Chekiang Province. The out-moded, four-place pursuit job lay open to the stars. Chill eddies from the slip stream whirled over the cowling and stung like tiny knives.

Benson lounged beside the Chinese pilot, half alert to the pound of the engine, his cold gray eyes brooding. Personal suffering had left its mark on him. His thin face and hooded eyes had the look of a hawk in repose. Few men and fewer women could meet his gaze steadily.

His thoughts were on the work ahead. However well laid their plans, it looked like a tough job at best. To land a Chinese plane unseen a few miles from Shanghai was only the beginning. There might be one chance in ten of pulling it off—unless the Japs recognized him. If they did, the odds against success ran up into astronomical figures.

As a captain of Marines, he had spent two years at the American Embassy in Tokyo and had known many Japanese officers. He had been in command of an American defense sector at Shanghai when a Japanese bomb had killed his wife and little boy in Nanking Road.

The shock had left him anything but neutral. He had resigned his commission, gone on a bender and made his way up to Anking to join the Chinese Army. Probably the Japanese secret service knew all about that. On the other hand, he knew that he had changed.

Plenty of Jap officers had seen his face on that last mad venture for China. But all these had been killed when the Chinese "treasure chest" was opened in the Japanese headquarters at Kaifeng. Packed with high explosive instead of gold, it had ripped the Japanese general and his staff to shreds.

There were many Chinese spies in Jap pay. The Japs might be waiting for him tonight, but that seemed unlikely. Yes, about one chance in ten. Not bad odds—for poor old China.

The plane flew without lights except the cowled ones over the instrument board. Benson stuck his wrist under these and peered at his watch. Taking off from Chungking before nightfall, they had flown almost two hundred and eighty miles an hour in a bee line ever since. The distance was nine hundred miles. Eleven-thirty now. They must be getting close. Anyhow, the calm, taciturn boy at his side was one of the best of the Chinese pilots, and knew the terrain. A quiet, modest chap, Tung Li, but a nerveless dare-devil according to Chang Tso.

Benson's mind reverted to his friend on the Chinese General Staff, the man who preferred to be called Chang Tso. In their final talk, Chang had recommended the pilot.

He had also wished Benson luck with a final warning: "Do not under-estimate the Nipponese secret police, respected friend. Their leader in Shanghai is clever as a fox—and harmless as a purring cat until he strikes. Well for China if he joined his dishonorable ancestors. Yet do not risk this venture, to that end. His true name is Colonel Kidote, but he uses many others."

"Colonel Coyote," thought Benson, his lips thinning in a hard smile. "Maybe I'll have a chance to collect me a pelt."

THE steady beat of the engine began to falter occasionally, with a cough like a sick animal. Benson felt the leaden discomfort of too little oxygen. His breathing had quickened and deepened. As the climbing plane leveled off, he glanced at the altimeter. The needle quivered at fifteen thousand feet. They had been flying at twelve thousand until now.

He leaned out and stared downward. The plane seemed to be hanging in empty space, whipped by a gale of wind. Starlight revealed a thin layer of cloud perhaps two miles below. It spread from horizon to horizon, like vast, dimly-white bandages on the tortured earth of China. He quartered it slowly with his eyes, hunting for Jap patrol planes. There were no moving pinpoints of light against the clouds. Eastward and far ahead, the lights of Shanghai pierced their cloud veil like a shimmering pool of milk.

The roar of the engine softened to a purr. The plane nosed downward, tilted into a loose, descending spiral. Tung Li leaned out his side. Benson watched the cloud floor rising, spreading sluggishly to engulf them. Now and then he yawned to equalize the pressure on his ear-drums.

Off to the south a faint, rosy light tinged the clouds from below. The pilot veered and made for it in a smooth glide. Over the light, he began to spiral again, cutting his switch. Without struts or wires to slice the wind, the stream-lined monoplane winged downward like a ghost, its engine silent.

Tung Li turned his goggled face. "They have heard my engine die, friend of China, and are prepared. It is well."

"We have not touched earth yet," said Benson drily. "'It is well!' cried the fledgling when he left the bough."

The blue-lipped young pilot took the hint to watch his flying. They circled down and down into less biting cold. Mist swirled in their faces and the plane bumped heavily. Then they slid clear, perhaps a thousand feet above the earth.

AHEAD and below, the country villa of some wealthy Chinese merchant was burning luridly. As they spiraled lower the roof subsided with an uprush of sparks, and the house became a flaming torch in the night.

Trees huddled on three sides of it. Across the fourth side a long ribbon of meadow separated the villa from one of the many small creeks in this lake region. It was to light the meadow for their landing that the merchant had sacrificed his house. On a field not their own, landing lights would have attracted Jap patrol planes, then little brown troops in armored cars. But a flaming Chinese home would not interest the Nipponese. It was too commonplace.

The plane jounced through an uprush of warm air and dove on, its black wings reflecting no light, its propeller oddly motionless. At length it banked around lazily and nosed for the meadow. Two walls of the house had fallen in. The deodars near it flung long, pointed shadows over the countryside. Black and red ripples shimmered on the creek, fading as the light dimmed. The oil-soaked villa had flared up like cardboard.

Benson leaned farther out. The ground was coming up fast, the near end of the meadow just ahead.

They slewed edgewise to lose altitude and leveled off, expertly close to the ground. The plane settled, jounced and bumped along in a perfect dead-stick landing. The firm, increasing check of the brakes halted it just beyond the trees.

Before it stopped rolling, three black-clad figures had trotted from hiding to converge on it. Benson looked at the pilot sharply. Tung Li had stripped off his goggles and was hanging them on a cowled light over the instrument board.

"It *is* well, friend of China!" He spoke in Manchu, as a compliment to Benson. "And these, too, are friends—" He released the brakes and smothered a yawn of fatigue.

The twittering coolies ganged up on the plane. They lifted the tail, caught hold of the wings and trundled it under the deodars. Two of these had been stripped of their low branches on one side. The prop nosed unharmed between these two trees until the black wings were almost entirely beneath the dark, upper branches.

Benson and Tung Li climbed out stiffly. Coolies ran up with five-gallon tins of gasoline. The pilot supervised the refueling. In the flickering light, Benson watched the lopped off branches being skillfully arranged to camouflage the tail.

When Tung Li joined him, Benson said gruffly: "We part here. Await me tonight or another night. Only the gods know."

The pilot saluted. "This vigilant person will be ready at all moments for your auspicious return, friend of China. May the god of luck ride on your shoulder tonight."

Benson returned the salute, his bleak smile an admission of liking. He watched the boy move stiffly toward a small, enclosed summer house hidden deeper among the trees. Then he caught the whisper of feet on pine needles and turned swiftly. A stout man in rags was lumbering up to him. The black-garbed coolies had melted into the shadows and vanished like gnomes.

"Ah! Are now-famous Captain Benson, isn't you?" came a buttery whisper. "Again I am proud man, dear sir, but are not time for shaking the hands. Please to step on my heels, Captain. This way, like spitting thunder."

The fat scarecrow set off through the trees. Benson followed. To the right and behind them a last tongue of flame died and left the villa a mound of glowing embers. They stumbled on in sudden darkness, to come out on the edge of a half-submerged field. The clouds reflected some light from distant Shanghai and from Soochow to the northwest. Trotting quietly

for all his bulk, the Chinese skirted part of the field, mounted a low irrigation dyke and turned away from the creek and the burned house.

They passed another field in which patches of ruffled water lay faintly gleaming. At last Benson saw another, wider creek ahead and the dark camel's hump of a sampan motionless against the near bank. When they reached it, the big Chinese grunted and leaped aboard. As soon as Benson's feet struck the rocking deck half a dozen coolies set about running up the sail, pushing off and working the boat downstream toward Shanghai.

Benson's guide had scrambled under the arched matting aft, and swopped ends clumsily. Now his fat, bald head stuck out like a snapping turtle. "Enter commodeless retreat, noble Captain," he chuckled. "Are much to be talking of."

II

BENSON eased under shelter feet first, then found and shook a huge, muscular hand. "Tien Wang," he whispered. "Good to see you. They didn't tell me you'd be here."

"Ah, hot cockles," chuckled Tien. "As fat, valuable spy, I not supposing be here. But your presence are seductive temptation—and latest news slightly discomfiture." Tien's knowledge of English seemed as voluminous as it was inaccurate.

"We're used to bad news," said Benson. "Spill it."

"Ha! Meaning elucidate tidings? Thanks for new word edifice! Yes, news are decomposing, Captain. For lately time, Nipponese aware that Ying Loy Wan are leader Shanghai terrorists. But not knowing shy retreat of said Ying.

"Hence I advising rescue of Ying before retreat located and Ying's head perambulate sadly from downcast body. On my saying so, you coming to pull over said rescue, my fearless friend. But two nights past, Nipponese secret police obtaining location of shy retreat. That highly wetting to hopes, Captain."

"You mean they've got Ying? Arrested him?"

"Not so—yet." Tien Wang chuckled fatly. "This sly fellow participate in Ying escaping Chapei retreat, finding nest in American sector. But nip and touch! You see, terrorists are busy climbing in hair of Chinese traitor who kiss Japanese foots. So very strong perfume of Chinese traitor in Nipponese finding retreat. For same reasoning, pretty soon Nipponese smelling out new hiding spot of Ying like proverbelish fox."

"We still have a chance then. Where is Ying now?"

"At house of loyal, ancient merchant, Wong Sin Meng. House are entitled 520 North Honan Road. Also Ying still possessing currency treasure subscribed by loyal merchants for Chinese cause. But danger big like elephant. Too many Chinese traitor, sorry to spill it. If possible Ying must go back with you tonight. Even now maybe Nipponese smelling where Ying are."

Benson hid his anger. The International Settlement was infested by Japanese spies. Everyone knew it. There was very little the municipal police could do about it. And Ying was in the American sector, guarded by U. S. Marines. Benson controlled his voice.

"*Do* the Japs know where Ying is now?" he demanded.

"Not sure, Captain. Quite possibility. Few Chinese know it—and traitors squeaking timidly, like rats in dark of night. But other situation entirely complicated, too.

"You see, inside home of Wong Sin Meng are now residing young girl. Oh, yes, American girl!" Tien Wang chuckled in the darkness. "She are innocent missionary advancing to instruct old China about tenants of religion. So, very nice. When China civilized on wisdom of Confucius, I think her ancestors all time running in naked state of body and worship thunder."

"Never mind that," said Benson patiently. "Get on—"

"Are plenty time in boating transporta-

tion, dear sir. Well, American girl bearing name, Ruth Stimmons. One time ago her father great friend, maybe save life, of Wong Sin Meng. Now maiden are regretting news that her father sick, maybe dying, at Chungking. Miss Stimmons so sorry, so wishing to reach beside bed of expiring parent.

"She having missionary friends in Shanghai, but no bloody use for helping her reach present Chinese base at Chungking. She knowing Wong are great friend of parent, so ask him to help. Wong are unforgetting friend, so very desirable to help poor, sorry daughter.

"Wong saying to her: 'Oh, sit under humble roof a while, my dear miss! Noble American come soon for flying back to Chungking with highest celerity. Maybe dauntless captain taking you back with him!' So—"

"So what?" grumbled Benson. "That's out. And what's all this got to do with Ying and the Japs?"

"WAIT, dear sir. I think all Americans in perspiring hurry. Now here are painful point. Before eye-wetting prayer for help orated toward aged Wong, Miss Stimmons are making same prayer to Japanese authorities, saying: 'Oh, please transport me some of long distance toward expiring bed of parent!'

"Nipponese so sorry, but are impossible. *Then* comes hoping American girl to Wong. You see? Nipponese very clever, thorough animal. So, knowing hopeful intention, maybe keeping unwinked eye on Miss Stimmons.

"Then asking own foxish minds: 'Why this American girl visit Wong and remain in happy sitting posture?' Because Wong in touch with Chungking! reflect back quick answer. So maybe Nipponese keep *two* unwinked eye on home of Wong Sin Meng."

"You mean this girl was at Wong's house before Ying got there?" muttered Benson.

"Oh, not so catastrophy, dear Captain. Miss Stimmons arriving later same night. Unlikely that home of Wong under Nipponese eye when Ying taking cover there. But *now* under eye, perhaps, and Nipponese secret police knocking on door any time, saying: 'Oh, so sorry, but like pleasing converse with American girl!' Then search house and finding Ying. Are very ticklish situation, Captain. Ying must go tonight if possible."

"Why didn't you move Ying when you heard about this girl?" asked Benson in a hard voice.

"Where, dear sir? And why? Dangerous for Ying to stay at Wong's house, but more dangerous to move Ying under Nipponese eye. Better leaving house only once —for Chungking."

Benson stared out over the shadowy deck, half-hearing the creak of the stern scull and the rubbing of poles along the sides. The sail filled or flapped lazily, but the coolies were putting their backs into it. They had entered a wider canal, and the lights of Shanghai had brightened and spread.

"How do you keep in touch with Chungking?" he asked.

Tien Wang hesitated an instant. "Oh, enjoying far-flung radio machinery inside Chungking. So intake radios here apprehending pushful messages at all times."

"How do you get messages back to Chungking?"

"For quick dispatching damn-vital news we manipulating smallish, portable out-go set here. Nipponese unable finding, because all time perambulate same elsewhere. Our news reaching set of similar likeness inside Hankow, and quick trip onward. So return answers penetrating Chungking in small era of time."

"What's to prevent the Japs decoding your messages?" Benson turned his head. "I mean, translating your code?"

"Only slight point of impossibleness prevent," answered Tien Wang coyly. "Code are bottomed on ancient Chinese books in rotating order each week. Nipponese in sea-deep ignorance which books used, if any, so quite impossibility to read messages."

"Unless somebody turns traitor as usual," grumbled Benson. "It won't be easy to get Ying away clear—at the best."

"No traitor in radio, Captain," said Wang, a note of uneasiness under his assurance. "Burning house for you to land—this waiting sampan device for saving of Ying—all arranged by radio, you see it? If Chinese radio traitor waggle tongue, Nipponese waiting tonight for skip up and capture your plane. But Nipponese *not* there, so all huckleberry dory, I think. Yes."

THE sampan had oozed into Soochow Creek, which Benson recognized. He felt angry without knowing why. "Well, go on," he muttered. "There must be Jap sentries around our defense sector. How do we pass them? We're getting close."

"That not uneasy, Captain. Nipponese in Shanghai now sweet friends to Chinese, only collect taxes and customs so that foolish Chinese not wasting same." The smooth irony held venom. "Now all business, even humble sampan, are kindly urged to work top speed for earnings which Nipponese sorry, but must borrow. Affectionate sentries not stopping this sampan, I think."

"Is that how you got Ying into the American sector? The Jap sentries and our sentries just let you pass?"

"Well, no, dear sir. That slightly otherwise. When Ying ready to skip inside American sector, great shootings and yellings take place in nearby street. Nipponese guard trot off for stopping such impudence. Some American sentries go, too. Others get speck in eyeball, dear chaps. Cannot see Ying pass with friends. Too blind, but pretty soon all well again."

Benson smiled in the darkness. "Were you seen by the Japs that night, Tien—at the barricade, or in Chapei?"

"Thinking not. Others extricate Ying from Chapei. I remaining very circumspective in background. Same at barricade. When Ying and friends skip into happy fields of American sector for picking innocent flowers of safety, it are Tien Wang who make rude yelling and shooting in next street. But not visible when Nipponese arriving with gleamy bayonets.

"That important, you see, because jolly Tien Wang very loving to Nipponese. Oh, yes. Sweet invaders who kiss China with bombs think Tien Wang devoted to them like wealthy uncle. Are mutual feeling also. Nipponese honor Tien Wang by not spitting in face. So I orate praises in shouting hurly-ballyhoo, then making trouble for said Nipponese in blushing whispers. Oh, having much fun." There was no humor in Tien Wang's smooth, reflective voice.

"Good work—and risky enough," commented Benson. "If you haven't been seen in this business, keep out of it. I think I can handle it alone—better alone. Your other work here is too valuable to have you suspected and shot, to no purpose."

"You have a plan, Captain?" asked the Chinese.

"A rough one, which doesn't include you, my friend." Benson coughed. "It's win or lose tonight, for Ying and me, and a quick out if we lose. I'll see to that. Why drag you with us either way? I'm thinking of China—"

Tien Wang rubbed his thick jowl and was silent.

The sampan had edged into the north bank. The sail was lowered and the mast unstepped. Four of the six ragged boatmen leaped ashore and vanished in the darkness. The other two began working the sampan downstream again. They were in the outskirts of Shanghai now; the British settlement looming and drifting past on the south bank; a dozen bridges ahead of them.

As the boat slid deeper into the city along the winding Soochow Creek the light increased. Both men drew back under shelter. Twice Benson glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. Exactly one o'clock—then one-ten. At this rate it would be one-thirty before he got started, and there was much to be done. It seemed almost impossible to get Ying and his funds out of Shanghai before dawn.

But it had to be done somehow. Everything he had accomplished for China had seemed impossible at first.

If the Japs bagged him alive as a fighting neutral—he shrugged that aside. Neither he nor Ying could afford to be taken alive. If things got too hot there'd be some very dead Japs, and two bullets left for Ying and himself. His frost-ravaged lips tightened. One chance in ten. Nothing unusual. He'd be getting morbid in a minute.

He turned his head. "Have them drop me at Honan Road, north bank, if they can manage it unseen. I'll take a rickshaw from there to the Astor House—Wong's home later."

"So? Then where abiding this sampan for transporting back to plane? Also humble self, dear sir?"

"The sampan wouldn't get us back much before dawn. I'm hoping for something faster. But have it tie up close to the Honan Road bridge, north bank, just in case. I'll whistle if we need it.

"You keep clear of this now. Stay away from the sampan, and don't come with me either. Not this time. Thanks, Tien. If I get Ying away, maybe we can tackle the next job together. But meanwhile, keep that useful head on your shoulders."

"To helping you are essence of pleasure," muttered the Chinese slowly, "but perhaps you have rectitude, Captain. Shall submitting obedience this time—" His huge hand closed on Benson's arm suddenly. "Extreme silence now," he whispered.

A hail in clipped Chinese from a Jap sentry floated over the water. The boatman at the scull answered in a good-natured sing-song that they had come from Lake Tai, seeking work as porters. Was such to be had? The sentry disdained to answer.

The sampan lap-lapped on quietly. More bridges arched their hollow darkness overhead. From the north shore a carrying, Texan drawl challenged the boat in something resembling Chinese. The tone was perfunctory. The boatmen ignored it.

Benson twitched and lay still as they drifted on. The sight and smell of Shanghai—that challenge from one of his own Marines—had roused a host of memories better left asleep.

Another bridge loomed ahead. Tien Wang eyed it, then called softly to the nearest boatman. The boat swung in toward the north bank, straightened again. Benson clapped Tien Wang on the shoulder and hunched out on deck. As the sampan rubbed the stone landing in the shadow of the bridge, he jumped quietly ashore. The gently rocking boat slid on, out of sight.

III

STEPS led up beside the bridge to the roadway above. Benson mounted until his eyes were on a level with the pavement. There were no cars nor pedestrians about at this hour, but he saw two vacant rickshaws at the old stand on the south bank. He climbed to the road and whistled. A boy sprang to his vehicle and came trotting across the bridge.

Benson wore dirty civilian clothes, an old hat, and a ragged trench coat. These and his slouch made him look like a bum. The coat was long enough to conceal the holstered gun in front of his left hip. He carried the forty-five there, butt foremost, to allow a quicker right-hand draw from under his coat. The boy eyed his clothes, saw his hard mouth and lowered the rickshaw handles.

Benson got in with a snarl: "Astor House, chop chop!"

The coolie insulted him experimentally in smiling Chinese, bent to the handles and trotted forward. Benson grinned to himself. The boy had not recognized him, although he had used this rickshaw a dozen times in the past. It seemed a good omen.

At the Astor House he gave the boy an American quarter and told him to wait. Then he slouched into the vestibule and surveyed the sunken lobby, his battered hat shading his eyes. Before the Jap invasion, half the deep easy chairs would

have been filled at this hour. Now, with so many foreigners gone, the lobby was deserted. Modifying his slouch a little, he went straight on to the desk. The night clerk eyed him unfavorably, with no sign of recognition.

