

10¢

Now 10¢

ARGOSY

NOV. 21

WEEKLY



*A Rousing Tale
of the Frontier West—*

“One Gun—One Dollar”

Two Complete Novelettes by

RD WORMSER • NORBERT DAVIS

SAVE UP TO 50% at Factory Prices!

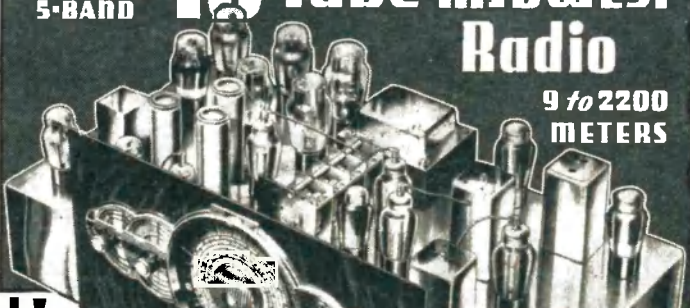
You'll Be Excited over MIDWEST'S DIAL-A-MATIC Tuning and Exclusive ELECTRIK SAVER!

Your radio enjoyment is doubled with Dial-A-Matic Tuning, the amazing new Midwest feature that makes this radio practically tune itself. Now, even a child can bring in ten perfectly tuned programs in ten seconds! It's a big thrill to whirl the dial... and then hear the station you want... come in instantly, automatically, perfectly. Zip-zip-zip... the programs roll in perfectly tuned... as fast as you can press buttons! This new Midwest feature will perform new miracles of radio for you.

New 1937 AIR-TESTED 5-BAND

16-Tube MIDWEST Radio

9 to 2200 METERS



30 Days FREE Trial!

Send for big FREE 40-page 1937 Midwest catalog before you buy any radio—and see for yourself why scores of thousands of radio purchasers have saved up to 50% by ordering the Midwest factory to-you way since 1920. Learn why Midwest radios are preferred by famous movie stars, orchestra leaders, musicians, sound technicians, and discriminating radio purchasers everywhere.

Once again, Midwest demonstrates its leadership by offering this amazingly beautiful, bigger, better, more powerful, 16-tube, 5-band world-wide radio—a startling achievement that makes the whole world your radio playground. Out-performs \$150 radios on point for point comparison. Powerful Triple Twin Tubes (two tubes in one) give 20 tube results.

BECOME YOUR OWN RADIO DEALER

Save the jobbers-retailer's profits that often amount to 50% of ordinary retail prices. Become your own radio dealer and buy at wholesale prices direct from the Midwest factory. Never before so much radio for so little money! Why pay more?



This super deluxe Midwest radio is so amazingly selective, so delicately sensitive, that it brings in distant foreign stations with full loud speaker volume on channels adjacent to powerful locals. You'll thrill

ELECTRIK-SAVER
This exclusive Midwest feature cuts radio wattage consumption 50% results in Midwest radios using no more current than ordinary radios enable them to operate on voltages as low as 80 volts.

over its marvelous super-performance... glorious crystal clear "concert realism"... and magnificent world-wide foreign reception. Scores of marvelous Midwest features, many of them exclusive, make it easy to parade the nations of the world before you. You can switch instantly from American programs... to Canadian, police, amateur, commercial, airplane and ship broadcasts... to the finest, most fascinating world-wide foreign programs.

Before you buy any radio, send for our big FREE 40-page 1937 catalog—and take advantage of Midwest's sensational factory-to-you values. You have a year to pay and terms are as low as 10¢ per day—and you secure the privilege of 30 days' FREE trial in your own home. In addition you are triply protected with Foreign Reception Guarantee, Full Year Warranty and Money Back Guarantee.

Only \$49.95 COMPLETE WITH GIANT THEATRE-SOUND SPEAKER (LESS TUBES)

TERMS AS LOW AS 10¢ DOWN

Only MIDWEST gives you 16 TUBES • 5 WAVE BANDS 9 to 2200 METERS • ELECTRIK SAVER • DIAL-A-MATIC TUNING • AUTOMATIC AERIAL ADAPTION • DUAL AUDIO PROGRAM EXPANDER



MY MIDWEST NOT ONLY MEETS BUT SURPASSES MY MOST CRITICAL STANDARDS.
Bing Crosby



NO SET THAT I HAVE EVER OWNED HAS BROUGHT IN FOREIGN RECEPTION SO CONSISTENTLY AND SATISFACTORILY.
Gloria Stuart



MIDWEST RADIO CORP.
DEPT. 63-H CINCINNATI, OHIO, U.S.A.
Established 1920 Cable Address MIRACO...All Codes

MAIL COUPON TODAY for **Free 30-DAY TRIAL OFFER and 40-PAGE FOUR-COLOR Free CATALOG**

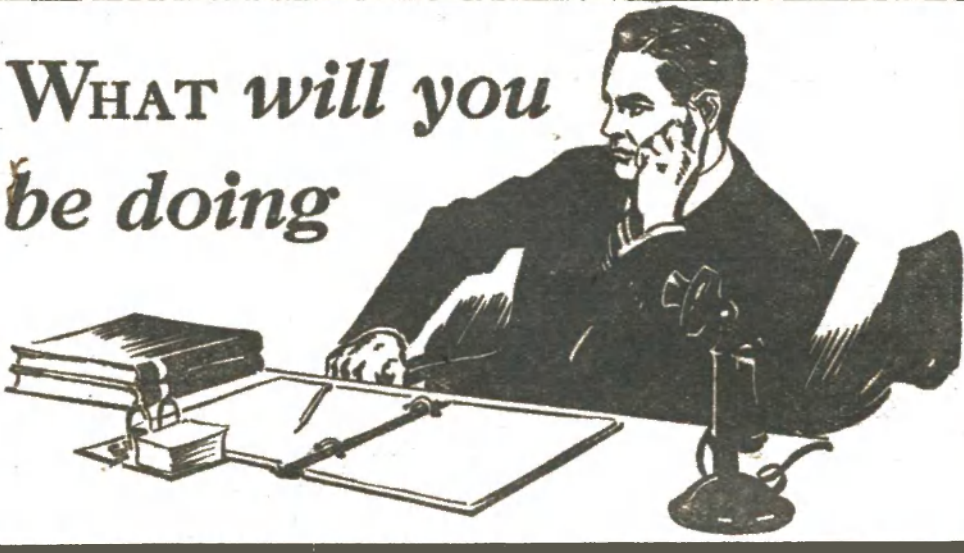
MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION
Dept. 63-H, Cincinnati, Ohio

Without obligation on my part, send me your FREE catalog and complete details of your liberal 30-day FREE trial offer. This is NOT an order.

Name _____
Address _____
Town _____ State _____

Special offer and prices given only when mailing direct with factory by mail.

WHAT will you
be doing



ONE YEAR *from today?*

THREE hundred and sixty-five days from now—what?

Will you still be struggling along in the same old job at the same old salary—worried about the future—never able to make both ends meet?

One year from today will you still be putting off your start toward success—thrilled with ambition one moment and then cold the next—delaying, waiting, fiddling away the precious hours that will never come again?

Don't do it, man—don't do it.

There is no greater tragedy in the world than that of a man who stays in the rut all his life, when with just a little effort he could advance.

Make up your mind today that you're going to train yourself to do some one thing well. Choose the work you like best in the list below, mark an X beside it, and without cost or obligation, at least get the full story of what the I. C. S. can do for you.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

BOX 2191-F, SCRANTON, PENNA.



Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X:



- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Architect <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Draftsman <input type="checkbox"/> Building Estimating <input type="checkbox"/> Contractor and Builder <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Draftsman <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineer <input type="checkbox"/> Management of Inventions <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineer <input type="checkbox"/> Electric Lighting <input type="checkbox"/> Welding, Electric and Gas <input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints <input type="checkbox"/> Boilermaker | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment of Metals <input type="checkbox"/> Sheet Metal Worker <input type="checkbox"/> Telegraph Engineer <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Work <input type="checkbox"/> Radio <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineering <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Draftsman <input type="checkbox"/> Machinist <input type="checkbox"/> Toolmaker <input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaker <input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Engines <input type="checkbox"/> Aviation Business <input type="checkbox"/> Automobile A. Mechanic <input type="checkbox"/> Refrigeration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Plumbing <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Fitting <input type="checkbox"/> Heating <input type="checkbox"/> Ventilation <input type="checkbox"/> Air Conditioning <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Electric Engineer <input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineer <input type="checkbox"/> E. R. Locomotives <input type="checkbox"/> E. R. Section Foreman <input type="checkbox"/> Air Brakes <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Signalmen <input type="checkbox"/> Highway Engineering <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineering <input type="checkbox"/> Surveying and Mapping |
| BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Business Management <input type="checkbox"/> Office Management <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management <input type="checkbox"/> Accountancy <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accountant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> C. P. Accountant <input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial Work <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> French <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Service Station Salesmanship <input type="checkbox"/> First Year College <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence <input type="checkbox"/> Stenography and Typing <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Service <input type="checkbox"/> Mail Carrier <input type="checkbox"/> Railway Mail Clerk |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge Engineer <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge and Building Foreman <input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry <input type="checkbox"/> Pharmacy <input type="checkbox"/> Coal Mining <input type="checkbox"/> Mine Foreman <input type="checkbox"/> Navigation <input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing <input type="checkbox"/> Woolen Manufacturing <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> Fruit Growing <input type="checkbox"/> Poultry Farming | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Grade School Subjects <input type="checkbox"/> High School Subjects <input type="checkbox"/> College Preparatory <input type="checkbox"/> Illustrating <input type="checkbox"/> Cartooning <input type="checkbox"/> Lettering Show Cards <input type="checkbox"/> Signs | | |

Name..... Age..... Address.....

City..... State..... Present Position.....

If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

Volume 268 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 21, 1936 Number 6

Snake Charmer— <i>Complete Novelette</i>	Richard Wormser	6
<i>Mystery in the Florida swamps</i>		
One Gun—One Dollar— <i>First of two parts</i>	William E. Barrett	28
<i>Two frightened kids and a wandering cowboy buck a boss-owned town</i>		
Agmar the Hittite— <i>Short Story</i>	Arthur Dana Hall	51
<i>Swords clash again in the palace of the Pharaohs</i>		
Black Bandana— <i>Complete Novelette</i>	Norbert Davis	59
<i>The Americano was the goat—ready for sacrifice</i>		
Annapolis, Ahoy!— <i>Fifth of seven parts</i>	George Bruce	79
<i>Navy blue versus Army gray—and touchdowns are trumps today!</i>		
Men of Daring— <i>True Story in Pictures</i>	Stookie Allen	96
<i>Arthur Vernay, Big Game Hunter</i>		
Not Dead Enough— <i>Short Story</i>	William Merriam Rouse	98
<i>Gun trouble on Crowquill Mountain</i>		
The Last Crusade— <i>Conclusion</i>	Martin McCall	106
<i>Strange romance and queer adventure in a hidden tropic Paradise</i>		
Party at Midnight— <i>Short Story</i>	L. W. Claffin	132
<i>Tough guys and ten-ton trucks</i>		

When Oil Was Just a Drug.....	Warren Padgett	58
The First United States Navy.....	Richard V. Whyte	95
We Walk Too Much.....	James F. Lambert	140
Argonotes.....		141
Looking Ahead!.....		131

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK
 WILLIAM T. DEWART, President

MESSAGERIES HACHETTE
 3, La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C.4

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE.
 111 Rue Beaumur

Published weekly and copyright, 1936, by The Frank A. Munsey Company. Single copies 10 cents. By the year, \$4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; \$6.00 to Canada; \$7.00 to other foreign countries. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Entered as second class matter November 28, 1896, at the post office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879. The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright, and must not be reprinted without the publisher's permission. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Printed in U.S.A.

Manuscripts submitted to this magazine should be accompanied by sufficient postage for their return if found unavailable. The publisher can accept no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

N.R.I. TRAINING CERTAINLY PAYS. OUR MONEY WORRIES ARE OVER AND WE'VE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO.



HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

"Since securing my operator's license through N. E. L. Training, I've been regularly employed and am now chief engineer with W. B. Y. My salary has increased \$1,200 a year."—JULIUS C. VERBELS, Station W. B. Y., Gadsden, Alabama.

"I am making from \$10 to \$25 a week in spare time while still holding my regular job as a machinist. I owe my success to N. E. L.—W. M. RUPP, 120 W. 12th St., Conshohocken, Pa."



"After completing the N. E. L. Course I became Radio Editor of the Buffalo Courier. Later I started a Radio service business of my own and have averaged over \$3,500 a year."—T. J. TELAAR, 627 Broadway, New York City.



I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week
Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$1,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$10 to \$500 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, pay \$1,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning
Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send special equipment which gives you practical experience—shows how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important Radio principles.

Find Out What Radio Offers You
Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It contains full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in studio and Television; shows you how to get letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning; tells about my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a post card—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. GMK National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. GMK National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.
Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 plan of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)



J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute. The man who has directed the home study training of more than 100,000 men for Radio has many other men in America.



NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....

In answering this advertisement it is desirable that you mention this magazine.

U.S. GOVERNMENT JOBS

RAILWAY CLERK, GOVERNMENT CLERK, MAIL CARRIER, POSTOFFICE CLERK

START \$1260 to \$2100 YEAR

MEN—WOMEN

Common education usually sufficient. Mail Coupon Today. Hurry

Franklin Institute
Dept. P254, Rochester, N. Y.
Gentlemen: Rush FREE list of Government big pay positions, with salaries, vacations, hours, work. Tell me what to do to get a position.

Name
Address

NEW TYPE CHEAP OIL BURNER
Sweeping the Country!!

COOK and HEAT Without Coal or Wood
In Your Present Stove or Furnace—HOTTER—CHEAPER—No Dirt or Ashes—Twice the Heat Quick at HALF THE COST.

COOKS A MEAL for LESS
Beats any oil burner ever gotten out for less cost, perfect performance. Burns cheap oil a new way, without pre-generating or clogging up. Quick intense heat by Simple Turn of Valve.

Try At Our Risk 30 DAYS' TRIAL
Prove it ends drudgery and dirt of coal or wood; cuts fuel costs in half, pays for itself quickly by what it SAVES.

FREE SAMPLE FOR AGENTS
offered to one energetic man or woman in each locality who will sell this burner. Make REAL MONEY right now, open or full time—mail to postpaid local UNITED FACTORIES, R-617, Factory Bldg., Kansas City, Mo., Money Write now.

AGENTS Salesmen BIG MONEY
For Dist. from Everything Quick Sell. Get oil burner FREE. Money Write now.

Slips into Any STOVE RANGE or FURNACE

Quick HEAT at Turn of Valve!

Be a McNeess Man

No Time Like Now to Get In—
Make up to \$75 a week
It's no trick to make up to \$12 a day when you use your car as a McNeess "Store on Wheels." Farmers are buying everything they can from McNeess men. Attractive business-getting prizes, also money-saving deals to customers make selling McNeess daily necessities a snap. This business is depression-proof.

We Supply Capital—Start Now!
There's no better work anywhere—pays well, permanent, need no experience to start and we supply capital to help you get started quick. You start making money first day. Write at once for McNeess Dealer Book—bells all—no obligation. (92-A)

FURST & THOMAS, 379 Adams St., Freeport, Ill.

Use Your CAR to Raise Your PAY

"Klutch" holds FALSE TEETH
Tight—all day

KLUTCH forms a comfort cushion, holds the plate so snug it can't rock, drop, chafe or be played with. You can eat and talk as well as you did with your own teeth. Why endure loose plates? Klutch ends the trouble. 25c and 50c at druggists'. If your druggist hasn't it, don't waste money on substitutes but send us 10c and we will mail you a generous trial box. **HART & CO., Box 2444-K, ELMIRA, N. Y.**



FUR-FISH-GAME

is just the magazine you have been looking for, at a price you can afford to pay. Edited by the well known outdoors writer, W. V. Harding, F-F-G contains in each monthly issue up to 100 pages of fascinating, thrilling, and interesting material on HUNTING, TRAPPING, FUR FARMING, GUNS, and Ammunition, Camping, Woodcraft, Dogs, Coon and Fox Hunting, Fur Miracles and Prices. New Reduced price on newsstands—15c, a copy or \$1.80 a year. Save money by sending your order TODAY for our

SPECIAL OFFER

6 months only 48c.
(save you 48c.)

Clip ad, attach address and send with 50c. cash, stamps or M.O. to

FUR-FISH-GAME, 167 E. Long Street, Columbus, O.

ARMY-NAVY Bargains

Haversacks .75 | Carb. belt \$1.00
Machete-holo . . \$1.50 | Flint pistol . . \$2.95
Army saddle . . \$9.85 | M/L shot gun . . \$4.85
Springfield rifle, cal. 45/70, 32 1/2" barrel . 4.25
New 1936 catalog, 364 pages of plates, armor, guns, daggers, etc., mailed for 50 cents. New special circular for 2c stamp.
Established 1888.
Francis Bannerman Sons, 501 B'way, N. Y. City

WANTED: SERVICE OPERATORS

Nationally known, A-1 Corporation has openings for reliable men to inspect and service an estimated number of 4 more than five million Underwriters' approved safety devices now in use. Service work brings handsome earnings. In addition you are trained for profitable District Dealership for new, patented safety device. No stock investment. Write details about yourself. **RAY C. MAHN, G.S.M., Dept. 39-11, Factory, Post Office Box 963, Dayton, Ohio.**

ARE YOU INVENTIVE

OTHER MEN have read and profited by our free books, "Patent Protection" and "Selling Inventions." Fully explain many interesting points to inventors and illustrate important mechanical principles. With books we also send free "Evidence of Invention" form. Prompt service, reasonable fees, deferred payments, thirty-six years' experience. Avoid risk of delay. Write immediately to: **Victor J. Evans & Co., Registered Patent Attorneys, 717 N. Victor Building, Washington, D. C.**

Operator No. 35

FOLLOW THIS MAN
Smart Service Operator No. 35 is the job! He is the man who has made \$25,000 a year. Tell us your name and address. We will send you a free report and details. Liberal are will NOT be sent to days unless at once. **INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 2148 Chicago, Ill.**

Old Leg Trouble HEALED WHILE WORKING

Congestion from VARICOSE VEINS, SWELLING, MILK LEG, or Injuries cause itching, leg rash and most old leg ulcers. **Viscose Home Method** relieves pain, heals many sores or no cost for trial. Mention your trouble for a FREE BOOK.

Dr. M. S. Clason Viscose Co., 140 N. Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

Help Kidneys

Clean Out Poisonous Acids

Your Kidneys contain 9 million tiny tubes or filters which may be endangered by neglect or drastic, irritating drugs. Be careful. If functional Kidney or Bladder disorders make you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Loss of Pep, Leg Pains, Rheumatic Pains, Dizziness, Circles Under Eyes, Neuralgia, Acidity, Burning, Smarting or Itching, don't take chances. Get the doctor's guaranteed prescription Cystex, the most modern advanced treatment for these troubles. \$10,000.00 deposited with Bank of America, Los Angeles, California, guarantees that Cystex must bring new vitality in 48 hours and make you feel years younger in one week or money back on return of empty package. **Telego your druggist for guaranteed Cystex (Siss-TeX) today.**

TYPEWRITER

PORTABLES
10c A DAY



BRAND NEW Special Low Prices
MEMO NO MONEY - 10 Day Trial

International Typewriter Co., 300 N. Dearborn St., Dept. 1232, Chicago

LAW STUDY AT HOME

Legally trained men win high positions and big success in business and public life. Be independent. Greater opportunities now than ever before. Big corporations are headed by men with legal training. Earn \$3,000 to \$10,000 Annually

Successful graduates in every section of the United States. We furnish all text material, including fourteen-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 24-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Business" books FREE. Send for them to: LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 1188-L, Chicago

Train for a Well-Paid Hotel Position

COME TO WASHINGTON

Good positions for trained men and women in hotel, club, restaurant and institutional field. Previous experience needed unnecessary. Quality hotel equipment, under expert instructors. National Placement Service FREE of extra charge. New Day Classes start Jan. Feb. Catalog FREE!

LEWIS HOTEL TRAINING SCHOOLS
Division RMT 7134 Washington, D. C.

BE A PASSENGER TRAFFIC INSPECTOR

Increasing Traffic Means More Men Are Needed
A GOOD POSITION is ready for you upon completion of our simple, home-study course. We place you as a Railway and Bus Passenger Traffic Inspector with salary up to \$185 per month, to start, plus expenses, or refund tuition. Interesting, liberal wages for your home.

Standard Business Training Institute
Bldg. 5012 Buffalo, N. Y.

LIQUOR HABIT

Send for FREE TRIAL of Noxalo, a guaranteed harmless home treatment. Can be given secretly in food or drink to anyone who drinks or craves Whiskey, Beer, Gin, Home Brew, Wine, Moonshine, etc. Your request for Free Trial brings trial supply by return mail and full \$2.00 treatment which you may try under a 30 day refund guarantee. Try Noxalo at our rick ARLEE CO., Dept. 204 BALTIMORE, MD.

Just Out!

World's Greatest Utility Light



300 CANDLE POWER—with new built-in Utility Pump. Handiest, most practical light invented. Storm-proof, rain-proof, bug-proof. Ideal for city, town, country—indoors, outdoors—anywhere. Bright, white light—50 times brighter than wick lanterns on half the cost. Burns 1/2 pint of kerosene.

AGENTS! Make up to \$12 a day. No experience or capital required. Outfit Free to workers. Exclusive Territory. Write quick!

30 DAYS HOME TRIAL Try 30 days at our risk. Send for speed shipping on your order. We pay all duties FOB. W. R. Co. THE AKRON LAMP CO. Lamp Bldg., Akron, Ohio

GENUINE DIAMONDS GUARANTEED Buy of LOFTIS DIRECT IMPORTERS



DIAMONDS WATCHES ON CREDIT

Use the LOFTIS BUDGET PLAN. Order direct from illustrations, or send for FREE CATALOG.

ENGAGEMENT RING AND WEDDING RING SET (As Illustrated) Your choice in Solid Natural or White Gold; both rings for the one price \$19.88 No. 202

50c a Week

Pay Only One-Tenth Down 16 Months to Pay

NO. 204 LADIES' 17-JEWEL WATCH
Solid 14-K Yellow Gold; smart round shape; silk cord bracelet \$24.98

NO. 203 MEN'S 17-JEWEL WATCH
Good-looking, dependable watch; Yellow Gold finish; genuine leather strap \$17.75

75c a Week

We sell all standard makes of watches: Bulova, Elgin, Hamilton, Gruen, Waltham on CREDIT AT CASH PRICES.

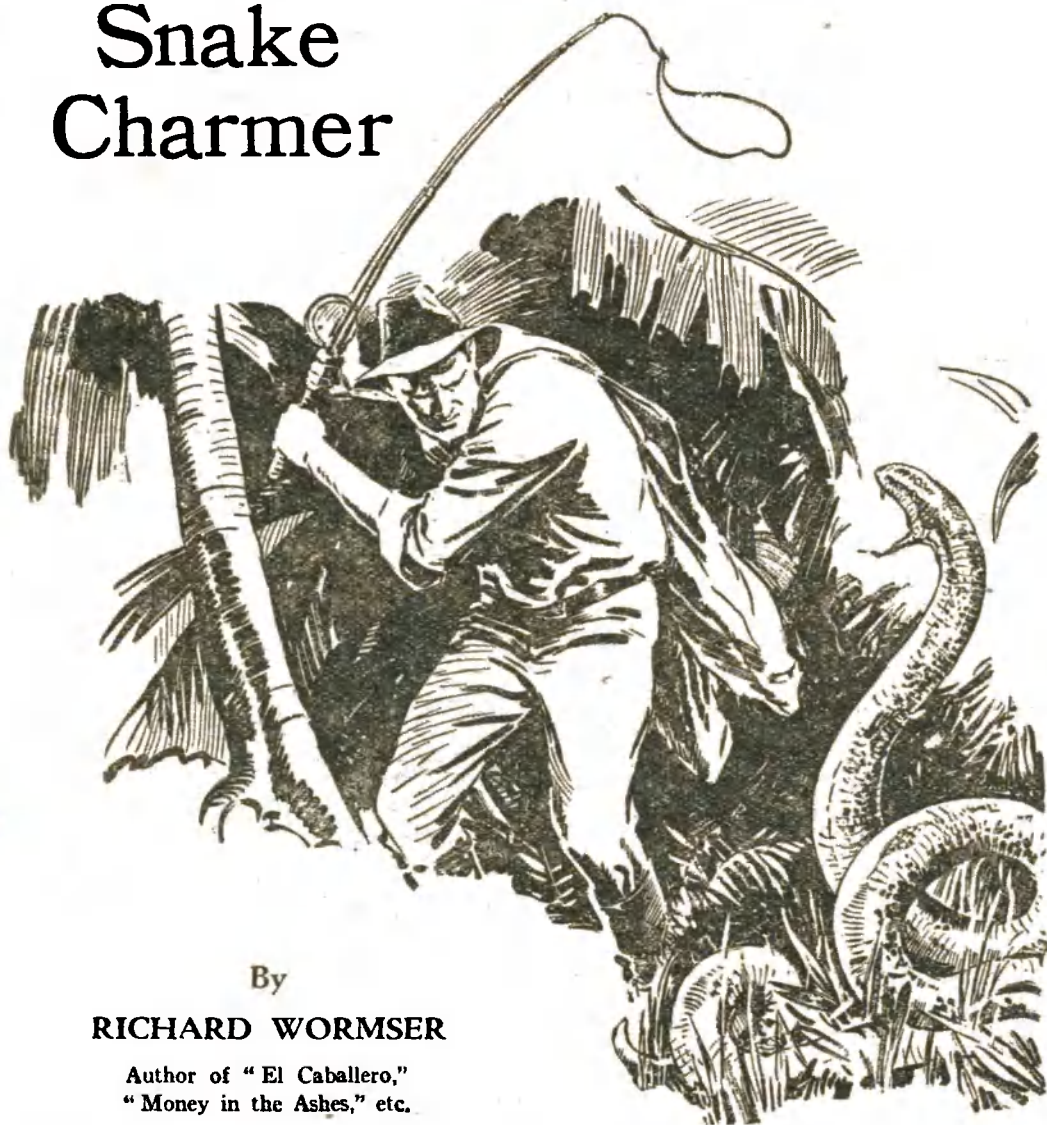
SEND \$1.00 WITH COUPON

I enclose \$1.00 DOWN PAYMENT on _____ (Watch or Ring) for which I agree to pay _____ on terms of _____ PER WEEK.