"Lieutenant Rolph in?" asked Benson gruffly.

"*Captain* Rolph is in. I believe he has retired—"

"Where's his room? I got a private message for him."

"You may leave it with me. I cannot disturb—"

"What's his room number?" Benson's voice had a rasp in it now. "This message won't keep. These're funny times."

"Well, it's 329. You may call him on the house phone, I suppose, but he—"

"I said *private* message!" Benson made for the elevator, knowing the clerk would phone upstairs ahead of him.

The door of 329 was jerked wide open to his knock. The overhead lights revealed a burly man in undershirt, britches and field boots. He held a service revolver half-concealed against his thigh. Benson smiled to himself, guessing the clerk's description of him as a hard-looking bum. Eight months ago, the night clerk had "sir'd" him to death.

ROLPH had kind, St. Bernard eyes, a craggy nose and a fighting jaw. Though older, he had been Benson's lieutenant. He was inclined to be lax on discipline, but the men loved him.

Benson eased into the room and closed the door. Rolph had stepped back, lifting the gun. "Who are you?" he demanded belligerently. "And what's all this about a message, my lad?"

Benson tilted his hat back. "Same old rhinoceros, eh, *Captain?* Congratulations. Time you had your step—"

"Neal! Well, fry me—" Rolph tossed his gun on the bed and stuck out a short, knotty hand. His blue eyes searched Benson's ravaged face—swerved—returned. "You've changed a bit, or I'd have known — Hell, it's good to see you, Neal!"

"Same here." Benson straightened his crushed fingers absently, his face harder than his eyes. Tommy had not changed.

"I've picked up news of you, what there was," growled Rolph. He glanced at the door and lowered his voice. "Shanghai's no place for you, fella! Settlement's riddled with Jap spies. Fry me, *you* know it is. What brought you here?"

"Active service." Benson glanced around the room and frowned. "Damn' active. I'm pressed for time."

"What do you want of me then? You'll get it."

"I was thinking of a launch, Tommy. There's a little matter of getting a good Chink out of here tonight before he's a dead Chink—yes, our sector."

"Huh. I've got a launch at the foot of Szechuan Road, upstream, north shore. Twenty-foot cabin job. Fast. But you can't have it. I'm neutral, I am!" Captain Rolph grinned like a pleased bulldog. "The keys are on my bureau there. Help yourself. Fry me, I'll get into mufti and come along with you." He turned and reached for a shirt.

"No you won't, you damn fool. But get into uniform." Benson smiled unwillingly. "Tomorrow you'll report your room entered. Somebody stole your keys. You got a message to report for special duty, but it was a fake. Must have been to get you away from your room.

"You didn't have much of a look at the man who brought it. Took him for an orderly. But he must have hung around to steal your launch keys. You may have left your door unlocked. Have you got all that? It's for your C.O. when the launch is found and the Japs protest—if they do."

"Aye, aye, sir. But why not come with you in mufti? Who's going to run the launch?"

"I'll manage. You've got to report for duty, haven't you? You're not throwing away your commission either. Follow my plan, or all bets are off, Tommy. And don't forget tomorrow to report your launch as stolen. There's one thing you can do tonight, though, when you report."

"Let's have it." Rolph was getting into his uniform.

"Well, if a squad of your leathernecks happened along North Honan Road, say in twenty minutes, they might run across some of these Jap plainclothes gentlemen where they have no business to be.

"That's just a guess. But since we're guessing, I'd try the neighborhood of 520 North Honan Road. The idea would be to get there quick and have the boys out of sight. They may not see anyone except my Chinese friend and me. In that case, have 'em stay out of sight. If we don't come out, or they hear a shot inside the house, they might investigate."

"Right! I'll 'gestapo' the little beggars if they're in our sector. We've run 'em out before and we'll do it again." Rolph buckled on his Sam Browne and service revolver and adjusted his cap. They shook hands. At the door, Rolph turned with sudden gravity and saluted. "Be seeing you, Neal. Count on it."

"Thanks, Tommy. Don't grab my rickshaw. It's little Tom Sim from the Honan Bridge. Hurry those men of yours along."

Rolph stuck his key in the outside keyhole and left it there, as though he had forgotten to lock his room. Without a backward glance he shut the door and stumped down the hall.

BENSON thrust the launch keys in his pocket, switched off the lights and entered the hall warily. There was no one in sight. He shut and locked the door, left the key in it, and cat-footed down the service stairs, for he knew the Astor House well. At the bottom he crossed a hall unseen, walked quietly out the side door and slouched toward the front entrance.

Tom Sim had waited. Benson climbed into the rickshaw, sat down heavily and growled: "510, North Honan Road. Chop chop, monkey face!"

Convinced that his passenger would not understand, the boy replied in smiling Chinese with an outline of Benson's habits and ancestry that would have made a dog blush. Then he picked up the handles and trotted into the maze of little shop-lined, Chinese streets behind the Astor House. These were deserted.

As they neared Honan Road, Benson glanced back at intervals until he was certain they were not being followed. At length the panting rickshaw boy slowed and stopped in front of 510, and lowered the handles. "There, son of all filth," he bobbed, grinning.

Benson climbed out. He did not want to involve little Tom Sim with the Japs, for all his cheek, so he handed the boy another two bits and snapped: "Now get the hell out! Beat it!"

Tone and gesture were enough for Tom Sim. He trotted away toward the bridge and disappeared. Benson turned up hill and slouched along in search of 520. As far as he could tell, North Honan Road was deserted also.

He followed a four-foot brick wall to a lower wooden gate with the numerals: 520. The curving eaved home of Wong Sin Meng was set well back from the street and half hidden by trees. The intervening formal garden was a landscape in miniature, with paths, connecting pools, stone lanterns and camel's hump bridges.

There were lights in the lower windows of the house. Benson glanced around and swore under his breath. All the neighboring houses were dark. Wong might as well advertise that he expected a visitor so late at night.

Something moved in the shadows across the street. Benson turned his head and caught another hint of movement at the end of the wall. He tried the gate. It was unlatched. Pushing it open, he walked swiftly up the central path to the house. He took care not to look behind him.

Reaching the front door, he knocked and pushed a button which rang a mellow gong somewhere inside. Out of the tail of his eye he saw agile little figures dart in at the gate and melt into shadow. Though he heard nothing, he sensed that they were approaching, taking cover were they could find it.

Again he swore under his breath. The

Japs meant to close in sooner than he expected. That squad of Marines would be too late. . . .

THE door was opened by the number one boy, a big man from the north. An aged, placid Chinese stood waiting farther back, hands in his sleeves. As he bowed and opened his lips, Benson checked him with a slight, quick gesture.

Benson spoke in English, distinctly: "Mr. Wong? Is Miss Stimmons here? I just heard that she is in difficulties."

Wong's mouth opened again—and stayed open, wordless. Something hard nosed Benson's spine with a jarring impact. Having expected it, his start was slight and purely physical. From behind him a hissed sentence in Japanese ordered him to walk forward. At the same moment another Jap in plainclothes darted into the room past Benson, his revolver threatening both Wong and the houseboy.

Benson started to turn. Another sibilant order in Japanese warned him to proceed. He ignored it and wheeled slowly, hands lifted, blank amazement on his face. There were no other Japs in the doorway, but his captor rammed a gun into Benson's stomach and his black eyes were threatening.

"Retreat, Yankee dog!" he ordered in Japanese. "Quiet!"

"No spik Chinese," said Benson. "Say, what is this?" He backed up then, in obedience to the prodding revolver. This was no time to start anything. The Japs were too alert.

His captor reached with his free hand and closed the front door. He repeated his order for silence in Chinese, adding a venomous command that Wong translate it into English. At the same time he stepped back out of reach, his gun leveled.

Benson turned his head with convincing bewilderment. An order in Chinese from the second Jap had made the big number one boy turn about sullenly and face the wall. Wong's wrinkled old face was like parchment, but he had lost none of his serene, motionless dignity. Even a splintering crash from the rear of the house behind him left him apparently unmoved, his old hands still in his sleeves.

"Our—guests," he translated in slow English, "say it are greatly important that we not speaking, please."

"Who are they? What's the idea?" Benson paused.

A fat Chinese houseboy shuffled in behind Wong, jowls quivering, little eyes fawning secretively. He was being prodded into the room by a third Jap. Keeping out of the line of fire, his captor pushed him around Wong and made him face the wall near the other houseboy. Now the second Jap prodded Wong into a similar position, his back to the room.

Benson stared at his own captor in puzzled anger. The Jap was watching him with beady eyes, tense vigilance unrelaxed. Benson's stare gave no hint of his own swift thoughts. He might leap sideways and go for his gun. He might kill two of the Japs before they got him—but that wouldn't help Ying.

He lowered his hands slowly and grasped the lapels of his coat. The revolver rose a little, menacingly, but the Jap said nothing. In lowering his arms, Benson had glimpsed the hands of his watch. Eleven minutes had passed since he left the hotel. Delay was better than action. Somehow he had to stall the Japs for another ten minutes.

IV

A SHUFFLE of feet drew his attention. Through another entrance stumbled a tall, richly-clad Chinese merchant of middle age. Though he was being prodded from behind by a fourth Jap, prodded with agonizing force, he remained impassive.

An eager hissing of breath from the Japs confirmed Benson's guess that the newcomer was Ying Loy Wan, leader of the Shanghai terrorists, the man he had come to rescue.

Unlike Wong, Ying was not driven to face the wall. A violent push sent him into a chair. Nor was Benson himself ordered

to move again. For an instant he wondered what had become of the American girl. Probably she was hiding. More Japs might be searching the house, might find her and bring her here, poor kid—but it all meant delay.

The Japs were conferring in tense whispers, their black eyes sharp and quick as rats'. Benson looked blank, but caught enough of their speech to understand the drift of it. The question was what to do with the prisoners until "he" came. One had gone for him. He would be here very soon. Meanwhile the house must be thoroughly searched for what "he" wanted.

The man covering Benson seemed to be acting as leader, although his eyes never strayed from his prisoner. At length he rapped out a slang phrase which meant nothing to the American.

Two of the Japs wheeled swiftly toward the wall. One of them lifted his revolver and brought the muzzle down on Wong's head. The old man collapsed silently, a trickle of crimson worming down his bald pate.

The big houseboy wheeled with a snarl and sprang at the Jap, his bare hands like claws. The other Jap darted in from the side. The barrel of his revolver struck the houseboy neatly at the base of the skull, and breath went out of him with a stunned *whoo* as he crashed on his face.

The fat houseboy cringed and turned, squealing in Chinese: "No, no! It was understood—" Then a muzzle struck his head and he sprawled unconscious against the wall, black eyes rolling up piously.

It was over in an instant. During that instant, Benson met his captor's eyes. The little brown man hissed a warning and jumped back, revolver lifted to protect himself. Benson guessed that only cool prudence had kept the Jap from firing. The shot might be heard outside the house and reported to the Marines. These Japs were efficient and quick-witted as well as ruthless. If "he" meant Colonel Kidote, the colonel chose his men well.

It was too late to protect Wong, even if Benson were willing to risk his mission on the old man's behalf. He veiled his rage in a stare of disgust, tried to look as though none of this affected him personally. He growled: "Dirty little—" and let his hands slip lower on his coat lapels.

The Jap understood the tone, at least. His black eyes flared dangerously for an instant, then grew veiled.

Benson looked down and caught a glimpse of his watch. Fourteen minutes now since he left the hotel, seven or eight minutes longer to wait, to make certain of the Marines. It was only half a mile to their barracks.

HIS captor spat a command in Japanese. The others began dragging Wong and the houseboys into the next room, from which Ying had appeared. When this was done, a second order made two of the Japs converge on the motionless Ying. One of them commanded him in Chinese to follow Wong and the houseboys.

Ying stood up with dignity. Benson got ready to shoot, taking care not to stiffen. If they tried to kill Ying or knock him unconscious, there would be slaughter.

Covered by the two Japs, Ying moved calmly through the arch. They followed, disappeared in his wake. The other two covered Benson, their eyes expressionless.

Listening intently he heard a gasp, but no thud of a blow or a fall. Rage darkened his face. They had tricked Ying away from him neatly enough. He could not even tell whether the terrorist leader was dead, unconscious or unharmed.

"What's all this anyway?" he blustered in English. "I came to see an American girl—Miss Stimmons. Unless you produce her there'll be trouble, understand?"

The Japs watched him steadily, ignoring his question. Their intent vigilance warned him not to take chances.

Because every moment of delay would help, he tried once more to make them talk. "American girl here—savvee? Me—American. Me look for girl—savvee?"

From the next room came the one word "Now," in Japanese.

Benson's captor jerked his head toward the sound. "You marcha thar shortta time," he ordered. "You doa so—notta shooting you, yess? You doa so chop chop, yess?"

He must fight now, or risk a trap. He had an outside chance of killing them both—a very slim chance. Yet even this would not save Ying from the other Japs. It was too soon to act.

With an angry stare he wheeled slowly toward the curtains, eyes intent on the wall for the shadow of a lifted revolver. The converging shadows of the Japs told him they were following, but there was no swift movement.

The arch was curtained for warmth, the curtains partly drawn. Before he reached it he saw the limp bodies of Wong and his servants on the floor, but neither Ying nor his captors.

Between the curtains he checked, sensing the trap. A muzzle in his spine jarred him forward a little. Before he could draw, the other two Japs were on him from either side. He knew enough jiu jitsu to shake one of them off. Then he stumbled and went down, all four of them swarming on top of him.

Skillfully tripped from behind, he had no chance at all to fight. He tried to roll them off, keeping his elbows at his sides. Vicious thumbs found a nerve in his neck. His lightning jerk made the grip less effective, but agony almost paralyzed him for a moment.

His arms were wrenched from under his body. Two pairs of hands clamped on his wrists, twisted and locked them up his back. He relaxed, knowing better than to resist now. Instinctively he panted and swore at them, trying to maintain his role as an outraged neutral.

"Let me up! You can't get away with this! What in hell's the big idea?" Desperately cool, he was trying to figure why they had not simply knocked him out.

It could point either way. They preferred not to injure a neutral; or they wanted him conscious for questioning when "he" arrived. The latter seemed the more likely. Injuring or killing neutrals was an old story to the Japs. They thrived on notes of protest.

He set his teeth. It looked as if they knew who he was.

WHILE two of them kept him down with painful arm locks, the others tore the remains of a beautiful tapestry into strips. Ying lay half in a chair, arms behind him, ankles bound with the same tapestry. He was conscious and seemed unhurt, but his indifferent eyes held only calm resignation as they met Benson's.

Wong and his servants, being unconscious, had been left unbound. Evidently the Japs had planned to pounce and escape in haste with their captive or captives. Benson fought down helpless fury. It was too late to go out fighting now.

In silence his wrists were jerked together and tightly bound. A warning grip on his neck kept him relaxed while they lashed his ankles. The Japs rolled him on his back and stood up. One of them kicked his hip-bone with casual accuracy.

Their leader squatted beside Benson, opened his coat and drew his gun from its holster. After a brief inspection he replaced it, to Benson's amazement. The Jap searched him, but found nothing important, stood up and spat in his face.

"Now the money of the Chinese traitor dogs," he hissed in Japanese. "Search quickly, beginning with this room."

Benson rolled on his side and wiped his cheek on the deep-piled rug. The Japs had begun a swift, vandal search, and paid no attention to him. They smashed open a carved desk, tore off the doors of an ancient cabinet as delicate as black foam. A large, golden Buddha was handled and dropped. Gun butts shattered exquisite vases. Knives and fingers ripped and disembowelled the upholstered furniture.

Ying was tumbled out of his chair to let them wreck it. When tapping the walls yielded no hiding place, they kicked the rugs this way and that in search of a trap door, booting and rolling the five helpless or unconscious men out of their way.

Finally the leader rapped a command. The others trotted after him into the front room and began wrecking that.

Watching his chance through the half-parted curtains, Benson hunched and rolled unseen toward the back of the room where Ying lay motionless. As soon as they were back to back, he shouldered the Chinese over on his side and managed to reach his bound wrists. The position was awkward, the woven strips tough, slippery and tightly knotted. Working furiously, he had loosened a knot when nearby movement made him turn his head.

Drawn curtains here at the back of the room shielded another doorway. The Japs had searched behind these, but had not yet entered the rear room. Now the curtains had trembled, parted warily to frame a young girl.

IN THAT split second she was photographed forever on Benson's memory. Her long-skirted, high-necked dress was primly voluminous. She had clear, straight-lidded gray eyes, rather a sharp nose, an obstinate chin and a small, determined mouth. Her soft brown hair was dragged back in a knot, but even this could not disguise the youthful prettiness of her heart-shaped face and smooth, delicate skin. Arriving when she did, she seemed beautiful to Benson. Her black straw hat was jammed crazily on her head, and one hand clutched a large, worn handbag.

She was so near that he heard her quick, stifled gasp as she looked down at him. Her eyes darted around the room with the stare of a hunted animal, widened on the archway, returned to Benson's face. She looked almost hysterical with terror.

"Where can I hide?" she whispered.

"Turn me loose," he answered, "and you won't need to hide. Knife in my left trouser pocket. Quick!"

Galvanized by hope, she knelt and fumbled, got out the penknife and dropped it. She picked it up and broke her nail trying to open it, glared wildly around and reached for a shard of broken vase near Ying's head.

Desperately cool, Benson whispered: "No! Put the knife in my hands. I'll open it. Calm down, youngster."

She fumbled it into his hands and waited, staring at the arch. Benson managed to get the big blade half open.

"Here!" he muttered. "Straighten it first, then cut."

The girl was all thumbs in her haste, but she managed to get the point of the blade on the floor and snap it open instead of shut. Benson rolled to let her cut his bonds and free his arms. The knife wavered in her shaking fingers, twice jabbing his wrists, but the strips of tapestry loosened.

He tore and wrenched free of them, grabbed the knife and sliced through the binding on his ankles, watching the archway. The Japs were still moving about the front room, though making less noise than before. Luckily, he could not see any of them from this angle, and therefore could not be seen.

He got to his knees, shuffled warily to Ying Loy Wan, rolled him over and freed his wrists. Ying sat up silently, a spark of vengeful hope in his eyes.

The girl was fumbling in her bag. "They're at the rear, too," she whispered. "Oh, here, take this—" She thrust a tiny, pearl-butted revolver under his face. "It's loaded!"

Swerving to cut Ying's ankles loose, Benson grabbed the .22 in his left hand rather than waste time refusing it. He had freed Ying when a quick-drawn breath from the Chinese made his nerves tingle and jerked his head around to face the archway.

A man had stepped between the curtains. Benson found himself looking straight into the muzzle of a Japanese service revolver.

V

THE Jap behind the gun wore occidental civilian clothes and a yellow silk mask, but his skin betrayed him as an Oriental. He held the gun like a rock, his finger curled suggestively around the trig-

ger. Benson registered these details in split second. Then Ruth Stimmons gave a stifled shriek and turned to run.

"Wait! Do not leave us, girl," murmured the Jap pleasantly. He spoke in English with almost no accent.

For an instant his eyes had swerved to Ruth. During that instant Benson palmed the little .22 she had given him. The Jap had not raised his voice. It was almost soothing. But its quality made the girl check and stand frozen in her tracks.

Benson got up slowly from his knees and folded his arms.

"It's about time!" he growled. "I came here to see this American girl. I'm an American. Those birds in the front room tied me up. I think they're Japs. If you're Japanese, you better tell 'em to get out of here—or leave us alone. I mean to report this. And we're getting out of here now!"

The masked man's eyes smiled. He was short and stocky, with yellow, muscular hands.

"Oh, well done, sir," he bowed. "You almost convince me! But please, now that you are free, do not leave so soon."

Benson stared an instant, and looked down as though at a loss. His hard eyes flicked to his watch. Twenty-five minutes had passed since he left the hotel. It should be time enough.

He looked up again with a swaggering uncertainty that was only nine-tenths assumed. In this stout, pleasant Japanese he sensed an enemy far more subtle and clever than himself.

"Why shouldn't we leave?" he blustered. "Who are you?"

"Oh, come, sir," pleaded the masked man. "Your second question is immaterial. As to the first, I will answer it just to oblige you. I hope you will not leave because you appear to be involved in matters which should not concern an American and a neutral. Does that soothe your indignation, old chap?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," growled Benson. "Just because I happened to show up here . . . Anyhow, you've got no business wrecking a Chinese home in the American sector, if you're in with those birds." He nodded toward the front room. "Are you going to put up that gun and let us out of here?"

"If I must, I must," the Jap said, ruefully, "but you will listen? Is it not curious that Miss Stimmons wishes very much to depart for Chungking—and that Mr. Ying Loy Wan, whom you have freed, also wishes so much to leave for Chungking with his collected funds, and sweet life in his body?"

Benson scowled. "I still don't get it. What's all that got to do with me?" He wanted to learn how much the masked man knew about him.

"I was coming to that. Do you not think it curious that an American ex-captain of Marines, now with the so-called Chinese Army, should arrive at this house just at this time—presumably from Chungking? My *dear* Captain, is that not pulling the long arm of coincidence practically out of its socket?"

Benson knew that the Jap was playing with him as a cat plays with a dying bird. His name had not been mentioned, but the Jap knew all about him. The fat houseboy had turned traitor to some effect. He thought fast. If the masked man had a weak spot, ridicule might find it.

He laughed easily. "That's all bunk, Mr. Jap Gestapo! You're afraid I'll report your raid and have you kicked out with your tail between your legs. Are you planning to murder us?"

The masked Jap was unmoved. "Neither of you, my dear chap. We do not fight women and terrified neutrals."

"Except from high and safe in the air," Benson laughed. "You little tin soldiers drop bombs without fear, but let the Long Swords get to grips and how you run! Women and civilians are all you *can* fight, by the look of it."

"You are mistaken, Captain. Enough of jokes. Ying must stay—and the funds, of course. But help us find the money, and you and the girl may go unhurt. Otherwise—so sorry!"

"Damn you!" Arms still folded, Benson stiffened with assumed rage. As though by contracted muscles, the tiny revolver in his left hand cracked sharply and broke the front window. He jumped and dropped the .22, looking startled.

The Jap's trigger finger paled and the hammer lifted. For a second, Death was close enough to Benson to breathe on his neck. As the tinkle of glass subsided, the masked Jap relaxed.

"If you are careless again," he said with a little laugh, "I shall have you both liquidated, Captain—you and this girl."

"I was annoyed," Benson grumbled. "The damn toy went off by accident." He looked down and kicked the gun aside.

"Your apology is accepted, Captain. What is your answer? Ying must expire in any case. You cannot help him. But you can save your own life and that of this terror-frozen girl by showing us where to find—" The masked Jap broke off, his head turning swiftly to listen.

THE front door crashed open. There was a quick pound of feet and a sharp command in Rolph's voice. Benson leaped aside, his revolver flashing out and up. Covering each other, both men hesitated an instant. Neither dared face the consequences of killing the other. Then, with amazing quickness, the Jap raced to the window, curled himself into a ball and crashed backward through the glass, taking the window bars with him.

Benson jumped to the light switch and plunged the room in darkness, then made for the broken window. After the light, he could see nothing of the dim garden at first. There was an uproar of chattering Japanese protests in the front room, but he ignored it, staring intently outdoors.

Something broke the horizontal line of the wall. The hump of a man's body appeared, widened, narrowed and vanished. Above the top of the four-foot wall a head bobbed along toward Chapei—away from Soochow Creek.

Whether or not the masked Jap was the notorious Colonel Kidote, he had taken the wrong direction if he still hoped to prevent their escape. Or was it craft rather than chance that took him away from the Creek? He was not through with them. Benson's respect for the masked man's wits assured him of that. The Marines had let Benson take one trick, but Ying's escape was still a question of speed and vigilance.

He turned back and switched on the lights. Ruth was on her knees, feeling over the floor. With the light she caught up her .22, stuffed it into her bag and stood erect.

Ying had got stiffly to his feet and picked up Benson's penknife. With a tigerish pounce he bent over the fat houseboy and ripped his throat open almost from ear to ear.

Ruth Stimmons gagged at the spouting blood and turned away, shuddering. Ying wiped the knife on the houseboy's clothing, snapped the blade shut, presented the knife to Benson.

"That thing betrayed its own treachery," he explained in Chinese. "So may all traitors find shameful death."

Benson nodded drily, and whispered. "Out the window at once! They might hold and question us. Be swift, Ying Loy Wan."

Ying strode to the golden Buddha which the Japs had dropped. He touched the head in three places. The belly swung open. From the cavity he took a huge roll of English notes and stuffed them into his sleeve, then lowered himself out the window, neatly avoiding the jagged glass.

The girl turned and ran up to Benson. "If you're going to Chungking, take me with you! Take me with you! It's my only chance to see my father alive!"

Benson shook his head impatiently. "This is war—"

Rolph's voice boomed out from just beyond the curtains: "You, Jones, phone for a truck. There's the phone, in the hall. You others watch these dicky birds—and no nonsense."

He stepped between the curtains, saw Benson and Ruth, and jerked his thumb toward the window. Then he looked

through them. "Three Chinks in here, at least one of 'em dead," he announced in a loud, ominous voice. "Fry me, this is serious!"

He wheeled and went out again. Benson started for the window, but the girl clutched his arm.

"You *must* take me!" she demanded. "I saved your life!"

Benson hesitated. "Come on, then. Out with you!"

He raised the broken window quietly, bundled her over the sill and followed. Taking her arm, he helped her to stumble diagonally across the garden to Ying at the gate. There, pushing them both into shadow, he looked up and down the street.

The masked man had disappeared. There was no one in sight. When he turned his head and beckoned, they followed him quickly out the gate and down toward Soochow Creek.

THE broken rhythm of their footsteps rang loud in the empty street. Benson ignored it. If he had left the house warily, it was to avoid being challenged and delayed by the Marines. He was sure the Japs would not have time to organize another attack on them in the American sector.

On the other hand, he was equally sure that the man in the yellow mask would not let them escape Shanghai as easily as he had entered it. The immediate future was dark enough without being handicapped by a girl.

The bare, Honan Road bridge was in sight when he turned west into a narrow street that ran parallel to Soochow Creek. At the corner he peered at his watch, and his lips tightened. It was three o'clock in the morning. With a gruff word to Ying he set a pace that made Ruth half run to keep up with them. At length he took her arm to help her along.

"You're risking your life with us," he warned bluntly.

She clutched her bag tighter and nodded, panting with unaccustomed exertion. "My life isn't very important—"

They came out into Szechuan Road just above the bridge. After one quick glance, Benson led them swiftly down toward the deserted bridge over Soochow Creek. As they drew nearer his lips tightened again. There was only one launch upstream on this side. It was not moored off-shore, but made fast to the low stone wharf next to the bridge. Its engine was running, throttled low, and a man sat hunched in the cockpit. This might be a trap.

Benson eased down the steps, right hand inside his coat, Ying and Ruth behind him. The man in the launch heard the click of her heels and looked around. Benson relaxed at sight of that craggy, hard-bitten face. It was Mullins, his former top-kick. Evidently Rolph had spare keys to the launch. He had sent the top-sergeant to start the engine and save Benson time.

Mullins shouldered out on the wharf like a bear, and made for the painter, his hand going up in a half salute. He cast off and held the painter, staring out over the Creek. Benson guessed that Rolph had told Mullins not to look at them, so that he could swear he had not seen them. Tommy never forgot to look after his men.

Benson stepped aboard, helped Ruth to follow, and sat behind the wheel as Ying joined them. With the first muffled drumming of the opened throttle, Mullins cast the painter inboard. Then he stepped into shadow, came to attention and saluted. Benson returned it stiffly, a wry twist to his lips. Staring ahead, he put the launch in gear, eased her quietly away from the wharf and nosed upstream.

Ruth had settled herself in the cockpit, out of his way, an almost exalted look on her face as she gazed steadily ahead. She was shivering a little, but did not seem aware of it.

As they gained speed, Benson said gruffly: "Go down in the cabin, Miss Stimmons, crawl up in the bows and hide. I mean, belowdeck. You'll find a way for'd, from the cabin."

The girl stood up obediently and went below.

With a sidelong glance Benson spoke in

Chinese: "Now, Ying Loy Wan, be pleased to enter the cabin for a time. It will be safer with only one person visible on deck. Please see that the maiden is well concealed, and do not turn on any lights."

With a slight, courteous bow, Ying entered the cabin.

Even half-throttled, the launch was fast. Since she was not only audible but visible from the shore, Benson switched on her running lights. Then he opened her wide.

She passed the American sentries unchallenged. Benson gripped the wheel easily and peered ahead. If the masked Jap had reached a phone in time to warn all posts, they were sunk. There was a chance that he had not. Such general orders would take time, and Mullins had saved them delay. He sniffed the dirty water curling from the stem and grinned faintly. Perhaps the god of luck *was* sitting on his shoulder tonight.

VI

THE speed of the launch, the dwindling creak of sampans rocking in its wash, gave him an idea. He glanced about and found a flashlight. Mullins had bent an American flag to the stern halyards. Because the launch had been "stolen," his idea could do Tommy Rolph no harm.

He jockeyed the skidding craft around a bend. The Jap sentries were close. He could see no Japanese patrol vessel waiting for him athwart the channel.

The sentry's challenge echoed over the water above his muttering exhaust. After a moment he stood up, turned a wavering light on the flag, staggered and yelled an incoherent greeting. He almost fell overboard, then plumped down behind the wheel, the light of his flash waving drunkenly about. He steadied the veering launch and yelled with laughter.

There had been nothing peremptory about that challenge. It did not come again. He was past now, speeding upstream.

From the Japanese post just astern came a sudden hail. A small searchlight sputtered into life, the beam lashing down to the water, sweeping after him. He stared ahead. White light enveloped the launch in stark relief. He ducked, expecting the hammer of a machine gun.

Instead, there was a dull boom from the Japanese post. A yellow spark climbed skyward, rotating lazily. It burst with a hollow *Tonk!* Houses, trees and water sprang out of darkness in the ghostly pallor of a star shell.

Benson took a deep breath. The masked Jap had phoned just too late to stop them. Pursuit by water might be shaken off in the maze of canals ahead. These were small and shallow. Luckily, this type of launch had a shallow draft.

There would be planes going up in a minute. The launch made a tiny target from above, but the Chinese plane would be an easier quarry, if they reached it. No use trying to hide and wait. Daylight would betray them. Tonight or never.

He switched off the running lights, ears alert for the drone of plane engines. Automatically he had noted by landmarks the route followed by the sampan. He recalled it now in reverse order. The turn out of Soochow Creek lay around the next bend.

Another star shell, now farther astern, cast a running black shadow ahead of the launch. Benson saw the narrower waterway and swung the wheel. As the arrowing little craft veered and rolled in a quarter circle, he reduced speed a notch.

Ying steadied himself in the cabin doorway, lurched into the cockpit and sat down. "They saw us," he observed.

"Yes. Is the maiden well hidden, Ying Loy Wan?"

Ying watched the star shell wink out. "She is, skillful rescuer." Calmly, he added: "The Nipponese will pursue?"

As though in answer, a wavering beam of light struck the launch for an instant. Benson snatched a lightning glance astern. A low searchlight had foud them across the flats. By the way it winked between the distant trees, it was traveling up Soochow Creek—traveling fast.

"They come in pursuit now," muttered Benson, intent on his steering. "Yet we may shake them off in these waterways, if the gods are kind." He said nothing about Japanese planes.

"If we are caught, let swift death take us under his protection," murmured Ying. "They will not harm the maiden."

Benson nodded. "This person will see to it."

AIDED by the star shell, the Japanese patrol boat had marked their turn out of Soochow Creek and followed. As the quivering launch began to reel in the miles, that finger of light from astern touched them again and again across the marshy flats, growing slowly but steadily brighter.

A few Chinese homes intervened, some ruined, some intact, but the searchlight always found them again. They must be within range, Benson thought, yet the Japs did not fire. And still there came no throb of plane engines from the sky. Just possibly none were available at once.

The Japs were a third of a mile astern when Benson recognized the next landmarks and slowed for them. Just ahead lay the entrance to the narrow creek where he and Tien Wang had gone aboard the sampan. The wavering glare of the searchlight helped him make the turn, for it showed the low creek banks distinctly.

Swerving into the narrower waterway, the launch slowed almost at once. Benson throttled down, thereby making more speed. Between these close banks under full power, the launch piled up a bow wave that kept her climbing hill all the time.

It was tricky steering now and demanded all his attention, for the little creek wound like a Chinese dragon. Half a mile ahead of its general direction his eyes found the dark hump of deodars that concealed the plane. If he could signal and wake the pilot . . . but even that wouldn't allow time enough, with the plane nosed in, unless he could shake off these Japs.

The searchlight was less brilliant as it played on the launch. The following boat must be larger, much more difficult to handle in the winding little creek. Benson wanted to glance astern, but knew better than to face that glare with the steering to do. So the launch raced on, and he missed the spurt of yellow flame that winked from the Japanese boat.

The bang, and the eager whine of a shell came almost together. The shell burst ahead of the launch with a startling white flash. Benson grinned tensely. The detonations ought to wake up his pilot—get him at least started on the plane.

The launch slowed abruptly, swung and picked up speed, his instant jerk on the wheel heading it back in midstream. He swore in sudden, fierce hope. She had touched bottom. The Japs' deeper draft should run them hard and fast aground there. Luck when he needed it. Of course, they might sink him before he got out of range, but it would require first-class gunnery to hit the twisting little launch.

"Ying," he ordered, "summon the maiden quickly."

The Chinese vanished into the cabin. The launch tore on, nearing that low irrigation ditch where they must land. To Benson's grim astonishment, the Japs did not fire again.

The beam of the searchlight flicked off the launch and swooped crazily away to starboard. The Japs had run aground!

Presently the light wheeled back and found him. Also, it showed up the landing place ahead. Still the Japs did not fire. Perhaps their gun had jammed. They must be demoralized to jam a quick-firer. It was almost impossible—

Benson slowed for the low-banked irrigation ditch as Ying and Ruth hurried on deck. "Down, and find a blanket!" he snapped in Chinese. Ying wheeled, disappeared below.

Swerving out of gear, then in reverse, Benson ran the boat aground on the lip of the ditch. Ruth was flung to her knees, but jumped up again. Ying stumbled out of the cabin.

Benson sprang ashore. "Come on."

In a moment he was leading them along the irrigation dyke at a steady trot. The searchlight clung to the launch for a moment, then swept to find them. It cast their enormous black shadows across the fields and lit their path confusingly.

THEY were skirting the second field when the beam swung ahead and played on the deodars. Out of the direct glare, Benson shaded his eyes to look back at the Jap craft. It was stationary, but he glimpsed little black figures bobbing toward them at the double. The Japs had taken to the soggy fields in pursuit. He might kill a few of them from the trees, but it looked hopeless. With a word of encouragement to Ruth, he trotted on.

As they reached the trees they began to hear yells and the crack of rifles. The Japs were still some distance behind. Benson plunged straight ahead instead of skirting part of the grove. Then suddenly, he knew that his luck had not failed him.

From somewhere beyond the trees had come the shattering roar of a plane engine. It grew irregular with popping backfires, softened and steadied, rose again to a blasting pound.

Benson traced the source by ear. The plane was moving now. The pilot would take off the same way he landed—into the wind, which meant away from the Japs. He shouted to Ruth above the noise: "This way! Run! We're going to make it!"

He found the girl and ran her through the trees, helped by the lancing white beams of the searchlight. Ying had taken her other arm, and helped to shield her from the low branches.

They burst into the open. The plane had taxied to the near end of the meadow and was bumping around for the take-off. The searchlight found it starkly because there were no intervening trees. The goggled pilot stood up and waved his arm. The plane stopped and waited, engine throttled to a steady beat.

Ying dropped the blanket, wheeled to recover it and had to search an instant in the dense shadows. Benson ran the girl across the open, swung her legs high and dumped her feet first into the rear compartment—then climbed in beside her.

The pilot bent forward and opened his throttle. Ying was only halfway to the plane. Benson saw him and shouted, "Wait!" above the racket of the engine. The pilot turned a blank, goggled face, his mouth screwed up with tension. Evidently he thought the girl was Ying. The plane began to move faster. Ying shouted in hoarse dismay, swerving to intercept it.

Benson snatched out his gun and rammed it into the confused pilot's neck. "Wait, I said! Throttle down!"

The plane slowed. Ying came panting up, richly embroidered house coat lifted high. Benson leaned out, grabbed the blanket and helped Ying into the front compartment beside the pilot. Again the engine roared. The plane jounced forward. It was quite within range of the quick-firer, but no shells came from the Japanese vessel.

Benson twisted around to the stern machine gun. Half a field away the Japs were kneeling to fire. As he sighted hurriedly, their rifles spat pinpoints of light. Perhaps they were winded, for none of their bullets struck the plane. Benson got in one burst of fire before the lifting tail raised the gun.

Loaded to capacity and refueled, it was a perilous takeoff over rough ground, especially with a cold engine. The plane bumped and yawed down the meadow, throttle wide open. She was not thirty feet from a ditch when she took the air sluggishly. Luckily, there was nothing but open field beyond the ditch.

The searchlight clung to her and seemed to make Tung Li nervous. He tried to climb too fast and narrowly missed stalling. Benson forgave his nervousness in view of their narrow escape. Having the plane ready had saved them all—for the moment.

They climbed straight west on a long slant. At length mist dampened their faces and the plane bumped jarringly. A few seconds later they rose above the clouds.

The white pool of the searchlight wavered below them for a moment and disappeared.

VII

BENSON stood up to look for Jap planes. He could see no lights anywhere except the stars. As their own plane was black and flying without lights, they were fairly safe now, until dawn.

Relieved and puzzled, he made Ruth stand and wrap herself in the blanket. When he had fastened both their safety belts, he leaned forward to speak to the pilot.

"Keep her at ten thousand feet," he shouted in English, "and fly well south of the Yangtze. Too many Jap planes over the river cities. Better turn south a bit now."

The plane banked smoothly and headed southwest. Benson yelled in Chinese. "There is less wind where you sit, Ying Loy Wan. Yet if you are cold, speak. You can change with me back here and share the maiden's blanket. My coat is warm."

"So be it!" Ying replied loudly. "This person is not cold, but warmly grateful."

"What of the treasure, Ying Loy Wan? It is safe?"

"It is safe, thanks to you, valuable friend of China!"

Benson leaned back and relaxed in body rather than in mind. On such a venture as this, unflagging vigilance was part of the price of success. They were not yet safe at Chungking.

He was dissatisfied, uneasy. Instinct told him that something was wrong. Instead of disregarding that instinct, he tried to reason out the cause of it.

At once he thought of the masked man. That friendly, warm, dangerous Jap had all the earmarks of Colonel Kidote; Kidote, the clever "Purring Cat" who seemed harmless until he struck. Clever or not, his blow had missed tonight.

The most difficult part of Benson's task was accomplished—getting Ying and the money out of Shanghai. It had been touch and go in spots, but that was to be expected. In each tight spot something had happened to make escape possible.

Benson stiffened. That was it. Their escape had been so easy. With his plan betrayed, and Kidote forewarned, too many things had gone wrong for the Japs.

Frowning, he recalled these. Two, at least, could be discarded as above suspicion—the lucky appearance of Ruth to cut them free, and the arrival of the Marines when he fired at the window. Kidote had offered to let him go free with Ruth in return for the hidden funds. Might as well discard that, too. Kidote had no intention of keeping his word.

But other things were not above suspicion. That sentry post had been warned as they passed. The shout and the star shell proved it. Why hadn't they machine-gunned the launch? He remembered expecting it, under that first searchlight.

Next the Jap patrol boat. Another searchlight on them, but no rifle fire. One shell over their bows, and only one. He had never heard of a jammed quick-firer. They might have failed to lock the breech block and blown it off, blown some of them to Hell with it, but Jap gunners were too efficient for that.

Running aground was dumb enough, but possibly accidental. Still no shells. That was the time to shell the launch.

Then those riflemen, half a field away. The Japs were good marksmen. At least two or three bullets should have struck the plane at that distance.

And why no pursuing planes? There had been plenty of time. Easy to spot the launch under that searchlight. Easy to bomb the Chinese plane before it took off.

Was it all luck? That seemed unlikely. Had the Purring Cat struck tonight and missed entirely? The head of the Jap secret service would have a long paw. Was it waiting to strike again, at the last moment?