Name _____
Street _____
City _____ State _____
Occupation _____ S.F.D. _____

LOFTIS JEWELRY CO. 34-No. State St. DEPT. H-1
Chicago, Ill.

Snake Charmer



By

RICHARD WORMSER

Author of "El Caballero,"
"Money in the Ashes," etc.

Bullets from phantom guns, a rotting inn and a girl with frightened eyes—these things Dave McNally found when he went hunting snakes in that Florida swamp

CHAPTER I.

REPTILES WANTED.

DAVE McNALLY sat with his feet on his roll-topped desk and languidly cleaned a gun. He was neither gangster, private detective nor sportsman; the gun would certainly

ly not have suited either of the first two classes of marksmen, and few sportsmen have ever handled an electric elephant rifle.

Below his window Times Square rattled and roared, with the clamor of a million people trying to make a dime, and another million trying to spend



The snake called to spring

one. The sun was going down behind the Hudson, and enough of its rays came through the canyons of the Forties to shine in Dave's gray eyes. He turned his swivel chair so as to face the other way. Now he was confronted with the hieroglyphics that are the backward for :

D. N. McNALLY
Expeditions & Amusements

A shadow bulked behind the plate glass background for this message, and the door opened.

"Don't shoot," the newcomer said. "I'll come down."

McNally laid down the rifle and swung to his feet. He gazed down at the visitor with something like amusement in his face. "Hiyah, Jake. I thought the McLaren Carnival was playing the cornbelt."

Jake McLaren sighed, sitting down. "The cornbelt's playing it," he said. "You seen the reports? Some weeks we almost make enough to buy wood for the cook tent, if we had any food to cook. I'm running the sideshow for a concession out at the island."

"Yeah? How's that going?"

"Not so good, Dave, or I wouldn't be here," Jake McLaren said sadly. "What with midget villages and such, the competish's too high. Know where we can pick up one good freak?"

"Nothing that isn't being used some place on the Midway already."

Jake McLaren got down to cases. He pulled up his trousers over his fat knees, rested his hands on his haunches and leaned over. "Dave," he said, "the gun what runs this show has dough. Real dough, and he'll sink it all to make the concess pay out. Now, I can get Steffa Ninksa, you know, the snake charmer. She's got the class and the looks—only she ain't got the snakes. I want you should get us the two largest snakes in captivity, only the largest, what I mean."

McNally laughed. "For a minute I thought you meant business, Jake. But snakes, you can wire to Florida, get snakes for two bucks apiece. Large as Steffo will handle 'em."

"No, Dave, you can't. See, we really mean snakes. Now, down in a swamp behind St. Michael City, when I was down there last winter, I heard about real snakes. Only none of the natives would go get 'em for me. Big fellas, twelve feet long and more, and thick as Steffa herself."

Dave looked interested. "Natives wouldn't get 'em, huh? That's funny. Those Florida crackers down there pride themselves on going up against anything, Jake. How come?"

Jake looked apologetic. "Well, you would laugh at me, Dave, only I got the money to put on the line. They say there are ghosts in that swamp. See, I knew you'd laugh, only—I want those snakes. The swamp's only a couple of miles long, by about a mile wide. You can cover it in two days."

The fat man reached into his pocket, brought out a wallet. At the sight of the money, Dave McNally began to grin. He flicked a hand towards the door. "O. K.," he said. "You see the sign. Expeditions & Amusements. This sounds like more of an amusement than an expedition, Jake, but it's your money." He reached for a time table. "Where is this place?"

"Rawley Acres, just outside of St. Michael City," Jake said. "This Rawley was a real estate guy, like they had in Florida during the boom. Since he went broke, the thing's gone back to the swamps."

Dave McNally wrote it down. . . .

THE taxi driver said: "There's Rawley Acres we's running along 'now." He jerked a hand over the edge of the wheel. Off into the palmetto scrub and jackpine ran concrete pavements, each a half a city block long; their edges were covered over by sand and weeds, their ends were no place. "Peck of money been lost in thet swamp," the taxi driver added, cheerfully. "Yes, sir, some fella with not much on his mind, he figgered out one day every 'gator in that swamp's worth five thousand dollars. Gave old man Rawley half a 'gator myself, back when he was promoting."

Dave McNally studied the swamps that began just back of those futile pavements. "What happened to Rawley?"

"Got on a boat to go up to N'Yawk to study with a bondholders' committee. Boat got there, but Rawley didn't."

"Jumped or fell, eh?"

"Reckon so. He'd a hundred thousand dollars' wuth of insurance, some say a million. His wife took it, she travels to Europe now all the time.

Raickon she couldn't face all the folks round here lost money." He turned the car off the road. "Yon's the beach, mister. Really almost an island, I guess, 'tween the acres and the ocean. You aimin' to sell somethin' out yeah?"

"I'm staying a few days," McNally said. "There's a hotel, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir, that there is." The taxi driver seemed amused. "Sure is. Minus only a roof, and mebbe a wall or two. Reckon I'll have to lug you back to town again, but it won't cost you nothin', mister."

"I'll make out all right," Dave said. "I'll only be here a day or so. There are some people living here, aren't there?"

"Yeah, some families on the beach, squatters like. You wouldn't want to sell them nothin', though. No money."

"I'm not selling anything."

The driver slowed down over the ratty, half shell road. "No? Well, mister, there's your hotel. Guess we can start back now."

Dave McNally looked. It was a big place; but tropical wind and sand had taken half the roof off; palmetto scrub and beach grass had ruined the landscaped garden; the wreck of an old sofa had been used to replace a broken front step. Rusty metal strewed the porch.

Only smoke from a lean-to at one end proved that it had not been abandoned.

The driver watched Dave McNally quizzically.

"All right," Dave said. "Let's get the bags out. I'm staying."

The taxi driver pulled out Dave's suitcases, his hunting bags, piled them on the broken sofa. "Sure you know what you're doin', young man? You ain't sellin' nothin', ain't visitin' kin-

folk; seems like a moughty funny place for a rest."

"Here, I owe you a dollar," Dave said. "I'm down here hunting snakes," he added.

The driver's face froze. "It's all right with me," he said levelly. "I'm not one to be a bad loser. Only, there's folks around here ain't never forgot how to run a lynchin' party." He kicked the car into gear with a heavy foot on the clutch pedal, and nearly went over Dave's toes. "Snake hunter," he muttered contemptuously as the car scudded away down the road.

DAVE looked around. Down the beach, nearly hidden by the sand dunes, three or four little shacks nestled; there was smoke coming from the top of one. Behind him lay the swamps, their lush foliage waving over more sand dunes; and ahead, between him and the surfy beach, was the hotel.

He picked up his bags, leaped over the rear end of a car, lying half buried in the sand, and started up the hotel steps. The first step cracked under him and his foot went through, scraping the skin off his ankle.

He swore mildly and considered the next move. To walk up the steps was obviously unsafe; on the other hand, to get up by jumping would be worse, because the porch looked as though it would surely give way if anyone jumped on it.

He finally worked out the problem; the sand had piled up on one end of the hotel and he would go around there and make his entrance. He fastened the rifle over his shoulder in its canvas case, and took a firm grip on the bags. As he walked, the soft sand gave way under him and filled his shoes, made the scrape on his ankle sting.

When he rounded the corner of the hotel, something went *plunk* into the soft wood, and a splinter stung his cheek.

It was a bullet. The noise of the shot had evidently been drowned out by the booming of the surf.

Dave McNally dropped his bags, and dropped himself too, to lie down behind them. He quickly unfastened the canvas cover, slid out his rifle, assembled it. It was a big bore Mannlicher, brought along for 'gators; it ought to be able to take on whoever had shot at him.

But there was nothing to be seen but the soft waving of the salt hay on the dunes. Dave shoved the bags aside, and lay for a moment in full view. When there was no further shot, he went forward, crouched over and running, and flung himself down behind a wrinkle in the sand. Five inches from his nose a fiddler crab dove for its hole; a little farther on, a chameleon stared at him unblinkingly, then scuttled away.

HE got his knees under him and grasped the rifle, then ran for a small dune. While he was still moving, a puff of smoke came up from behind a dune, and sand spurted behind him. This time he thought he heard the crack of a rifle.

He lay still, staring at the top of the dune from which the shot had come. Whoever had shot had evidently dropped back without waiting to see if he had hit anything. With that kind of shooting, a man ought to be able to get right up on the hidden gun worker and smoke him out. Dave began to think up things to say to the law about self-defense. Or was there any law on Rawley Acres?

The grass on the top of the dune

moved suspiciously. Whoever the man was up there, he was coming up for another shot. Dave watched him through his telescopic sight.

A voice behind him said, coolly, "It is out of season for ducks."

Dave looked over his shoulder. A pair of legs that ended in beach shoes at one end and culottes at the other; a short sleeved cotton jersey; a head of bobbed hair. He let go of the rifle, rolled over, grabbed the ankles above the beach sandals, and jerked.

The girl went over hard, and landed on top of him. He shoved her off, held her down with an elbow, and muttered: "Lie still. There's someone shooting at me from up on that dune."

The girl wriggled free and stood up, brushing the sand off her. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "There's no one there." She walked ahead of him, right along the line of his rifle barrel; there was nothing to do but get up and go with her. But Dave kept the rifle cuddled in his arms at the alert.

"My name is Virginia Rawley," the girl said. "I own the hotel back there." It was an obvious request for Dave McNally's name and business. He gave her the first, and added: "I'm hunting snakes for a sideshow. I hear there are some beauties in the swamps here."

The girl didn't bother to answer that. They were at the foot of the dune now; Dave raised the rifle, and yelled: "Stand up. I'm coming after you."

There was no answer.

"Isn't that rather childish?" Virginia Rawley said, and walked up to the top of the dune. "You see? There is no one up here."

Dave went up after her, pointed. "See? Someone was lying in the sand there. And the salt grass is pressed down there, where he walked on it to keep from leaving footprints."

"I don't see a thing," the girl said. She turned on her heel and started back for the hotel.

Dave McNally looked at her quizzically, and then followed her back again.

But he did not much care for the idea of turning his back on the dune.

CHAPTER II.

CLOSED DOORS.

HE caught up with her at the spot where he had dropped his bags.

"Is this your hotel, Miss Rawley?" he asked.

"I rent it. Yes."

"That's fine. I don't reckon I'll be here more than two or three days; just long enough to round up some natives, and go through the swamps. If these snakes are as big as I think they are, they ought to be easy to find."

"I'm sorry. The hotel doesn't take guests."

Dave grinned at her, picked up his bags, and shoved past her through a door. He was in a kitchen; he set the bags down there, walked through another door. He was now in what had been the main ballroom of the hotel; it was in much better repair than the outside would have led him to believe. In back of the front entrance there was a room that had obviously been the office.

He dug under broken chairs, three-legged tables, a gutted sofa to find what he was looking for—a copy of the hotel license. It was many years out of date.

He carried it back to the girl. His lips were pressed down tight over his teeth. "Look," he said. "This is a licensed hotel. You can't refuse to take me in."

"That thing is ten years old," the girl said.

"But you are not the owner," Dave pointed out. "You can't do anything to destroy his property rights. Once you refuse to take in guests, you prevent his ever taking out another—"

He was having such a fine time with his ridiculous argument that he did not notice what the girl was doing. She had moved around behind him, and something round and hard suddenly pressed into him. From a rifle length behind him the Rawley girl said: "Pick up your bags and get out of here."

He raised his hands and slowly turned around to face her. She was holding his Mannlicher, pointed at his midriff, and her hands were not shaking. "You heard me, snake hunter," she said. "This is my home. Please leave."

His face got cold and hard, and he bent over and picked up his two bags. He said, clearly: "I could swing this one bag into the rifle barrel and the other into your face, and knock you for a loop before the bullet could get up the barrel."

"But you're not going to," she said, "or you wouldn't have told me."

"No," he said, "I'm not. I've nothing to gain by it; I wouldn't sleep in your hotel anyway. But," he said, walking down the side porch and starting over the sand, "I never knew a girl to go to so much trouble for a pair of snakes. They must be pets of yours," he added, for no reason at all. "Or relatives."

The change in her voice was so marked that it brought him around on his heel. "Get out of here!" she shrieked. Her face was white and drawn. "Out of here, will you? Are you crazy?"

"No," Dave said. "But one of us is. So long, pal. Can I have my rifle back?"

She didn't answer. But her nerves were so obviously taut that he walked away. There was always the danger that her hands would shake, and the trigger jerk back. He still did not believe she had ever meant to shoot him.

HE found a path towards the shacks he had seen. Sitting on a fallen palmetto, he took off his shoes, shook the sand out of them. He found himself moved to an unusual extent; there was something indescribably horrible about a girl who was so young, pretty and well educated, and who had in some way been worked into a position where she would threaten to shoot any stranger who came near her.

Barnum knew that Dave McNally's life had been no bed of roses. He had been in all the worst corners of all the continents of the world, looking for freaks and animals; and his childhood had been spent with the Wild West Show in which his mother was a rider. His father had been a carnival advance agent.

There were few things that could shake him, but this was one of them. For this girl was so obviously from a class of society that did not go around shooting people. She belonged among her own kind, at Miami or Newport, Park Avenue or Grosse Point, and not squatting in an abandoned hotel between the deserted beach and a swamp.

Dave lit a cigarette and tucked it between his lips while he opened the larger of his grips. He extracted an Army .45 automatic, wiped the excess grease off it, and shoved a clip into the butt. On second thought, he worked

a cartridge into the chamber; might as well be ready for anything. The leather armpit holster showed under his vestless coat, but that was just as well; maybe if these crackers up the beach knew he was armed they'd meet him with a little respect.

Rawley, he thought, standing up and throwing the cigarette away. Virginia Rawley, of Rawley Acres. A daughter, probably, of the Rawley who had killed himself when the real estate development failed. And her father's failure, the loss of the family money, had made her a little screwy.

But somehow that theory didn't hold water. . . .

He went around a dune and came in sight of the cluster of shacks.

There were five of them, and they were not prepossessing. He selected the largest, the one from which smoke was coming, and went up. A side door, gritted with blown sand till the paint was all gone, a window with wadded newspaper replacing most of the panes, and an outside shower to wash off salt water.

DAVE McNALLY rapped on the door. Then he stepped back a pace, his hands ready to go up to his armpit if necessary.

When no one answered, he rapped again.

Finally the door opened and a man stepped out. He was dressed in overalls and battered sneakers; about six feet tall, very wiry, and wasted away to a scorbutic hundred and fifty pounds. Deep hollows separated his unshaven jaws from his lackluster eyes.

To this unpromising figure there was added a rifle, cradled in the overalled arms.

"My name's McNally," Dave said

pleasantly. "I'm hunting snakes for a circus. Could you put me up for a couple of nights and give me a hand in rounding up some men to go into the swamps?"

The man drawled a syllable in the flat, nasal cracker accent. The syllable was, "Naw." He started to close the door again.

"I'm not selling anything," Dave said. He tried a disarming grin; the cracker remained armed. "I can pay two dollars a night for my room and board, and I'll pay five dollars a day each for three men to help me round up these snakes."

The cracker said, "Naw." But there was a little interest in his eyes.

"That's thirty-four dollars for two days," Dave said, encouraged. "The man who helped me could have it all, and pay his two helpers whatever they had to have out of it."

Automatically the cracker's lips got round, with another *N*—but then he stepped out and closed the door behind him. "Could bring a pa'r of snakes into town foah you," he said. "Ten dollars each."

This was getting some place. "Go on," Dave said gently, "any cracker in Florida will go into the swamps and bring me a pair of cottonmouths and a 'gator for a five dollar bill. I want *big* snakes. Half a foot through, and ten feet long."

"They's in the swamps, misteh. I could git 'em foh yuh. Biggest snakes in Floridy."

"Those are the ones," Dave said. "Only my time's worth money. I want to go along, and get this over with. I don't want to have to stay here more than two days."

The cracker was definitely interested now. "Ah kin git 'em, misteh. Yuh ask innybody in St. Michael. Lafe

Overholt's bin around these swamps all his life, they'll tell yuh, 'n' he ain't scared of nothin'."

Some devil in Dave made him ask, "Nothing?"

Lafe Overholt's face hardened . . . like the taxi driver's had done. He said, "Naw," and reached behind him for the doorknob. The paintless door slammed in Dave's face.

As Dave turned around he saw faces disappearing through the dirty windows of the other shacks. He knocked on each of the three doors in turn; when there was no answer, he yelled, "Well, I'll be camping on the beach. Come talk it over if you want that money."

THERE was a path from the shacks to the beach. He carried his bags down it, dumped them above the high-water line, and dragged down a piece of driftwood stump to sit on. There was some bar chocolate, emergency rations, in his suitcase; he got out a bar and chewed on it. The surf looked attractive, and he was hot; but he certainly couldn't afford to leave his automatic on the beach.

He took a chance on the bags, though, and when he had finished the chocolate walked back toward Overholt's place. As he came up the path, some towheaded kids squealed and ran away through the salt hay.

Dave got himself a drink from the outside shower at Lafe Overholt's house, and then went back to the beach. He took a rubber poncho from his bag, stretched it on the sand, and lay down, his head pillowed on the smaller suitcase. At least, it didn't look like rain.

If a man has to sleep on a beach, there are worse places for it than Florida. The breeze off the ocean kept

the insects moving; it was not too cold; and as it got dark and the stars came out, the porpoises leaping just off the shore sent arcs of luminescence through the night to entertain him.

Lying there in his shirt and trousers, Dave McNally finally rolled himself into his poncho and went to sleep. He had been hungrier in his life, and dirtier, and had slept on more uncomfortable places.

He was awakened at eleven by a motorcar. He sat up abruptly, hand on his gun; lights were coming swiftly along the beach. The tide was out, and the car was making good time on the hard-packed sand. Dave pulled on his shoes and ran down toward the tidal beach.

Shells crunched under his feet. He got to the middle of the wide beach when the headlights were still a hundred yards away, projected himself into their gleam, and waved his arms. Brakes screamed, and for a moment he thought the car was going to be unable to stop before it hit him; but it went into a skid, and stopped about fifty feet opposite him. A flashlight played on him, nearly blinding him.

A voice called, "What do you want?"

"I'm camping up by Overholt's," Dave began.

"Yeah? That him, mister?" the voice asked someone else in the car. It was a Florida voice.

Another, more Northern accent said, "No, neither of 'em."

The first voice cried, "Stay away from this car. We don't want no trouble till we're sure." The car went into gear and away, its motor drowning out Dave's voice.

Dave McNally gently scratched his head, muttered, "Southern hospitality," and went back to his sandy bed.

But not to sleep. Coming up the path, his feet noiseless in the dry, loose sand, he made out a figure stooping over his bags. His temper snapped. "Throw up your hands and stand still!"

His own flashlight went on after he had dropped to the sand, the gun out. People shoot at flashlights. But this one didn't. It was the girl, Virginia Rawley. She didn't seem to have the rifle with her.

HE let the flashlight go out, then made a swift, bent-over run that brought him right up to her. If he got right on her, none of her strange friends could dare shoot without taking a chance of hitting her.

He flung an arm around her waist, pulled her to him. She struggled.

"This isn't love," he muttered. "I'm holding you as a shield, in case you've got Overholt ambushing me." Her waist was firm and muscular under his hand.

She stopped struggling, relaxed. "I'm all alone. I came out to talk to you."

"Word of honor?" He grinned in the dark at the childish phrase.

"Word of honor," she said. As he let her go, she sat down on the sand next to the poncho.

Dave McNally crouched beside her, said, "Cigarette? They can't see us here, the dunes protect us."

"All right." She accepted a cigarette and a light, puffed once, the glow setting off her fine, delicate features. She said, "There a filling station about four miles from the beach. It's on the main highway into St. Michael's. You can get up there by three o'clock; there's a milk truck comes along then that'll take you into town."

"But I'm not going to town," Dave

said. "I invested in a railroad ticket to come down here and get some snakes. I'm going to get them."

"That's the most ridiculous story. You could have stopped at St. Augustine, or even Jacksonville, and sat in your hotel lobby, and the natives would have caught all the snakes you can use. Don't tell me you're a scientist, looking for a rare specimen. You are not the type."

"Not intellectual enough, eh?" Dave growled. "Well, while we're playing truths, you're not the type to bury herself in a ramshackle hotel like that little ruin you're living in. Would you, since my roofless condition seems to give you insomnia, mind explaining what this is all about? I come down here to wrestle a couple of snakes, and everybody in the county starts shooting at me. I didn't know you prized your snakes so highly in Florida."

He felt around behind him for his coat, got out his wallet. "Here's my business card. Amusements and Expeditions. I want two very long snakes for a sideshow at Coney Island. I know I could buy them, but by sending me down, the man who wants them figured he could cut the time by two weeks. Two weeks, lady, is something like ten per cent of a Coney Island season. It means the difference between a profit and going broke."

She examined the card in the glow from her cigarette. "You sound almost convincing," she murmured. "Isn't there any other place you can get these snakes? I thought the biggest ones came from South America."

"Sure they do, pal," Dave said. He felt he was getting some place at last. "But the P. A. won't carry them on their planes, and it would take six weeks or two months to get them up

on a freighter. See?" He took a deep breath. "Look," he said, "if you're in some jam with the law—you and your cracker friends—why, that's all right with me. You don't get ahead in the carnival trades by running to the sheriff every time you see someone breaking the parking law. All I want is my snakes, and a lift to the nearest railroad for the big city."

"I almost believe you. Well—pick up your bags. You might as well sleep at the hotel tonight."

HE walked along behind her, carrying the heavy bags once more, the automatic swinging against his chest. He was a little breathless when they got to the house.

She said, "Take the room up there on the gallery. That bed has the least number of springs broken. I'll make you some supper."

He grinned at her with depthless gratitude, and lugged his bags upstairs. When he came down he was still wearing the automatic, but he had buttoned his coat over it. He put a flask of brandy on the kitchen table. "For the coffee," he said. Straddling a kitchen chair, he watched the girl moving around the big kitchen, frying eggs, opening a can of tomatoes.

When the food was ready she set out two coffee cups. "I haven't had a coffee and brandy in months," she said. For all her youth, her eyes looked a little tired.

Dave McNally forked in food, then suddenly said, "Look, it's against all the rules of my business to step into trouble when I don't have to—but can I help you in this jam you're in?"

She shook her head. "No, thanks. I—it isn't my secret to tell you, anyway."

"O. K., pal. That was the law I

talked to on the beach before, wasn't it?"

"That's right. The sheriff. Going to run to him?"

"And get held here as a witness, when I ought to be in New York?"

She smiled. "Tough, aren't you? If you want to bathe, there's a bathroom next to yours. But there's only cold water."

"O. K. See you in the morning. Can you get me a guide into the swamps?"

"I'll talk it over with the Overholts," the girl said. She smiled wearily and went upstairs.

Dave McNally finished his coffee, smoked a cigarette, and then turned out the lights and went across the ballroom to the stairs that led up to his room. He had not seen his rifle. Presumably it was in Virginia Rawley's bedroom, some place in the old building.

It was too bad, he thought, about repeal. If there were still bootleggers and rum-runners, he would know what to make of this, what line to take.

CHAPTER III.

INTO THE SWAMP.

WHEN he came down in the morning, there was conversation in the kitchen. He went across the ballroom, his feet making scraping noises as they drove the sand into the maple floor. Virginia Rawley was talking to Lafe Overholt and another man who was obviously some kin to Overholt, though he was shorter, narrower, and in much better health. They grinned at Dave with what was meant to seem like friendliness.

"This is Lafe Overholt," the girl said, "and his brother Mark. They're

going to take you out in the swamps after your snakes today."

So that was all there was to it? These were like mountaineers, surly to all strangers, but friendly enough if you gave them a drink and time to get used to you.

Dave sat down opposite the Overholts. "Know where I can find the big ones, boys?"

"Over by Salt Run, this time yeah," Mark Overholt volunteered. "They's th'oo layin' their aigs now, an' they go down theah for the hawgs. Couldn't sell ya a passel of wild hawgs, could we, misteh? Go right well in thet circus Miss Rawley been tellin's 'bout." Their dialect, aided by the brandy, was almost unintelligible.

The girl gave him eggs and toast and coffee. "No hogs," Dave decided. "We leave that to the customers." There was no laugh. "Have some more brandy, boys."