On the other hand, why let them escape? It didn't make sense. It didn't make sense the other way either. The Japs were too efficient to make so many blunders. Especially Kidote.

Another recollection deepened Benson's frown. Why had Tung Li tried to start without Ying? Nerves? He had flown badly just after the take-off. But leaving Ying was different. The whole object of their mission was to rescue Ying. Bribery? But suspecting Tung Li was nonsense. The boy's forethought in having the plane ready, or his quickness in wheeling it out, had saved all their lives. Was he getting the jitters himself?

Benson grunted with a sort of angry patience. None of his speculations made sense. Anyhow, they were out of Shanghai. He swore at his own persistent uneasiness. Well, nothing to do but keep his tired, smarting eyes open and his wits about him a few hours longer. At least, they were safe until dawn.

HE GLANCED at Ruth. She had lost her hat and was huddled in her blanket, the shadowy whiteness of her forehead just perceptible. He laid an encouraging arm around her shoulders and drew her against him to speak in her ear. "Cold. young lady?"

Ruth shrank a little and looked up, her eyes solemn in the starlight. "It doesn't matter. I'm not cold."

With a nod he took away his arm. He was hungry. There were slabs of meat and rice and a thermos bottle of hot tea at his feet, but he needed rest more. He settled back for a cat-nap, his eyes half closed. Tung Li had brought his own food and, presumably, had eaten while he waited for them.

Lulled by the steady roar of their flight, Benson at last noticed that Ying's head and shoulders had grown more distinct in front of him. He twisted around. The first chill fingers of dawn were stealing into the sky behind them.

Steadily, imperceptibly, the light grew and put out the stars. The plane tilted a little and began to climb. Benson stood up in the bitter cold slip stream. Same blanket of cloud far below. Not a plane in sight. He sat down again, yawning.

Ruth stirred, then moaned faintly. She lurched to the side and was air-sick over the cowling. Benson leaned forward to jog the pilot. "Down, Tung Li! Keep her at ten thousand feet."

They nosed downward. He got out the thermos and gave Ruth some hot tea. She drank it under protest, her lips blue. When she leaned back, a trace of color in her cheeks, he divided the food into three shares and passed one to Ying. He had to insist that Ruth eat and drink hers

Sunrise found them well to the south of Kinkiang. The clouds were dispersing. Benson caught a glimpse of the city and parts of the looping, silver Yangtze away to the north. He kept on looking north. Twice he saw the tiny, distant flash of sunlight on the wings of a wheeling plane. The Chinese plane flew level and passed unseen. Its wings were painted black, partly to make it invisible at night, partly to identify it to other Chinese planes—for it carried the Japanese wing symbols.

There was small risk of encountering Jap planes over this vast territory south of the river. The danger would grow as they neared Chungking, because of Japanese bombing raids. When Kinkiang lay far behind, Benson had the pilot descend to six thousand feet. It was equally safe, and the denser air helped Ruth fight off her air-sickness.

Warmed by the sun as it rose higher, the girl settled herself in her corner and fell asleep. Presently her bag slid out of her lap and spilled open. Benson gathered up her things and found them just about what he expected: a brush and comb, a toothbrush and soap, the little .22 she had lent him, her passport, a small Bible, two cheap handkerchiefs and nailfile, a box of talcum powder, but neither rouge nor lipstick.

At length he replaced her things and tucked the bag at her side without waking her. After a look around for Jap planes, he studied her sleeping face curiously. It was young but not adolescent; repressed, bitter and subtley pathetic—her youth flung away, he guessed, with uncomprehending sacrifice.

He searched the empty skies again, then leaned forward and requested Ying in Chinese to fasten his safety belt. Ying woke quietly, fastened his belt and dozed off to sleep.

THEY were flying over Yochow, not ten miles from the long, southerly bend of the Yangtze, when Benson saw the plane. It was flying southwest to their west, evidently scouting along south of the river.

Perhaps a mile away and several thousand feet higher, it was no more than a drifting speck in the sky. It might be Chinese. There was no way of telling at that distance. It was about abreast of them. Because their courses converged, he touched the pilot and showed him the other plane.

"Fly as you are," he directed. "They may not see us."

His order came too late. The pilot banked southwest and began to climb for altitude. Then, in belated understanding, he slanted west and continued to climb.

Benson swore under his breath. Their last bank might have given the other plane a flash of their wings. When he looked, the other plane had vanished. That meant it was coming for them on a long glide, the edges of its wings invisible.

"Get away if you can," he said hoarsely, "but check your gun. If he's faster than we are, give me a chance at him. Level off and get more speed." He shook Ying and the girl awake, pointed to the oncoming plane. "Keep down, and hang on."

Ying understood the situation if not the words. Benson turned to swing the after machine gun, getting used to the feel of it. The forward gun was fixed, synchronized with the old-fashioned, wooden propeller. In the hands of an expert pilot it could be deadly for attack, but it was no use at all for defense from a fleeing plane.

Ruth caught his arm. He shook her off, pushed her down as far as her safety belt allowed. The pilot was busy with his forward gun.

Benson crouched at the after gun, his tired eyes intently hard. After a moment he saw the plane as it leveled off, glimpsed the Jap symbols on its under wings. It was almost astern and a little above them, overtaking them slowly. He knew it for a light, fast bomber, mostly used for strafing troops or civilians. It was out of range, so he did not move the gun.

It tilted and began to draw abreast, higher and still out of range. There were two men in it, bombs visible against the under body. Benson guessed that the Japs were trying to speak to his pilot by radio, having seen their own symbols on the black wings. The Chinese plane had no radio set.

Presently the Jap plane banked away, wheeled on flashing wings and came for them. Warning tracer bullets streaked in front of the Chinese plane, leaving thin strings of smoke. Tung Li sheered off. Instead of flying level and giving Benson a chance to fight, he dove to escape. It was a natural but stupid move. The Japs dove in pursuit, dove more steeply to come up under his tail. The Chinese plane would be riddled—

"Level off!" roared Benson over his shoulder. Their only chance now was a point blank duel. No use maneuvering with a slow-thinking pilot against a faster plane. He believed they were done for anyway, but it was not in him to give up.

TUNG LI understood and nosed up swiftly. The rest happened in deadly split seconds. Bullets began to whip so close that he could hear them as well as see the tracers. They missed the sinking tail and went over Tung Li's head.

Benson had his gun fully depressed. He started firing as the Jap's nose lifted into his sights. He saw his own tracers streak just too high, then find the target. The Jap pilot yanked his stick back and zoomed to save his life, his observer firing at the sky. Benson's hammering machine gun raked along his under body.

A blinding white flash hid the Japanese plane. A direct hit or a ricochet had found

the contact detonator on one of the bombs. As the flash vanished, the pursuing plane seemed to leap apart in the air. Benson saw the limp bodies of the two Japs hurtle clear in falling arcs, the engine plunge downward trailing strips of the plane, the severed wings go swooping and flashing toward the earth in crazy zigzags.

With the shriek of bomb fragments, a blast of air hit the tail of the Chinese plane, swerving it downward. The plane whipped up sideways like a leaf in a gale, then plunged nose down again as the blast struck its wings. The next instant it went into a shuddering spiral nose dive.

Hanging on grimly and staring straight down, Benson saw the unexploded bombs shoot up plumes of mud and water from the shore of Lake Tung-ting far below. That all the bombs had not exploded was no more of a miracle than hitting that half-inch wide detonator with a machine-gun bullet.

He was about to yell disgusted orders, when Tung Li cross-ruddered out of the dive and brought them on a flat keel again. Discovering the sun in his eyes, he wheeled around not too steadily, headed west and began to climb.

Ruth was white and speechless, apparently too frightened even to scream. Ying glanced back with a smile of calm approval, although his eyes were dilated. The pilot did not even turn his head, for which reserve Benson could hardly blame him.

There were no other planes in sight.

VIII

DURING the rest of their long, swift flight, Benson alternately dozed and watched for enemy planes. He saw none. Even when they neared Chungking, the skies were empty.

The pilot circled once over the field just outside the city, then made a smooth landing. Before the wheels had touched, Ruth spoke urgently to Benson, her small mouth twisted.

"Please have him wait," she said, nodding toward the pilot. "Don't let him put the plane away yet."

"Why not?"

"Because my father isn't here at Chungking. He's near here, at Li-min. It's just across the river. I'm going to ask Chiang Kai-shek to have the plane take me there. He may be dying. You must! I've waited so long. And minutes may count."

Chinese mechanics had trotted out toward the slowing plane. A group of officers were advancing from general headquarters a hundred yards from the field. Although it was likely to be bombed, Chiang Kai-shek had moved his headquarters here in the faint hope of sparing the city.

Benson asked the pilot to wait, possibly for another short flight. Then he and Ying got out, and helped the girl out. Benson explained to the mechanics in Chinese and they drifted back to the hangars. The plane taxied around, waddled down the field, and bumped around again for a take-off into the wind.

The man who called himself Chang Tso led the reception committee of officers. He greeted Ying with ceremony, bowed to Ruth and gave Benson his hand with grave, approving warmth.

"You have succeeded, Captain," he bowed, "as I knew you would. The Leader awaits us." He glanced at Ruth.

Benson explained. "This maiden wishes to speak to the Leader at once. For her, it is most urgent."

Chang Tso nodded and led the way. Benson paused for a quick, low-voiced word with one of the Chinese pilot officers. This man agreed in surprise, and turned back to the field.

Chiang Kai-shek stood up behind his huge desk as they entered. Still vitally impressive, he looked worn and tired, but his attractive smile was firm, with no hint of defeat. He shook hands with himself in greeting to Ying, smiled at Benson, then bowed to Ruth, his impassive eyes lingering on her face.

She hurried up to his desk. "Mr. Chiang," she said in a strained voice, "I came to find my father, Ralph Stimmons.

I heard that he was dying at Li-min. Can I be flown there?"

Chiang eyed her with compassion. "Your father is dead, Miss Stimmons. He died at Li-min a month ago—of cholera."

Ruth made a strangled sound and dropped weakly. Her breathing caught, and she fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief.

Then her body stiffened and her hand came out—not with a handkerchief, but with her small revolver. She pointed the gun at Chiang Kai-shek. Before anyone could move, she had pulled the trigger again and again.

The vicious little clicks of the hammer were loud in the frozen silence. Then two officers sprang for the girl and her weapon. Benson intervened swiftly, waving them back.

Ruth flung away the gun with a desperate gesture. "I've failed! I've failed!" she moaned hysterically. She clenched her fists and her head went up. "Kill me! Don't you think I'm ready? Kill me now!"

Chiang looked at Benson gravely. "How did this happen?"

"Kidote, General. I wasn't sure. I wanted to be sure what his game was." Benson's hand came out of his pocket and opened. On his palm lay six .22 cartridges and one empty shell.

"I took these," he added, "while she slept."

The Chinese leader studied Ruth. "Why did you try to kill me?" he asked. "I did not kill your father."

THE girl shook her head, her lifted eyes fixed and unseeing. "It wasn't that," she said stonily. "I knew he was dead. It was you—Chiang Kai-shek." Her frozen voice rose a little. "You are anti-Christ! Atheist and murderer. Communist. You are leading the communists against the Japanese—costing your own country hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. The Japanese want only to help China, educate her, give her Christianity, and you fight them with your atheists. Beelzebub!"

Chiang Kai-shek eyed her with unmoved pity. "But it is the well-intentioned, religious Japanese who invade us, and bomb our women and children, Miss Stimmons. I am trying to defend my own people, you know. We have not bombed the Japanese cities. How does Colonel Kidote explain that?"

"You dare not," she recited promptly. "Heaven guards their work. They will free China of atheists. And I shall die a martyr to the cause. I am ready."

"War breeds this sort of madness," said Benson acidly. "It's no use shooting her, General. Kidote has filled her up with his specious propaganda until she's beyond all reason."

"Shoot her?" frowned Chiang Kai-shek. "We do not kill women and children, or child-women, Captain." His tired glance swept the officers, and he added in Chinese: "Let nothing be told of this, lest the maiden be injured by our men. She is free to go unpunished. It is my order that she be conducted under protective guard to the American mission at Li-min."

As though dismissing the girl, he turned to Ling. "You brought us the funds, Ying Loy Wan? They are sorely needed."

"Yes, General!" Ying strode forward and thrust a hand into his sleeve. The officers crowded around him to see what he had brought. For a moment Ruth was forgotten.

Ying stiffened. Then his hand came out, clutching a roll of oily rags instead of English bank notes.

"That damn pilot," Benson said slowly, "robbed you while you slept." He looked for Ruth suddenly. She had vanished.

He made for the door and raced down the hall, leaving the startled Chinese behind. As he sprang into the open he saw Ruth pelting for the flying field. She gained it long before he could overtake her. Though he shouted, he did not see her again until his long legs carried him swiftly between two of the hangars. She was running toward the black plane, had almost reached it. The idling engine roared, softened a little.

Benson's quick eyes found the pilot officer whom he had warned at the gate. This man was talking to a sentry at the edge of the field. Both had started walking toward the plane.

Not walking fast enough, though. They must have missed the significance of that girl running, with Benson in pursuit.

"Stop him!" yelled Benson in Chinese, for they were nearer. They began running toward the plane, the officer drawing his revolver, but they were at least a hundred yards from it.

At least Benson might intercept it. He raced on.

Ruth reached the black plane and darted around the wing to gain the rear compartment. As she drew close the pilot raised a Luger automatic and shot her three times at point blank range. The heavy bullets checked her, then knocked her down. She twisted into a quivering ball, kicked aimlessly and relaxed.

The pilot officer and the sentry kept running. They were shouting now.

Benson was still a hundred feet away. The engine roared. The black plane came on to pass him, gathering speed. Benson drew his revolver, halted and took cool aim at the blurring wooden propeller. When it was almost abreast of him, he began firing. One—two bullets failed. At his third shot something whizzed skyward and the engine rose to a scream.

Benson swore with grim satisfaction and kept moving, his gun ready.

Automatically cutting his switch, the pilot flung himself into the after compartment and got his hands on the rear machine-gun. He had swung it awkwardly when the running sentry and Chinese officer opened fire on him.

They were excited but quite close. The goggled pilot jerked, flung up one arm in a queer, spasmodic gesture of farewell, and slid down out of sight. The slowing, unguided plane bumped around in a half circle and came to a stop, just missing Ruth's body.

And that was that. It had all happened much too quickly for thought.

Benson ran and leaned over the huddled girl. She had died instantly, shot through the head. He climbed to the after compartment, his revolver poised. The pilot was dead also. He flung the body out, jumped down and tore off the goggles. The man who had flown him from Shanghai was a Japanese, older than Tung Li, but the same wiry build.

So that was it. The substitute pilot explained many things that had been at the bottom of Benson's unease during that flight into the dawn.

By this time Chiang Kai-shek himself was approaching with his staff. He stared down at Ruth, looked up and spoke in a chill, formidable voice: "Who killed this maiden?"

Saluting, the pilot officer indicated the dead Jap.

"Why?" asked Chiang Tso, his onyx eyes on Benson.

"Because she would have talked," said Benson harshly. "Also, perhaps, because she must have seen Kidote's face. He was masked when he came for Ying Loy Wan. I knew something was rotten, but I could not guess all of it. Certainly not murdering this girl—his own deluded tool."

Swearing tonelessly, he knelt and straightened Ruth's skirt. Then he searched the dead Jap, found the big roll of English bills, handed them to Ying. The merchant presented them to Chiang Kai-shek with a low bow and a murmured salutation in Chinese. The General replied formally, gave the notes to Chang Tso and turned his commanding eyes on Benson.

"Tell us, Captain," he said in English. "Everything."

Benson described the night's work in terse detail.

"It's clearer now," he finished. "Kidote's plan. Wong Sin Meng's houseboy learned and betrayed our plans to the colonel. Kidote sent this Jap to meet our plane, murder Tung Li and take his place. The girl was put there to cut our bonds, so that we would take her with us.

How could she have escaped the Japs in that house otherwise?

"Kidote planned to keep Ying Loy Wan and the money. That was why he had us pursued. But they dared not fire because Kidote wanted Miss Stimmons and me to escape. When they failed to catch Ying, they still let us escape—for the more important business of assassination.

"Miss Stimmons was to be killed in any case, whether she failed or succeeded. So this Jap waited. She thought he was waiting to save her." Benson's voice grew hoarse. "Stealing the money from Ying must have been his own idea."

"Thank you, Captain," said Chiang Kai-shek. "You have done well. Come and talk with me, please, later. I shall leave the burial of Miss Stimmons to the mission at Li-min. Her death was accidental. She got into the path of war."

He turned away, followed by his officers. Chang Tso lingered, watching as Benson looked down at the dead girl.

"Of what are you thinking, my friend?" he asked.

"Of the Purring Cat, and his little, American cat's-paw," said Benson. "I haven't finished with Kidote. I'm going back there, to Shanghai, do you understand?"

"I understand, friend of China," said Chang Tso quietly. "But the girl is dead. I am thinking of one who helped you reach Shanghai last night, and who still lives—I hope."

Benson's head came up. "Tien Wang! You mean—?"

"That he must be warned. That Kidote knows—perhaps. That Tien Wang may need help. He is one of our best men."

"You think of everything," said Benson in a cold rage.

He thought of something else.

He knelt and gathered Ruth's limp body into his arms.

Loot Lies Deep

Hislop's breath hissed as the gold spilled out on deck

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

GET the setup as we sailed out of Miami on Grace Taver's yacht, the *Condor*. Captain Hoke Scanlon, a hard, cold customer who (I knew) had served time for second-degree murder: he claimed to have the key to four million in gold off the coast of Venezuela.

A crew of gorillas.

A passenger list that read like Winchell's column: Grace Taver, society racketeer, who was trying to replenish her fortune; Buck Bosworth, wealthy and perpetually drunk playboy; Arthur Hislop, a nightclub bounder who had introduced Scanlon to Mrs. Taver; Vicky Seymour, ex-glamour girl with a possessive eye on Hislop; Linda Haywood, beautiful debutante of the current season.

And me—Bat Mason, reporter—sent along by my boss to keep a log of the screwy trip. Screwy and—for some of us—fatal.

First casualty was Timmons, the radio operator, who went over the side one night leaving a trail of blood behind him. He was finally hauled out, and buried at sea; but never a clue as to who had done him in.

THEN there were two attacks on me, on successive nights: and in the darkness of my cabin I knew only that my assailant was a man—a mighty husky one. In the first struggle he left a knife which had obviously

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been intended for burial in my throat. . . . I warned Hoke Scanlon that I had the goods on him and was going to write it—for publication in case anything serious happened to me on the cruise. And I did just that—hid the letter under my bunk.

Obviously the captain didn't want the outside world to know what was happening on that boat. The death of the radio man and the smashing of his equipment left only one man capable of fixing that set and sending out messages—Buck Bosworth. And two nights before we reached our goal Buck Bosworth was murdered in his cabin—with the knife that had been intended for me.

I found his body. Forgetting all caution, I drew the knife out of his throat, tossed it through a porthole into the sea.

In spite of the fact that Bosworth had had a nasty argument with Arthur Hislop the night before, suspicion for this murder seemed to fasten on me. There was an air of increasing tension on board the *Condor*, until—

THE gold was found! Or at any rate, a diver reported locating the wreck of the steamer that had carried it; Captain Scanlon dove on the spot, and came up with a handful of gold coins. To my insistence that the setup still looked phoney, Scanlon replied with a veiled threat that something might happen to me before we got back to Miami.

"Hoke," I said, "if anything happens to me you haven't any idea just how sorry you'll be!" . . . .

CHAPTER XVII

ROCK-a-BYE MASON

THEY brought the first bags of gold over about five o'clock. Everybody, even Grace Taver, was at the rail to see it. They passed the well-filled bags up with excruciating care and when they put them on the deck they clinked excitingly.

"Let's see the gold!" demanded one of the sailors, and the others pressed close with a murmur that sounded almost like a growl.

Hoke Scanlon's eyes swept that avid circle of faces. He stepped forward, untied the mouth of one of the bags, and after assuring himself there were no scupper holes nearby, shook some of the gold coins out on the deck.

There was an audible gasp from the spectators. Art Hislop was standing close by my shoulder. I heard the breath hiss in and out through his set lips.

I won't say that the sight of all that gold left me unmoved, either. I had no share in this syndicate. None of those coins would be mine. Yet I became conscious that my own pulses were beating faster, that a strange, tingling excitement was stealing through me.

I found myself glancing quickly, suspiciously, at Hislop, on my left, and at the mate, Garside, on my right, who was licking his thin lips as he stared down at the yellow coins.

I let my eyes slide from one down-turned face to another, and I was suddenly startled at something I saw which was common to the expression of each. They had all kinds of faces—broad, thin, cultured and ignorant—but each of them seemed to be skinning back his lips wolfishly, waiting for someone to make the first grab at that gold so he might join the others in tearing the grabber to little bits.

Each? No, I am wrong. There were two exceptions. Linda's well-bred face betrayed only a bright interest. And Hoke Scanlon was grinning. There was a sardonic, almost pitying smile on his thin mouth as if he were saying to himself, "Go on, boys and girls, help yourself and see if you can keep it long enough to spend the first peso."

He met my gaze and then—deliberately, it seemed to me—swung his eyes to Linda.

"Well, Linda," he said in a voice that all could hear, "I've always wondered what it would feel like to be a millionaire. Or even almost a millionaire. Now I know. It feels good. How about showing me some of those fancy Fifty-second street joints when we get back to New York?"

THE members of the crew left off staring down at the gold. They looked, instead, at Linda and the captain. So, as a matter of fact, did everybody.

I held my breath, waiting for her to

blast him for using her first name, for his possessiveness, for his insolence. But she did not blast him. She gave him a clear, level-eyed look and said evenly:

"Find out who murdered Mr. Bosworth, Captain, and see that he is convicted. The night he is sentenced by the judge, I'll take you up and down Fifty-second Street, from one end to another."

One of the sailors laughed out loud. Another joined, and in a moment they were all laughing. I could almost hear the crashing of barriers—the customary barriers which for the sake of discipline and safety at sea separate passengers and crew. And Hoke Scanlon had done that deliberately, knowing full well the effect it would have on his men.

Swift anger rushed over me like heat from a blast furnace. My intelligence told me this was no time to force things. No man—no woman, either—was completely normal right now with fingers itching to grab that gold. Emotions were all a-boil close under the surface. Including mine. And that was what tipped it over for me, made me stop thinking and begin only to feel.

"That rules you out, doesn't it, Hoke?" I said.

The sailors stopped laughing and looked at me. Everybody recognized that note of wildness in my voice. They all looked at me. And waited.

"What rules me out, Mason?" asked Hoke in a silky tone.

"If the judge sentences you to the hot seat, how can you spend that night on Fifty-second Street?"

"Bat!" said Linda, sharply. "Stop it!"

But it was Grace Taver who, unexpectedly, boiled over. In a voice as shrill as the scream of a band saw she shrieked:

"Captain, he's trying to put the blame on you. He killed Mr. Bosworth! He'd have killed him before he did, only I saw him creeping down the passageway—and he had a knife in his hand!"

And Art Hislop's icy voice cracked into the stunned silence.

"I saw him wandering around the corridor, too, Captain. You'd better put him in irons before he murders us all."

OH YES, I know. I should have stood there and told them all what I had been doing in the corridor those two nights. Not being guilty, I should have argued it out with them dispassionately, even let them take me into custody; and should have proved to them as best I could that someone else was stalking around the yacht, murder bent.

But I didn't do any of those things. I had been pushed around too much already. Or maybe I, like almost everybody aboard, had been infected by the malignant virus of the gold.

All I know is that I saw a triumphant gleam in Hoke Scanlon's eyes as Art Hislop spoke his piece. And the effect upon me was like the detonation of a Mills bomb.

I couldn't hit Grace Taver. But I could hit Art Hislop. And brother, I did! I spun on the ball of my right foot and took two swift steps toward him. He saw me coming—saw my expression—and his hand went in for his gun.

He would have done much better had he put up his fists. He did make a last-second attempt to guard with his left, but he was too late by a heart-beat.

My right came up from my hip and exploded against his chin. It slewed his face around, snapped his head back so I thought his neck was broken, which at that moment would have suited me just fine. He went back on his heels, staggered, hit the rail and half-spun around. Then slumped to the deck as if all the bones had been pulled out of his body.

Vicky's scream was like the cutting edge of a razor. "Captain, stop him!" she shrilled.

He was on his way, all right. And so, it seemed to me in one quick glance, was practically every man aboard. Hoke Scanlon came in fast. I aimed a punch at him that would have dented the *Condor's* plates.

But I was off-balance and he wasn't. He rolled under it and his shoulder hit

my chest so hard it picked me up and slammed me against the rail, just beyond the spot where Hislop was groggily pulling himself up.

Hoke knew his stuff. He made no effort to slug it out with me. In that bear-hug clinch he tried to hold me jammed against the rail until the others came. I reached around behind him and slipped him a rabbit punch that all but tore the head off his shoulders. His body sagged but his arms dragged me down with him to the deck.

And by that time the whole crowd was there. On hands and knees I wrenched myself loose from Hoke's arms and tried to butt my way through the encircling legs and so fight myself to my feet.

A heavy body threw itself upon me, rolling me over on my back. Somebody grabbed one of my legs. I lashed out with the other and my foot went ankle-deep into a sailor's stomach.

The whole ship was a bedlam. I could hear shouts, screams, and the slapping of feet as latecomers among the crew raced aft to get in on the fun.

I rolled over again like a cat and got my belly down so they couldn't stomp me. Then, somehow, I grabbed somebody's body and dragged myself to my feet.

They were handicapping themselves by all trying to get at me at the same time. They had to be careful not to hit each other. But they were all enemies to me and whenever my fist hit anything it was all right.

MORE fists than I could count were slamming at me from all sides. The circle of contorted faces and dancing bodies was pinkly blurred and I was having trouble seeing the flying fists. I felt myself being knocked this way and that by blows I didn't see. After a minute or two those fists stopped hurting when they landed and only bothered me because they tossed me around so.

I tried to wrestle my way to the rail. It would feel good to let that wet, cool, sea envelop me and to swim and swim until I was too tired to go on. But I couldn't get to the rail. I didn't have enough breath to make it. I was choking on salt, warm blood and there was no time to spit.

I shook blood out of my eyes and got one instant's clear vision. And to this day there is a series of images indelibly stamped on the retina of my mind. One series alone, as if cut at random from a motion picture film. Art Hislop, just in front of me, his face a horrible mask of fury, his entire body doing a curious side-to-side shuffle as he tried to aim his gun at me.

"Get out of the way," he was squalling. "Get out of the way so I can shoot his guts out!"

There wasn't any strength to my legs. Slowly but surely they were buckling under me and I was sinking. I threw my arms around somebody's body in a desperate clinch to keep myself on my feet. But I was still falling, buffeted this way and that by blows which had long since lost their power to hurt. Nothing hurt any more.

I was on deck. On my back. Somebody was kicking me. I tried to get my two arms up around my head, but my muscles would not obey the commands of my brain. I tried to roll over to protect my face and stomach, but that didn't work, either.

I got my swollen eyes open a little and looked up. It was, of all people, Art Hislop who was kicking me. That I saw and filed away in my dimming brain for use if I lived through this, which I doubted. What had happened to his gun?

I got one glimpse of something else—a girlish figure in a white dress flying at him, frantically pushing him away from me and out of sight.

But Art Hislop didn't own the only pair of feet there were. Another came into view from the opposite direction. I saw it for the thousandth part of a second before it struck me.

I saw it, but I did not feel it strike my head. All the lights in the world suddenly flamed before my eyes. They flamed into

an intolerable brilliance which seemed to blaze like a magnesium flare 'way inside my brain. Then vanished into utter, absolute, blackness.

And as I floated lightly away in this surrounding void, I was feeling pretty good. If this was dying, I told myself, sleepily, it wasn't as bad as it had been advertised.

CHAPTER XVIII

GUN-MUZZLE INTERVIEW

IT WASN'T much fun, fighting my way up out of the dark abyss of unconsciousness. Two or three times I almost opened my eyes, almost got my mind clear, then, with relief, let myself sink into merciful blankness wherein there was no pain, no agony of mind or body.

My entire being felt as if it had been shoved through a laundry mangle—as, in fact, it just about had. My mouth tasted like hell, being full of dried blood. And I could not open my left eye more than a quarter-inch slit.

I got the other one open, however, and found that I was in my own cabin. They had apparently dragged me below and flopped me headlong on my own berth, not even taking the trouble to remove my shoes.

If they hadn't done that—painfully I reached back and patted my hip pocket. The gun I had taken from Buck's top drawer was still there. It had probably never occurred to them that if I had been packing a gun I wouldn't have dragged it out and gone to work with it. So they hadn't troubled to frisk me.

The fact was, I had been so howling mad I had simply forgotten the gun. When you run amuck you don't do very much plain and fancy thinking. You just act.

Every muscle in me screamed protest as I pushed myself to a sitting position, swung my long legs off the berth and stood on the floor, holding on to the side of the berth to brace myself against the gentle rolling of the yacht.

Dizzying waves of pain raced over me from head to foot and something seemed to stab into my left lung every time I took a long, deep breath. A ten-year-old, I told myself grimly, could push me over now.

Maybe so. But no grown man had better try it while I had that gun on my hip.

I tottered over to the door and tried the knob. It was locked, as I might have expected. I looked at the porthole. It was dark outside. I must have been unconscious for some hours, since it had been just before sundown when they had ganged me.

I went over to the washstand and stared at myself in the mirror. I had never been handsome, but now I looked like a nine-day derelict. I was developing a world's-record black eye; there was a ragged scratch on my cheek and my whole face was streaked with caked blood. There was blood even matted in my hair.

I wriggled out of my torn and bloody clothes, went into the shower stall and stood there for a good ten minutes, letting the cascading sea water sluice over me until it washed away all the blood and some of the aches.

When I had gingerly towelled myself and gotten into clean white clothes I felt better. In my body, that is. Mentally I was just as sore as I had been when I had cut loose up there on deck.

More, if that were possible: for my white-hot frenzy had changed into a cold, killing, anger. Without compunction I could throw a whole clip of slugs into Hoke Scanlon if he so much as laid a finger on me. I had had enough pushing around. I wasn't having any more at all.

I went to the porthole and listened through the screen. And as my ears groped past the swishing of the long seas under the anchored yacht, past the squeaking of shackles at the boat boom, past the purring of the generator exhaust, they heard something that stretched my nerves tight and made me listen incredulously for a repetition of that sound.

It was repeated, all right. A drunken

laugh from the direction of the bow, followed by the unmistakable crash of an empty bottle! The crew was celebrating its new-found riches!

I turned away from the porthole and came to a sudden halt, every nerve-end tingling.

Hoke Scanlon was standing just inside my door.

He had come in while I was listening at the porthole and in his hand was that great cannon of his, pointed straight at my belly.

I HAD a gun, too. I could feel its weight against my hip. How long would it take me to drag it out of the pocket, use both hands to charge it, get it aimed—and shoot?

Too long. He would have time to send his whole clip crashing through my flesh and blood before I squeezed my trigger the first time.

All this I thought in the hundredth part of a second.

"Okay, Hoke," I said, gently, so as not to scare his trigger finger. "No need to shoot."

And I reached for the ceiling, pretty glad I hadn't yanked at my gun and thus let him know I packed one.

His lips stretched in a mirthless grin. "I'd feel better, Bat," he said, "if you was to crawl into your berth and just lay there while you and I have a nice, quiet little talk."

What did I have to lose by obeying? I had plenty to lose if I didn't. So I crawled into my berth. I was comfortable there, anyway.

"Now," he said, dragging a chair into the middle of the room and seating himself, "I can stow my gun. I can shoot my initials in your guts while you're rolling out of that bunk, so take it easy."

I took it easy, all right.

"Mason," he said, "you're in a jam." And when I did not say anything, "Hislop and Mrs. Taver have both filed charges against you, so you're officially under arrest for murder."

"For one murder, or two?" I asked.

"For one, Bosworth's. You were in the lounge with a couple of the owner's guests when Timmons, the wireless man, went overboard. But Hislop swears he saw you mooching around in the passageway about three in the morning one night."

"I was," I said. "And he saw me, all right."

"And Mrs. Taver swears she saw you in the passageway the night before Buck was murdered. You had a knife in your hand. And Buck was killed with a knife. She asked you what you were doing and you told her you were walking in your sleep."

"So?" I drawled.

He grinned. "So I'm forced to keep you under confinement until I can turn you over to shore authorities, charged with murder on the high seas."

"Think you can convict me?" I asked.

"You know, Mason," he said, evenly, "I really believe we can."

"You don't think a jury will be interested in the coincidence that the wireless man was murdered—obviously not by me—and that Buck was the only other man on this yacht who could repair and operate the set?"

"Maybe they'll be interested, but I think they'll hang you just the same." He rocked back on the rear legs of the chair, watching me narrowly the while.

"Here's some more bad news, Bat," he said, smiling mirthlessly. "I believe I can find a steward who actually saw you come out of Buck's room about the time somebody was cutting his throat."

"A nice frame-up," I said, holding my voice level.

He didn't deny it. But on the other hand, he did not admit it. He just sat there, watching me.

"Speaking of jams, Hoke," I said, looking up at the deck beams above, "you'll be in one if the crew gets too drunk. By the looks of them, they'd be a good gang to keep sober."

"They broke into Mrs. Taver's liquor locker," he said. "By the time I heard them they were drunk already. It's better

to let them have their fun. They'd get ugly if I tried to stop them. After all, why shouldn't they celebrate finding the treasure? It'll mean plenty of jack to them."

"It's your yacht—and your funeral."

"My yacht," he admitted. "But you're nearer a funeral than I am. I've got a proposition for you."

"Ah, I thought you didn't come down here just for a nice little chat. Let's dig the meat out of the coconut."

"Ever fool around with a sailing dinghy?" he asked.

"Not much," I said. "Most of my sailing has been with the bigger boats. Why?"

"But you could sail one, all right?" he persisted.

"Of course."

"ONE OF our rowing dinghies is fitted up as a Class B racing dink," he said. "The mast and sail are in the lazarette. With a compass, a chart, plenty of water and victuals, a good sailor could make it from here to Curacao, or La Guaira, or even to Trinidad if he really put his mind to it and the wind was right."

I was beginning to get it. So I played safe and said nothing.

"You could, for instance," he added. "The crew is all drunk. You might find the dinghy at the outboard end of the boat boom, with everything in it."

"So you want to get rid of me," I commented.

He didn't blink an eye. "I'm giving you a chance, Mason. But there's a condition."

"There would be. What's the condition?"

"Give me that letter you hid somewhere and promise not to hide another one aboard."

"What's to prevent me from telling the shore authorities everything that's in that letter?"

"I suppose you will," he admitted. "Only I don't want it aboard this yacht, that's all."

He dug into his pocket and with an air of triumph presented me with a sheet of paper, carefully typed. For the sum of $25,000 already paid, he had purchased the *Condor* from Grace Taver. He was now both owner and master.

"That's entered in the log," he said grinning widely, "and the page is witnessed by every one of the guests. Will it stand? I'll say it will. You've put a hex on her by hiding that letter somewhere. Oh, I suppose I could just about pull her to pieces and find that letter, but you know boats—I'll admit that—and I know that letter will be hard to find."

"Why did you buy the yacht, Hoke?" I asked him.

"I like her, that's why. And I had the money. Why shouldn't I buy her?"

"You could steal her just as easily," I pointed out.

"And have the authorities at every port in the world ready to crack down when I put in for supplies?" He grinned. "Not me."

"The twenty-five grand was out of your share of the treasure?"

"Where else would I get a hunk of money like that?"

I lay still, thinking that over. It smelled gamey all right. It was a piece of the jigsaw puzzle that I couldn't find a place for —yet. But there was a place for it. I just couldn't see it in the light of what I knew.

Hoke Scanlon sat watching me alertly as I tried to get the details of his racket clear in my bruised and battered head. Once in a while, as some particularly raucous burst of laughter came from the drunken crew, his eyes would slide away, but not very far. Nowhere near far enough to permit me to roll over on my left side, work the gun out of my pants pocket, roll back again, level the gun at him and fire.

"HOKE," I said, "save your breath. Let's speak plain English. You killed Timmons and Bosworth yourself, or you had it done."

"As a detective," he drawled, "you're a knockout."

"The same applies to the couple of

attempts to cut my throat. I rather think you had it done. I can see you shooting someone, even if his back was turned, but I don't see you stabbing with a knife. It just isn't in your character."

"For the compliment," he murmured, "a thousand thanks, but—"

"Let me go on with it," I interrupted. "I know why you killed those two men. When you have the gold aboard you're going to have a showdown with the members of the syndicate and gyp them out of their share.

"But Bosworth, and *his* radio man, Timmons, could have spilled the beans by wireless, and you didn't want that. And you wanted me out of the way because I might have told enough about your record so that Mrs. Taver would have insisted on stopping the voyage. And if you had refused to stop the voyage then, she could have sent away a wireless asking for help."

I stopped and waited for him to say something. But all he said was, "Go on, master mind, unless you're through."

"You don't really want to prosecute me for murder, because with your record you could never hang it on me. So you're kind enough to offer me a chance to do a fade-out.

"If I take the dink and sail to the Venezuelan coast," I went on, feeling my way along, "I'd be leaving the women on this boat to the tender mercies of a drunken crew—and a bird who has already murdered a couple of men."

"Take the women with you," Hoke said, carelessly. "That is, most of them."

"Maybe they won't want—" I began, then came to a full stop. "What was that crack, 'Take most of them?' "

"You're welcome to the former owner, now my guest, Mrs. Taver," he said, his black eyes very watchful. "And that love-sick, disappointed, Hislop-chasing female, Vicky Seymour; you can have her, too."

He stopped and waited for me to call the play. Well, I would call it, all right, but just not yet. So I sidestepped it.

" I wouldn't take myself and the women in a dink, together with their shares of gold. In a squall she'd never ride through."

"Oh," he said, blandly, "don't worry about the weight of the gold bags. After all, what would they do with them—lug them under their arms along the main street of La Guiara? I'll deliver it to their order at Miami or New York, or wherever they choose."

"With you," I said, sardonically, "it would be as safe as in the vaults of the Federal Reserve Bank."

He never cracked a smile. "That's right. I'd like to see anybody get it away from me."

So that, you see, was the tip-off. Have you noticed he said nothing about my taking Art Hislop along with me?

"I see, now," I said, slowly, "why you bought the yacht instead of stealing her. You can use the yacht in your business, but a boat isn't much good unless her papers are in order. Besides, what did it matter how much you paid for her when you were going to keep the money anyway? Have you got a good place to hide the gold in? I know an island in the mouth of the Orinoco that would be just dandy."

He grinned at that. "Too bad we didn't get together earlier, Bat," he said. "If you weren't so bull-headed, you'd make a great partner. The trouble is, you get things in your head and you can't get them out. Like that about me sicking someone on to slitting your pipes, and killing Bosworth and Timmons, for instance. I declare, you almost hurt my feelings. I—"

"About getting ashore in the dinghy," I cut in, sharply. I decided I might as well have all the bad news, even if I knew the answers already. "You didn't mention taking Miss Haywood."

Even lying on my back the way I was, he didn't trust me. He pushed himself to his feet, got his gun good and comfortable in his hand and then looked straight at me.

"Sorry," he said. "The others I can spare. But not Linda. I've taken a great

fancy to her. In fact I think I'm in love with her. And after all, I'm no worse than some of the crowd she runs with.

"A little rougher, perhaps; that's all. If all of her society pals were in jail who belong there, half her favorite joints would have to shut up. I got good accommodations aboard my yacht, here, and I'll have plenty of money. She'll get used to my ways in time. She stays here with me."

CHAPTER XIX

SWAP LEAD FOR GOLD

IT WOULDN'T have been difficult right then to get myself killed. As much as I've ever wanted to do anything, I wanted to come out of that berth and take a chance on getting to Hoke Scanlon's throat before he sent three or four bullets into me.

I knew I'd never have time to drag my gun out. But with my hands there was a possibility—

No, there wasn't even a remote possibility. Hoke was one who had led a violent life. He knew what it means when anger boils up in a man's eyes, when his muscles all get set and he holds his breath, getting ready to go.