"Hev some yourself, misteh. Don't know as we fancy this fancy likker."

Looking at the empty bottle, Dave suppressed a grin. He ate quickly, and stood up. "I'll go upstairs and get my equipment."

"'Quipment? All you need to ketch a snake's a pronged stick, misteh."

"Not these snakes," Dave said. "I want big ones. I've got a canvas bag to put them in when we get them. No use doing things the hard way when you don't have to."

As he went up the stairs he could hear a chuckle behind him. It was not the girl who had laughed.

"That's right," one of the Overholts said.

He got his canvas snake bag, and a short steel fishing rod that he could run a noose through. If you can hold a snake's head down, you have him. On second thought, he put another

flask of brandy in his pocket; it seemed to be the solution to the Overholts. He took along a needle filled with anti-venom, and a package containing two extra clips for his automatic, and went downstairs again. He carried rubber boots in his hands.

THE Overholts swung up. "S' long, Miss Rawley. Thenks foah gittin's this little job," one of them said.

The girl had not said a word since he had come down to breakfast. Just as they were leaving, though, she waved her hand and smiled. The smile was not very successful.

Well, he had nothing to fear. He was armed, and the Overholts were not, except for a fisherman's knife at Mark Overholt's belt.

"Hope you ain't skeered of 'gators, misteh," Mark said. "They's a passel of 'em in yon."

He led the way along the trail away from the hotel. As soon as they had crossed the road down which the taxi had brought Dave the day before, the ground underfoot changed, became less sandy. In a few yards they were winding among scrub palmetto, then among true palms. The Spanish moss came down from the trees far enough to scrape the top of Lafe Overholt's hat.

They were going downhill, and moss was underfoot too. And then, abruptly, they were at the edge of the swamp. Mark Overholt cut a stalk of some weed, and began to use it for a walking stick, tapping the ground ahead of him for firmness. They went along, occasionally jumping from one hummock to another, to avoid a patch of what was apparently solid ground.

Within five minutes they were completely surrounded by trailing vines and moss and gnarled short trees. It

was as though the beach and the sand were miles away. Mosquitoes descended on them in swarms, and black flies; once a spider as big as Dave's fist regarded them from its web in the branches of a live-oak.

"Theah's a snake," Lafe Overholt said. He pointed at a moccasin swimming calmly in the dark waters of the lagoon they were skirting.

"That's just a baby," Dave said.

"Sho," Mark said over his shoulder. "Jest a baby."

"Big enough to pizen yuh, though," the dour Lafe said.

Mark cried, "'Ware 'gators!" and jumped the lagoon. Under his feet as he went through the air were logs floating—big logs with moss on their back. One of them opened its mouth and snapped at Mark's heel with a click like a steel trap. It was an alligator.

Lafe tried a vine, abandoned it, found another that was strong enough to swing his ungainly body over after his brother's. Three of the 'gators snapped this time, their malevolent eyes blinking at the indignity of having their rest disturbed.

When Dave jumped, he jumped so high and so hard that the Overholts had to catch him to keep him from going headlong into a pool of rotted vegetable matter on the other side.

"Ef you cain't jump right," Lafe said, "better use a vine. Cracker's railroad."

"We's neahly to Salt Run," Mark said. "Yon's egrets. Send you to the pen for life foah killin' one of those critters." He pointed to a flight of white birds, startlingly beautiful.

"Game wardens in the swamps, eh?" Dave asked.

"Yeah, they visit us now an' again," Mark said. "You never can tell."

A CRANE whooped overhead, as they went on. So whatever fears Dave had had were groundless. The law patrolled these swamps, game wardens watched every party that came in.

At noon they came out of the swamp, or so it seemed. Ahead of them stretched a bay of some sort, fifty yards across, and twisting at both ends so that its length couldn't be estimated.

"Salt Run," Mark said. "Mought's well eat."

They sat on hummocks at the edge of the sand, and ate sandwiches that Lafe had carried.

Mark said, "Had we time, mought ketch a crab or two, and roast her."

"Gempun wants snakes," Lafe pointed out.

Mark waded Salt Run first. When Dave saw that the water scarcely reached to his knees, he pulled on the rubber boots and followed him. His feet scared up crabs and needle-fish in the clear shallow water.

On the other side, Lafe pointed. "Mought as well leave those fancy boots. Jest weigh yuh down in the swamps." His overalled legs dripped water.

Dave took off the boots, and Mark hid them under a driftwood stump.

On the other side, as soon as they had gone a hundred feet inland, the swamp closed around them again. A spring that they passed explained the vegetation; hidden springs were pouring fresh water into the swamps.

"Keep youh eyes peeled," Mark said. "See the snakes any time now."

They reached another lagoon. Mark looked up and down, then jumped. Lafe went after him, then Dave McNally got ready to jump.

Mark cried, "Snakie. Behind you, misteh."

Dave whirled. Coiled on the ground behind him was a rattler, one of the biggest he'd ever seen. But rattlers were not what he wanted. He jerked the automatic loose from its holster, and fired on the down-thrust. The rattler sprang, but it no longer had a head.

Dave put the automatic back in its holster, turned, and jumped the lagoon. He felt pretty bad; he'd collected snakes before, but he'd never gotten over his fear of them. And that had been pretty close, and plenty messy.

He said to Mark Overholt, "Not big enough. No rattler would be."

"He wants chokers," Mark said. "Follow me, misteh."

They tramped on. Dave's face felt hot and swollen from the exertion, from the damp muggy swamp air, from the mosquitoes. His head was beginning to throb from fever.

Half an hour later Mark said:

"Chokers in theah. C'mawn."

He motioned to Dave and Lafe to flank him. They went ahead in single file, putting each foot down cautiously, lest it hit quicksand.

The rays of the sinking sun were in their eyes when Mark cried:

"Choker!"

CHAPTER IV.

ABANDONED.

THE two Overholts stepped back. Dave blinked, getting out his noosed rod. He shut his eyes to get the sun out of them, opened them again, and saw the boa, if that was what he was, lying along the ground. There was no bulge in the animal's long, thick body; it had not fed lately. It was neither sleepy nor afraid; it was coming for him. The Overholts

went back another step. The snake coiled the front half of its body and sprag.

The big snakes are not poisonous; they kill by sinking their jaws into their prey, and then winding their body around until they have choked its life out.

Dave dodged, and as the big fellow went by, swung with his rod. It was a lucky cast; the noose went over the boa's head. Dave tightened with the reel, and thrust down. The boa's head went to the marshy ground, as the hunter felt a shock run up the rod that nearly tore his shoulder loose at the socket.

He yelled: "One of you get his tail! Don't let him kink."

There was no answer, and at that moment the snake acted. His body, almost independent of his head, slashed around. Dave ducked, lying nearly flat, still holding on to the rod—but even so, the snake's scaly, cold, heavy body flicked his head. Had it hit square, he thought, it would have knocked him down, certainly knocked loose his hold on the rod, possibly stunned him.

He yelled: "Give me a hand here!" There was still no answer, and he stole a look.

His guides were gone.

It was not the first time he had known heart-chilling, breath-taking fear, but it was one of the worst times. The snake's body was writhing gently; it was getting ready for another attack against this monstrous foe who held its head down.

It was a temptation for Dave McNally to pull his gun and end it there. But snakes were what he had come to Florida for, live snakes and big ones.

He shoved the butt of the rod over a live-oak limb, pulled it down again;

the snake's head went into the air. Surprised, thrown off its plan of murder by this, the charge was lost to the snake.

Before it could recover, Dave had whipped off his belt and tied the fishing rod tight against the gnarled tree trunk. The animal was left there, hanging head up, its body lashing around the trunk.

Dave dropped back, sweat covering him—cold, clammy sweat. He bawled: "Overholt! Come on back. He's tied up!"

There was no noise, no answer. The snake's wild body made thudding sounds against the tree trunk, and that was all.

HE called twice more before he realized that this had been planned. Dave McNally, the wise guy! Lured into a Florida swamp by a couple of crackers, and left here. They had meant to do this all along. That was why they had swallowed their animosity, had become suddenly friendly. It was a trap to get rid of him.

He thought of the Rawley girl, pretty, young—and somehow she seemed more horrible, more loathsome now, than the boa striking and coiling around the trunk. She had done this to him, had sent him out into this 'gator-covered, snaky swamp, this morass of quicksands and vipers—to die.

Well, he wasn't dead yet. He started up to work on the snake. He might as well accomplish what he had come for.

Something warned him, then, to turn.

Snakes often came in pairs. This one had. The female had come from some lair, seeking its mate; and she had found Dave McNally.

As he jumped back, she sprang. She sprang low, for some reason; her mouth, fangless, closed on his boot. It was not much of a grip—but instantly the long body, nearly as thick and heavy as its mate's, kinked and then swung for the choke.

Dave's hand got his gun, Dave's arm swung it down, made the butt ring against the ophidian skull twice; he never knew he had done it.

The snake dropped away, its body unslashing, striking angrily in the other direction.

It backed off a yard, small cold eyes glittering. Dave ripped a branch off a live-oak, tearing his fingers; his strength was superhuman in his fear. He jumped before the snake could charge, and his heavy heel landed on the snake's head. He struck at her lashing body with the branch, brought his other foot down to hold her neck, released the first foot, and struck again.

The snake kinked and wound around the branch. Dave felt a surge of triumph; he pulled the first of the canvas bags off his back, and threw it over the coil; he pushed the stick into the bag, and all of the snake except her head and neck went in. He jumped off the neck, kicked at the head, and then pulled the draw strings tight. He had his snake. In a way it had been ridiculously easy. . . .

He made a sailor's knot in the heavy drawstrings, and took off the other sack; he had tied them to his shoulders. His hand came down bloody, and he investigated; the branch he had torn away had skinned his hand, and he had broken the string that held the sacks to his back. But he had not known it at the time, or he could not have done it; the force he had used had driven one of the strings through his shirt and into his flesh across his shoulder.

A long, straight welt was bleeding gently on his shoulder.

He sat down on the ground and was violently sick. He had never fought harder, or called on his body for more immediate, violent effort. But he had won. He had the snake.

WHEN he could get up again, he took a swallow of his brandy, and tackled the male. Tired out from battling the tree, the big fellow did not give him much trouble. Just as the last rays of the sun disappeared, he bagged his second snake. He was ready to go back to New York now. Only he didn't know the way.

He sat down, lit a cigarette, tried to make a plan. The intelligent man makes a plan, he does not go barging off into the night looking for action. The intelligent man knows that he will be all right, that quicksands can be avoided with a stick, snakes and alligators fought back with an automatic. The intelligent man takes his fears and analyzes them, until they cease to be fears.

Of course he does. That quick thudding of Dave McNally's heart was just caused by overexertion in going through the swamps, in fighting with the boas. The sweat that pricked the roots of his hair and the back of his neck was from the heat.

He was not afraid. That shape over there was only a tree. He was not afraid of spending a night in the swamps. Not at all. His throat was dry because he needed water.

Water, that was it. He could not stay there because he had no drinking water. That was the reason he had to get out. The intelligent man would not drink swamp water and get some horrible disease just to avoid walking through a swamp at night.

Filled with relief because he had a sensible reason for doing the thing all his instincts called on him to do, he rose, blowing a last puff of cigarette smoke at the mosquitoes that were coming on with renewed vigor, now that it was dark. He tied the snake-bags to a tree-limb; they were too heavy to carry.

The sun had gone down that way. Therefore the ocean would be in the other direction. If he could find the beach, he could follow it back to the hotel. He would be all right there, though the girl had sent him to his death. He had his gun, and she would not be expecting him back.

He unclasped his big pocket knife, and started out with a cypress limb for a walking stick. He went along very slowly, and every few yards he slashed a blaze on a tree, so as to make a trail he could find back to his snakes.

IT was slow, tough going. Tough thorns and branch tips caught at his clothing. The mosquitoes and gnats swarmed over his face, nearly blinding him. Several times in the first few minutes his stick came down on nothing, water splashing, mud quaking, and he drew it back, thrust it around till it came to firm footing.

After ten minutes he seemed exhausted. He stopped, panting, wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his shirt.

He took a tiny swallow of brandy, rested a few minutes, went on. Almost instantly something brushed his face, and he leapt back in horror. Leapt back, one foot going onto a firm hummock, the other splashing into water. . . .

With the aid of his stick he righted himself. He thrust the stick out in front of him; it encountered something.

Finally he struck a match. Then he grinned, wryly, ruefully. The thing that had struck his face was no snake. It was Spanish moss, hanging from a tree limb.

But as the match burnt his fingers and he had to shake it out, he saw something else. He had come to a lagoon, and a wide one.

And he had learned something else. There were very few matches in his box.

He went ahead to the edge of the lagoon. He could jump; but how did he know he would land on solid ground? He could wade, but there might be 'gators—or worse, water moccasins, in the lagoon.

Dave McNally, tough guy, stood on the edge of that little stretch of water and was afraid.

Finally he stirred the water with his stick. No 'gators thrashed, no snakes lashed at the stick. Maybe it would be all right. He lowered himself from the bank, cautiously. All right. It was hardly to his knees. He took a step forward, then another.

His foot sank on and on. He tried to pull it back. The other foot went into the mire, too, and he was caught. The soft mud pulled him down.

Dave strangled a cry in his throat and flung himself forward. His fingers caught a feel of muddy bank; nothing to catch on there. Desperately, knowing that if he failed he was dead, he lurched forward. One hand closed on a cypress root.

Inch by inch he pulled himself from the mud. Inch by painful, throat-clogging inch. . . . It seemed an hour till he lay on the hummocky bank, gasping.

After a while he stood up, made a blaze on a tree to show where he had crossed, and went on.

Fifteen minutes later his hand brushed a tree, then went back to brush it again.

It was one of his own blazes. Since leaving the lagoon he had, in his exhaustion, traced a circle, like any tenderfoot. He, Dave McNally, who had been to Africa after tigers, to Brazil for monkeys, up the Rima on a silly expedition for white Indians, had behaved like a tenderfoot.

Someone had said, once: "The life of an explorer's safe enough. Ten to one you won't get killed. But when you've made twenty expeditions, the odds are two to one against you."

Sitting on a hummock, he started to count how many expeditions he had been on.

"This is crazy," he muttered. "Stop it, Dave, cut it out." He didn't even know he was talking out loud, didn't know anything.

Like many a man before him, he started reciting the multiplication table. At six times seven is forty-two, he suddenly grinned. And then he knew he was going to be all right. He might fall into a hole or be bitten by a snake, but he was through being scared.

He stood up, tried to get his bearings—and the moon came out.

Dave McNally punched his mosquito-swollen jaw, and said: "O. K., pal. Let's go shoot us a couple of Overholts." Because, sleeping on the beach the night before, he had seen the moon rise in the east, over the ocean, and all his directions were O. K. now.

Twenty minutes later he smelled salt air. An hour later he was floundering down Salt Run, half swimming, half walking, his automatic ludicrously strapped to the top of his head.

Salt Run ran, as it had to do, into the ocean. He climbed out at last on the beach.

CHAPTER V.

TWO SNAKES.

BEACHES are about the nicest things in the world. There is no greater pleasure in the world than walking along a beach at night, though your face is puffed to twice its natural size by mosquitoes, though one hand and one shoulder is scraped and cut, though most of your clothes have been torn off, and an oyster shell has sliced through your boot sole and slashed your foot.

The very feel of the sand working into the cut is a pleasure. Because on a beach, in the moonlight, there is a hundred feet of smooth, shining sand, and nothing can sneak up on you at all.

As he had seen the natives do in the West Indies, Dave McNally changed his course a little, and walked into the ocean, until it bathed him up to the waist. Then he held his gun high and ducked under.

He couldn't be any wetter, and the good ocean washed away the mud and cleaned out, stinging cleanly, his cuts and bites. He walked on up-grade again, and continued along the beach.

Eventually the hotel bulked darkly in the moonlight. He sat down, took a sip of brandy, inspected his gun. It seemed to be in good working condition, as nearly as he could tell without actually firing it.

His feet made no noise on the soft sand as he went up the hill towards the hotel. There was a light burning in the kitchen; he crept up and peered into the dirty, sand-scratched glass.

The two Overholts, and a third man who might well have been an Overholt, were talking to a man and woman of middle age, and from their clothes, something better than middle position.

Dave McNally could not hear what they were saying. He moved down to the next window; there was a missing pane, and he could hear.

The middle-aged man said: "I'd go away, if I could, if I had any place to go. Then they could search the swamp, and find this fellow with his neck broken. Who would there be to say how it happened?"

"Nobody," Mark Overholt said. "Anyway, they wouldn't have to find him. They's quicksands 'n' muckholes in yon, no one's never plumbed." He grinned, slyly. "'At's why I raikoned 'twould be better t' leave that second Yankee alive. He'll find him a muck-hole all by hisself."

"You're sure he won't get out, Mark?" the middle-aged man said.

"No, sir. No Yank could find his way out of that yere swamp. No, sir, Mr. Rawley."

MR. RAWLEY! Rawley, the promoter whose schemes had gone broke! The man who was supposed to have jumped off a boat! There had been someone—the taxi man—mentioned a hundred thousand dollar insurance policy. So that was what this was all about. Rawley had faked a suicide, his wife had collected the insurance, and now they lived somewhere around here, hidden by the swamps, with the Overholts to keep strangers away.

"But I haven't got any place to go," Rawley said. "I can't take a chance of being recognized. My picture was on thousands, hundreds of thousands, of folders that we sent out when we were promoting the Acres; too many people—"

Mark Overholt finished it for him: "Too many people would be pleased to see yuh in jail, misteh. I know."

Rawley flushed, and said nothing.

"Anyway," his wife said, "we couldn't do that. We can't kill Virginia, and she'd talk. She wants to leave, she hates us for leaving that second man in the swamp." The woman fluttered her hands. "But there was nothing else to do."

So the girl hadn't been in on the plot to kill him! Dave was glad, somehow.

"The snake hunter?" Mark asked.

Lafe laughed.

Dave backed away. Somebody had come in here, looking for Rawley. There must be rumors that he was still alive. The way the cab driver had frozen up, he must have believed Dave was a friend of the absconder's.

But that wasn't important. They had the girl some place, and the girl had tried to save his life. He couldn't do less for her, and anyway he wanted to find his Mannlicher. In all probability the automatic would jam when he tried to use it. Maybe she was at the Overholts. . . .

No, of course not. They would keep her in her room, upstairs. It was logical, the thing to do.

He crept around to the far end of the hotel. The sand had drifted high here; it covered all the downstairs windows. But the girl would be upstairs, and she would be at this end. At least, she had put him at the other end of the gallery, and he had not heard her.

He started up the sloping pile of sand. It shifted and spilled under his feet; he went back to the bottom almost immediately. Five minutes of struggle filled his shoes and clothing with sand, and his mind with the acceptance of failure.

That left going through the kitchen, or over the rotted front porch. The Overholts would be sure to be armed now; that meant the porch.

He got around on the front. The gone-wild trees and shrubs cast shadows, made it hard for him to see what he was doing; he stumbled over a gutted cash register, and stretched full length on the ground, swearing softly.

WHEN he finally got to the porch, he bumped into it before he saw it. He stopped instantly.

It seemed to him that he had made no more noise than a pair of elephants.

He inched up on the porch, lying flat on his belly, thinning his body out to cover as much area as possible, trying to keep from putting enough strain on any one point to go through.

He made the wall of the hotel that way. To his other troubles were now added a few splinters. His hands explored the wall above his head, feeling for a window. He found one, but it was, miraculously, intact. He crept upon the porch. Here was one that was broken, but the jagged edges of glass were still stuck in the woodwork.

He knelt, praying every moment that he would not go through the porch, and worked on the glass with his swollen hands, laying each piece beside him as he got it out. One chunk stuck, and he had to take the putty out bit by bit with his knife.

All the time he could hear the steady hum of conversation in the kitchen.

The last piece of glass came out. He put his hands on the sill, slowly hoisted his body up, letting his feet trail. He was half through now, more; there was the problem of landing inside without noise.

He managed it by letting himself slump through, landing on his shoulder with only a dull thud, then pulling his legs down on top of him.

The stairs ought to be that way, through the dark. Dave went along

slowly, pushing one ragged boot and then the other, fearful that he would upset a chair in the dark. . . .

His hand closed on the newel post. He went around it, and was on the stairs. He climbed one step, two—

The lights went on, and Mark Overholt yelled something unintelligible.

Dave made a wild scramble up the stairs.

A rifle crashed, and a bullet smacked into the splintering wood with a wicked, singing noise.

He turned, the automatic ready, the safety unthumbed. He saw Mark in the kitchen doorway, the lean Lafe behind him, the rest of them crowding through. He squeezed the .45.

And as he feared, it jammed. The automatic is no gun to fill with sand and mud.

MARK'S rifle came up again, pointing at him. Mark's face cuddled against the stock.

Dave heaved the automatic straight at the cracker. Mark fired, the rifle bullet doing something to the ceiling of the ballroom. A bloody smear became one side of Overholt's face, and he tumbled back against Lafe.

Dave McNally took the rest of the stairs in antelope leaps, yelling, "Virginia! Miss Rawley!" as he galloped along the balcony.

A man's voice bawled something from a room he had just passed.

Dave turned and flung himself against the door. It flung him back against the creaking railing. From below two rifles thundered at the same time, and dust came down on his sweating face.

He had gathered himself for another plunge at the door when he saw that it was locked, and the key left in the hole. He stopped himself in mid-

air, dropped to his knees to make as poor a target as possible, and twisted the key. He plunged into the room, yelling: "Where's that rifle? That Mannlicher?"

There was no answer. He groped for the light switch, pressed it.

Virginia Rawley was huddled in a chair, her hands tied behind her. A man was in another chair, tied hand and foot. Gagged, but the gag had slipped enough for him to have been the one who yelled at Dave.

Dave's knife tore at the cords, ripped the bandages that held the gags. "My rifle!" he said. "Damn it, where is that elephant gun?"

The girl said, foolishly, "It's the snake hunter."

"Yeah! Yeah!" Dave snapped. "Where's my gun?" Outside noises told him that the Overholts were coming up the creaking stairs.

"They've got it," the girl gasped. "And another from your suitcase."

He should have known. More to give himself time than anything else, Dave grabbed up a water pitcher and stepped onto the gallery.

Mark Overholt was half up the stairs; Lafe was still in the kitchen door.

Dave heaved the half full pitcher at Mark, and Lafe fired. The man who had been tied said, "Damn it," and sat down behind Dave.

THE heavy jug landed square. Mark Overholt's bloody face snapped back, the pitcher bounced off, went over the railing, smashed.

Mark let go of the gun, and as he jackknifed backwards, the rifle bounced into the air, landed on the steps higher than Mark had been.

Dave jumped the railing, got down

the steps, got the gun before Mark could recover. It was a .22 repeater, which explained why there had not been any more casualties.

Dave flung himself down on the floor of the gallery, poked the rifle between the rails, and took careful aim at Lafe Overholt.

Lafe, in the doorway, was using his rifle like a machine gun, spraying bullets along the gallery. It seemed to be some vermin size, too. But with a .22 it is accuracy that counts.

Dave shot slowly and easily, praying each time that he had another cartridge. On the third shot, a little round hole appeared in Lafe Overholt's head, and he went over backwards. Neither the third man nor the Rawleys had appeared.

Mark Overholt, bloody and battered, went wild then. He charged up the stairs, firing Lafe's rifle as he came; it was hell on the woodwork.

Dave picked him off at the top of the stairs.

THERE was no more disturbance. Dave went back to the room. The girl was mopping at the wounded man's bare chest. Dave pushed her aside, and bent over. Blood was oozing from a tiny hole.

"I think it missed the lungs," Dave said. "You can't be sure, though."

The girl said, "We'll have to get him to a doctor."

"So you use doctors down here?" Dave asked bitterly. "I thought maybe you just said a chant at the dark of the moon. In case you're interested, I just killed Mark and Lafe Overholt. You might say thank you; they were sitting in the kitchen getting ready to knock you off when I got there. I don't know what happened to the other man

that was there, or to your father and mother."

"They aren't my father and mother," the girl said. "My uncle and his wife. I—I didn't know my uncle was even alive. My aunt got me down here. She wanted me to sell some stocks and things. She—"

"All right, all right. Who's the boy friend here?"

"A detective from the insurance company. Weren't you looking for him?"

"No, pal," Dave said wearily. "I was looking for snakes. But nuts with that. I have to find that other cracker, also your uncle."

"I think my uncle and aunt went away." Virginia Rawley said. "And Jase Overholt has a broken shoulder. He was trying to fire off your big rifle."

Dave sat down. "O. K.," he said. "Don't talk. Let me rest. . . ."

But the girl talked on.

When she had gotten to Rawley Acres she had been somewhat alarmed. There didn't seem to be any reason why a woman like her aunt—wealthy, fond of luxury—should want to stay at a battered place like this.

Then it developed that there were some bonds cached here that should have gone to the receivers when the Acres promotion went broke. She wanted Virginia to cash them for her. The girl refused.

At this point Uncle George himself came out of the swamps, and argued with her.

But while he was doing it, the insurance detective arrived. They had captured him, tied him up. Mrs. Rawley had been against killing him. And yet . . .

They had persuaded the girl, when Dave got there, to stall him off. They

were sure he was looking for the captured insurance man.

She had said the easiest way to get rid of him was to take him to the swamps, and capture the snakes for him. Then he would have no further excuse to stay on. Her uncle's henchmen, the Overholts, had agreed—too readily.

Then, at noon that day, Jase Overholt had started going through Dave's bags. He had taken down his Mannlicher too, announced that he was going to try it out against a sand dune target.

The girl had protested that Dave would be mad if they fooled with his things, and Jase had laughed. It was then that she knew, for the first time, that they meant to leave Dave in the swamps.

She had threatened to go down for the sheriff, and they had tied her. She had heard the Mannlicher go off, and Jase screaming that it had broken his arm. They had untied her long enough to help set the arm, then tied her again and put her with the insurance dick.

She was sure they had meant to kill her.

DAVE heard the story with lack-luster eyes. He had done his best. He had done more than any two guys could be expected to, and now he had to make the six mile trek to—

A voice in the door said: "Put 'em up, all of you. There's a car comin' an' you have to—"

It was Jase Overholt. His one arm was still in a sling; but he was holding Lafe's .22 with the other, pressing it tight against his good shoulder, his finger against the trigger.

"Keep 'em up," he droned.

The girl, nervously, quickly,

screamed. Jase swiveled towards her, the gun following—and Dave dived.

As he hit the cracker around the waist, his arms tightening on the lean body, he felt the .22 barrel come down on his back. He heard the report in his ear, one of his legs went limp.

He let go, slid his locked arms higher, threw himself forward again. Jase Overholt went down backwards, his forehead striking Dave's teeth.

He kicked, hard, with his knee, trying to get the cracker's groin. He missed. He let go with his arms and groped for Jase's throat, fighting to the death, knowing this was the end.

Something crashed on his head, and then there was blackness.

Jase out with the rifle barrel, and I got both of you. I—I might have killed you. I'm so sorry."

What was left of Dave that could feel knew that the girl felt pretty good. But he disentangled himself and sat up. His head ached horribly.

One of the three men in the room wore a star. Dave said: "If this is all over, Sheriff, I have a couple of snakes in the swamps. Can you get me two men, early in the morning, to carry them out?"

The sheriff blinked and drawled, "I reckon. Yeah, it's all over, suh, thanks to you. We caught the Rawleys comin' down the beach."

"No thanks to me," Dave said crisply. "This insurance man did it all. I just happened in at the end. You hear? I can't stay here and attend any trials. I want to be on the train for New York tomorrow."

"All right, suh," the sheriff said. "Feelin' around here is that anything that you want is yours. We sure don't like that George Rawley. . . . But I reckon you won't be bound North alone." He looked cooly at Virginia.

Dave felt the top of his head gingerly. Then he smiled. "No, not alone," he muttered. "I'll have two snakes with me." He did not look at the girl.

THE END

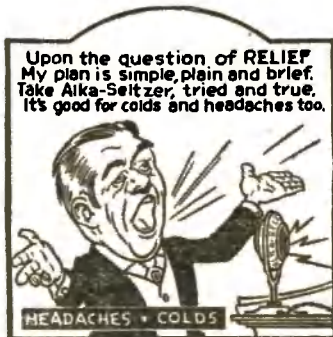
A VOICE said: "Mike, you ought to be shot. You just walked up and told them you were looking for this Rawley for the insurance company?"

"I was shot," another voice said. "You say I'll be all right?"

"All right, but unemployed."

A Florida voice said: "The circus man's comin' to. Hey, take it easy, lady."

Soft arms went around Dave's battered neck, a soft voice said: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I meant to knock



Alkalize with Alka-Seltzer AT ALL DRUGGISTS 30-60¢ SLIGHTLY MORE IN CANADA

One Gun—One Dollar

By WILLIAM E. BARRETT

The mob was rigging a hanging-bee for young Tex Corey—for he was a stranger in the friendless town and an easy gent to frame for a long line of killings!



Beginning a New Western Serial

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGER IN TOWN.

TEX COREY had just inherited a hardware store in Kansas City. "Just a danged citizen behind a counter with an apron tied around my middle," he growled disgustedly. "That's what I'm goin' to be when I start ridin' herd on that shop."

Slim Denham cocked his left eyebrow. "You don't wear an apron in a hardware store," he said.

"You might just as well wear one," Tex shrugged. "Why not?"

Slim threw up his hands. "If I've got to argue with you clear to Kaysee," he said, "this is going to be a helluva trip."

"It's going to be a helluva trip anyway. Playing nurse to a lot of traveling cattle isn't my idea of transportation."

Slim shrugged and started to deal himself a game of solitaire on a box-top. "It's cheap," he said, "and an



In a second that wagon was going to be yanked right out from under Tex Corey

heir to a hardware store that's dead broke hasn't got a kick over being the assistant of a man on a one-man job. No kick whatever . . ."

"There's men that's born to low-down jobs and there's them that never get used to them . . ." Tex answered. Then he got up and prowled to the platform. They had rattled to a stop at some forsaken station or other. Almost anything was acceptable variety from the noisy, odorous clatter of the cattle train. The constant argument with Slim had been all that made the

trip bearable. It had made many a winter cow camp bearable, too, before this. Now the range and all that it stood for was dropping behind them. This winter Slim was taking a job in the stockyards at Kansas City—and Tex Corey had inherited a Kansas City hardware store from an uncle he had never seen.

"Lowdown jobs is the only kind of jobs you ever had, yuh polecat!" Slim cut back. "If hardware storing in Kaysee is a decent job, you'll have tuh sell . . ."

Slim's voice followed Tex out the door. Corey didn't look around. "Probably nobody's danged fool enough to buy a hardware store . . ." he said.

He stepped onto a platform that was like so many others he had known; a single station lamp on a pot-hook, a building sadly in need of paint, the bawling of cattle from the loading pens. He walked to the outer edge of the illuminated circle that was the lamp's range and looked up at the sign. **BANNOCK.** It didn't mean much to him. He had a vague idea that it was the county seat of somewhere, but, as far as he was concerned, it was just a place where the train stopped.

He was turning on his heel at the platform edge when he saw two dark figures dart out from the shadow of a concealing stack of lumber and make for the long dark train. They might have been hoboes except for the way they ran and for their uncertainty once they reached the train. They stopped short and seemed undecided as to the next move. Corey grunted.

It was none of his business but it was unusual and he was bored. He crossed toward them swiftly and when they turned, startled, he put a commanding growl into his voice.

"What's the idea, you!"

No one, not even with a guilty conscience, had a right to be so startled. The taller of the two figures took the lead. He put his companion behind him and faced Corey shakily. He was only a youngster, nineteen or twenty, and dressed in gray shirt and corduroys. His face gleamed white in the overflow of illumination from the platform.

"We're not regular tramps," he said huskily. "We're just bumming our way out of town on that freight."

Corey grinned. "You don't have to be so scared about it," he chuckled. "You sure ain't regular tramps but—" he shook his head—"you're not bumming your way out of town and that's no freight. It's a cattle train."

"We've got to get out of town. We . . ."

The youngster was desperate but he was thin and none too strong and lacking in aggressiveness. Corey stood between him and the dark bulk of the train. "You'll get yourself killed, Bub. That's a fact. You've got to know how to ride these things . . ."

"We're ready to take a chance. We . . ."

For the first time, Corey got a good look past the pleading youngster to the second half of the "we." He stopped the half jocular comment that was already forming on his lips and his Stetson came off awkwardly. The second "boy" was a girl; a girl in well-worn whipcord breeches and scuffed riding boots. Corey flushed. He had been having a good time at the expense of these youngsters, but if there was a situation desperate enough to send a young girl like this to hopping trains in the dark, then his humor had been badly timed.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, "I shouldn't have been so downright comic . . ."

"You'll let us go?" The girl was looking anxiously toward the train. There was a rattling of couplings, a forlorn whistle from the locomotive. Corey's lips tightened.

He ought to be aboard right now himself and if this was really a pair of boys in a jam, he'd take a chance and get them on the train; but bringing the girl aboard would mean trouble, not only for himself but for the train crew.

"We're going to talk this over," he said grimly. "Let's go over in the lumber where you were."

"We can't. We've got to get out on that train."

"So do I . . ." Corey said.

COREY was watching the train get under way with a sort of dull wonder. These kids meant nothing to him, he was a long way from Kansas City and he had five dollars in his pocket. He had a hunch, too, that the two before him had nothing to add to his trouble-filled prospects except more trouble. But he was staying.

"Slim'll bust a cinch," he thought. "But he reckoned it was a one-man job anyhow."

He was suddenly adjusted to whatever lay ahead. He had reached decisions in just that way all his life. It was worrisome, but a man didn't have to spend half his life wondering what was going to happen next; things just happened anyway.

"Whatever's going to get you will get all three of us," he said. "Smoke?"

He held out the crumpled package of cigarettes to the boy, but was conscious of the girl's eyes fixed on him. They were deep eyes and he couldn't tell their color but he knew that her hair was coppery because there were waves of it escaping from under the soft, pressed-down hat that she wore. The boy started to take a cigarette, then stopped with a shake of his head. Corey looked at him, startled, and saw the greenish pallor in the youngster's face, the perspiration on his forehead. He was puzzled for a moment; then, in a bewildering flash, he knew.

"You kids are hungry . . ."

"No. No!" The girl's denial was

too swift, her worried glance at the boy too easy to read. Corey stepped in between them and whirled around.

"I'm hungry myself," he said. "We're going into town and have a feed . . ."

"No. We can't—really!"

It was the girl who protested now but with the same old pointless protest and it was not at all as much fun as arguing with Slim. An argument where nobody got abusive was pretty flat, Corey thought, so he took the youngsters by their elbows and walked them towards town. The girl was about a year younger than the boy; slender and rounded and with a glow about her that comes from living in open country and never from living in towns. Little by little, their story came out.

The youngsters were Bob and Nell Rariden. Their folks had been homesteaders, but they hadn't been able to stand the life. They were both dead and the kids had been trying to run an eating house in town. Some gent called Jess Gade had made Nell Rariden's life miserable with his attentions and finally had forced their eating house to the wall.

Tex Corey listened to the story quietly as sister and brother alternated in the telling. Jess Gade, it seemed, was the big bogie man of Bannock. He owned the two big gambling houses, three eating places, the dance hall and the sheriff's office. He was supposed to be hand in glove with rustlers, providing them with the means of shipping rustled stock out of Bannock.

"Judge Wilson is the only one in town that dares stand against him and the Judge can't do much without help. He's been trying to get the governor to do something, but he can't seem to get enough evidence . . ."

Bob Rariden explained, shrugging dispiritedly. They were walking the main drag now, a typical cow-town street on a night when cattle are shipped. Noise blared from the saloons and there was a tinny beat of music that located the dance hall. Sunburned, swaggering men clumped along the board sidewalks and jostled one another good naturedly. Saddle leather creaked and horses stamped nervously at the hitching racks. There was a nip to the air and a smell of snow. Tex Corey's instinct pointed his feet to the biggest place on the drag. Bob Rariden slipped his grip.

"That's Jess Gade's place, his principal place. He'll be there himself probably . . ." His voice was shaky with fear.

"All the better, Kid," he said enthusiastically. "That's where we eat. If he feels like getting tough, he wouldn't mind mussing up a place that belonged to someone else. He'll be fussy about his own spot."

"That's right, Bob. We'll eat there." The girl's chin was up. There was fear in her eyes that no man had the right to inspire but she had the courage of a thoroughbred. Her brother muttered a little, but his thin shoulders squared.

THEY entered Gade's. It was called THE SILVER DOLLAR, and the name meant something. A meal cost just that; no more and no less. It was a pretentious place for a cowtown. The saloon was next door, cut off from the eating house by a partition. The place was furnished with chairs, a long counter and tables. Corey picked a table in the corner where he could sit with his back to the wall.

The waiter who took their order

didn't speak any more than he had to, but he had nervous, ratty eyes that kept darting to the Raridens and away. Bob gulped his water when the man left the table.

"You saw how he looked at us," he whispered. "Well, he's one of Gade's men. Gade told me to get out of town. I told him where to head off about Nell."

"You did?" Tex Corey was startled. He couldn't imagine the frightened, shivering, skinny youngster telling anybody where to head in; but in the sudden look that the boy threw his sister, there was a clue to the other side of his character. There was a protective something in that look. Bob Rariden could probably nerve himself up to action in behalf of his sister that he would never take of his own accord or for himself. Corey could see the bruise, too, on the youngster's cheek, the swelled lump on his jaw. There was a story in those inconspicuous marks.

Tex Corey chewed that story over with his food. He watched the Raridens eat without appearing to do so. They were trying not to be too eager, but their hunger wouldn't wear a disguise.

A husky, flat-nosed bruiser with the map of Mexico on his face stamped noisily across the room. Everything that he wore was silver-studded; his holster, his low-top boots, the band of his sombrero. There was clatter and color and weight to him. He grinned a crooked yellow-toothed grin at people that he recognized, but the grin came off when he stopped before Corey's table. He ignored the Raridens and fastened his beady eyes on Corey. He gestured with a thick thumb.

"The boss! He's want you upstairs. Now."

There was arrogance in him—and challenge. Corey stared hard at him. "You don't see any apron on me, do you?" he asked.

The big husky seemed disconcerted. He fumbled around mentally with the apron idea and didn't connect it up. He frowned fiercely. "I say to you that the boss want you," he growled.

"Yeah." Corey rose slowly, very slowly. He was conscious of the fact that he was focussing many eyes as he stepped clear of the table. He was also conscious of the fact that his gun was with his gatherin's on the cattle train.

"Your boss, maybe," he said firmly. "But to me, he's just a guy I buy grub from. You tell him that."

The Mexican flushed as somebody in the room laughed. Corey was standing up to the six-foot bulk of him and Corey was deceptively average in build; tough and wiry but running not at all to bulk. Slim had once described his expression as "no expression at all" and it was a description that described. He didn't wear his thoughts or emotions publicly. He looked almost meek now and that was a come-on.

The Mexican made a mistake—two of them. He took time to curse and he started an annihilating blow with his right hand. Corey's left flicked out like a rattler's head and there was stinging enough to it to throw the Mex off balance. In that wobbly split second, Corey's right hand boomed through to his chin.

The husky took a vacant table down with him when he went and the clatter wakened the echoes around the four walls of the Silver Dollar. Nell Rariden gave a choked cry and there was a scraping of chairs as patrons of the eating house jumped up for a better look at the excitement. The man with

the silver trappings glanced up dazedly, cursed and came to his feet.

HIS gun was clearing as he found his balance and Corey stepped into him fast. His left snapped and then his right came over. The lad from south of the border was no faster with the gun than he had been with the gunless hand. His feet tangled when he tried to avoid the overhand right punch and when the punch landed, he dropped his gun.

No gun-toter is ever more completely licked than that.

Corey stepped back and he knew by the hushed, unnatural quiet of the Silver Dollar that the Raridens were not alone in their awe of the powers that sat the saddle in Bannock. No one whooped, no one cussed and there was no joy over a swaggering Mex bully in the dust. The faces that Tex Corey could see showed only consternation and he caught a glance or two that seemed to be already mourning the dear departed.

He looked toward his own table. Nell Rariden was whiter than the oil-cloth table-top and her big eyes were fixed on him with a blending of fear and amazement. Bob Rariden, strangely enough, was flushed, his jaw hard. He was half out of his chair.

"Better get his gun, Tex . . ." he said.

Corey shook his head. "No dice, Bob . . ."

He was thinking of the immediate future as tipped off by the seriously intent expressions of those about the room.

He wasn't thinking far into the future, but far enough to guard against the mistake of inviting a play of fire-arms.

The Mexican still lay where he had

fallen. He had gone down face first this last time and he was trying now to raise his head. It was still too heavy for him.

Suddenly the attention of the crowd shifted. Corey sensed the shift before he consciously noted any evidence. He looked up. A man who was nearly as big as the Mexican, but of a totally different type, had come quietly into the room and moved down the counter. He was standing with his hands on his hips; a black-mustached individual in a shirt of white silk, breeches of light buckskin and boots heavily inlaid with fancywork.

Corey's eyes ranged carefully up the picture of cow-town elegance and stopped when they met the eyes beneath the Stetson. They were slaty gray eyes and looking into them was like looking into an open grave.

Tex Corey needed no identification, no labels. This man had to be the boss of the town that he is in or seek another town. This, positively, was Jess Gade.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOSS OF BANNOCK.

JESS GADE'S voice was as soft as his eyes were hard. "I sent my man after you. There seems to have been some trouble." He was lounging a little in his stance and he was wearing no guns. Six or eight feet behind him and a little toward the center of the room stood a man who was wearing guns; a short, thin, wiry individual with a French cast of countenance and eyes as unblinking as an Indian's. That, of course, would be the bodyguard and Corey was satisfied with the hunch that had made him leave the Mexican's gun where it lay.

He faced the slaty eyes with his chin jutting.

"I told your man that I didn't work here," Tex explained. "He didn't believe me." He nodded briefly toward the man on the floor. "There was a bit of an argument."

"I see." Jess Gade didn't look at anyone in the room but Corey, but he was obviously aware of the others. He had an actor's trick of playing to an audience from a spot as though no audience existed. "Well, now that the argument is over, suppose that you come along to my private office!"

There was command in his voice which took any weakness out of the "suppose." Corey was feeling that command, feeling the strength of the man, the lack of support from the crowd which, although a group of strangers, was comprised of his own people. But he was not prepared to knuckle down—not even with the chill of the expressionless eyes and the silent room in his blood.

"I'm eating grub I paid for, Mister. That's all the business I've got here," he said grimly. "I'm passing through."

Gade's expression did not change. "You're not wearing a gun," he said. "You better get one."

His eyes flicked briefly to the Raridens. "I told you to get out of town *once*," he said.

He turned on his heel and walked back the way he had come. The French-looking bodyguard sifted inconspicuously after him and the Mexican paused only to glare at Corey before he dropped into line. Corey dropped into his place at the table.

"My grub's cold," he said.

He felt the eyes of the Raridens on him and he continued to be nonchalant. Inwardly, however, he felt very uncomfortable. When a man is told to

get a gun, he is being told that he is going to need one.

"You've got guts." The respect in Bob Rariden's voice brought a flush to Corey's wind-toughened face. Corey waved one hand negligently.

"So have you," he said quietly. "Has anybody else in town got any?" He looked briefly around the hushed room. "Or have they all lost theirs?"

"Judge Wilson and Tim O'Meara," Bob told him. "The judge is trying to put the skids under Gade and O'Meara is helping him; Tim O'Meara runs the livery stable."

"And that's all?"

"That's just about all. You can't blame these people around here. There's been too many shootings that looked accidental and too many wild shooting scrapes between Gade men where nobody got hit except some innocent bystander who happened to be a hombre who was in Jess Gade's way. . . ."

Bob Rariden was leaning across the table and keeping his voice pitched low, but Corey paid off again on the kid's courage. The kid hadn't even wanted to come back to town, he hadn't wanted to come to Gade's place and now he was in a worse jam than ever—with a sister to look out for besides himself. Yet he was laying the facts about Gade on the line while everyone else in the room was looking as though the mere mention of Jess Gade's name would cause an earthquake.

Nell Rariden was toying with her fork but her eyes were level and unafraid. Corey pushed his chair back. "We'll get out of here as a first move worth making," he said. "Let's go."

He was conscious of the stares, the undercurrent of interest expressed in a hum of hushed voices, as he swaggered up to the wooden coop that served the

cashier. He was none too sure about his next move in this one-man town and because he wasn't sure, it was a good time to swagger. A man with a strut looks like a man with an ace in the hole.

He hadn't quite reached the pay-off counter when something happened that added one more complication to the strange set-up Corey had stumbled into. A broad-shouldered, medium-high husky in a black sombrero lurched against him, apparently by accident.

"Pardon me to hell," he said fog-gily. "M'foot slipped . . ." He seemed to be struggling for balance and grabbed Corey hard for support. Corey tensed, in wait for a trick and the man's voice reached his ear in a ghost of a whisper that was astonishingly clear. "Loading pens. Fifteen minutes. Meet me."

It was all the happening of a second. The man straightened, jerked his sombrero low and with the exaggerated dignity of a drunk, made his way to the door. Corey didn't look after him.

If the man was on the level and a friend, then to look would be to betray—because the man assuredly wasn't drunk.

COREY laid his five dollars on the cashier's counter and waited for the change. The hard-faced man behind the counter pushed it back. "On the house," he said wearily. "A guy always gets fed before the hanging."

Corey's chin jutted and he pushed the bill forward again. "Take your three bucks, hombre," he said. "I haven't any credit here and there ain't going to be a hanging."

"That's just one of *your* ideas."

The man made change, shoved two silver dollars at Corey and shrugged.

Corey picked them up. As a goat-getting system the town was organized. He felt no chills and fever over it. They were getting him mad. He was wondering about the man in the black sombrero. There might be a lead there to a play that would spike the Gade system; spike it long enough, anyway, to let him get out of town without crawling. There was only one thing that would make the man a friend; if the man were an enemy of Gade's. There was no sense to anyone tying up to Tex Corey for his own sake. Tex Corey looked like a losing horse at the minute and a terribly bad bet for anybody's money. He turned to the Raridens.

They were out on the drag again, out in the noise and the bustle and the loud confusion. Nell Rariden was less sure of herself, a little more frightened. Bob Rariden was trying to keep his thin jaw hard.

"If they want us out, they can stage something anywhere along here," he said. "You don't know the town."

"I know enough to stick to the spots where it's hard to pull a raw play. There's an awful big crowd on the street, kid . . ."

He was thinking desperately. He couldn't admit to these kids that he didn't know what the next play would be and he didn't like to admit to himself that he wasn't even sure of the truth of what he had just said. He was going to go to the loading pens to meet a stranger in a black sombrero. If the man were a decoy and the date a trick, he wouldn't be coming back. He knew that, too. But he had the problem of putting the Raridens some place first. He could handle himself better alone.

"How much was your eating house worth, kid?"

He threw the question to make conversation, to steady the kids with some other thought than the immediate danger. Bob Rariden looked startled.

"Gosh. I don't know," he said. "We had about a thousand dollars when the Slash W bought out our stuff at the ranch. But the eating place wasn't worth that. Five hundred, maybe, if they'd let us alone."

Corey nodded. He sniffed danger in the air suddenly as he saw the gray, sharp-faced, lath-like man who was striding down the drag toward them. There was authority written all over the man and there was a star on his flapping vest. Behind him strode a blue-faced man of the short, close-coupled, tight-lipped breed. With the two walked trouble. When, they were within six feet of Corey, the man with the badge slowed. The blue-faced man dropped his hand to his holstered gun.

"I've got a warrant here for the arrest of Bob Rariden," he announced. "Deadly assault on the person o' one, Pancho. Do ye surrender peaceably or not?" The sheriff wasn't looking at Corey. He had his eyes fixed on young Rariden. The blue-faced man, however, was watching Corey. Bob Rariden looked startled.

"Me? I . . ."

"He wasn't the one that slugged that big greaser. I was . . ." Corey's fists bunched as he spoke. The sheriff threw a very wary side-glance at him out of watery, colorless eyes.

"This here warrant is sworn to," he said, "and it's all regular and proper. It says Bob Rariden. I don't know a thing about you."

The blue-faced man hadn't moved, but there was menace in him. Corey's fists relaxed. He had had a theory about the safety of numbers on the drag, but the sheriff had that problem

all solved. Tex need only make one move toward resisting an officer and the blue-faced man would start throwing lead. The warrant for Bob Rariden, of course, was a raw frame-up. He looked around desperately. Bob's chin was up and he wasn't even a memory of the frightened kid that he had been. He was the type that works best under pressure. His sister was clinging to his arm and he was patting her hand.

"Stay out, Tex," Bob said. "They can make a frame stick and they've got this one loaded. Won't do us no good to steam up now!"

"Ye coming peaceably?" The sheriff was standing in a stoop-shouldered crouch and he had the permanently sour expression of a man who has waged a losing, life-long fight with indigestion. Bob Rariden's thin shoulders straightened.

"Yes," he said. He whispered something hurriedly to his sister, patted her hand once more and stepped clear with his hands up. "No gun," he said.

Tex Corey's eyes were hot pools and he could feel his blood surging angrily. The wordless, blue-faced man was waiting grimly, showing Tex that it was no time to act upon impulse. Tex could only play waiting cards, stand back and let the lean old buzzard of a sheriff take the kid to whom he had promised protection and sock him into Jess Gade's jail. Corey's face burned with the shame of it, but this was a time when the best that he could do was—nothing. He stepped to Nell Rariden's side.

"We'll get him out," he said quietly.

There was a quiver on her lips and her eyes were moist with tears held in check. "We've got to get him out," she said. "We've got to . . ."

THEY were leading Bob Rariden away and the blue-faced man seemed disappointed as he dropped his hand from his gun. Bob Rariden did not look back. Tex Corey found his voice somewhere and it was cracked when he found it.

"Where's this Judge Wilson?" he asked grimly. "I've got to see him."

"That's my job." There was a catch in Nell Rariden's voice, too. They were walking along the drag together. The sheriff and his deputy had their crowd of curious followers and it was doubtful if anything serious could happen to the kid for a while.

"It's a job we'll do together, then . . . I got him into that mess."

She shook her head. "You don't know Judge Wilson. I'd go it better alone. He's suspicious of strangers."

Tex frowned. There was more to this Judge Wilson business than appeared on the surface. Neither of the Raridens, apparently, had gone to the judge for anything while things were tough for them and they were under orders to get out of town. The girl was going now only out of sheer necessity. Tex Corey lifted his Stetson with one hand and scratched his head thoughtfully with the curved fingers.