"Bat!" he said, sharply. "Don't do it! I'll have to kill you before you get your feet on the deck!"

I knew he could do it. And I knew he would. There was no use in committing suicide. So I relaxed and waited for the wildness to die out of my veins. It takes more guts sometimes to remain still than to let the need for violence carry you into certain disaster.

"Think it over, Mason," he said, soothingly. "I'm giving you your only chance for your little white alley. If I take you to port they'll hang you for murder, because there'll be plenty of evidence in the hands of the federal D. A."

"Evidence mostly manufactured," I said.

"But evidence just the same, I'll have to remind you of this, too: you may never even reach port on the *Condor*. The crew is pretty ugly about having someone aboard who has murdered two men. I'll find it hard to guarantee your safety if you stay aboard."

I laughed at that, remembering how safe I had been already. But I guess my laugh wasn't a pleasant one, for Hoke's eyes narrowed and he began to back slowly toward the door.

"Think it over, Mason," he urged again. "And if you decide you'd like to go for a little sail, ring the call bell and send for me. I'll show you how you can get yourself and the two women into the dink without the crew seeing you."

He slipped out of the door, and I heard the thin grinding of the key in the lock.

Noise from the crew's quarters and from the foredeck was increasing. They were pulling quite a party. I was astonished that Hoke would allow his men to get that far out of hand. Unless, of course, it would serve some obscure purpose to have them all drunk.

I hoped against hope that the girls would have locked themselves into their cabins and jammed the doors. There was still Art Hislop to look out for them, but that knowledge didn't make me feel any better.

And if I got out of this cabin, Hislop would have both hands busy looking out for himself. In the eyes of my mind I could still see that rat dancing around trying to shoot me when I was battling that mob up there; trying to kick the life out of me as I lay helpless on deck.

And exactly what did it mean that Hoke had not mentioned my taking Art Hislop in the boat with Grace Taver and Vicky? So I wasn't to take Linda, either—nor the gold.

Things, I told myself with a strong sense of approaching catastrophe, were coming to a head. The explosion was not far away, either. I could feel it in the very atmosphere of the ship, in Hoke's hurry to find my letter and to be rid of me, even in the growing noise from the drunken sailors on the forward deck.

I don't know how long I lay there, my

aching thoughts spiraling down into bitterness. Perhaps twenty minutes, perhaps an hour. I had somehow lost all sense of time. But I was suddenly jerked into attention by the sound of the knob turning in my door.

This time I was going to be ready. I rolled over on my left side and yanked Buck's automatic out of my pants pocket. Then I swung my feet over the edge of the berth and got the gun comfortable and steady in my palm, with my elbow braced on my knee.

I aimed it at the widening crack of the door, pointing it at the exact level of a man's stomach when he came barging in through the opening. And I had no intention of missing.

But it was not a man who came in. It was Linda Haywood.

I LET my breath run out in a long, hissing sigh of relief. Linda had on something white that was tight here and fluffy there. Her skin, too, was white. Whiter, even, than I had remembered.

Her slender hand, as she lifted it to close the door behind her, shook violently.

"How did you get in here, Linda?" I asked, keeping my voice well down.

"Oh, your poor face!" she faltered, staring at the lumps which felt as if they stood out like golf balls.

"I'm all right," I said, impatiently. "How did you—"

"It was terrible, the way they kicked you when you were down!" she burst out. "In all my life I'll never forgive Art Hislop. I'll see he's never invited to another party or—"

"You can leave that bird to me," I said, grimly. "Now tell me how you got in here."

"I found the steward's key ring in the service pantry," she said, simply. "There was trouble on deck and Captain Scanlon and the rest were all up there."

"What kind of trouble on deck?" I snapped. "You mean about the crew getting drunk?"

"Maybe that started it," she said, doubtfully. "But the trouble was between Captain Scanlon and Mr. Garside, the mate. Mr. Garside came aft with a sailor and began to talk to Captain Scanlon. It was something about the gold, I think. Captain Scanlon knocked the mate down and when Art Hislop interfered, I thought he was going to knock Art down, too."

"Didn't you hear any of the argument?" I asked quickly.

"No, but they were certainly mad."

I thought that news over, wondering how trouble between Hoke and Garside might affect the rest of us. But there was no knowing—not, at least, until I found out more about it.

"What happened then?" I asked. "After the captain knocked Garside down?"

"The sailor went forward and the captain told Garside to go to his cabin. Then Captain Scanlon bawled Art out for sticking his nose into things that were none of his business. And just then I remembered there might be a chance of getting in here so I hurried down."

"That might be a very nice break for us," I said, thoughtfully. "Let's go on deck now. I have two or three scores to settle; and right now, with the crew drunk and trouble between Hoke and the mate, might be a perfectly swell time to settle them."

"Wait, Bat," she said, urgently. "I want to ask you something"

"Okay. Shoot."

"Did you kill Buck?"

I looked down into her sweet, uptilted face. "Do you think I did, Linda?" I asked, very quietly.

She met my eyes unflinchingly. "No."

"A good guess, Linda," I said. "I didn't kill him. And I didn't kill the wireless man, either."

RELIEF rushed into her eyes, lighted up her entire face. "I knew you didn't," she exclaimed. "Kill Buck, I mean. And you were right with Buck and with me when the wireless man screamed. But Grace and Art—why do they insist you did?"

"I don't blame Grace," I said, slowly. "It might have looked pretty suspicious, my going through the corridor in the middle of the night with a knife. And I guess I was pretty wild-looking, too. I was trying to catch the baby who had just tried to get into my cabin. And she saw me.

"But Art Hislop is a plain liar. He saw me in the passageway, all right, but he knows I wasn't on my way to kill Buck."

"Art has always been a liar," she said, vehemently. "If his mother hadn't been a Vandersandt, nobody would ever have him around. He wouldn't be invited anywhere."

"When I get through with dear little Artie," I said, "even his mother's being a Vandersandt isn't going to help him any."

She tugged at the lapel of my coat. "Bat," she said with a sort of desperate urgency, "don't touch him! He has a gun and I heard him tell Captain Scanlon he'd kill you if you ever laid hands on him. And the captain told him he'd better start shooting right away if he wanted to do that.

"He said, 'There's a man you should never have kicked, Art. Not at least, while he was conscious enough to know it was you doing it.' "

"And wasn't the captain right!" I murmured.

There were other things I wanted to ask her before I went up on deck. But suddenly they vanished from my mind. All I could think of now was the fact that she was here before me, the most desirable girl I had ever known. Her clear oval face was still uptilted as she looked straight up at me, and I was conscious that my pulses were hammering wildly as tension built up between us.

Oh, I knew well enough that I was only a newspaper man who had a knack with boats. And she was America's glamour gal whose every move was noted and recorded by Winchell, Kilgallen and the rest of the gossip columnists.

But none of these things seemed to matter now. We were a long, long way from Fifty-second Street and nothing seemed to matter but that she was a woman and I was a man. She had taken all kinds of chances just to get into my cabin to find out how badly I had been hurt by those kicking feet. I had been hurt, all right—but not so badly that all my senses couldn't respond to the electric current which suddenly shot an arc between us.

I reached out, hauled her into the hard, tight circle of my arms and jammed her tightly against me. Her lovely face was still uptilted and I put my hard lips fully on hers, to taste a moment of completely forgetful sweetness which seemed to drive my troubles a million miles away.

While my mouth was tasting the fragrance of her sweet lips it was easy to forget that beyond a steel bulkhead sixty feet away men were getting drunker and drunker and their shouts and laughter gave a sinister background to the entire night.

It was Linda who broke first. She pulled her face away from mine and pushed at my chest with her slim, astonishingly strong hands.

"Bat," she whispered unsteadily, "I'm afraid!"

"What are you afraid of?" I asked in a voice which was probably as shaky as hers.

"Not of—for," she answered raggedly. "For you. The captain said he had an iron-clad case against you. And that isn't all. I—I'm afraid tonight for everybody. I wish none of us had ever come on this awful cruise!"

THAT jerked me back to reality. It wasn't real, kissing Linda Haywood, whose perfume allowance probably exceeded my yearly salary. It wasn't real, letting my thoughts run wild as to the places we could go and the things we could see, this young, lovely creature and I, reporter for the Miami *Sun*.

But the drunken laughter on the foredeck was real enough; and so was the door of my cabin, which was now unlocked; and so was the need for somebody to take things in hand, and right away.

Reluctantly I set Linda's slim body aside. I dragged my gun out of my pocket and started for the door.

"Come on, honey," I said, quietly, "let's get things done."

When she did not immediately follow, I turned to look at her. She was standing by the porthole, her dark and glossy head cocked in an attitude of listening.

"What's the matter?" I whispered.

She turned, went to the porthole and looked out. Puzzled, I moved up beside her. She pulled away from the screen and I took my turn.

At first I noticed nothing unusual. In the light from the half-moon I could see one of the dinghies floating out there, apparently tied to the stern of another by its painter.

Then I heard a voice, hardly above a whisper. I could hardly distinguish the words on account of the drunken talk and laughter from the foredeck.

"We're ready," said the taut voice. "Call the others."

Then, suddenly, I realized that the dinghy was riding very low in the water. Another thing; it should not be tied to the transom of the other dinghy, but should be swinging at the boat boom forward.

Still puzzled, and not knowing what it was all about, I turned hastily toward the door.

"Something funny going on," I said. "Let's go on deck."

"But Captain Scanlon—" Linda protested, and then cut her words off short as I swung open the door.

Just at that moment I heard the first shot. It was muffled by distance, its echoes seeping in through open ports; and I couldn't guess where it came from. But I suddenly became aware that I could hear no more of that drunken laughter. There was a confused trampling of feet, a shout or two, but the laughter had been chopped off as by a knife.

I RUSHED aft along the passageway. Grace Taver was just coming out of her cabin. She saw me, screamed and dived back into the room like a rabbit going into its hole. I could hear Linda's footfalls padding along behind me but there was no time to wait for her.

The sense of impending disaster was strong in me. By the time I went through the main saloon and hit the companionway steps I was running at full tilt.

I bolted out of the doghouse and almost fell over Hoke Scanlon, who was on his hands and knees with his head hanging down, like a wounded animal. He pushed himself up and as he stood there, swaying unsteadily, I saw a large and growing stain just below the left shoulder straps of his clean white uniform.

He stared owlishly at me, almost as if he had never seen me before, and I noticed that dangling in his right hand was that huge automatic of his. But he made no effort to cover me with it.

"Who shot you, Hoke?" I snapped.

While I waited for him to answer I had my quick look around. Art Hislop was crouched behind the steel shelter of the doghouse staring at something off to starboard. I followed the line of his eyes.

There, thirty or forty feet away, was the motor lifeboat, jammed with sailors, towing the two dinghies which were both riding low in the water. The motor lifeboat was curving away from the *Condor* in a wide arc and heading straight for the reef beyond which the *Ulvik* had sunk.

Hoke Scanlon shook his head violently and began to curse like a madman. He staggered to the starboard rail, knelt down and rested his right hand on the wide teak surface.

The gun lanced fire and a sailor in the stern threw up his arms and fell across the tiller, causing the lifeboat to swerve sharply toward the *Condor*.

Again and again Hoke fired, while those in the lifeboat made desperate efforts to get away from that hail of lead. But with the weight of the two dinghies astern she made painfully slow progress and Hoke's bullets were creating havoc down there.

His gun was not the only one that was blazing down into the overcrowded boat.

A white figure—a sailor—was firing from amidships. He was taking his time, and apparently making every shot count.

They were firing back from the lifeboat now and shots whipped savagely over our heads and clanged against the steel plates of the yacht's hull.

Art Hislop was not shooting. Crouched low to escape the flying steel he was watching with narrowed eyes the slaughter that was going on just a few yards away from the *Condor's* side.

Hoke and the sailor amidships were concentrating their fire upon the men who, one after another, tried to grab the tiller of the lifeboat and to get her out of range. Already four or five men lay hopelessly intertwined in the stern sheets.

A man stood up in the lifeboat. He was tall, sharply outlined in his white officer's uniform. It was Garside, the mate.

"Hoke!" he cried. "Don't shoot any more. We're through! We'll come back aboard."

Somebody amidships in the lifeboat had thrown the reverse lever and the lifeboat was no longer surging ahead with her tow.

"So?" Hoke screamed down at Garside. "You shoot me, you try to get away with the gold, and now you want to kiss and make up, do you?"

His gun flamed. Garside clapped both hands to his belly. He seemed to make a formal bow toward us on the *Condor*. But he never straightened up again. His head went lower and lower until he lost balance and pitched over the gunwale into the sea.

CHAPTER XX

CARGO OF CARNAGE

THE reverse gear ground noisily. The lifeboat took up the slack in her towline and tried to speed away from the *Condor*.

Hoke fired again and again into the crew of the boat. He seemed out of his head with fury. The lifeboat was now a shambles. A shallop of death in which dead, dying and uninjured were hopelessly tangled.

"You'd doublecross me, would you, you stir-crazy rats?" he yelled at them in a pain-drugged voice. "I give you a break and this is the way you pay me back!"

I thought I was hard-boiled, but I discovered that I was nothing of the sort. I stood there praying for that lifeboat to put on more speed, to get out of range of Hoke's gun.

But they still had a long way to go—and I doubted if any of them would make it. They were in a panic, now, fighting one another as they scrambled for any sort of shelter—under the bodies of the dead and dying, behind the thin lapstrakes of her hull. Three leaped overboard and started to swim away from her—away from the *Condor*—away from the gunfire.

"Hoke!" I said, sharply. "That's enough."

But Hoke Scanlon, still crouched at the rail, was firing slowly, steadily, picking his victim each time he squeezed the trigger. A dying man fell against the reverse lever. The engine roared, died down as someone cut the throttle.

"Bat!" Linda cried from somewhere behind me. "Stop him!"

It was surprisingly easy to stop Hoke. He had already bled away most of his strength. About all that remained to him was that will of his, strong as steel, bitter as wormwood. When I grabbed him from behind and yanked away his gun, it was like pushing over a baby.

But he still had plenty of will left, also plenty of voice. Wrenching his arm away from me he braced his hands on the rail and cried:

"Had enough, rats, or do you want some more?"

"We've had enough!" squalled a desperate voice from the boat.

"Is there gold in both those dinghies?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come up under the stern and take a line," Hoke ordered.

This puzzled me. Why didn't he make them come up to the boat boom, where there would be sixty or seventy feet of open deck between us and the mutineers? The sailor who had been standing at the rail amidships came aft. It was the hairless boatswain.

"Bosun," said Hoke, wearily. "Get out a heaving line and stand at the taffrail."

The reverse gear ground home in the lifeboat. The queer and macabre procession of small boats cut a half-circle toward the *Condor*, heartlessly, leaving the swimmers out there to follow as best they could. Those still alive and unhurt were silent, but the screams and wails of the wounded were pitiful to hear.

Have you ever listened to the crying of a wounded man? It touches you, that sound, as with an icy hand, making something inside you shrivel up.

But it did not touch Hoke Scanlon at all. Not even the harsh and breathless yapping of a man in the bow, whose voice grew fainter, instead of louder, as the train of boats approached. Hoke just stood there, both hands braced against the rail, holding himself up through sheer physical strength.

"All right, you," he snarled at the men in the overcrowded lifeboat, "come around under the stern and make ready to catch the heaving line. Stay about four boat lengths from us or we'll start shooting again."

THEY cut a half-circle well away from our stern. The boat, under the silver-painted light of the moon, was a horrible thing to look at. Four or five men were writhing in the bottom between the feet of those who sat on the thwarts. One man was hanging over the side, his arms and the top of his head dangling in the water. And even as we looked, one of the seated men lifted his feet and dumped him overboard.

"Oh!" Linda gasped.

I wheeled. She was standing right beside me, her eyes as round as dollars, her bright mouth compressed.

I reached out, quickly, grabbed her by the arm and unceremoniously pushed her halfway back to the deck house.

"Stay there!" I commanded.

The bosun heaved the line to those in the lifeboat. They caught it, passed it back to the man in the sternsheets, who made it fast to the painter of the leading dinghy.

"Cast the dinghies loose," Hoke ordered.

Swaying from weakness, the dark splotch ever growing on his white uniform blouse, he watched them cast loose the line which now made the two gold-carrying dinghies fast to the stern of the yacht.

The motor lifeboat, her engine still purring but her reverse gear slipped into neutral, now lay about 30 feet off our counter. There was something which passed for silence, broken only by the moans and the wails of the wounded.

In the moonlight I could clearly see the white ovals of the sailors' faces, and their uniforms and the stewards' white jackets stood out sharply against the yonder darkness. There was something incredibly sinister as those who could sit upright just looked at us without speaking, without paying any attention to the others who stirred and groaned at their feet.

I wondered what this yacht would be like with those men on deck, mutinous, vengeful and—if only for the moment—beaten.

"All right, you rats," Hoke Scanlon roared. "Throw your guns overboard, every last one of them."

There was a long pause down there. The sailors and stewards whispered among themselves.

"Okay, Hoke," someone called at last. "Here they go. Over with them, you fellers."

There was a succession of small splashes.

"Stand back of the rail," Hoke whispered.

Wondering, I stood back. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Art Hislop stand back, too. The bosum was busily hauling in the bight of his line. Glancing be-

hind me, I saw Linda standing where I had pushed her. Beyond her, in the door of the doghouse, were Linda and Grace Taver, waiting and listening.

"They're all overboard, Hoke," called a man from the lifeboat.

"The hell they are!" Hoke snarled. "Let me hear the rest of them go."

There was another pause, then two more staccato splashes.

"All right, you stir-bugs," Hoke said, edging still farther away from the rail. "Now get away from here before I shoot the bottom out of your boat!"

A DOZEN age-long seconds dragged past before there was a response from the lifeboat. Then a wailing voice cried:

"Have a heart, Hoke. Some of us are wounded. Ain't you going to take us wounded ones aboard?"

Hoke laughed and there was a quality to that laughter that made chills run up and down my spine.

"What wounded you?" he shouted back. "Standing your watches here on deck? Listen, I gave you a chance to make yourselves a piece of jack when nobody else would have touched you with a ten-foot pole. But you tried to grab it all and—"

"That's what you're doing, isn't it?" snapped a surly voice.

"Hoke," I urged. "The wounded ones will die in that boat. Let's just take those aboard."

"Ever try to pet a wounded rattlesnake?" he snarled at me.

"Hoke," said a voice from the boat, calmer than the rest, "there are sixteen of us still in good shape. If we have to come aboard by force we'll pull your arms and legs off your body."

"Better be going along," Hoke replied. "By noon tomorrow those wounded guys'll be getting the fever and that won't be so good. If you hurry, you can make land tomorrow by that time. Just steer due south and you'll be there."

"When we get aboard," growled a voice, "I'll take that dark gal. The one whose pictures are always in the papers."

"Me," snapped another, "I'll choose the blond one."

"One last chance, Hoke," said the calm voice. "Do we come aboard, peaceable, and go back to our watches, or do we come aboard anyway?"

By the tone of his voice, and the mood of the others, I knew the answer. Bending low, I moved over to Hoke and put his big gun back in his hand. I pulled my own out of my hip pocket. Hoke saw me and, sick as he was, he lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

"What do you say, Hoke?" the voice asked, insistently. "If we come aboard without your say-so, it'll be just too bad for you and the women."

"You had your chance," Hoke growled. "You signed off. I make you a present of the lifeboat. Now scram before I shoot holes in the bunch of you!"

A knife-stab of flame leaped from the lifeboat. The bosun, who had not been quite far enough away from the rail, fell flat on his face, which had received the full impact of a bullet and had suddenly ceased to resemble a face at all. Linda, standing a dozen feet behind him, got a good look at him when he went down. She screamed.

The lifeboat, her propeller kicking up a smother of foam, swung her bow toward us and began to close in.

If her crew had thrown away any of their guns, they certainly had plenty more left. Bullets clanged solidly against the *Condor's* gunwale, whickered nastily over our heads as we crouched there.

Hoke was firing steadily. I knew it was too late for any sympathy. If those sailors got aboard—well, I couldn't wait for that. "Me," someone had said, "I'll take the dark one."

Without compunction I aimed my gun down into them and went to work. They couldn't take it. Nobody could have taken what we sent down at them. They sheered away, headed for the outer darkness. Hoke Scanlon kept on firing.