"I can't leave you alone in this town," he said. "I'm responsible for your brother. That's bad enough . . ."

She snapped her fingers like a man. "I'm safer alone," she said "than with either Bob or you. Here's our old eating house. I'll meet you here in an hour."

Like her brother, she came up to scratch best when the play was toughest. She had her chin high now and she was as straight as a soldier. If she was shedding tears, she was shedding them inside where they wouldn't show. Tex Corey nodded.

"I'll be here in an hour," he agreed. He watched her trim figure down the street and he pulled his Stetson brim low with a savage jerk. "She can have her Judge Wilson," he thought, "and seeing him may keep her out of mischief. But I'm riding the winners. I'm going to see Jess Gade."

CHAPTER III.

GADE'S ENEMIES.

JESS GADE sat at ease behind his big desk and pared his fingernails while Corey talked. The lean-faced bodyguard stood between Corey and the door, his arms folded, eyes sleepy. Corey's lips were a hard, straight line.

"You know as well as I know," he said, "that the kid never slugged your big gorilla. You'd look silly in court stacking that skinny kid up and saying that he did."

"Who said anything about court?" Gade raised his cold eyes briefly and Corey felt the spell of them once more as he had when he first encountered them.

"You arrested him," he said.

"I didn't. The sheriff did," Gade insisted. "I didn't see Pancho slugged, either. Maybe the kid did it. If he's a desperate character, he may try to escape . . ."

The chill eyes completed that statement. Bob Rariden was under the threat of a Mexican verdict. Gade had something in mind, perhaps Nell Rariden, and Bob was a hostage. Unless Gade got what he wanted, Bob would be let run some night and he'd be shot running. Prisoners who were shot escaping embarrassed nobody in court and told no tales.

"What's your deal?" Corey stared

across the desk grimly. Gade waved his dainty penknife.

"No deal with you," he said. "I had a deal for you once. Not now. I'm not interested in you. I can buy your kind cheap—complete with guns."

"After you've got them cheap, what have you got?"

Corey was mad and his temper flared. The flare-up seemed to amuse Gade. He waved his hand again. "Lads like Frenchy," he said.

Frenchy grinned and for a moment, he was off guard. A hunch flashed in Corey's brain and he acted with the flash. He spun and swung. Frenchy, who was a gun-fighter, had not been taking his rôle too seriously in a room with a gunless man. Corey's weighted fist crashed against his jaw.

Gade was out of his chair before Frenchy hit the floor and there was a derringer leaping from his cuff. He caught the derringer neatly as Corey turned instinctively on the balls of his feet. There was cold death in the eyes of Bannock's boss as he stared down the tiny belly-gun and Corey was never closer to eternity in his life. He grinned into the gun.

"Lads like Frenchy," Tex repeated. "It's still 'what-have-you-got'!"

His life hung there on a thread, an impulse in the brain of Jess Gade. And Gade lowered the gun.

"All right," he said. "You've got more nerve than I gave you credit for. And you didn't get as old as you are in the clothes you're wearing without knowing how to use a gun. I'll give you the proposition that you wouldn't listen to a while ago. Join up with me and take orders as you get them. Don't join up and see what happens."

Corey straightened slowly. "I reckon that I'll see what happens," he said.

They duelled silently with their wills. Corey could hear Frenchy getting up off the floor. His spine crawled with the expectation of a bullet, but he kept his eyes on Gade. Jess Gade shrugged. He lighted a cigarette and turned suddenly thoughtful. He looked at the cigarette tip rather than at Tex Corey.

"If that's how you want it," he said, "That's how you'll get it. But take a tip. Go to my enemies while you're able to go. Mack Wilson ought to be able to use you and if you want to find Mack Wilson, see Tim O'Meara at his livery stable . . ."

He stood up, waved a signal that sent Frenchy's gun back into its holster and nodded toward the door. "Vamos!" he said.

COREY felt like saying thanks. He was walking out with his life when he didn't figure ever to leave the room under his own power. Moreover, Gade had given him a straight steer about his enemies. The Raridens had named Judge Wilson and Tim O'Meara as the only ones organized against Gade. Jess Gade was sending Corey out of an iron-clad trap to those two men. Why?

The feeling of strong undercurrents was present in Bannock. A man didn't have to be a heavy thinker to figure out the fact that neither the Raridens nor Tex Corey could be very important to a man like Gade who practically owned a town. Yet Jess Gade had spent time and effort on Tex Corey for some reason instead of having the Gade-owned sheriff jail him or Gade-controlled roughnecks knock him over.

"I can't figure it," he thought, "but I ain't a figuring type. It ain't sensible to do what Gade tells me to do, but I reckon that this Judge Mack Wilson is the man I want to see . . ."

He was shaking his head solemnly as he walked the drag. He had been in his share of jams, but this one copped the prize. He was into something up to his neck and his life was in the middle like a blue chip, but he couldn't see where he figured to win anything if he won. He'd moved right into a tough game without having a stake to play for—and now he couldn't get out.

"Just tryin' to keep a couple o' kinds from getting killed—and look what happened!"

He saw the livery stable ahead and quickened his stride. There was a stout, red-cheeked man sitting in the doorway with a pipe in his mouth. His impersonal gray eyes swept over Corey. There was no expression, friendly or otherwise, on his face; but it was a face that was made to mirror emotion.

"I'm looking for Tim O'Meara."

"You're looking at him." The man's voice was as impersonal as his eyes. "What can I do for you?"

"The name's Corey. Gade's sheriff slapped a friend of mine in jail for something that I did. I want to get the kid out."

"I'm not running the jail. Tell the sheriff." O'Meara was not hostile, he was merely blunt. Corey took him as he was.

"You know how much good that would do," he said. "I went to Gade. He sent me to you. The idea is that you'll send me to Judge Wilson."

Tim O'Meara sat up straight and tapped the tobacco from his pipe. "Tell me about this," he said.

Corey told him. He started with the scene in the Silver Dollar and worked down the line. "That's how it is," he said, "and I've got to get that kid out of the calaboose before something happens to him."

O'Meara's gray eyes appraised him shrewdly. "You're maybe a damned liar," he said, "and no offense meant if you aren't one—or there's more in this than meets the eye. I'm not the one to say. You'll find Judge Wilson's place a square to your left from the next corner. It's a red brick building and there aren't many such in Bannock." He put the pipe in his pocket and stood up.

"If ye're an honest man," he said, "Mack Wilson's the man you want. If your tongue's not straight, stay away from him. Ye won't fool him a mite . . ."

Corey turned. "Thanks," he said. "That's all that I want to know."

He removed his Stetson and scratched his head thoughtfully as he stretched his legs for the red house of Judge Mack Wilson. He was getting into deep water mentally. Gade's advice was still stacking up and he was impressed with Tim O'Meara. O'Meara was the blunt, yet cautious, type of Irishman and not the type of man to be engaged in any shadow boxing or sham fights. The suspicion that Gade's enemies might be owned by Gade and kept in action as a front was just about settled. Corey didn't entertain that notion any longer.

And he still had no gun.

Corey hitched his strangely light belt. He'd been told to get a gun and there was evidence to support the notion that he'd need one—but in a country where guns are taken for granted, he didn't have an idea of how to get one. He had two dollars and no friends.

Moreover, he had slugged two tough gun-toters, Frenchy and the Mex called Pancho. As long as he remained in Bannock, there would be death in the very air that he breathed. Men

who live off their reputations as gunmen, cannot afford to overlook affronts to their dignity and their hardness.

HE had the swagger back in his walk by the time that he reached the red brick house. Judge Wilson himself opened the door; a short, dark, wiry man with nervous hands and eyes that jabbed rather than hit. He had his hand in his pocket and the outline of a gun showed through the fabric. Corey made a wide-open gesture with his own hands.

"No gun," he said. "I merely want to palaver."

"Come in." Mack Wilson's voice had a deep-chested quality that was suggestive of platform speaking. He kept his hand in the pocket with the gun. Tex had been debating mentally whether to stand alone or to mention Nell Rariden. He hadn't been able to make up his mind while he was just thinking; acting on impulse, it became no problem at all.

"Miss Rariden's probably told you part of the story . . ." he said.

Mack Wilson's eyes narrowed slightly. "Miss Rariden?"

"Didn't she just come to see you?"

"No one has been here this evening." The Judge's grip on the gun in his pocket seemed to tighten. His eyes were definitely suspicious. Corey shook his head.

Through the welter of confused thought in his mind, he felt sudden fear for Nell Rariden. He had doubted the wisdom of letting her fare forth alone and now he knew that his doubts had been justified. She hadn't been better off without the company of marked men, because she had been marked herself. If she hadn't reached Judge Wilson, then something had happened to her on the way—the arithmetic of the

situation was as simple as that. And mention of a person who hadn't shown up—particularly of a woman that hadn't shown up—was enough to make Mack Wilson fearful of a frame-up. They had entered a shelf-lined room that was all but filled with books but they were both still standing. Corey reached for a chair and sat down without asking for permission.

He knew that a seated man always looks less dangerous and he was recalling the fact that Nell Rariden had mentioned Wilson's aversion to strangers. In a town like this where he was one man against a system, Wilson probably had to be careful. Corey settled into the chair.

"You better hear my story," he said. "Maybe you can understand it better than I can."

Mack Wilson sat down reluctantly. "Be brief, please," he said. His hand remained in his pocket.

He listened gravely, then, while Corey told again of his arrival in Bannock, his eyes fixing themselves in a disconcerting stare, dropping away and darting back again to Corey's face. When Corey finished his recital with the statement of Jess Gade's advice to go to Judge Wilson through O'Meara, Wilson's forehead creased into a frown of intense concentration.

"He considered you an enemy and he warned you to get a gun—then he sent you to me?"

The Judge seemed to be struggling with the implications of that situation for several seconds, then he removed his hand from the gun pocket. "Your story is incredible," he said, "but I believe it. A man has to know Bannock to believe it. The town is incredible. The situation in the town is incredible."

He got up out of his chair and paced up and down like a platform speaker,

punctuating his speech with gestures. "I'll do what I can to free young Rariden," he went on. "I don't know what can be done. Tom Beeler is Gade's sheriff and he runs things just about the way that Gade wants them run. It's a scandal to the state. I've gone personally to the capital before and I've tried to get the interest of the governor. We need martial law in here. The county has no control over its lawless elements. The courts are a joke."

He stopped short and stabbed one finger at Corey. "Young men like yourself can be a help, can be the salvation of Bannock. If the state won't help us, we can set ourselves up against boss rule and end it. If necessary, we can fight fire with fire. . . ."

Tex Corey stirred uneasily. He could understand now why Bob Rariden hadn't taken his troubles to Judge Wilson. The man didn't talk to a man, he orated at him. And Tex Corey wasn't a bit interested in a bigger and a better Bannock. He wanted to get the Raridens to safety and lined out, he wanted to get out of town with his skin intact—and he asked nothing else from Bannock. After all, he owned a hardware store in Kansas City and he had a bunk in a bunkhouse on the Flying K. He couldn't see Bannock as an opportunity. He shook his head.

"I'm a peaceable man, Judge," he said. "I never hired out for fighting wages and . . ."

Something in Wilson's stabbing eyes stopped him. The man was grinding his clenched fists into his hips, standing still for once, with his legs spread. "You don't like the way your friends are being treated here," he said, "but you don't want to fight about it. Whose fight is it?"

Tex Corey flushed. He hadn't thought of it that way. Mack Wilson

was stabbing with his forefinger again. "You're all alike," he said, "every damned one of you. You leave the fighting to me. I've been collecting evidence against this crooked ring down here for a year. I've got it and Jess Gade knows that I've got it—affidavits, confessions, the addresses of witnesses. I've risked my life to get it and to hold it. . . . With some decent help, with co-operation from the governor, I can use what I've got. I . . ."

He broke off suddenly and his eyes leaped, startled, beyond Tex Corey. There was a sound and Corey turned. He turned right into something that slashed at him out of the doorway and he never saw what hit him. He knew only that his feet were traveling one way and his body another. The floor came up and the curtain dropped on his brain.

CHAPTER IV.

HANGING PARTY.

TEX COREY came back to consciousness with a jerk that was as abrupt as the blow that had knocked him out. The shooting stab of agony in his brain almost drove him into unconsciousness again. He was lying on his face and he pushed himself up from the carpet with an effort that brought the sweat out on his body. Somebody cursed at him and he looked up.

Tim O'Meara was shaking his fist at him and some stranger was holding O'Meara back. The livery stable man was almost sobbing in his rage. "You dirty bushwhacking murderer."

He was all but helpless in his rage, the grip of the other man preventing him from giving violent vent to it. Corey blinked. The room was crowded

with a miscellaneous collection of men from the streets outside; punchers who had ridden in with the cattle, townspeople, nesters. The lean, sour-faced sheriff was standing with his hands on his hips in a little cleared space.

In the middle of that space lay the body of Mack Wilson.

There was a pool of blood around the body and the outstretched hand gripped a Colt forty-five. Along the barrel of the Colt was a streak of blood. Corey felt his head gingerly. It was murderously sore and his fingers came away wet. His eyes went dazedly around the room and he read the verdict in the eyes that looked stonily at him.

Judge Mack Wilson was dead and the barrel of his gun said that he struck Tex Corey down before he died.

The beautiful simplicity of it was a shock. Tex Corey's brain cleared as though an ice-water sponge had been passed over it. He was wondering now why he had not seen the frame-up from the start. Mack Wilson was a menace to Jess Gade and Gade didn't want the governor's troops to clean up Bannock. Mack Wilson hadn't been as brave as he pretended. He was figuring on the fact that Gade wouldn't dare remove him. Wilson's death would bring the very thing that Gade feared.

But now, it wouldn't.

Judge Mack Wilson had been murdered, but the sheriff had caught the murderer red-handed and the room was full of witnesses to the damning evidence. There was no mystery, no excuse for state investigation. The county authorities had the situation well in hand.

Tex Corey was the goat. He had been intended as the goat all along. Gade had probably been waiting for a likely prospect who looked hard and

who had no backing. If Tex Corey had joined the gang, the result would have been the same. He'd have been given an innocent looking job that would have walked him into the same frame-up. It had been there waiting for the right man.

"I was talking to him. Somebody knocked me out from behind. I didn't see him killed. . . ."

He forced the words out. He had to voice his defense, even when he didn't expect to be believed. The stony faces and the cold, hostile faces showed that he wasn't believed. Outside, he could hear the noisy movement of people who were not able to get into the house. The lean sheriff was looking at him grimly.

"You're under arrest," he said dryly, "for the murder of Judge Mack Wilson. Anything that you say will be used against you."

He was a great stickler for rules and forms, this sheriff. Corey was standing a little unsteadily upon shaky legs. He didn't try to answer. He merely nodded—and the nod shook the sparks of agony in his brain. The sheriff let his eyes range around the crowd while his blue-faced deputy stepped up beside Corey and gripped his wrist.

"The law will take care o' this feller all right and proper," he said. "I don't want no mob vi'lence. I ain't a-goin' to stand for none."

Corey's throat felt a little dry. He hadn't got around to thinking about that yet, but it was an angle. Judge Wilson had probably been pretty popular and a crowd that would be pretty much piped down if a Gade man was accused of the murder would give free play to its feelings if the murderer were a friendless stranger.

"Come along now!"

The blue-faced deputy was starting him out through the crowd. Corey

went without protest. He saw the second gun that the sheriff had wrapped up in a handkerchief. That would be the murder gun, the gun that he was accused of having. There was a grim jest to that. He'd wanted a gun all night and now when he had one given to him, it was given without the right to touch it. He had a gun. It was his gun. And it was in the hands of the sheriff.

He was fogged. He couldn't see a way out—and in the midst of his predicament, his thoughts swung to Nell Rariden. What had happened to her? If Gade's men got her, what had they done with her?

"I played hell when I flagged those kids off that train."

HE was stumbling across the room. The faces were a blur to him until he lifted his head and one face came sharply into focus. Standing inconspicuously and without expression just inside the door was the man in the black sombrero.

That was the last straw. Out of all the blunders of a crazy night, he had to be reminded of another now. This man had asked him to meet him beside the loading pens—and Corey had forgotten. He had forgotten the very thing that might have saved him. He had needed an ally and he had passed one up. Things had happened too swiftly for him.

He was scarcely conscious of the mob through which blue face pushed him outside, scarcely conscious of the mutter, the rippling murmur of excitement. It beat about him like something heard in a dream. Several people struck at him and he scarcely felt the blows. He was numbed with the helplessness of a free man who has lived and fought and done his thinking in the

wide spaces and who finds himself suddenly penned in an unbreakable trap.

He shook himself and spat and when he felt the tightening of the blue-faced man's grip and the increased tension in the man, it helped his own spirits. A man always had a chance as long as he was capable of any movement which forced another man on guard.

Behind him, the sheriff was clearing the Wilson house of curious idlers and taking official possession. Before him loomed the jail.

There was no conversation when they checked him in. The mob was packed pretty solidly about the jail but curiosity was its principal emotion thus far. The jailer, a wizened little man with a game leg, checked him into the same cell with Bob Rariden and left him. The kid was white and nervous again. He took a look at Corey's bleeding head and his eyes darted anxiously toward the window that opened on the front of the jail.

"Tex! What happened?"

"Somebody killed Mack Wilson, kid. They've got it hung hard on me." The unsteadiness of young Rariden helped to steady Corey. He felt his confidence increasing. There had to be a way out. No man could build a trap that another man couldn't open. There had to be a weak spot, somewhere.

"My sister! Nell. Where is she?"

Corey looked gravely down at his hands. "I booped the detail there, too, kid. She wanted to go to Judge Wilson alone. I let her. She never got there. I'm sorry. Damned sorry . . . but they won't hurt her, kid. They won't dare."

He believed it himself when he said it and the belief helped. Bob Rariden believed it, too, and that was a good idea. The kid was rubbing his hands together nervously.

"Nell would be like that," he said. "She always had too much courage. I—I never had enough. . . ."

"You've got plenty, kid."

Corey walked over to the barred window. He could see half of the square before the jail and a portion of the main stem. The crowd was increasing. Word of the murder had spread with the usual speed of such news and the crowd was assembling from somewhere. It was a noisy, boisterous crowd that was bringing plenty of business to the saloon but it would not take it long to develop into an ugly crowd. There were sullen elements already at work; tight lipped men who stayed out of the saloons and who hung around the jail. These were the men who liked Mack Wilson and who really believed that Corey had killed him.

"It looks like a hanging crowd, kid!"

Corey had to exert effort to control his voice. Bob Rariden rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead. "Lynching? Gosh, no! Jess Gade couldn't let that happen, Tex. It would mean troops for sure. He can't let them, Tex. There's no danger."

Bob Rariden was talking fast, using his own arguments on himself as well as on Corey. Corey was staring somberly out through the bars. He hadn't ever seen a lynching, but this looked like his idea of the beginning of one. He saw a little knot of men forming around a red-faced rotund man and the knot grew larger by the second. Timothy O'Meara was talking—and the gift of eloquence was in the Irish.

"Gade mightn't be able to do a damned thing about this," he said.

He was thinking that the town had been pent up long enough and he was remembering those unnaturally silent men in the eating house when he had

socked the Mexican. Bannock hadn't had an outlet for its feelings. Bannock had been controlled too long. Now Bannock had a stranger who was outside of anyone's protection and who was hung with the murder of a leading citizen.

O'Meara was whipping them up. Corey could see and hear and feel the changing temper of the mob. The Irishman was down there with his soul in the job of firing this crowd with hatred. Corey knew that the man was baiting them for his blood, but he felt strangely unresentful of O'Meara. O'Meara was sincere and he believed, probably, that Corey was a hired Gade killer.

THE respectable element of the town and the boss-rule element were allies for once and against them Corey stood alone.

"I'm glad that they put us in the same cell. If they crash in!" Bob Rariden clenched his fists, his thin jaw hard. Corey threw one wondering look at him.

"You stay out of it, kid!"

His mind swung on another tangent. They had put them in the same cell. It mightn't mean a thing except that there weren't very many cells and that this was the one most generally used. It might mean, too, that Gade was figuring on mob action and that he would be just as well satisfied if something happened to Bob Rariden at the same time; something for which he couldn't be held accountable. He had, after all, warned the Raridens and that meant that something was scheduled to happen to Bob Rariden anyway. But Corey voiced none of his thoughts on the subject.

"Soldier law mightn't bother Gade a bit," he said, "with Wilson dead. If

he's got hold of Wilson's papers, they wouldn't prove anything on Gade anyway. And they can't keep soldiers in a town forever."

Bob Rariden paced the cell. "Gade won't dare let the mob do anything. He won't dare," he repeated.

Outside the voice of Bannock was becoming a menacing growl. Corey fixed his eyes on O'Meara. He couldn't hear a word of that speech, but he could imagine it. The man's gestures alone had power. Corey's heart hammered.

"Gade figures the long way," he said. "He sent me to O'Meara first. Why didn't he just tell me where to find Wilson? He wanted O'Meara to see me and remember me."

He saw the Irishman's arms sweep out in a terrific gesture that was like a man hurling a heavy weight. The crowd answered with a roar; then the human tide broke.

From the box upon which the Irishman stood, they spread in all directions; men who shouted and swore—men who set the spark of their own awakened blood lust to those groups furthest from the Irishman's voice.

Corey saw the swift scattering and swifter reforming of the mob with eyes that registered its full significance. He half turned for a second toward the pacing Bob Rariden.

"Kid," he said, "they're coming!"

Out in front of the jail, Horgan, the blue-faced deputy, faced the crowd—swearing at them, waving them back. He was joined by the sheriff, Tom Beeler, and the sheriff was gripping a gun; his shrill voice rising above the hoarse rumble of the mob-cry.

"Git on back there! Ye can't . . ."

A husky in a black shirt slapped his gun hand down and the crowd flowed over him. The blue-faced man lashed

out with both hands but did not attempt to draw his gun. The forward surge of the crowd took him back against the jail as though he were a chip swirled in the backwash and after that, Corey could see nothing but the heads and shoulders of mad, unreasoning humanity bent upon his destruction. He whirled away from the window.

"Under the bunk, kid, and keep your lip buttoned. They don't want you unless you make them sore."

"I won't do it, Tex. You stuck by me and I'm backing your play."

There was a crash as the outside door went down and the roar of the crowd swept through the corridor. Corey gripped the kid's shoulder and spun him toward the bunks along the wall.

"Get under 'em, you danged fool! Outside, you might be some help to me. You can't do any good here. . . ."

"I can try. I . . ."

"Your sister's out there some place."

It was the last appeal as he spun the kid from him and he knew that one registered. Bob Rariden had to be out of this mess for Nell Rariden's sake—and Corey couldn't get out of it.

The jail corridor was choked. Corey saw the black-shirted man who had slapped the sheriff's gun down and then he saw the red face of Tim O'Meara. Somebody had keys and the cell door clanged back. As they swarmed in, Corey swung.

He swung with his weight behind his fist and the black-shirted man went back into the wall of men behind him. Corey kept his hands up and he kept pumping. He landed three times and then the blows came at him faster than he could send them back. He tasted the salt of his own blood in his mouth and the cell wall was rough against his shoulders.

He started one more punch and a heavy hand caught it before it found a target. Other hands closed in and his muscles strained against the pressure helplessly. A hairy hand slapped him across the mouth.

The cry of the mob reduced then to the single phrase:

"Swing him!"

CHAPTER V.

THE FEEL OF A ROPE.

THE chilling cry rose full-throated about the light wagon upon which Tex Corey stood. It battered against his ear-drums as the heavy fists had battered against his body in the mad, hysterical rush from the jail to the tall tree under which the wagon stood. He tried to blink the daze out of his eyes and comprehend the fact that he was going to die.

It didn't seem real, somehow, despite the coarse rope about his neck, the cutting pressure of the thongs that bound his wrists and the shakiness of the platform beneath his feet. There were three men on the light wagon with him. One of them was shaking his shoulder and cursing at him.

"Are yuh goin' tuh confess, yuh mangy blankety blank blank?"

Corey spat. "Cut my hands loose and try to stay on the wagon with me, Big-mouth!"

There was defiance in him, flame. If they were going to kill him, they were going to do it because they were too many for him. He wasn't going to let them outgame him and he'd let them know to the very end that he had contempt for them because they rode their heavy odds over him.

"Swing him!"

The crowd was impatient, maddened,

unreasoning. The pressure of those in back was jamming the men in front against the wagon. There was no horse between the shafts. A horse's nerves wouldn't have stood this. Grim men gripped the wagon shafts and waited for a signal from the men who stood beside Tex Corey. The man who had been shaking Corey waved his hand.

"He ain't goin' to confess!" he yelled.

"Swing him!"

The other two men jumped down out of the wagon. The man in the checked shirt gripped the noose. Grim hands fought for grips on the wagon. In a few seconds that wagon was going to be yanked right out from under him and Tex Corey would be left to do his rope dance alone beneath the tree. He knew it and he couldn't believe it. He'd been worse frightened at the jail in those few moments before the mob broke in.

A FORTY-FOUR boomed suddenly above the heads of the crowd and a broad-shouldered man who had been working down close to the wagon shoved two first row men aside.

"Let go o' that noose, you!"

His voice carried clear through the dead space of silence that followed the crashing thunder of the report. Corey looked down and drew a deep breath. It was the man in the black sombrero.

For a split second the sole survivor on the wagon hesitated with the noose in his hand. The easily swayed emotions of the crowd swung from mad violence to a sort of paralyzed curiosity. All of the menace remained—but it was momentarily in suspension, like a balanced weight that can still destroy for release. If the man with the noose had had the initiative to tighten it and

and that takes only a finger pressure throw defiance at the interruption, the crowd would have swung behind him with a roar. When he hesitated, they all hesitated—and the man in the sombrero leaped into the wagon.

With a flip of his left hand, he tore the noose out of the hands of the man in the checked shirt and his snapping wrist lifted it from Corey's neck like a deftly twirled lariat. With an almost simultaneous motion, his right hand produced a gun.

"Ranger!" he boomed. "On authority of the governor of the state! This man rates a fair and decent trial."

He had lungs and he knew how to throw them behind his voice. It boomed out over the heads of the mob with thundering authority and the man stood there with his legs wide apart and his chest forward; the tough, fighting symbol of the voice.

He stopped them cold. The one word "Ranger" had magic in it. It stood for more than a man; it stood for an organization and for a tradition. The man himself stood for initiative and for courage. He was facing them all and throwing commands and he had only his tremendous confidence in himself and in what he was. The gun meant little. The sheriff had had a drawn gun and this mob had struck it down. Even the maddest of the crowd recognized that this man had more than a gun.

"I'm taking him back to the jail!"

He gripped Corey's wrist and he would have taken him back. He'd have taken him back to the jail against the very teeth of the men who had been within split seconds of killing him. But he reckoned without one man whose guts matched his own and whose temper had blazed to the white hot heat that is hatred.

There was a ripple in the human tide and into the circle about the wagon came Tim O'Meara.

Despite his age, he vaulted into the wagon as easily as the ranger had done—and he ignored the ranger's presence. When he raised one gnarled hand to the crowd there was an uneasy surge, a scattered cheer.

The ranger took one look at him and dropped his gun into its holster. He could shoot into the very mob itself with greater safety than he could threaten this man, and he knew it. Corey felt tension in the man's grip on his wrist; nervous expectancy but not fear. Tim O'Meara threw his voice to the crowd that had stopped against the ranger's.

"Did you know that there was a ranger in the town?" he roared. "Ye did not. Nobody knew it. If he was here, what was he so quiet about?" His face was red, his eyes flashing; but he was taking his time. He knew that a mob is never snapped into action. It is led to a point and then set afire with a phrase. He gave them the phrase. His eyes sweeping the crowd and his finger pointing back toward the ranger.

"He didn't protect Mack Wilson's life," he said, "but he's right on the job to protect Mack Wilson's murderer!"

That did it. The ranger knew it and Corey knew it. The roar that answered Tim O'Meara's voice was the full-throated roar of the aroused mob, the roar that had boomed about the jail and that had been stilled for a moment, but not stifled, by the bold play of the ranger. Against that, the ranger threw neither words nor guns. He snapped a handcuff link about Tex Corey's wrist and locked the link to his own. He stood with his legs braced then and threw the key into the crowd.

"They'll hang us together, guy, if they've got that much guts," he said.

The first two men were vaulting into the wagon and the ranger spilled them off with his feet. The wagon rocked to impact and mob pressure jammed the leaders against it. Somebody caught the ranger's ankle and Corey went down with him when he went.

Somewhere out in the mob there was a key that would open the fetters and eventually the key would find its way to the wagon but Corey was paying off silently on the ranger's guts once more. The man was playing desperately for time—for time which cools a mob's fever.

The longer they waited for the kill, the more chance of stopping them.

But they didn't need a rope. Corey was taking punishment from fists and feet. The ranger, one-handed, was fighting back and he was taking punishment himself. He left his gun where it was and Corey applauded that. The actual shedding of blood in this crowd would be the last needed touch to fury. . . .

There was another rift in the ranks of the mob. Somebody yelled that the key was coming up and the rift widened. It wasn't the key. Tom Beeler, the sour and lanky sheriff, fought his way to the platform with Horgan, his blue-faced deputy, at his back. His face was bleeding but he had a gun in his fist—and Horgan had two.

"Hold there! I'm backing this ranger's play. . . ."

His voice was lost in clamor and he was swept back against the wagon. Four or five more men struggled onto the packed wagon and one of the wheels gave way. There was a panic and confusion in the collapse and the mob divided away from the milling group that was dumped to the ground.

Out of that confusion, another man made his way to the wagon clearing. With Frenchy at his back, Jess Gade lined up in the little group that already included the ranger and the sheriff, the sheriff's deputy and Tex Corey. Jess Gade's men were already scattered through the crowd; breaking it up into scattered units. Jess Gade himself yelled against the subsiding clamor.

"I'm backing the ranger's play, too. Anybody think I can't do it?"

Nobody did.

A ranger, the sheriff—and Jess Gade! It was three to draw to, but never three of a kind. Against the combination there was no mob calculated to stand. This one had started its disintegration and the disintegration proceeded rapidly. The saloons caught boom business again as men who had stirred briefly and fiercely to the blood lust relaxed back into a mood for gossip and for wonder.

The wreck of a wagon lay in the clearing and there was an unused rope in the wreckage. Tex Corey went back to jail.

COREY had no clear recollection of those last few minutes. The entry of the sheriff, the collapse of the wagon and the arrival of Jess Gade had all happened within split seconds, of course, but the aftermath—the clearing of a way to the jail—had taken minutes. Corey had stumbled through those moments in a high haze.

One of the mob had received a broken leg out of the wagon crash and no one who had been on the wagon was improved in the mêlée. Corey, who had started with a gashed head, felt now that he had made a modest start. He didn't seem to have any skin left.

"Better get washed up, guy. You're a mess. . . ."

3A—21

The ranger led him to the jail wash basin, took a key from his pocket and unlocked the cuffs. The sheriff was watching him sourly. "I thought you threw that key away," he growled.

"That's what the mob thought." The ranger didn't even look around. "A man would be a plumb damn fool to throw away a key that locked him up to some strange buzzard."

Jess Gade was sitting on a desk and swinging his leg. He looked as dapper and as elegant as ever. "Pretty cute, aren't you, Ranger?"

"Not terribly." The ranger left Corey at the wash basin and turned around. He was pretty much the worse for wear himself. He didn't pay much attention to Jess Gade. He had his eyes fixed on the sheriff.

"I'm presenting my credentials if you want to see them, Beeler," he said. He slapped an envelope on the desk. "Because I'm taking over under the governor's authority to order in troops where the law is not being enforced."

"You're not troops," Gade said.

"It's me right now or troops tomorrow. Which do you want?" The ranger faced him with his chest high, his jaw jutting. Jess Gade waved his hand toward the sheriff. Tom Beeler was squinting at the ranger's papers.

"I'm sheriff o' the county," he said. "You ain't got a speck of authority unless I ask for you to come in. There's plenty o' law in this county."

The ranger didn't argue. "I'm taking over Judge Wilson's papers till the grand jury sees them," he said.

There was electric tension in the room. No one spoke loudly and no one touched a gun, but the element of strife could not have been more strongly present if they had. The sheriff was glaring at the ranger from under heavy brows.

"I didn't see no papers at Wilson's."

"You saw them and you took them and you brought them to the jail. I watched you and I followed you. I want those papers, Beeler."

Tex Corey was momentarily forgotten. The cold water had cleared his head and although he was beginning to stiffen up, he was feeling more like himself again. He stalled around with a towel and watched drama unfold.

Jess Gade was still sitting on the desk but his foot had stopped swinging. He was thoughtfully intent upon the clash between sheriff and ranger. Watching him, Corey remembered how Jess Gade had looked when Jess Gade was figuring him into a frame that had no out.

"If you've got any papers, Beeler, and this ranger has any authority," he said, "let him have them and make him sign for them. If the governor doesn't like your brand of law, let's see what his brand is like."

"Thanks, Gade." There was more mockery than gratitude in the ranger's speech. The sheriff looked startled, incredulous. He had his eyes fixed upon Gade as though for a secret signal. Gade merely nodded. The sheriff muttered something and walked across the room to the big iron safe in the corner. The ranger's teeth flashed briefly.

"Thanks again, Gade," he said.

Jess Gade waved his hand. "I've been backing you up all night," he said. "For a hell-cat ranger, you sure need a lot of help."

"I got a helpless streak in me that way." The ranger's eyes were following the lean form of the sheriff. Tom Beeler came to a stop before the safe, rested his hand upon the knob and reached for the combination. He stiffened a little and shook the knob. The safe door opened easily.

Even Gade seemed startled. He came suddenly to his feet. Beeler swung the door back, rummaged in the cluttered interior and whirled around, his eyes stabbing accusingly at Blue Horgan.

"Didn't you . . .?"

"Hell, yes!" The blue-faced man seemed shaken. He came half way across the room. "I put the papers in there when you gave them to me and . . ."

"And you didn't lock that door?"

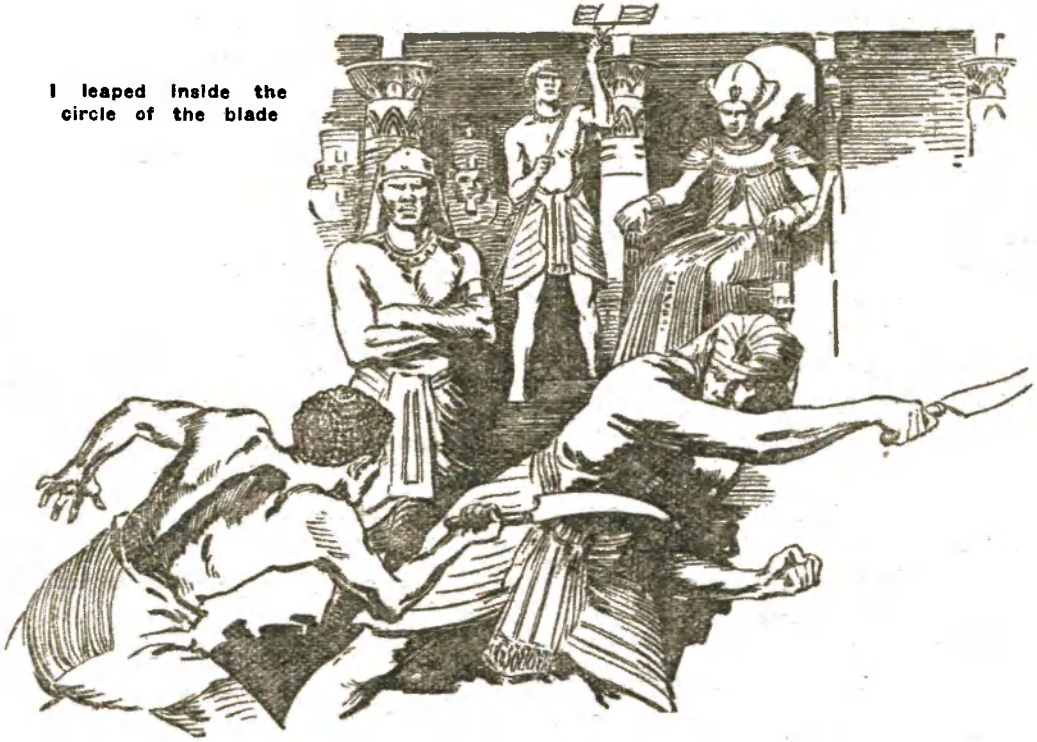
Horgan passed the back of his hand across his forehead. "The mob was charging the jail," he said. "I had to move fast. I don't know if . . ."

Tom Beeler straightened. "There ain't any papers in there now," he said grimly.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



I leaped inside the
circle of the blade



Agmar, the Hittite

By ARTHUR DANA HALL

*The mighty bowman of the Pharaoh had this choice:
death or slavery*

"ARE you afraid to die?" I whispered to the bearded Libyan whose right wrist was shackled to my left by a heavy golden chain.

We waited in an antechamber just off the feasting hall of the palace. Through the hangings that framed the doorway came glimpses of the splendor of an Egyptian court; a sight even of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Aa-Kheperu-Re himself. Our ears caught the murmur of a multitude—the sweet, far sob of cymbal, flute and

lyre. And to our nostrils—Holy Ish-tar! What torments can the reek of smoking meats bring to a hollow belly!

I used a dialect of the desert tribes, and the huge man understood my words. His eyes rolled wildly and the sweat dripped from his naked body. It would be my luck—Hittite luck—to be fettered to a coward. The stifling anteroom was jammed with a silent, bloody throng, chained two and two as the bearded one and I. Dully they stood, like cattle waiting slaughter. But I had no wish to live my span of

years as eunuch in some harem, or as grubber in the soil behind a temple wall. To die I was determined; and I would pass as a Chief of the Hittite Bowmen should pass—with honor. A warrior I had been born; and fighting I would go. Better the brief agony of many wounds than the weary wasting of years in servitude.

Our guards were all intent upon the scene within the hall. So I inched closer to the Libyan and muttered guardedly: "Listen, friend. Our lives are forfeit once we step beyond that portal. We are prisoners of war, you know. Now, we can die gloriously, as becomes a man of any nation, or we can placidly await the butcher's knife. Which do *you* choose, comrade?"

His eyes twitched more wildly and between loose lips I heard the rattle of chattering teeth.

"My plan is this," I urged, "once well within the feasting hall, we each seize sword or mace or dagger—whatever comes first to hand. Then, back to back, do we carry as many with us to hell as the gods allow. With your strapping bulk, it should be a score at least. What say you?"

Still he could not answer, and I substituted guile for reasoned argument: "You do not know the cunning of their executioners. They can flay a man alive, and keep him conscious of the awful agony all the while. You, with your great strength, will last a long, long time under such demonstrations of their art."

I STOPPED, for the fool seemed near to fainting. For all I knew, the stuff I uttered was sheerest nonsense. I have never heard of a prisoner of Egypt put to torture, and but thought to stir his sluggish mind to action. However, I had overshot the

mark, as bowman say it, and now must set to work to build him up again.

His was a simple, vacillating nature that reacts as readily to tone of voice as to thought expressed. Gradually I calmed his fear; saw the horror leave his eye and the tenseness drain from out his giant's frame. The honey in my mouth soothed the unthinking animal within him.

Once more my tactics changed. I spat a word into his beard that, through all the ages, has been the vilest name one man may call another. With a burst of oaths, I dragged the memory of his ancestors through the foulest mire. Again his eyes rolled wildly, and I lashed his soul until he writhed and foamed in rage.

When his fingers dug my throat, I strained for breath. But as I strangled thus I grinned, for I had found a way to rouse the sluggish beast.

"You dirty swine," I gasped, "all your race was spawned in filth and never shall it rise above the gutter. The best of you cannot compare in worth with the lousy dog that scratches in the market place. The very fleas upon that dog have courage of a sort, but you and all of yours know not the word."

He roared and crushed me to my knees. The guards came running then and saved my life, I think, for in his hands was the strength of many men. Cruelly were we handled—viciously; and I had a foretaste of what a slave could hope for in that heathen land. Nor did I dare strike back as yet. Fettered still and weaponless, I would have lasted but a moment. And I had no wish to die alone.

Then were the hangings drawn and a chamberlain or royal herald beckoned to our guards and whispered. And we two, the Libyan and I, were thrust

within the hall to a cleared place by a painted column.

A guard said, "Now?" The other answered, "Wait for Mentés' signal." So they left us.

All thought of dying left my mind then for a while.

I am no clod—no gaping, witless tiller of the soil—no petty merchant filled with small affairs. I have seen the courts of kings—in Khatti-land, in Syria, the Isles, and far-off Punt. But never court like this. My eyes were dazzled, senses drugged; how can I hope to paint the scene?

The room was full six hundred paces long and near as wide. Its ceiling, tinted blue and spangled thick with silvery stars, arched high, at least ten times a grown man's height. Great pillars reared their flowered heads aloft and marbles paved the walks below. And in that room a host was gaily feasting.

Near us, on a dais, stood the throne of Egypt's king. A masterpiece of carved ivory and gold, wrought most cunningly and set with jeweled figures of their gods. Pharaoh himself reclined before it on a couch; surrounding him, and blocking our clear view, were members of his household. The hall was brightly lighted by great flaming silver lamps, and far as we could see were tables of the diners. Men and women both; a strange, barbaric custom, it seemed to me, that women dined thus publicly with men.

PHARAOH was in a temper. This I gathered from the anxious mien of those who formed his suite. In particular, a giant Nubian who held the king's war bow and gilded quiver of long arrows. . . . It was the mightiest bow my eyes had ever seen. This slave—some captive prince of Kush—stood like an image carved in shining ebony,

motionless save for grotesquely rolling eyes. It was plain the man feared death—or worse. Others about the royal couch were in as sad a plight, and I chuckled in my throat at the thought that here was a despot very like all other kings, who held the lives of men as cheap compared with his own pleasure.

Of the king himself I saw but one bronzed fist that clenched and loosened fitfully upon the drapery. And then the cloud of courtiers shifted and I saw the king. A great, deep-chested man, burned almost black by sun and wind; heavy-browed and stern of face; yet young withal. His gray eyes had yet to see their thirtieth High Nile, as time is reckoned in that land. He had the build of a warrior, and my heart leaped. For here sat a king worthy to follow in battle.

He took no heed of the chatter that pulsed throughout the hall, nor notice of the tense uneasiness of those close to him. Frowning, he sat alone and stared. And ever his bronzed fist opened and clenched convulsively.

A place in front, some twenty paces deep, was cleared and here sat girls and youths with instruments—the music we had heard. It was foreign to my ear, and held a haunting rhythm that sent the pulses swinging. A child danced slowly in the circle, weaving her slender body deftly through the intricacies of the dance, and seeming to gather all the threads of light upon her small perfection.

While Pharaoh stared ahead. . . .

I nudged the Libyan at my side: "A storm is in the air, comrade. Can you feel it? We'll see the lightning—hear the thunder roll at any moment now. 'Tis best to be prepared. Bend your great strength here, thus, behind the column; twist these links that join us. Thank the gods they are but gold and

not some sterner metal. Close to the band that clasps my wrist. There—it gives!"

Pharaoh raised his hand and one knelt instantly before him. "Bring Mentés." At sound of that cold voice the chatter hushed throughout the hall.

I know the Egyptian speech, though never could I master their awkward writing. All bees and birds and animals and abstract signs and symbols. It is so with every land I ever visited for my king; my lips could form the sounds, but my eyes and hands were dumb. So, while the Libyan worked stealthily to sever our twinship, I awaited with anticipation the coming of this Mentés.

And he came leisurely, with strutting insolence, bowing right and left as if he and not the other were the king. He even stopped and chatted for a moment, keeping the master waiting. My eyes grew round with wonder, for not thus carelessly are monarchs served. The man was either very brave, or a monstrous fool, or mad.

As he approached, he made a brief obeisance to his king and stood at ease, a sneering, thin-lipped smile upon his face. It was a strong face, though weakened by excess and careless living. Beardless, as are all Egyptians, he was richly dressed, and with the jeweled collar of valor pendent on his chest. I felt a sneaking admiration for the man. He was so cool, so self-possessed; he alone of all the host assembled dared to look his master in the eyes—and smile.

They were of about the same age, this Mentés and his king. Both were drunk with the heady wine of youth and both possessed of more than normal courage. Here was a clash of wills, I guessed, that kept the court and empire in an uproar. It would be almost worth living for, a little while, to watch the conflict between these two strong men.

Sometime Pharaoh would tire of the sport; and then . . .

A HUSH lay on the hall. The king broke silence. "My lord," he said, and the wind from off the snowbound heights of Khattiland could not be colder than his voice, "we have watched for three days to congratulate you upon your safe return, and to receive report of your campaign."

"Affairs, Majesty," Mentés answered curtly. "Of a very private nature."

I held my breath; but Pharaoh chose to overlook the insolence. He nodded thoughtfully. "Most of our subjects would hold their king's affairs to outweigh the pressure of private business. But you are different, aren't you, Mentés?"

Crimson stained the noble's face and neck. "I bring you victory, tribute, slaves," he answered sullenly. "Is it not enough?"

"It is not enough. But of that later. Meanwhile, what of this tribute, these slaves?"

Mentés' arrogance returned and he swaggered. "Great treasure, Majesty; ship-loads. Grain and cattle, chariots and their horses with equipment. Suits of armor. Tents, household furniture. A silver statue, three spans high, of some god of the vile Naharin. Ivory. Vessels of the work of Keftiu. Gold and silver rings. All are now with the Chief Treasurer."

"And the slaves?"

Mentés scowled. It was plain he looked for praise—for thanks at least—instead of this scant recognition.

"The slaves are here," he answered shortly. He turned his back upon the king and signed with an angry gesture to the guards. And the king—I saw his hand grip tightly once till white showed

through the bronze; then a grim smile loosed his mouth and he reached and drained a cup of wine.

Trumpets sounded as the hangings drew back; there came the clank of chains and scuffling of weary feet and the sad, unfortunate troop filed past us. Two and two they came; some naked, some in rags, and some in bloodied finery. Princes and peasants; women and children; wounded men whose passing left great blotches on the marble. Long-haired Scythians, surly Kassites, men of my own country in peaked caps and upturned shoes. Weary and dazed by suffering and ill-handling, they stared unseeing at the splendor in that room.

Jests were thrown and muffled laughter sounded from the diners. Pharaoh, though, sat deep in moody thought, unmoving as the melancholy throng crawled by. Mentès, arms folded, glared thunder-browed at the king.

The Libyan, behind me in the shadow of the pillar, put lips to my ear and breathed, "'Tis done, Master."

THE end of the column entered the room. Two hundred and five, I counted. They were ranged against the farther wall as they passed the king; made to stand there in their suffering, forced to watch the gaiety and to smell the tantalizing odors while their own bellies knotted and writhed in hunger.

The last in the procession was a girl. She walked alone, unchained, slender body draped in mud-spattered rags. She was tall and blue-eyed; this with her white skin and flaming hair proclaimed her to be of the Amorites, a small but sturdy kingdom in the land of the Two Rivers.

Pharaoh frowned at sight of her and at his sign a soldier barred her progress. Mentès took a long stride forward

and caught her wrist. She snatched it from his grasp and glared so fiercely that a titter rippled through the room.

"No harm shall come to you, my child," said Pharaoh gently.

Mentès answered. "She knows no tongue but Hittite, Majesty. All the slaves are yours but this; she I hold as mine. A mouse, my king; a shy, white mouse. A pretty plaything, eh?"

As he spoke, his hand caressed her bare white arm. Quick as thought she slapped him on the jaw, a stinging, weighty blow that turned his dark face livid. With a snarling oath, he snatched a whip from the nearest guard and struck her.

She was at him on the instant, scratching, tearing, screaming; a red-haired, clawing fury whose nails left bloody furrows in their wake. He stumbled backward in amaze, then brought the loaded butt of the whip with a sickening crack upon her skull. She whimpered, sagged, and rolled upon the floor.

The beast in every man is close beneath the hide, I think. The pride of noble Mentès had been stung till he forgot the time, the place, remembered but his rage. He stood above the girl and lashed her quivering flesh with all his strength. The hall was in an uproar. Men stood to see and women shrieked, while Pharaoh, half-rising from his couch, signed guards to seize the madman from behind.

But I was first. I snatched a heavy goblet from a passing slave, leaped to the clear and threw it. It caught the noble Mentès on the ear and sent him sprawling.

There was reason behind my act. If I could lesson this proud Mentès and gain favor with the king of Egypt, my fortune was assured. I had seen enough to know there was no love between the

two; Pharaoh might welcome the opportunity to curb his insolence, lower his pride. I had everything to gain and nothing but my life to lose. And that was forfeit, anyway.

Guards came running, but the king stayed their blows. Mentès struggled to his feet, tugging at his sword, his eyes ablaze with the fury that enflamed him. Him, too, the king restrained, with a cold anger that matched the other's boiling wrath.

"The man is unarmed, Mentès. Touch him at your peril." There was that in Aa-Kheperu-Re's voice that stopped the heavy sword half swung.

"You take the part of this yellow-skinned slave—against *me*? You go far, Pharaoh— Give him a sword, then, and I will kill the filthy brute."

"You would fight him—a slave, and you a prince of Egypt?"

"I will kill him as one kills a dog."

Pharaoh turned to me, and our eyes locked. "Who are you?"

"Agmar, Majesty; Chief of the Hittite Bowmen."

"You speak our tongue?"

"I speak all tongues, Majesty."

Pharaoh's eyes searched mine. Mentès' impatience broke. "Enough. Give the braggart a sword."

"The whip will be enough, my lord, to lesson woman-beaters," said I.

"Silence!"

Pharaoh turned to his officers. "Userhet, see that the woman's hurts are cared for. Semnut, mark a circle on the floor before us. Ten paces across. Ramose, your sword for the Hittite. Take your places, and may the gods favor the best man."

THE king's favored officers formed about his couch. The Nubian who carried the great war bow was in the front, and grinning

hugely. Before the couch and edging the circle drawn by the Royal Butler crowded the diners, men and women both, those behind standing upon the low tables for clearer view. Mentès, bared to the waist, muscles crawling beneath his brown skin, scowled menacingly at me across the open place and fingered the hilt of his heavy sword.

My own preparations were quickly made; I had but to tighten the rags about my waist and grip the sword thrust to my hand. It was a good blade, nicely balanced. I watched the king.

Now, I know little of sword-play. Slingers and bowmen use the javelin and the dirk. Swords are for the heavy-armed, the spearmen, and the Horse. Mentès was Captain of Horse. Being of noble heritage, he had been born with a sword in his hand, as the saying goes. He had every advantage, save one: he fought in hot blood, I in cold.