"Damn you, Hislop," he raged, as he fed a full clip into his gun. "It's about time you made up your mind, isn't it?"

I straightened up and put my gun away. "Come on, Hoke," I said gently. "Let's see how badly you are hurt."

He had straightened up, too. His left hand was digging into the rail like a claw, holding him on his feet. He aimed his gun in the general direction of the lifeboat, and pulled the trigger until the clip was empty.

"I'm all right," he snarled. "I can't leave the deck now. Those guys had sooner kill than eat, maybe rather. You don't know them like I do."

He stared out to sea.

"Well," I snapped at him, "you knew them before you shipped them. Nice picking, boy, nice picking."

I took him by his good arm. It wasn't hard to pull him away from the rail. All his great muscles were slack as I started him toward the doghouse.

"Hislop," I commanded. "Watch that lifeboat. If it starts back, sing out. That is, if you like living."

LINDA helped me. We got Hoke into the lighted shelter and laid him out on one of the settees. I cut away his bloody blouse and undershirt. Linda's face was so white I thought she was going to pass out.

But she could take it, that kid. Vicky and Mrs. Taver appeared from somewhere and stood behind us making vaguely sympathetic noises in their throats.

"That louse Garside planned it all," Hoke said through clenched teeth. "He came to me at eight bells and told me the crew wanted fifty percent for their split and—" He gasped as I swabbed blood away from a little blue hole under his collarbone. "Easy, Bat, easy! He was getting tough about it, so I slapped him down."

"Did you slap Art Hislop down, too?" I asked, as I worked.

Vicky Seymour gasped. Hoke rolled one hard black eye at me.

"You hear things, don't you, Bat?" he murmured painfully.

"Help me roll him on his side, Linda," I said.

Linda and I rolled him over. There was a small hole in his back to match the one under his collarbone.

You can't command ocean racing yachts, even as an amateur, without having some practical knowledge with first aid. Pots slop over on galley ranges in a seaway and there are scalds to paint with tannic acid. Fingers get jammed in blocks and cleats. Heads get split by thrashing booms and now and then there is a broken bone to set. But I had never had to worry about bullet wounds.

"A lucky break, Hoke," I said at last. "The slug went all the way through. If it didn't nick your lung, you'll live to fry in the hot seat. Is there a first-aid kit aboard?"

"Yes," said Grace Taver, and hurried off to fetch it.

I stood there beside Linda and looked down at the man I was trying to keep alive.

"Hislop and I," Hoke said in a labored voice, "were down in the chart room, figuring things out. For an hour Garside and the boys must have been lugging gold out of the lazarette and stowing it in the two dinghies.

"Then the bosun came aft through the engineroom passageway and told me what was going on. He'd been trying to get away from them ever since they had started, but they had been watching him and he had to pretend to play along with them.

"I got on deck just as Garside, the ungrateful louse, was following the others over the rail. He heard me coming and he didn't wait at all. He just turned and plugged me. After what I had done for him! Why, he couldn't have gotten a job as mate on a rowboat in Central Park."

"Nice choosing, Hoke," I murmured. "Where'd you get the rest of them—out of St. Quentin, or Alcatraz or Sing Sing?"

"None of your stinking business!" he snarled.

He was silent after that, exhausted from the effort of talking. But the wild anger was still in his eyes. It took a lot to put Hoke Scanlon out of the running.

Grace Taver came back with the first-aid kit. There wasn't a lot I could do. I doused the wounds with mercurochrome, put a gauze pad over each of them and bandaged them up. He was losing a lot of blood, all right. The color had gone from his lips and from under the ruddy tan of his cheeks. If the blood didn't coagulate pretty soon he'd be putting his chips back in the rack.

Linda helped me with the bandaging; she worked efficiently and in silence; but her face told me how near she was to breaking.

Just as I was straightening up, there was a sound that brought my heart into my mouth. Hoke Scanlon's eyes popped wide. He braced his good elbow on the settee and rolled to his feet. We heard the sound again, a scraping bump that made the entire fabric of the ship shudder violently.

"We're aground," I said. "That's the reef under us!"

Hoke roared, "They must have slipped the shackles and turned us adrift."

There was another of those bumps, a grinding sound—and the *Condor* listed over to port. A book slid off the table. A vase splintered on the floor and from somewhere came the noise of crashing dishes. Grace Taver wailed, "We're wrecked!"

And from the distance we heard the sound of faint cheering.

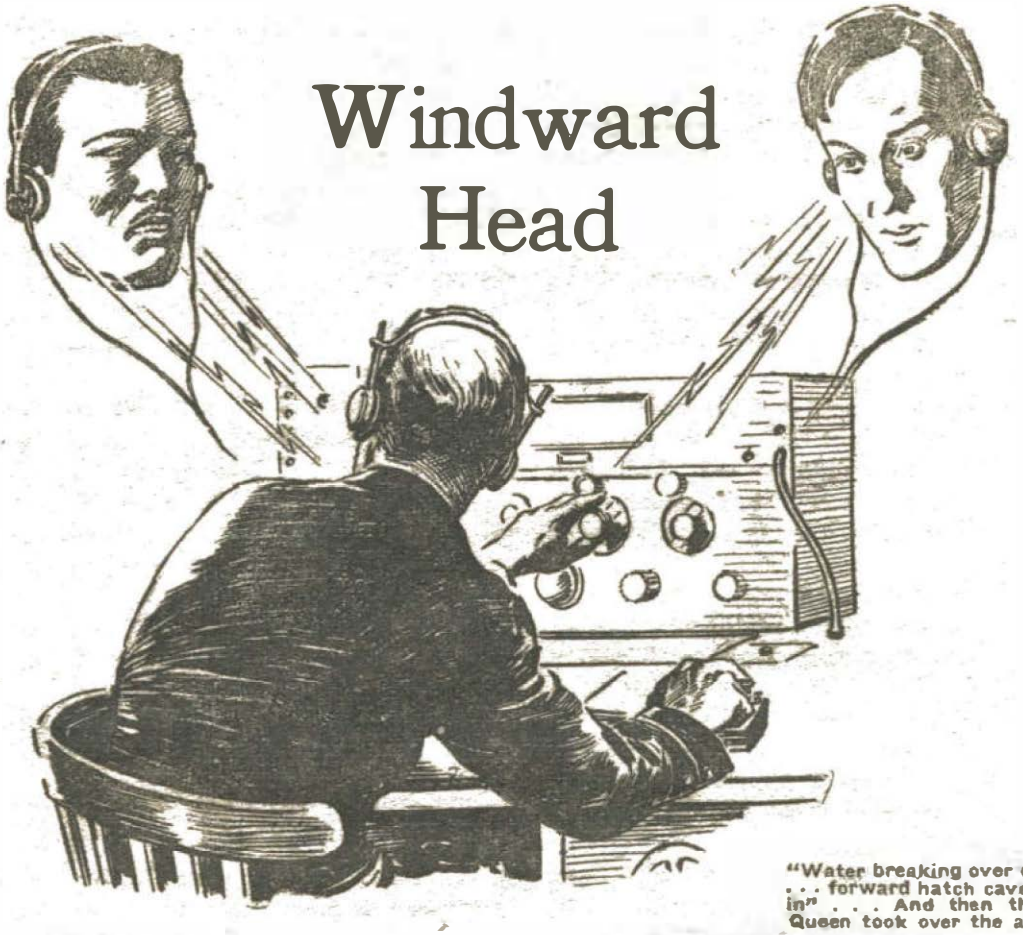
There was just an instant then that Hoke Scanlon stood motionless, his eyes wide with the pain, summoning up what little strength remained in him.

Ar. Hislop pushed a white, scared face through the companionway door.

"Hurry, for God's sake!" he yelled. "We're on the reef! And the lifeboat is coming back!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Windward Head



"Water breaking over us . . . forward hatch caved in" . . . And then the Queen took over the air

It takes a radio operator, half-asleep at the switch, to demonstrate that old blood mixes very well with salt water

By GEORGE MASSELMAN

Author of "Dutch Courage"

MR. LAMSON was leaning over the railing, idly watching the last bit of cargo being hoisted on board. There was a cold December wind blowing and even the Dutch stevedores, accustomed as they were to raw weather, stopped every now and then to blow into their hands.

Mr. Lamson pulled his scarf a little tighter around his neck. He was not as young as he used to be and he felt the cold creeping down his back even under his heavy overcoat.

He might have gone inside but curiosity, acquired from listening in on other people's messages for some thirty years, told him to stay where he was.

From somewhere down the deck, in between the high-pitched whirring of the winches, he heard the staccato voice of the first mate dealing out his orders.

When, prompted by that voice, he cast an eye over his shoulder he saw that the mate's assured way of carrying himself was in keeping with his voice; a quick, unerring pointing at things to be done. He also saw the meticulous uniform with the three gold stripes on the sleeves. They were of equal brilliancy, which proved

that whenever Mr. Hodges stepped up in rank he discarded all the old stripes instead of just adding a new one.

Mr. Lamson was quietly wondering what happened to the old sets. Wireless operators did not have such problems. And now, by the looks of things, Mr. Hodges' tailor would soon be sewing on still another new set. It was this knowledge which made Mr. Lamson stay on deck rather than go below to the more cozy confines of his own cabin.

The second time it had happened it had seemed like a coincidence, but when the third captain within a year had been sacked aboard, gossip had it that this was "young" Mr. Ruddey's way of doing things.

The reason for this odd procedure may originally have been a sentimental one—if that trait could have been attributed to the business-like owner of the Ruddey Line—in that he may not have considered his father's office the proper place in which to cashier the same captains with whom the old man had been on such intimate terms.

Be it as it may, the dirty work was done in Europe at some agent's office, and all the captain had to console himself with was his last voyage home. Some had tried to argue with Mr. Ruddey but it had been of no avail. It was obvious that the new owner, being young himself, implicitly believed in youth.

And so Mr. Lamson was waiting, knowing that Mr. Ruddey was in Rotterdam; the captain ashore, and the *Starlake* pulling out on the four o'clock tide. A cab pulling up at the dock made him crane his neck. Contrary to his expectations it was not the captain but a quick-stepping man whom he had no difficulty in recognizing as Mr. Ruddey himself.

"The captain on board?" he asked while still halfway on the gangplank.

"No," Mr. Lamson replied. It was his habit to fall into the exact formality with which he was treated by others.

"The first mate?"

"Yes," he said, thinking how convenient it was to work for the radio company rather than for the owners.

"Never mind," Mr. Ruddey said. "I'll find him myself."

As he strutted across the deck Mr. Lamson looked at his broad back, wondering where the other had got the impression that he had offered to find Mr. Hodges for him. Then he slumped again into his former position, hands deep in his pockets, braving the sharp gusts of wind which tore along the deck.

Glancing toward the afterdeck he saw the first mate engaged in animated conversation with Mr. Ruddey, nodding his head jerkily several times while his face was on the verge of beaming. When the owner made ready to return ashore Mr. Hodges accompanied him to the gangplank and he heard him say: "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," several times in succession. Then they shook hands.

"Captain Hodges," Mr. Lamson said to himself as the other went about his business.

HE STARTED to walk back and forth a little, thinking that the "old man" was long in returning to his ship. The stevedores had finished with the cargo and, under the direction of the efficient Mr. Hodges, the hatches had already been battened down. The next arrival was the pilot. After a while the first mate came back.

"Have you seen the captain, Sparks?"

"No, I haven't," Mr. Lamson admitted.

"You'd think he'd be on board before the very last moment," Mr. Hodges said.

"Why?" Mr. Lamson asked.

The first mate did not deem it necessary to answer and turned on his heels.

Ten minutes later the "old man" came down the dock. He seemed like a capable sort of person, even to the drawn look on his face, which was not so much caused by any immediate problem as it was the result of many years of responsibility.

The result of his talk with Mr. Ruddey showed itself in another way. The captain undoubtedly had tossed off a few quick

ones. Who wouldn't? Mr. Lamson thought, watching him coming up the gangplank. Reaching the deck the captain stopped.

"Hello, Sparks," he said.

"Hello, Captain," Mr. Lamson said. The captain walked a few paces across the deck, then stopped and came back.

"How old are you, Mr. Lamson?" he asked.

Mr. Lamson was more taken back by being called by his name than by the question he had been asked. Always he was "Sparks," no more. It was sometimes hard to imagine that anyone knew his real name.

"Fifty-four," he answered.

The other looked at him for a short moment, then cleared his throat.

"You and I seem to be the old fogies on board," he said. This time he went straight to the bridge.

When the telegraph rang to the engineroom the first mate hurried to the bow. The second mate was already aft where he belonged at such a time. Mr. Lamson, squinting at the bridge, saw the old man, bareheaded, still in his shore clothes and only a greatcoat over his shoulders.

With him, at least, starting on a transatlantic crossing seemed as uneventful as a ferry pulling out of its slip. He did not bellow his orders but spoke them quietly, hands in his trouser pockets while his coat blew open and away from him.

The chief mate repeated the orders from the bow in a much louder voice while he stood at the railing, both hands resting upon it so that the two sleeves became a gilded ripple.

The dock, slowly sliding away past the ship, was already deserted; the men who had thrown the hawsers loose not even waiting to see them being hoisted on deck, their ends wet and dripping where they had fallen into the water. No fuss when we leave, Mr. Lamson thought, going inside.

Mechanically he went over the things he had to do: a clean sheet for his reports, sharpening a few pencils. He would hook up the antenna later, when they'd be heading out to sea—a good two hours yet. For the time being there was nothing else to do; the rest was all stored up in his head, the automatic rearranging of dots and dashes into intelligible language.

He sat down in the chair where he spent most of his time, where with the earphones on his head he could read or even doze if he wanted to, reserving a tiny alarm-like quality in his head for whenever his call signal came through, or an SOS for that matter—though in all his many years as a wireless operator he had really heard only one, and that had been during the war when things were going down right and left.

But he had never forgotten the sound, nor the sudden tremor it had given him. Strange that a mere three dots and dashes could make a man stiffen in his seat, feeling the tenseness which suddenly gripped a million square miles of ocean. . . .

"Nothing for you, Sparks."

Mr. Lamson looked up, seeing the captain stand in the doorway, a few letters in his hand.

"Never get any," Mr. Lamson said.

"That's tough," the captain said. "Although I got one I'd rather hadn't received."

"They are bad news sometimes," Mr. Lamson said, thinking he knew what the old man was driving at.

"IT IS FROM my grandson," the captain went on. "Had to promise to take him across on our next voyage—a kind of Christmas present. He says he has everything straightened out with his teachers. Right now he is doing double homework."

Mr. Lamson did not look at the captain then but let his eyes rove over his instruments. The captain fairly had to drag him back, holding an envelope before his face. "Look at this!"

Mr. Lamson looked. He saw the laboriously written envelope. It read: *Captain Charles Warman. Master of the S.S. Starlake, Rotterdam, Holland.*

"How old is he?" Mr. Lamson asked, for want of anything else to say.

"Jimmy is twelve—but he is husky," Captain Warman added quickly. "And you ought to see the imp handle a dingy."

That was all. The captain had suddenly moved on and Mr. Lamson had the feeling that no one else knew about that letter.

After a while he put on his coat again and, tying a muffler around his neck, went to the bridge to connect the antenna at the insulator which was sticking up through the deck like a strange mushroom. It only took a minute to fasten the bolts, then he straightened up.

They were in the breakwater now, two arms sticking out into the sea. Toward the stern was the shore, lighted windows spelling houses with people in them; women cooking the food waiting for their men to come home. . . .

Ahead was the sea. In the breakwater there was still no appreciable movement in the deck. Slightly ahead, on either bow, were the two beacons, obliterated at times by waves which broke over them. There the sea began. Against the bridge railing he saw someone outlined against the not quite black sky: the old man was taking his ship out for the last time.

The beacons were sliding by. The waves took the bow and shook the *Starlake* by her nose. Not until then did he go below, to his earphones and his keys. Within ten minutes every ship within a thousand miles knew Mr. Lamson was on the air.

Through the North Sea, the Channel, past the south coast of Ireland, Mr. Lamson often heard the measured footsteps of the old man on the bridge deck overhead. On previous trips he had usually remained in his cabin, leaving it to his officers to stand their watches alone.

But now, on his last voyage, he seemed bent on saturating himself with the feel of his ship. Possibly he got a little satisfaction out of the fact that they were running into a lot of bad weather which might drag out the voyage a few days longer.

After the Channel they had set out on an extremely northern route, one which was theoretically shorter—more perfectly "great circle." It had been one of "young" Mr. Ruddey's innovations in which he had the support of the younger captains who seemed to take the attitude that they were the ones who had discovered the real groove across the Atlantic.

It did not surprise Mr. Lamson when one day in the messroom the old man referred to this procedure as being "sheer nonsense." Both he and the chief mate had been outsitting each other after lunch with only Mr. Lamson left at the lower end of the table speculating on who was going to start the argument.

"You'll miss that cargo in New York," the old man said with more than a little sarcasm. "On a lower latitude you'd have saved time."

"Ours is a shorter route," Mr. Hodges said blandly, ignoring the implication.

"But the weather is worse up here," the captain shot back at him. "And even if it wasn't I'd still rather be on the shipping lane."

"I don't see any need for sailing a busy street," the first mate said. "We are quite well able to take care of ourselves."

"You'd sing a different tune if you needed any help," Captain Warman said bitingly. "It is all very well to be snooty but wait until something happens."

MR. HODGES shrugged his shoulders. Almost abruptly he got up as if he remembered a possible promise to Mr. Ruddey not to become involved in any argument with the captain. For a while the old man said nothing and kept staring into his coffee cup. Then he looked down the length of the table at Mr. Lamson.

"For two cents I'd change course and move back into the lane," he said.

Mr. Lamson could understand his feelings. Intrinsically it might make little difference but under similar conditions he, too, would resent being told where to get off.

"Why don't you, Captain?" he asked.

Captain Warman answered with a short laugh.

"Mr. Ruddey said he'd find me a job ashore. I'll be needing it," he added significantly. "Did *you* save up enough for your old age?"

"No," Mr. Lamson said. He had not but he had never let it disturb him. He had no great hopes for an old age ashore and if his time came . . . well?

"I can't afford to antagonize the owner," Captain Warman said, still pursuing his own trend of thought. "It doesn't pay."

Mr. Lamson made no further comment but watched the coffee in his cup creep from one rim to the other. The slats had been on the table for several days and it was nothing strange to see the coffee run out of the cup. There was a sudden hard slam and the whole ship trembled.

"How is it up ahead?" the captain asked, referring to the recent weather reports Sparks might have received.

"Lousy," Mr. Lamson said.

"If the glass drops any more we'll be having a real time of it," the captain said. "I guess I'd better go to the bridge."

Mr. Lamson got up too. There was more movement in the ship than before lunch, he thought, as he saw the door frame bend itself toward him. From the pantry came a sudden crash of plates falling to the deck and breaking, immediately followed by a stream of profanity which elicited a tiny smile on his face.

He did not like trouble—not a whole lot of it—but a little was fun. He waited behind the high doorstep until the water had run off the deck through the scuppers.

By this time it was coming overboard in big chunks every time the *Starlake* pitched into a wave. There were thousands of them tearing by, the storm shearing off their crowns, turning them into plumes, white and smoking, and all pointing into the same direction. There was little difference in color between the sky and the sea. Both had a strange luminosity, cold and menacing.

When the bow lifted itself high out of the water, trying to shake it off like an angry animal, Mr. Lamson dashed across the deck. Once in his chair he braced his knees against the edge of the desk and, clamping on his earphones, began twisting the dial.

Before him, weighted down by an old coil, were a number of messages which a Norwegian had given him for transmission to the States. He had been unable to raise Stony Brook and was considering passing them on to the *Queen,* who was somewhat astern, rapidly overtaking the *Starlake.* She, with her powerful transmitters, should have no trouble in getting Long Island.

Not quite sure yet of what he wanted to do, Mr. Lamson allowed himself to doze off a little, something to which the rocking of the ship was very conducive

The eerie lightness through the porthole beat against his eyelids but Mr. Lamson did nothing about it. He preferred a state of semi-wakefulness. He had turned down the amplifier so that the always-present signals through the ether were hardly more than a gentle buzzing.