Pharaoh nodded. A trumpet blared. Mentès leaped.

That first swing, had it caught, would also have been the last. It was a fearful blow; one, I judged, with which Mentès had ended many such encounters. I escaped it—give Ishtar the praise—and we circled. I knew my antagonist now: ruthless, weapon-wise, skilled in the tricks of single combat. I began to feel a sorrow for Agmar the Hittite.

Mentès leaped again. This time I was ready, met him in mid-circle. Our blades crashed in air, and locked. Chest to chest we strained, his hot breath upon my cheek—and I sneered in his face. "Beater of women," I mocked, and laughed then at his cursing. A new scheme had come to my mind. If I could rouse his anger, make him care-

less and forgetful of his skill—if I could disarm him, maim him, possibly, then all would be well. Pharaoh, then, could not do less than free me. But if I killed him, nothing—not even Holy Ishtar—could save me.

According to my plan, I played on the defensive. Indeed, the Egyptian gave me little chance for else. He pressed, in fury that I held him off so long. His blade was everywhere at once, it seemed, till all the air was filled with whirling fire and the crash of sword on sword. Whatever else he was, the man was fighter born. And fearless as a panther at the kill.

Twice he caught me—on the shoulder, then on the thigh. Scratches both—I did not feel them—but the blood that showed enraged him. He shouted loud in maddened glee and swept a blow that should have cut me clear in two. I leaped inside the circle of the blade and once again we strained there, heart to heart. I taunted him again and saw the flush of baited fury mount his neck.

And then I slipped.

I heard a shout from a thousand throats that echoed as I fell. I saw the blade drawn back to strike—the grin of fiendish joy that scarred his face. Desperately then, I strove to bring my own sword up to counter.

I swear I had no thought to kill him. He killed himself—the force of his own rush drove him full upon my point. I heard him choke. He kicked but once, and then lay still.

FOR a space of twenty breaths, perhaps, dead silence hushed the room. Small wonder; I could scarce believe the thing myself. One moment a raging, roaring, slashing fiend; the next a lump of bloodied clay.

Then fury burst. From every throat

came a yell of hate; knives were drawn, and swords. From every side the throng pressed in, urged by one impulse—vengeance on the foreigner. No friendly face—no blade to guard my back. I staggered as a javelin ripped my side; the hilt of a dagger, poorly thrown, near cracked my knee. I turned and struck—swung blindly, jabbed, and saw men fall.

And thus I gained the side of that tall black who held the king's war bow.

Him I dropped with a back-hand cut and snatched the bow and quiver. A stunning blow from an axe near beat me to my knees, but I reached the wall. Their numbers played against them. And there I cleared a space with my flailing sword, then threw it in their faces—and strung the bow.

A calmness filled my veins. A bowman, I, and in my hands a weapon such as few have ever drawn. A mighty bow, as I have said; a royal bow; a bow for men. I notched an arrow, drew to ear, and loosed.

I heard three screams as one. Three soldiers of the guard were struggling, skewered on that one long arrow! Again I drew and loosed; again; again.

The press fell back; an arrow splintered by my ear, a dagger thudded on the wall. Each time I drew, a life or two was snuffed. I should not lack company on the road to hell that night.

And then I heard the king. His voice came clear, above the clamor and the shouting. "Stop! Let be, I say. Tutu sound recall."

The mellow notes rang through the hall; arms were lowered, voices hushed; and a way was opened for the king.

He came straight toward me, all unarmed and all alone. I could have killed him; yes, the thought flashed

swiftly, "Here's noble prize and royal company on your road." But something in his eyes forbade the deed. I lowered then the bow, but kept the arrow notched, and ready.

It was wonder in his eyes that I had seen; and admiration. And when he spoke, his voice held wonder, too; and awe, and fascination. "Why did you not tell me"—his tone was rich and deep—"that you were first among the bowmen of the world?"

"Majesty!" I stammered.

He took the jeweled collar from about his neck—insignia of valor, most prized of worldly decorations—and placed it on my shoulders.

"Yes," he said, "greatest among the bowmen of the world. You are

the first to draw that bow, besides myself. A host have tried, who boasted of their strength and skill. But you alone, of all that host, have done it."

He placed his hand upon my arm in earnestness. "Agmar the Hittite, remain in Egypt. Riches shall be yours, and honor. While I live—by my own father, Ra, I swear it—no foreign foot shall tread your country's soil. The rest of all the world is ours, to plunder as we wish. Glory that the very gods will envy—that will live throughout the ages. And death, too, perhaps."

"It is no shame to die, my king," I answered simply, "so that the gods are pleased with the manner of one's passing."

And I knelt and kissed his sandal.

THE END.

When Oil Was Just a Drug

TODAY we'd be in a bad way without petroleum and its products. It has a thousand uses. It makes cars go and millionaires to buy them. But once, in this country, it was just a drug—and a drug on the market as well!

That wasn't so long ago, either. . . . Back in 1814, somebody bored a well for brine down in Kentucky. Instead of getting brine, they got a lot of black oily stuff. The well was abandoned. . . . Ten years later, also in Kentucky, another well was drilled for brine and the same thing happened. This time the flow of petroleum was so great that people came from miles around to see it. They thought it was pretty wonderful, but didn't see anything to do about it except look at it. The owner did bottle a few barrels, but that was all. He marked his bottles "American Oil" and sold it here and abroad as a liniment. The rest he let run back into the ground.

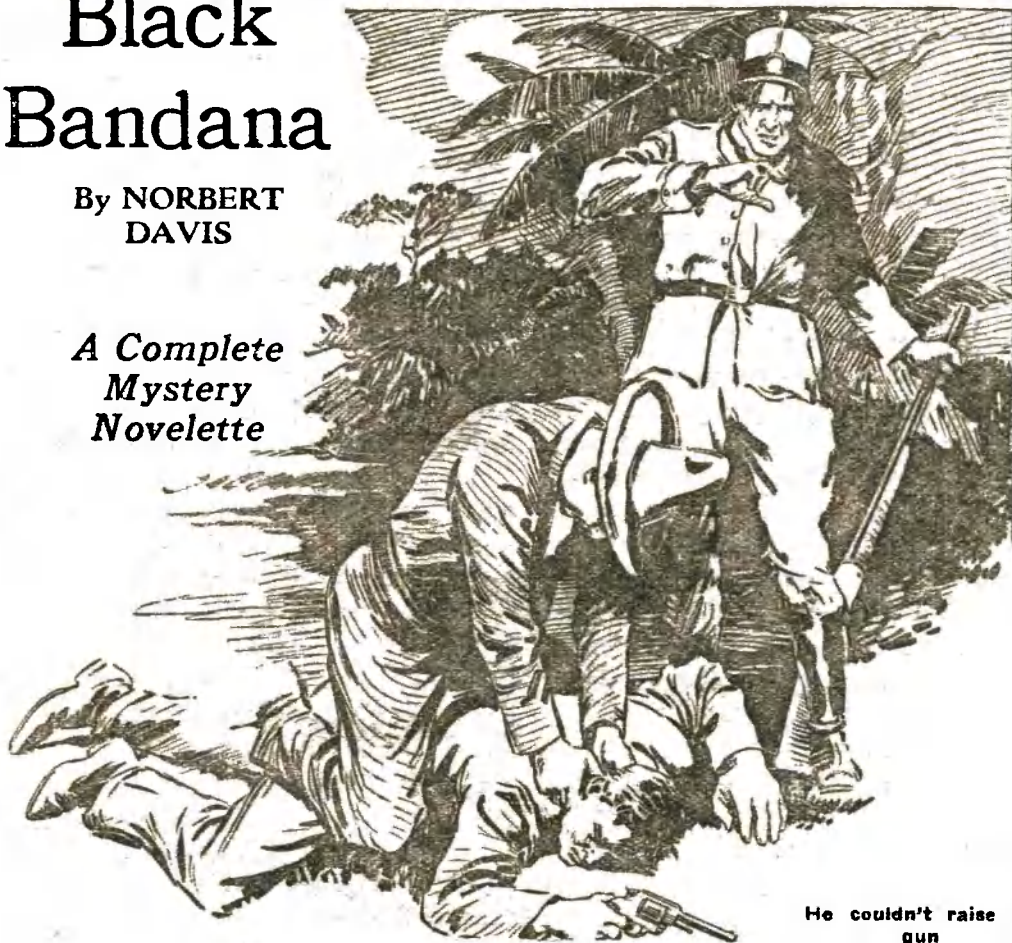
It wasn't until around 1850 that Americans began to discover they had something worth while in this black liquid that gushed from the ground. Meanwhile, a couple of Englishmen named Binney and Young had gotten together and started to manufacture illuminating oil from petroleum discovered in Derbyshire. The demand for their product became so great that Americans heard about it. Chemists made tests—and soon wells were being drilled for something besides brine.

—Warren Padgett.

Black Bandana

By NORBERT DAVIS

*A Complete
Mystery
Novelette*



He couldn't raise his gun

El Diablo Negro had a strange and intricate way of saving his diamond hoard from the revolutionists

CHAPTER I.

THE DIAMONDS.

THE barroom of the New Grand International Hotel—accommodations of the highest class and rates most reasonable—was long and dim in a shadowed low-beamed ceiling. Sunlight slid through the iron gratings on the high, narrow windows and cut bright waffle-like patterns on the stained floor. Big bluebottle flies sailed around and around over the

small wire-legged tables, making a lazy, droning buzz.

Señor Mendigo, the owner and proprietor of the hotel, was sitting in the place of honor behind his own bar. He was a skinny little man with three parallel streaks of greasy black hair combed carefully over the top of his bald head. He was so cross-eyed that both pupils focused on a point about an inch in front of his long, inquisitive nose. Mendigo was carefully polishing his finger nails, using the towel he

wiped the glasses with as a buffer, when Carson stopped in the side door that led to the hotel's inner patio.

"Ah!" he said cordially, seeing Carson. "Señor!"

Carson walked quietly across to the bar. He was a little over medium height, but so thick-set that he seemed shorter. His shoulders were wide, powerfully sloping, his arms long and thickly muscled. He had deep-set gray eyes that were always narrowed warily. His face was very darkly tanned.

"The clothes!" Mendigo exclaimed triumphantly. "They fit so beautiful, hey?"

Carson held up one arm. The sleeve of the white duck coat came down only to halfway between his elbow and wrist. He moved his broad shoulders a little, and a seam groaned in straining protest.

"Very beautiful," he agreed. "Who'd they belong to—a midget?"

Mendigo tapped his own meager chest proudly. "No. Me! I got two suits of clothes. Two! See?" He held up two fingers to illustrate his affluence.

"Marvelous!" Carson said. "How about *my* clothes?"

Mendigo shook his head regretfully. "Very bad. I have to throw them away. All muddy."

Carson stared at him. "You mean you threw my clothes away just because they were muddy?"

Mendigo nodded calmly. "Oh, yes."

"Did you ever think of washing them out?"

"She's bad, that washing," Mendigo said. "She's spoil clothes to do that."

"So it's better to throw them away?"

"Oh, yes."

Carson sighed wearily. "Well, live and learn." He took a stubby pipe out

of his pocket, began to fill it carefully out of an oilcloth tobacco pouch.

"You don't got more clothes?" Mendigo inquired, watching him.

Carson shook his head. "Nope."

"You don't got any baggage at all?"

Carson lit a match and sucked flame into the scarred pipe bowl. "Nope. Want me to pay in advance?"

"No, no!" Mendigo said, looking shocked at the very thought. "No, no! Of a certainty!" He leaned close and lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. "Ask for payment in advance when I know the Señor could buy the whole hotel with one of the diamonds?. Such a foolishness!"

Carson blew out the match with a sudden puff of breath. "Diamonds?" he repeated blankly.

MENDIGO smirked at him and then winked very mysteriously, holding one finger over his lips.

He went down to the end of the bar and looked carefully around the dimness of the room. The only other person in sight was an Indian woman sitting on the floor near the front door. In the shadows she was a squat bundle of gaudily colored cotton cloth. There were a few dusty wilted bunches of jungle flowers on the floor beside her. Her multiple skirts had slipped aside a little, showing one bare, flat foot and the thickly muscled brown calf of her leg. A fold of her shawl was thrown over her face.

"*Hola!*" Mendigo yelled at her fiercely, leaning far out over the bar and pointing a skinny finger. "Out! Go! Begone from this place!"

"Leave her alone," Carson said. "She's all right."

Mendigo moved his shoulders up to his ears and let them slide back to nor-

mal again. "I was only thinking of the Señor's safety. She is the nuisance, anyway. She just sits there, and everybody that comes in has to walk around her. No one in their senses would want to buy any of those old weeds she thinks are flowers. She has not sold one since she has been here, and she has no money."

"Maybe she's hungry," Carson said.

Mendigo moved his shoulders again. "One hopes so. One hopes she will get hungry enough to go back where she came from. *Indios*, they are no good."

Carson felt in his pockets, finally dug up one battered silver coin. It was all he had. He flipped it glinting in the air, caught it in his palm. He walked over to the woman, knelt down and selected one of the freshest flowers. Dropping the battered coin in the woman's lap, he put the flower in the buttonhole in the lapel of the coat.

One of the woman's brown hands moved up to the shawl that covered her face, pulled it aside. She looked silently up at Carson. Her face was square, firm-set, smoothly flat. Her eyes were a dull, soft black, widely expressionless. She didn't say anything, made no move at all, except after a moment to draw the shawl across her face again.

"See?" Mendigo said. "No gratitude. Not even the thanks."

Carson walked back to the bar. "She probably can't speak Spanish or English. You were saying something about diamonds?"

"*Sssh!*" Mendigo hissed, nodding warningly at the woman. "She pretends she cannot understand, but one never knows about these *Indios*. They are of the most treacherous."

"Diamonds," Carson repeated patiently.

"Diamonds!" said Mendigo. "Ah, the beautiful diamonds! Glittering like the white fire! The Señor carries them in a money belt around his waist, no?"

"No," said Carson flatly.

Mendigo nodded, grinning slyly. "Fear not, Señor! Mendigo can be trusted! Not a word have I breathed since I have known of the Señor's perilous mission!"

"Mission?" Carson repeated. "Perilous?"

"Yes!" Mendigo hissed dramatically. "*El Diablo Negro* has many enemies—fierce and murderous ones! But you are safe here, Señor!"

"I'm beginning to doubt it," Carson said frankly. "Now would you mind explaining just what you are talking about?"

"Mendigo knows all! You see, Señor, sitting here in his New Grand International Hotel, many rumors come to the ears of Mendigo, who listens to all with the great care and never speaks."

"I noticed how little you talk," Carson said. "You're practically a sphinx, aren't you?"

"Yes!" Mendigo said. "Yes! Never a word does Mendigo say! Sitting here silent, Mendigo heard of the terrible revolution in Panvuelo, whose border is only the few kilometers away. Mendigo heard that the president of Panvuelo, Pedro Guterrez, he who is known as *El Diablo Negro*—was overthrown and forced to flee for his very life with his enemies at his heels, anxious to stand him up against the wall. But *El Diablo Negro* was always the clever one! He escaped his enemies! And *El Diablo Negro* was always the far-sighted one, too. Many are the rumors Mendigo has heard of the diamonds *El Diablo Negro* was hoarding against the day when his ungrateful

subjects would rise in wrath against his benevolent rule!"

"I've heard a few rumors about Pedro Guterrez and his benevolent rule, too," Carson said. "But not the same ones you have. I heard that he got himself elected president as the defender of the poor people and then promptly proceeded to load them with taxes until their backs broke. I've heard that he stayed in power by stuffing the ballot boxes regularly and shooting everyone he could find with nerve enough to vote against him. He kept a couple of firing squads busy all the time. The blank bandana handkerchiefs that they used to blindfold their victims were his trade-mark. He was a black-hearted murdering rat, and it's too bad those poor devils he misruled for so long didn't catch him and stand him against a wall and give him a dose of his own medicine."

Mendigo stared wide-eyed. "You—you say that about him?" Then he chuckled, nodding. "Ah, but I see! You are the clever one, Señor! Who would suspect you of being his employee when you speak that way?"

"His employee!" Carson exclaimed blankly. "Me?"

"You," said Mendigo. "Ah, I knew it from the very first, Señor! You see, the rumors had come to the silent Mendigo. The rumors said that *El Diablo Negro* did not wish to carry his diamonds with him when he fled, because, you comprehend, if he was caught, he could use them to buy his way free again. So the clever *El Diablo Negro* gave them to a messenger he could trust to get them out of the country for him. The little rumors whispered to Mendigo that the messenger was an *Americano*. And then when Mendigo hears of a whole company of the rebel army of Panvuelo chasing an *Ameri-*

cano to the very border of this country—then Mendigo adds the two and the two!"

"I see," Carson said quietly. "I wondered why those birds were chasing me. They didn't give me a chance to ask. They started shooting as soon as they laid eyes on me and kept it up every time they caught a glimpse from then on."

"Surely," said Mendigo. "*El Diablo Negro's* diamonds are worth many hundreds of thousands of pesos. Who would not shoot for the chance to have them?"

"I wouldn't," Carson said. "I never saw them, and I don't want to. I'm a mining engineer, after a fashion, and I'm trying to make a living digging things out of the ground."

Mendigo winked knowingly. "The Señor is very wise. Trust no one with your secret, Señor!"

CHAPTER II.

THE GIRL.

CARSON stared at him for a long moment, scowling, and then he turned on his heel and walked back across the barroom to the door through which he had entered. He went out into the whitely bright sun glare of the patio. A red and green cockatoo in a wicker cage screeched at him insolently. Carson went up stone steps to the balcony that circled the inside of the patio, walked around it to the door of his room. It was a small, white-walled cubbyhole furnished with one rickety chair, a narrow bed with a lumpy mattress and a ragged mosquito net stretched on a rack over it.

Carson leaned over the bed, fumbled around under the covers at the foot.

He brought out his hand holding a .45 Colt revolver. It was a gun that had seen much service. The bluing was worn off the cylinder and short barrel in thin streaks where holsters had rubbed it. The checkered walnut grips were stained with sweat, chipped and battered from numerous blows.

Carson flipped out the cylinder with a quick, casual twist of his wrist, ejected the cartridges in it on the bed. He reached under the covers again, found an unopened box of cartridges.

He smiled wryly to himself, weighing the gun in one hand, the cartridges in the other. They were his total available resources at the moment.

He opened the box of cartridges, loaded the big Colt, slid it into the waistband of Mendigo's trousers. Mendigo's coat fitted him so badly that the bulge it made was unnoticeable when he stood up. He dumped the rest of the cartridges into his pocket, walked over to the window and tossed the empty box outside.

The jungle stretched away from the back of the hotel in one thick, unbroken green mat as far as the eye could see. There was nothing else—just that hungry livid green. Carson watched it, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe.

Two weeks ago he had been prospecting in the Panvuelo back country. He had owned plenty of food and equipment, an expensive outfit. And then, without a word of warning, the detachment of rebel soldiers had descended upon him, stolen or destroyed his outfit, hunted him through the jungle like a wild beast. All because of some wild rumor that he was carrying *El Diablo Negro's* hoarded diamonds.

Carson wasn't particularly resentful about it, or even very amazed. He had been prospecting through Central

America for ten years. He had learned long since that anything can happen there, and quite frequently does. He took what came and made the best of it. He figured now, and quite rightly, that he was lucky to have gotten out of Panvuelo with his life.

He stepped to the other side of the window, leaned against the wall. From here he could see the rest of the town of *El Hilo*. A scattered litter of flat adobe buildings, silent and dusty and dead against the living green of the jungle, with the heat waves rising in slow wriggling shimmers. Further on there was the white curving sand of the beach, incredibly glittering and bright against the slow heaving green of the ocean.

There was no reason for *El Hilo*. It served no purpose at all. It sat there cooking in its own heat, visited once in a while by fruit steamers plying up and down the coast, sleeping with the jungle waiting around it, ageless and untiring.

The cockatoo in the patio screeched suddenly on the obscenely jangling note it reserved for those who disturbed its privacy. Carson turned away from the window, walked quietly out on the balcony. He stood looking down into the contrasting glare and shadow.

FOR a moment he couldn't see anything, and then he noticed the white blur of her dress moving a little. She was flattened against the wall under the overhang of the balcony on the opposite side of the patio, half hidden by the thick, intertwining vines. She moved again, very cautiously and silently, as Carson watched her, sliding carefully along the wall. Her profile was a pale, neat etching against the dark of the adobe, and her slender

body was rigidly tense. She was watching the blue-painted door at the back end of the patio, evidently the one through which she had entered.

The door was closed now, but Carson heard the latch click as he turned his head to look at it. The cockatoo had stopped screeching and was watching with beady-eyed interest, tilting its green head as it looked first at the door and then at the girl.

She had stopped moving when the latch clicked, and for a second there was no motion or sound anywhere. Then the hinges on the blue door creaked, and it moved a little inward.

After a second Carson could make out the face in the shadow behind it. A thick lumpish smear of flesh with eyes that were black narrowed slits under the down-turned brim of a straw sombrero. The face moved a little from side to side as its owner stared around the patio. The slitted eyes searched carefully through the shadows, found the girl. A hand with long rope-like fingers slid around the edge of the blue door, pulled it further open.

Carson deliberately scraped his foot on the floor of the balcony. The girl whirled against the wall, staring up at him. The lumpish face behind the blue door turned to stare, too, slowly. The slitted eyes studied Carson carefully, dispassionately, and then very slowly the blue door closed again and hid the face.

Carson scratched a match on the wall, applied it to his pipe. He already regretted that he had interfered. He had never seen either the girl or the man before. The whole affair was none of his business. He had troubles enough of his own at present without going out of his way to assume some one else's. He pretended now that he hadn't seen the girl. He walked down

the stairs, started straight across the patio toward the barroom without looking in her direction. She waited until he was almost to the door and then said softly:

"Señor."

Carson turned around slowly. "Yes?"

She walked with a peculiarly effortless grace. As she came closer to him Carson saw that she was even smaller than he had thought, but not so young. Her skin was clear, softly olive, and her features were thin, aquiline, faintly cruel. Her eyes were wide, slanting just a little, a deep-blue-green. She was beautiful in a calculating, cat-like way.

"Thank you." She spoke English with a slight accent that was not Spanish.

Carson shrugged. "For what?"

She made no effort to explain, watching him thoughtfully. "You are Señor Carson?" she asked at last.

Carson nodded casually. "Yes."

"I am the Countess di Redozi."

"Glad to meet you," Carson said.

She smiled a little, meaningly. "You don't know me?"

"No," said Carson.

She kept on smiling, and then she moved her slim shoulders in a casual little shrug. "Then perhaps you would refuse to do a favor for this person you do not know?"

"Perhaps I would," Carson said. "And then again, perhaps I wouldn't. It depends on what it is."

"Will you walk with me to the place I am staying?"

"Why?" Carson asked.

"Because of the man who waits outside for me."

"The same one who just looked in through the door?" Carson inquired.

She nodded easily. "That one. It would be best for both of us—and for

him—if you went along with me, I think.”

“I don’t know why it should be,” Carson said. “But I was going to take a walk anyway. Do you want to go out the front or the back?”

“The back, if you please. It is closer.”

THEY went across to the blue door, and Carson kicked it back with a quick trust of his foot. There was nothing in sight except the blank green wall of the jungle and a faint path that wiggled darkly off at an angle away from the hotel.

“That way,” she said, pointing along the path.

She started off at her easy, graceful walk. Carson stood in the arched doorway for a second, listening, looking around in the close knit vegetation, and then followed her. The path made a quick turn, and then the jungle closed in silently all around them and there was no sign of any other living thing than themselves.

“Have you seen him yet?” she asked softly.

“No,” Carson said.

“You were to meet him here?”

“No,” Carson said stolidly.

“He couldn’t tell me all his plans,” she said. “He was wounded, and I had to leave him with friends while I came to meet you.”

“You’d better not say any more,” Carson told her. “I think you’re making a mistake.”

“No. But I will not say any more.”

The narrow path turned again, slanted off to the left. There was a clearing ahead now, like a flat scar cut in the jungle and half healed over again. The creeping green vines had begun to crawl across the bare ground in a thick mat, to feel their groping

way up the crumbling adobe walls of the house whose empty windows stared out at them—lifeless, dusty, deserted.

She went straight across the clearing, stopped in front of the moldy, iron-studded door. “This is where I am staying.”

“All right,” said Carson. “Then I’ll be saying good-by.”

He turned away and started back the way he had come on the narrow path.

“Señor Carson,” she said softly.

Carson stopped and turned around. “What—”

She moved the small automatic she was holding in her right hand, and the sun caught the nickel plating on the stubby barrel and made a bright, jumping glitter.

“I will take the diamonds now. He wants me to bring them to him. He said that you could keep any one that you chose for your pay. Give me the rest.”

“I told you you were making a mistake,” Carson said. “I don’t have any diamonds that belong to *El Diablo Negro*. I never saw the man in my life, and I hope I never do. I don’t know how this rumor that I’m carrying his diamonds for him got started, but it’s caused me plenty of trouble, and I’m getting tired of it.”

“Give me the diamonds, please.”

Carson shrugged wearily. “I tell you I haven’t got any diamonds.”

She smiled, and there was thin, calculating cruelty in her blue green eyes. “Señor, it is quite useless to lie. I know you have his diamonds. Pedro Guitierrez told me that he gave them to you. He told me that himself, and he sent me to get them from you. No one lives in this house, Señor. Neither I nor anyone else. There is no one close enough to hear a shot. Mendigo

told me you were carrying the diamonds in a money belt. It would be best for you to give them to me—now.”