Occasionally his face twitched a little, reacting to some particular message, or his eyes would open, to close again after a brief moment. It was in this way that Mr. Lamson became part of the ether waves—a world by itself, which paid no heed to the moods of the sea. . . .

■

MR. LAMSON'S eyes opened again, a little wider this time; and they stayed open. For once he was not quite sure. Possibly he had been dreaming. Slowly he released his legs from their rigid position against the desk, allowing them to slide forward.

While his right hand reached for a pencil the other moved towards the amplifier. His eyes focused themselves on a cockroach against the wall, right underneath a chart of the North Atlantic.

Then it burst on his ears: a hoarse kind of hissing, pregnant with fear by the monotony of its repeated three dots . . . three dashes . . . three dots. Again and again . . . *zzzZZZzzz* . . . *zzzZZZzzz.*

Mr. Lamson felt a prickle run down his neck. After more than twenty years it had come again. Automatically he looked at the clock, noting the time and writing it down: two-four P.M. Behind it he wrote: SOS

He did not bother looking up the call letters which followed. Those, too, were repeated many times in a nervous, raucous series of futile cries.

Then came words which, while Mr. Lamson rapidly wrote them down, made no sense at all. Impatiently he looked at them—*taka-shuma-nichi-kita*.

"Why don't they talk English?" he said; but there was only the cockroach to hear him. There finally came a word which explained it: *Maru*.

"Ah, a Jap," Mr. Lamson said appraisingly. "He is in trouble and calls one of his own kind, spilling out his tale of woe as a child will run to its mother . . . but eventually he will have to cry on someone else's shoulder."

Combing the ether during the past week Mr. Lamson had not come across a single Japanese steamer. There was nothing he could do now but wait until this one tired of letting his signals go to waste.

Behind him, in the alleyway, Mr. Lamson heard the messroom boy whistle. He had gotten over his momentary setback about the broken crockery. Mr. Lamson was not whistling but remained hunched at his table, pencil poised over the paper.

And then it came, The Japanese having decided to turn to any mere English-speaking ship.

Takashuma Maru—So that was her name. . . . The rest came slower than the earlier gibberish, as the Japanese had to feel his way in a language with which, at best, he was not very familiar.

Gradually it came out. First the position. . . . At least he knows his onions, Mr. Lamson thought, telling where he is before spilling the gory details. He noted that the Japanese was taking no chances, repeating his latitude and longitude over and over.

They can't be far away, Mr. Lamson thought—not from the way that primary coil was coming in—but already he was writing down the rest: . . . "extremely voluminous . . . voluminous—"

He repeats it; it is an important word for him, Mr. Lamson observed . . . "cargo of heavy iron. After Boston i-n-s-t-a-n-t-a-n-e-o-u-s-l-y"—he is spelling it out of a dictionary—"enjoyed heavy following seas causing great discomfort. Particularly in engine compartment."

Damn right, Mr. Lamson agreed; those boys in the bottom would have to throttle her down every time the propeller broke water or she'd—"propeller shaft she broke! . . . wallowing in . . ."

There was a long silence and Mr. Lamson had visions of the Japanese fingering his little dictionary . . . "t-r-o-u-g-h." Yes, that *was* a tough word . . . "water breaking over . . . forward hatch caved in . . . any quick assistance you may render will be greatly appreciated. . . . Stand by."

It stopped. Mr. Lamson was itching to start up his motor and talk to the poor Japanese who undoubtedly considered this English business a far greater ordeal than even the trouble he was in. But a radio operator had no right sending messages on his own hook, not even to disclose his whereabouts, until the captain had given the necessary instructions.

Mr. Lamson rewrote the message in less flowery language and while he did so he heard the *Queen* come in. There was no mistake about the pecular high-pitched spark which had been on Mr. Lamson's tail for two days now.

The *Queen* was telling the *Maru* to hold out . . . they were coming to the rescue at full speed . . . they would be there by ten the next morning. Without another moment's delay Mr. Lamson gathered his notes and went to the bridge.

IT WAS still the first mate's watch. Mr. Hodges stood behind the railing, peering over the stormsail which had been stretched across the whole width of the bridge, billowing inwards from the pressure of the wind against the sail.

There was water on the bridge too. Right then a fountain sprung from the bow, raising itself high into the air before the wind took it and blew pieces of it over the bridge.

"What's the matter, Sparks?"

"Where is the captain?"

"Why?"

"SOS Jap," Mr. Lamson said cryptically. He turned to the chartroom where he found the captain bent over the chart table. Mr. Hodges followed him inside.

"What is it, Sparks?" the captain asked.

Mr. Lamson quickly explained, handing his report to the captain who took it to the chart. Mr. Lamson saw the pencil line which marked the course of the *Starlake* with its little encircled dots of successive positions at noon. The last few were closer together than they had been earlier in the voyage, showing that they had not made as much headway in the storm.

Both the captain and the first mate were bending over the chart, bracing themselves with their elbows, while their feet were far back to counteract the violent pitching of the ship. Mr. Lamson watched the captain place the *Takashuma Maru's* position on the chart, using a pair of dividers and a long rule.

"She's about here," he said. It was a spot below their own course and west.

"If we were in the steamer lane we would run smack into her," the captain remarked. He was again applying the dividers, stretching them between his own last dot and the one just marked. He brought that distance over to the edge of the chart and measured it.

"A hundred and seventy miles," he said.

"At least," Mr. Hodges chimed in.

The captain looked at the clock. "Two-thirty. At ten knots we'd be there before the *Queen*." He looked out through the chartroom window, a few points off the port bow. He knew it to be the general direction where the other vessel was floundering in the waves.

"We're not doing ten knots," Mr. Hodges said. "We have barely been making eight since midnight."

Mr. Lamson was waiting for instructions but he was also watching the subsurface wrangling between the two men. If they'd go to that ship and reach it before the *Queen* the captain would get the glory, while the first mate might have to go into the lifeboat, maybe get capsized and lose his chance of getting that new set of stripes.

Mr. Lamson looked out of the window too; saw the *Starlake* dip her nose into the ugly seas, bright and luminous with their foamy plumes and overhung by that too-bright sky without a trace of sun anywhere. He could not exactly blame the first mate for not wanting to go.

"I still think we could make it by eight," the old man said. "When did the *Queen* say she'd be there?" he asked Mr. Lamson.

"Ten," Mr. Lamson said.

"WE COULDN'T be there by eight," Mr. Hodges spoke up, with almost a little too much self-assurance for a mere mate, but perhaps knowing that he had more right to it than the captain himself. "We have been slowing up right along and the glass is still dropping."

Mr. Lamson looked towards the aneroid, seeing the bluish line still on its downward path across the paper-covered drum.

"Best we can hope for," Mr. Hodges continued, "is to get there at the same time as the *Queen*—and watch *her* take the crew off."

He looked at the captain, not anxiously as if awaiting a verdict from one who was actually his superior, but rather with the air of one speaking to a child, saying to himself, "Come on; haven't you had enough yet?"

The old man was looking away, half at the chart, half through the window, seeing in the vile and shattered ocean a visual accompaniment to the knife-like whistling of the stays.

Inwardly he was perhaps weighing all of the known factors of his past and future life, thinking that one false move now might make the future even more drab than its immediate outlook.

"We'd be going faster with the wind and sea on our starboard bow," the captain said finally, but there was no firmness in his voice. He made a show as if he were still considering changing his course; but Mr. Lamson knew that the captain would not make the decision. After a man is on the skids he has a way of forgetting all the hold he ever had on authority and thinks only of what there is still for him to lose.

"You're trying to beat the *Queen* to it, Captain. But it won't help the Jap any. The *Queen* can give that ship ten times more lee than we can. Besides, Mr. Ruddey is on board the *Queen*." He strutted out.

"Any message for the Jap?" Lamson asked.

"No," the captain said. "No message."

That last one must have clinched it, Mr. Lamson thought, descending to the deck below—the first mate making it known to the old man that he had information concerning the owner's movements of which the captain himself was in complete ignorance. That proved something; not only that the captain was on the skids but that he was already sliding towards the bottom and sliding fast.

At his desk Mr. Lamson quickly picked up his earphones. The *Queen* was still in communication with the Japanese ship, making her wireless operator give all the details which led up to the disaster.

There must be a mob on that liner, Mr. Lamson thought; passengers hurrying home for Christmas. He visualized the elaborate layout on the *Queen:* three or four wireless men in attendance, a reception office with comfortable seats for the passengers.

It was almost a God's Christmas gift to them—and for that matter, to the line, which could be counted on to make the most out of anything as thrilling as a rescue at sea. Right then the passengers must be flocking to the office, standing around in the doorway and on the deck outside perhaps, trying to catch the news even before the junior wireless man had pinned it on the bulletin board.

Mr. Lamson could have no part in it. He was not even allowed to let anyone know how close he was to the scene of the disaster. It was the *Queen's* job and she was running it for all it was worth.

THE Japanese, in his too precise English, dutifully transmitted the details. The *Queen* wanted to know everything. How fast did the water come in? Had anyone been hurt when the shaft gave way?

The Japanese operator did his best. The engineer on whose watch the shaft had broken had committed hari-kari. One sailor had been washed overboard. The lifeboats had been bashed in by the seas.

Then the *Queen* broke connection and Mr. Lamson heard how she made contact with Stony Brook—no trouble for her equipment. He listened in, jotting down the messages.

They were paid messages from someone on the *Queen* to a newspaper in New York, translating the details from the Japanese ship into more graphic language: a ship going down . . . are making for it . . . will take the crew off tomorrow morning at ten . . . will keep you posted at frequent intervals . . word-by-word description of rescue . . . advise rebroadcast on nation-wide hookup. . . .

Mr. Lamson remembered the messages he still had to transmit for the Norwegian. When the *Queen's* transmitters were momentarily silent he tried Stony Brook but could not raise the station. Then he called the *Queen.*

"Urgent?" her operator asked.

"No, ordinary," Mr. Lamson replied.

"Can't take them, old chap, not until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow I can get Stony Brook myself," Mr. Lamson came back. The *Queen's* operator lost his patience. Didn't he know there was a ship in distress? "You are interfering! Stay off the air!" The *Queen* signed off.

Stay off the air!

Mr. Lamson looked at the words. Slowly their full meaning became clear to him.

He had no business being on the air. The *Starlake* was hiding, sticking to its course. The *Queen* had the right of way. In a sudden burst of anger he took the paper and crumbled it into a ball.

His key was dead. He took off the earphones and threw them on the table. He slumped in his chair, played with his pencil, aimlessly scribbling. He looked at the chart before him on the wall and then allowed his eyes to roam through the darkening porthole.

What if something should happen to the *Queen?* What if she'd blow out a turbine because she was straining them? Then she would not have such a big show.

Even without that the *Starlake* might nose in first—if she changed her course right away. . . .

Mr. Lamson looked at the paper on which he had been scribbling. "One of starboard turbines blown out. Will be delayed at least two hours. Can you hold out?"

"Anything new about the Jap, Sparks?"

He looked up and saw the captain standing behind him. The old man looked over his shoulder and read the message scribbled on the pad.

"My God, man!" He snatched up the paper and dashed with it to the bridge. Mr. Lamson made no move. He kept watching the slowly darkening porthole.

Even while wondering what was happening on the bridge he felt a different movement in the *Starlake.* She began to roll more violently. Also, the pitch of the twining rigging had changed, as if the storm was hitting it from a different angle. The old man had accepted the jolt he needed. The *Starlake* had changed her course.

Mr. Lamson slowly raised himself out of his chair. That gold-braided whippersnapper on the *Queen* had told him to stay off the air. Well!

Standing on the threadbare little carpet he easily kept his balance while the cabin swung past him like an inverted pendulum. On the table something began to rattle: a box of pencils was taking the vibration from the desk, which in turn was accepting it from the ship—the added revolutions of the propeller.

Mr. Lamson allowed a tiny smile to curve his mouth. The old man had not only changed his course but he was giving the *Starlake* all she had.

MR. LAMSON deliberately left his cabin and walked to the door which opened on the deck. There he stayed for a while, one foot on the high sill. The water came over continuously while the *Starlake* shouldered herself through the waves.

The ocean was still lighted with that strange eerie glow even now after the sun had set. Mr. Lamson was thinking of the Japanese, wallowing in those waves, staring a tough night in the face.

Toward the stern he visualized the *Queen,* her stacks belching smoke as she tore along at thirty knots or better. The passengers would not mind being interrupted at their fashionable ten o'clock breakfast in order to watch the rescue from a glass-screened promenade deck.

All during the night Mr. Lamson listened while his key remained dead. While the *Takashuma Maru*—or what was left of her—continued her agonized cries, he heard the measured beat of more than one pair of boots overhead. The old man apparently had no thought of sleeping while he was driving his ship.

Toward dawn the *Maru's* signal became weaker. Mr. Lamson had a momentary scare that they might have passed her, until he realized that the other's batteries must be giving out. The *Queen* was asking for signals to help her direction finder.

From then on he never left his porthole. Standing up, with earphones to his head, he did what they were doing up on the bridge: watched for the glare of rockets. The bridge saw them first.

A quartermaster came down with a message for the New York office: "Am taking crew off *Takashuma Maru.* Warman."

This time Mr. Lamson told the *Queen*

to stay off the air. He paled a little when he heard her signal come in like a fog horn and he had visions of that crack liner being right on top of him.

Captain Warman went into action as if taking a crew off a foundering ship were an everyday occurrence for him. He brought his ship to windward of the Japanese, making a lee for her.

Before long the oil which was allowed to seep into the sea prevented the waves from breaking and they became smooth —high, to be sure, but not vicious.

The Japanese was in a bad state. Her whole forward half was under water and the crew had gathered on the poop deck, huddled together like a bunch of frightened monkeys. Well they might be, Mr. Lamson thought, looking through his porthole. He could just reach his key from that position.

The cryptic and terse description he gave of the rescue is one of record. While early listeners in the States had been waiting for the *Queen* to start her word-by-word account, the news broke that a small American freighter was on the scene.

In due course they learned how a line was shot over the *Takashuma Maru* . . . a heavier line followed to which a raft was attached. The sailors on the Japanese steamer had pulled the raft toward their ship, while on the *Starlake* they paid out the hawser which held it in position.

Because of the expert handling of the *Starlake* the distance between the two ships remained practically stationary. A less experienced sailor than Captain Warman might easily have allowed the ships to drift apart in the gale and so break the hawser.

Half the crew was taken off the first time and a winch on the *Starlake* pulled the raft back. Willing hands hoisted the shivering Japanese on board. The rest came on the second trip.

There had been no need for the first mate to take a lifeboat across. Mr. Lamson sent that out too.

JUST when Mr. Lamson was telling Stony Brook how Captain Warman was hoisting his raft back on board, he heard several hard blasts and he noticed how everyone was turning his head toward the other side. He looked at his clock and saw that it lacked a few minutes of ten.

Mr. Lamson told Stony Brook to stand by and went on deck. From the bridge the old man searched him out; Mr. Lamson returned his questioning look with a bland one.

The *Queen* passed closely, dwarfing the *Starlake*. On her bridge a gold-braided arm raised a megaphone.

"Need any assistance, Captain?"

"No, thanks," the old man shouted back. "We're all through."

"Well done, Captain!" the *Queen's* master shouted.

Captain Warman waved his hand.

Mr. Lamson was very busy the rest of the voyage, so busy that half the messages he got he did not even bother to read, except one in which Mr. Ruddey sent his congratulations to Captain Warman, asking him to withdraw his resignation.

Mr. Lamson smiled a little to himself at that one.

A day before they pulled into New York harbor the old man entered the wireless room asking him to send a message. It was for Jimmy, asking the lad to be on hand for a ride up Broadway. There might not be any snow for Christmas but lower Broadway would be white nevertheless.

"Anything else?" Mr. Lamson asked when the old man was still lingering. The captain gave him a funny look.

"I thought the *Queen* was going to be delayed, Mr. Lamson?" he said.

"Yes," Mr. Lamson said; "that's what I thought!"

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

IT'S time we admitted that this department has an Information Please corner. This is nothing that we thought up, we hasten to add; our readers simply foisted it upon us, and we are not always happy with it. In a good many cases we can't, for one reason or another, answer the questions we receive—because it wouldn't be ethical, or because we just don't know what the answer is.

For example, we don't know what would be the wisest diet for a sick pony named Powder River. We haven't the slightest idea whether or not the practice of voodoo is increasing in New York. We are not equipped to translate a motto written in Anglo-Saxon. Indeed, we are so intellectually limited that we don't know how a daily stint of Yoga exercises would affect rheumatism.

Occasionally, too, we receive perfectly legitimate questions that stump us. The letter below is a case in point, and here and now we issue a plea for help. If any of you are students of ancient religious cults, please let us know what are the best books on the subject. We'll turn the titles over to

JOSEPH GLYNN

This is the first time I have ever written to you although I have been reading ARGOSY for eighteen years, ever since I was twelve years old.

The Dec. 9th issue starts a story by Jack Mann, and in it I find reference to Daoine Shik, the Druids, Eleusis and feys.

Would you mind printing in the ARGOSY or sending me by mail a list of books and their publishers devoted solely to the above mentioned cults? They may be either fiction or non-fiction.

Four serials would make a better magazine, but I still say that poor stories are few and far between in the ARGOSY.
Brooklyn, N. Y.

THE "other gods" controversy is cooling a bit, but Mr. Rhoades' sharp remarks about the evangelists of the past have stirred the memory of another reader. He is

F. D. STANFIELD

In this week's ARGOSY I was very much amused by Mr. Rhoades' letter about the resentment of a Mr. Snyder against "The Ninth Life" by Jack Mann.

Mr. Rhoades should be a writer. It seems to me he is hiding his light under a bushel down there in Old Kentucky. Being a few years younger than Mr. Rhoades and born and raised in a state just north of his own, I can still remember the Hell raising evangelist, who condemned everybody to the hot place for a pants burning if they did not drop their tithe in the collection basket.

I am looking forward to "The Man Who Wouldn't Be King" as I am very much interested in all historical fiction. The further back in history the better.

Have been a steady reader of your magazine since the first story I read in it, which has been clinging in my memory through all the past years. Its title was "The Red Arrow." I have forgotten the writer. So from this story you can figure out how long I have been a reader of the ARGOSY.
Santa Monica, Calif.

With considerable satisfaction we offer a further note on ARGOSY writers who are women (we were challenged, remember?): the C. D. Appleton who collaborated on "Fate Wove a Rug," in this issue, is a brilliant example. Her full name is Caroline Dawes Appleton. Okay, ladies?

Looking Ahead!

SEAL OF TREASON

When the Devil sings, cavaliers must sharpen their wits and polish their blades. Cleve and D'Entreville, the most arrant rogues who ever plagued a Cardinal, turn their blood-letting talents to solving a murder in the Palace and prodding the villain where it hurts the most. A lusty short novel by
M. R. MONTGOMERY

THE DUST ON THE TRAIL

The sinister trouble at Mud Camp was something to be discussed in whispers, and to be forgotten quickly—until the Stranger came riding into town to hold a rendezvous with a burro's ghost. An exciting Western novelet by
ARTHUR LAWSON

Also distinctive fiction by Donald Barr Chidsey, William Gray Beyer, Richard Howells Watkins, and others

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At left: ACTUAL COLOR PHOTOGRAPH. James Callis, North Carolina farmer, shows Miss Agnes Williams—from a near-by farm—a tobacco plant in flower, from the fine crop he has raised by U. S. Government methods.

"UNCLE SAM'S

new ideas helped make tobacco better than ever

..and Luckies bought the top-notch grades!" says Luther Herring, 12 years a buyer!

Q. "You say Uncle Sam helped tobacco farmers?"

MR. HERRING: "Yes. Even though crops vary with weather, U. S. Government methods have made tobacco better than ever during the past few years."

Q. "And Luckies get this better tobacco?"

MR. H: "Luckies buy the finer grades, and always did."

Q. "That's a strong statement."

MR. H: "Well, I see first hand that they buy the prettier lots of tobacco. That's why Luckies are the 2-to-1 favorite with independent tobacco men. And that's why I've smoked them myself for 21 years."

Try Luckies for a week. You'll find they're easy on your throat—because the "Toasting" process takes out certain harsh throat irritants found in all tobacco. You'll also find out why—

WITH MEN WHO KNOW TOBACCO BEST —IT'S LUCKIES 2 TO 1