“I haven’t—”

She raised the automatic casually, and the safety lever made a quiet little click that had a deadly note of finality about it.

“Now,” she repeated, without raising her voice.

Carson’s lips tightened thinly. He was too far away to reach her before she could shoot, and yet close enough so that she couldn’t miss.

“Listen to me,” he said quickly, and then he saw the moldy iron-studded door in back of her move a little.

There was no noise. No click of the latch or creak from the rusty hinges. Just the door moving back a little and showing the black, shadowed gloom of the hallway of the deserted house—showing that and nothing more, until two hands came around the edge of the door very quietly. The hands were incased in white cotton gloves, with long floppy fingers that hung horribly lax. They looked strangely like the hands of a scarecrow.

The hands came forward out of the blackness of the hallway and closed their floppy fingers around the soft throat of the Countess di Redozi. Her face twisted terribly, and she had time to utter one short, strangled cry. And then the hands jerked her back through the doorway, and the big door slammed with a thunderous boom that echoed and reëchoed flatly.

CARSON stood there for a long second, staring at the closed door with a blank, unbelieving amazement. He could feel the sweat wetly cold on his forehead and his throat was thick and stiff when he

swallowed. He took a deep breath and drew the .45 out of his waist band. The checkered butt was coldly comforting gripped close in the palm of his hand.

The sun had gone down behind the green rim of the jungle now, and shadows made a black lattice work across the face of the door. The latch moved easily under Carson’s fingers. He pushed the door back with a quick shove of his left hand, stepped sideways in the same instant with the big revolver leveled hip high.

The door swung back silently, bumped into the wall with a heavy thud. A long slanting ray from the sun came into the dark hallway over Carson’s shoulder and touched the Countess di Redozi’s thin, faintly cruel face like a tiny questing spotlight. She was lying on her back on the dusty floor, and her neck was twisted sideways until her sleek head rested flat against her shoulder.

There had been perhaps a ten-second interval between the time the door slammed and the time Carson opened it again. In that time, the owner of the hands with the long floppy fingers had broken the Countess di Redozi’s neck as easily as snapping a dried stick and laid her very carefully down on the floor. She hadn’t had a chance to struggle at all. Her clothes weren’t even mussed. The small nickel-plated automatic was still gripped in her hand.

There was no one else in the hall. There was no sign that there ever had been anyone else in it. The dust was thick on the walls, grayishly moist, untouched, and Carson’s heavy breathing sounded startlingly loud in his own ears.

“Hello,” he said.

His voice came back to him in a hundred slyly whispering echoes, but there

was no other sound. Carson walked slowly down the narrow arched hallway. Instinctively he crouched a little, with the revolver held out in front of him.

He came out into the gray shadowed gloom of what had been the inner patio of the house. It was a crumbling ruin now with the moss growing like green crooked snakes in the cracked walls. Carson advanced slowly toward the center of the patio.

"Hello," he said again.

The only answer was the dull boom of the outer door closing. The sound hit Carson with the force of a physical blow. He whirled and ran back through the door by which he had entered. The arched hallway was dark now, and cold. Carson's lips felt dry, thick against his teeth, and he could feel the heavy thud of his own pulse pounding in his ears.

He slid along in the darkness with his back against the cold roughness of the wall, feeling out ahead of him with his left hand. His right hand held the .45, cocked, flat against his stomach, where no sudden blow could knock it out of his grasp.

His left hand touched the studded panels of the door, found the latch. He swung the door back toward him, stifening warily. The jungle twilight rushed in softly and showed him the empty hall, showed him the hall completely empty except for himself. The Countess di Redozì's body was no longer lying on the dusty floor.

Carson's breath, suddenly expelled, made a little whistling sound in his nostrils. He slid through the door, out into the open. The clearing looked just as it had before—a little darker now with the twilight drawing a gray, mysterious veil over it. Carson backed slowly away from the house, watching

it. He didn't relax until he reached the path by which he and the Countess had entered and the walls of the jungle closed in around him.

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK BANDANA.

IT was completely dark by the time Carson got back to the New Grand International Hotel. He came in through the blue-painted door at the back of the patio, went across to the entrance to the barroom. He was inside the room before he noticed that there was anything wrong, and he stopped short then, sliding his hand inside the ill-fitting coat.

The man standing at the bar turned around slowly, and the brilliance of the kerosene lamp hanging low over his head glittered brightly sleek on his leather boots, on the military belt across his chest and the twin rows of brass buttons down his olive drab coat. He was a small man, stiffly erect. His military cap was tipped a little to one side, giving him a faintly jaunty air. He had a blandly round, impassive face, a black needle-pointed mustache.

"*Buenas noches, Señor,*" he said amiably, and then in precise English: "Good evening, sir. You are the American—Mr. Carson—who is registered at the hotel?"

Carson nodded warily. "Yes."

The man clicked his heels and bowed. "I am Captain Garcia of the *Guardia Civil*. Will you drink with me?"

"With pleasure," Carson said promptly.

There was a bottle on the bar in front of Garcia, and he was holding a glass in his hand. He reached across to the shelf in back of the bar, got another glass.

"Brandy?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "I'm sorry there isn't a wider choice, but I am not very expert at mixing drinks."

"Brandy is fine," Carson told him. "Where's Mendigo?"

Garcia nodded his head sideways absently. "There." He carefully poured liquor in Carson's glass, handed it to him.

"Where did you say—" Carson stopped short, and his hand jerked suddenly, spilling a little of the brandy out of his glass.

At its far end, the bar made a sharp angle. Mendigo was lying in the shadow under it, close against the wall in a crumpled motionless heap. His face was turned up to the light, and his crossed eyes stared in glazed, frozen amazement. His whole shirt front was a sodden red, and there was a black spreading stain under his slight body.

"He's—he's dead?" Carson asked thickly.

"Yes," Garcia said. "Quite dead." He raised his glass. "To your very good health, sir."

Carson drank automatically. The liquor burned in his throat, spread a slow, creeping warmth in his stomach.

"What—happened?"

Garcia shrugged. "Suicide. Very regrettable. Probably financial worries drove him to it. I understand the hotel was not doing very well. At present you are its only guest."

"Where is the weapon?"

"I do not know," Garcia said indifferently. "Someone must have removed it. Some thievish peon, probably."

Carson put his glass down on the bar, stepped closer to the limp body. There was something wrong about the face—the mouth. . . . Carson saw that the mouth was open, gaping wide, and

that a black silk handkerchief had been stuffed into it like a gag. Carson swallowed hard.

"That—that handkerchief—in his mouth. . . ."

"A black bandana," Garcia said.

Carson stared at him narrowly. "That's the trade mark of *El Diablo Negro*."

Garcia nodded. "Yes, I know. Remarkable coincidence, isn't it? If we didn't know that he had committed suicide, we might think that perhaps *El Diablo Negro* had arranged his death, leaving the black bandana gag as a sign that it is not healthy to talk too much about certain subjects."

"Yes," said Carson. "If we didn't—know he committed suicide."

"Juan!" Garcia said sharply, turning from the bar.

There was a lazy stir in the shadows near the doorway, and a tall, gangling man ambled slowly into sight. He was dressed in the tattered remnants of several uniforms of different sizes. Black, lank hair sprouted out from under his cap, hung down over his dully staring eyes. He had a long, sad face, a slack-lipped senseless mouth. He carried a rifle, holding it by the muzzle and letting the butt trail along behind him, scraping on the floor.

"Outside!" Garcia said, pointing to the door.

The military scarecrow turned around listlessly and ambled out the door. There was a clatter of his rifle thumping down the stone steps outside.

"My newest recruit," Garcia said. "An example of the excellent material they send me from the capital. I don't dare let him have any cartridges for that rifle for fear he would accidentally shoot himself, or me. Another drink, sir?"

"Thanks," Carson said.

Garcia filled both glasses, sipped at his own appreciatively. "You see, Mr. Carson, this town of *El Hilo* is peculiarly situated. It is only three or four days' travel on foot through the jungle to the Panvuelo border. On the other hand it is at least a week's travel the same way to the nearest city in this country. Now presidents come and go—and sometimes they come back again. *El Diablo Negro* is going at the moment, but he might return to power. If he did, it would be unfortunate for me if I were his enemy. There would be nothing to prevent a detachment of his soldiers from slipping over the border and paying me a visit. You saw the specimen that just left. He wouldn't offer much resistance."

"I see," Carson said.

"And so"—Garcia finished—"and so—Mendigo committed suicide. Undoubtedly the medical examiner will confirm my verdict. I'm waiting for the good doctor now. I sent a couple of my men after him, but it will probably take them quite some time to arouse him. He is usually drunk by this time in the evening. And—while we wait—will you join me in another brandy?"

"I will," said Carson.

THE moon was a shallow silver coin pinned against the soft blue blackness of the sky when Carson came across the patio and mounted the stone steps to the balcony. There was no other sound but the grate of his feet on the stone until he pushed back the door to his room, and then a soft voice said out of the darkness:

"Stand still, please."

Carson's hand flipped his coat aside, gripped the battered butt of his .45. Instinctively he started to step backwards, out of the doorway, and then

the cold sharpness of a knife blade pressed flat against the back of his neck.

The same soft voice spoke from in front of him. "You will be very wise if you take your hand away from your gun and stand still."

Carson moved his hand away from the .45, standing rigid.

"That's better," the soft voice commended. "Much better."

There was a little scraping sputter, and a match flared. Nothing was visible in the flicker of the yellow flame except the hands of the man who held it. The hands were encased in clumsy white cotton gloves, and the long fingers had a horrible laxness about them, like the hands of a scarecrow. The hands moved across to the lamp on the little shelf against the wall, touched the match flame to its wick. Light swelled out softly, and Carson could see the face of the man with the white gloved hands.

It was a long pale oval of a face with a bony forehead and sunken, shadowed hollows in the cheeks. The mouth was a pinched dry line. The eyes were black pools that had no life or feeling in them, but still gave the impression of casual, callous cruelty. The man had a short, puffy body that, taken with his long skinny arms and legs, gave him the appearance of a gigantic bloated spider.

"You may take the knife away now, Tomas," he said. "Stand outside and see that we are not disturbed."

The knife blade slid away from the back of Carson's neck. He turned his head a little. The man Tomas was tall, thick-boned with brutally flattened features and slitted eyes under the brim of a floppy sombrero. He was the same man Carson had seen watching the Countess di Redozi through the blue

door that afternoon. He was holding a long knife in his hand. He slid it into his belt now, backed through the door on to the balcony, softly closed the door after him.

"Sorry to have startled you," the man with the white gloves said in his soft, pleasant voice. "I was afraid you might shoot before I had a chance to explain myself. Will you sit down? My name—for the present—is Valdón."

Carson sat down slowly on the lumpy bed. He said nothing, watching with narrowed, wary eyes.

"We almost met this afternoon," Veldón said. "I thought it best not to show myself then—for several reasons."

"I suppose," Carson said slowly, "that I should thank you for saving my life."

"You should," said Valdón. "You should, indeed. The Countess would certainly have shot you in about another second. Never think that she wouldn't have done it. You wouldn't have been the first on her list by any means."

"You didn't have to kill her."

"Not to save you—no," Valdón said. "But I had another little matter to settle with her. Have you ever heard of me?"

"No," said Carson.

"Very few people have. Do you know anything about *El Diablo Negro's* early history?"

"No," said Carson. "I'm not interested."

"Then you'll pardon me, I'm sure, if I bore you with it," the man said suavely. "About five years ago I was exploring in the back country of Panvuelo just to see what I could see. I didn't find anything but a man by the name of Pedro Guterrez. I didn't even

find him, as a matter of fact. He found me. He was the leader of a dozen or so flea-bitten horse thieves and bandits. He had the audacity to kidnap me and hold me for ransom. One of my agents paid him off in counterfeit money. He didn't have sense enough to know the difference. But a little later I had some trouble with the government of Panvuelo. They refused to give me some concessions I wanted. I thought of this Pedro Guterrez again, then. I went up in the back country and located him. He was still running his flea-bitten crew of petty thieves. That man, who was once Pedro Guterrez, is now *El Diablo Negro*."

"So?" Carson said politely.

Valdón nodded. "Yes—so. I made Pedro Guterrez into *El Diablo Negro*. When I started with Pedro Guterrez he was a half-witted lazy hulk of a peon, more than half Indian, with a peon Indian wife and a dozen brats. He was a bandit because he was too lazy to work. I furnished the money and the bribes and the rifles for his army. I planned the campaign by which he led a revolution of the peons and overthrew the government and set himself up as president. I told him what to do and when to do it and what to say while he did it. I made him president, and for doing it I got the concessions I wanted—free."

"You made other people pay a big price for them," Carson said gravely. "You saddled that country with a government so corrupt and extravagant and vicious that it set the progress of the whole nation back ten years."

Valdón shrugged indifferently. "Faugh! What do I care for that? The point is that I made *El Diablo Negro* president. I even invented that name for him. I thought up the idea of using those black bandana hand-

kerchiefs for a symbol. And then as soon as he got in office, his power began to go to his head. He began to think how clever he was, what a great diplomat and political schemer. He acquired some very polished manners and even learned to speak English. And he double-crossed me just as soon as he got the chance. He waited until I got my concessions developed to the point where I could make some money out of them, and then he cancelled them and re-sold them to a syndicate of which he and the Countess Redozi held all the stock."

"Is she actually a countess?" Carson asked curiously.

"No. She stole the title the same as she always stole everything else she could lay hands on. She got hold of *El Diablo Negro*, and she was clever enough to get him to do anything she wanted.

"He even married the woman, although he neglected the little formality of divorcing his first wife before he did it."

"All this leaves us where?" Carson asked.

"Right here," said Valdón. "I made that tramp into a president. Now I want my pay for it. I'm not greedy. But I want to get my investment in him back again. I want half of those diamonds."

Carson sighed wearily. "I thought we'd get around to that before the end. I'm getting tired of explaining about it. I don't have *El Diablo Negro's* diamonds. I never saw them, nor him either. Somebody started a rumor that I had them. I don't know who, but I'd like to find him. As a result of his little story, I lost all my outfit and was chased out of Panvuelo by a company of rebel soldiers. If they'd been a little better shots I wouldn't be here now."

Valdón's tight little mouth twisted knowingly. "Yes, yes. Of course. That's all very interesting. But now I want half of those diamonds."

Carson said very slowly: "I—don't have—*any*—diamonds."

"I know you do," Valdón said amiably. "The Countess thought you did—and certainly if she thought so, then you do have them. It's lucky you didn't give them to her, by the way. She would have skipped out with them and left *El Diablo Negro* to stew in his own juice. I'm not quite so foolish as she is. I know you're not carrying the diamonds now. You've hidden them somewhere."

Carson merely shrugged his shoulders in a resigned way.

"You don't have to bring them all to me," Valdón said, "if you don't trust me. Just bring me half of them. I know how many there are. Or, if you don't believe the story I just told you, tell me where *El Diablo Negro* is hiding, and I'll go collect them from him myself after you've given them to him." The long fingers in the floppy white gloves moved in a slow squeezing motion. "I'd like to do that."

"I don't know where the diamonds are," said Carson, "and I don't know where *El Diablo Negro* is, and I don't see any point in talking about it any longer."

"Of course not," Valdón agreed, smoothly polite. He stood up. "If I were you, my friend, I would consider this matter at some length before I made any decisions that you might regret."

"I've considered it all I'm going to," Carson said. "You'll find the door in the same place it was when you came in. Good-by."

"Good-by," said Valdón amiably. "You'll be seeing me again—very

soon. Let us hope—for your sake—that you see things in a more reasonable light before that time.”

HE walked to the door, opened it quickly. The man Tomas was standing there, bulking huge and thick in the doorway. He slitted little eyes were wide now, and bulging, and his loose mouth was a motionless round O of surprise. He had been leaning against the closed door, and now he swayed forward stiffly.

He fell straight forward on his face and hit the floor with a jarring crash that raised a thin sifting of dust particles that glittered brightly in the light of the lamp. He never moved after he struck the floor. There was a neat little slit punched in the rough cloth of his shirt in the back just over his heart. Blood had soaked down his back in a wide, ragged stain. There was a black silk bandana knotted neatly around his throat.

Valdon stared down at his body for a long moment, and then he looked up at Carson. His eyes were like black smooth blobs of pitch that reflected the light in molten little glints.

“You and *El Diablo Negro* are both going to be very sorry for this little trick.”

His soft voice was as smooth as ever, and his long pale face showed no emotion at all. Without saying another word he stepped over the body with a startling snake-like agility and disappeared through the doorway.

Carson stood for a long moment looking down at Tomas' still form. He shivered a little suddenly and drew the .45 out of his waist band. The big hammer made a coldly comforting click coming back to full cock. Carson blew out the lamp and slid out the door with the gun balanced in his hand.

The brightness of the moon painted the walls in contrasting silver and black streaks. Carson went very slowly and quietly down the stone stairs, across the patio.

Captain Garcia was standing in the same position as when Carson had seen him the first time, except that he was not quite so erect now. His back had lost all its stiffness, and his knees were bent a little. He was leaning forward over the bar, balanced on his elbows.

“Good evening,” he said in a thickly dignified voice. “I am Captain Garcia of the *Guardia Civil*.”

“Good evening,” Carson said gravely. “My name is still Carson.”

“Ah, yes. Yes, yes. I think we've met before.”

“I think so, too,” Carson agreed.

“I am waiting . . . waiting . . .” Garcia stopped and blinked vaguely around him.

“Waiting for the medical examiner,” Carson finished for him.

“Oh. Yes. Yes, I believe I am.”

“When he comes—if he does—there's another suicide for him to examine upstairs.”

“Very strange,” said Garcia absently. “Must be an epidemic. Will you drink with me, sir?”

“There isn't any more,” Carson said. “You've finished the bottle.”

“So I have,” Garcia agreed, looking at the empty brandy bottle in a mildly surprised way. “But there's more behind the bar. Allow me to offer you—”

He unhooked his elbows from the bar and stepped backwards. He wavered a little on laxly bent knees and then sank slowly and gently down to the floor and rolled over on his back. His eyes closed and his mouth opened. He began to snore quietly.

Carson watched him for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders wear-

ily. His mouth was twisted into a bitterly resigned line. Still carrying his cocked revolver in his hand, he walked across the room to the front door, looked cautiously out.

There was a sputtering little giggle from the darkness. Carson swung out of the light, flattening himself against the wall, leveling the big revolver.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

The shadows moved and Garcia's lank, ragged recruit shambled into the light. The butt of his rifle trailed along behind him on the ground, making a snaky groove in the dust. His glittering little eyes stared cunningly up at Carson through the lank hair over his forehead. His mouth moved and twisted, the thickly wet lips mouthing mumbled fragments of words.

"*El Diablo Negro — El Diablo Negro . . .*"

He laughed again, twitching his gaunt shoulders.

Carson didn't say anything, watching him narrowly.

The recruit shambled cautiously closer. He held out his clenched fist toward Carson and then suddenly opened his fingers wide. There was a black silk bandana on his grimy palm.

"*El Diablo Negro,*" he said.

"*Donde?*" Carson asked. "Where?"

The recruit jerked his head back toward the jungle. He walked a few dragging steps, then stopped and jerked his head, inviting Carson to follow.

CHAPTER IV.

DIABLO.

THE path was a winding narrow slit between the high thick walls of the jungle. In that darkness Carson could see nothing but the bob-

bing crooked shoulders of the ragged recruit just ahead of him. Carson held the big Colt leveled, lined up with those shoulders, his thumb curled comfortably around the hammer.

The path made a sharp turn, and ahead Carson could see a small clearing with the moonlight drenching it in a thin silver mist. The recruit slowed a little, and his face made a white blur in the gloom looking back at Carson.

"*Esta aqui,*" he said casually. He turned and ambled on toward the clearing.

Carson followed cautiously, trying to peer ahead. He had almost reached the edge of the clearing when an invisible hand grasped him by one ankle and jerked. Carson half-twisted, trying to catch his balance. The hand jerked harder, and he went down flat on his face in the path.

He tried to roll over, but sharp knees dug into his back, holding him flat on his face. Cloth covered fingers closed gently and slowly around his neck.

"I warned you," Valdón's soft voice said. "You see, I thought you might be a little stubborn, and I planned in advance. I hired this half-witted recruit to lead you out here in the jungle. I knew you wouldn't suspect him. Now I want those diamonds."

"I haven't any diamonds," Carson said, making his voice casual. His right hand still held the big Colt, and he moved his arm very slowly and silently, swinging the short barrel around until it pointed back up over his shoulder. The muzzle of the gun was only about an inch from his face, and he closed his eyes tightly to protect them from the powder flare and squeezed on the trigger.

There was sudden movement in the darkness, and the metal shod butt of a rifle slammed down on his cramped

wrist. The blow numbed his whole arm. The rifle butt moved a little, knocked the Colt spinning out of his lax fingers. The recruit laughed.

Valdon's fingers dug into Carson's throat. The fingers were incredibly, inhumanly strong. They were like steel hooks, biting right through the muscle, crushing it.

"The diamonds," Valdon said, and the terrible grip relaxed a little, allowing Carson to breathe.

"I haven't—" Carson said thickly.

The grip clamped down again, before he could finish. He writhed back and forth, trying to arch his back, but the smooth, soft earth of the path gave him no purchase. Valdon's bony knees dug into his back. The man's weight held him flat. The silver and shadow of the jungle spun in a whirling, crazy pattern in front of Carson's straining eyes.

Valdon's voice sounded faint and thin and far away.

"The diamonds. Where are the diamonds?"

Another voice said, "Right here, friend."

Valdon's clutching fingers suddenly jerked away from Carson's throat. His knees released their pressure on Carson's back. Carson sucked in air in a great gulping gasp, rolled over on his back.

The two men were crouched in the path, close together, facing each other. The recruit had lost all his slackness, all his aimless idiocy. He had attached the bayonet to his rifle, and its thin, glittering point almost touched Valdon's chest.

"They're in my pocket, friend Valdon," he said. "Right in my pocket, where they've always been."

"Guterrez," said Valdon in a whisper. "*El Diablo Negro!*"

"Yes," said the recruit. "Pedro Guterrez—*El Diablo Negro*—at your service. You should have talked to me where the light was better, Valdon. You should have looked a little more closely at my face. But who would think that Pedro Guterrez—that stupid, half-witted hulk, that fleabitten petty thief who you turned from a tramp into a president—would have the sense to make a plan? Who would think that he would know enough to provide himself with a disguise? Who would think that he could make himself another identity that would fool everyone—even the great Valdon?"

"You have learned very quickly," Valdon said in a strained voice. "You've won this time, Pedro. Let me congratulate you."

He spread his hands in a casual gesture, and all in the same motion half turned and struck at the bayonet with his closed fist, trying to knock it aside. Pedro Guterrez stepped backwards agilely, and the rifle swung back, then forward again with a quick, twisting thrust.

There was a thump, the ugly grate of steel on bone. Valdon screamed once in a horribly choked voice. His long arms flopped up and down, the gloved fingers clawing at the air. Pedro Guterrez freed the bayonet with another quick twist. Valdon's puffy body crashed backwards into the underbrush.

CARSON came up to his knees, groped frantically on the path in the darkness, searching for the Colt.

"Don't," Guterrez said softly.

The bayonet was leveled again, the blood-stained point at six inches from Carson's throat. Over it, Guterrez's thin face split into a widely cruel grin.

"Why should we quarrel?" he asked. "You don't want my diamonds, do you?"

"God knows I don't," Carson said emphatically. "I've had enough trouble on account of them. I'm sick of the sound of the word, even."

"Just so," said Guterrez. "And besides, Señor, I owe you a debt of gratitude. You see, I was the one who started the rumor that you were carrying my diamonds for me."

"Carson got up slowly. "Why?" he demanded.

Guterrez shrugged, keeping the rifle leveled. "When you are a dictator, you learn a great many things. One of them is that people put money even above revenge. I have a great many enemies, but any one of them would gladly see me go free with my life if he could get his hands on my diamonds. So I laid a false trail. I told everyone you had my diamonds, and while they chased you I escaped. I think I made a wise choice in my decoy. You seem well able to take care of yourself."

"I'm not feeling so capable at the present," Carson said morosely. "Well, what happens next?"

"I think your troubles are over," Guterrez said. "All the leading—ah—prospectors, shall we say?—for my diamonds have been eliminated by one means or another."

"You mean—I can go back to the hotel?" Carson asked incredulously.

"Not just now," Guterrez answered, grinning. "You see, I also learned while I was dictator that it is not wise to trust anyone—not anyone. I didn't even trust my dear wife—the Countess. I told her that you had my diamonds. I acted very wisely, too, as it proved. She preferred my diamonds to me. She joined forces with Mendi-

go, the prying little rat, to try to get you to deliver the diamonds to her by one means or another. Mendigo, the fool, even cut to pieces the clothes you gave him to clean, looking for them. I settled the score with him, and I'd have done the same for her if Valdon hadn't done it first. As for you, Señor Carson, I really don't think you want the diamonds, but just in case you change your mind about that, I've arranged to give myself a little time to get away. There is a hut in the clearing back of us. It has a strong door, a good lock that I provided. I'm going to leave you inside."

Carson took a step forward. "You—"

"Careful!" Guterrez warned, raising the rifle. "Careful, Señor. Captain Garcia told you I had no bullets for this rifle. He was wrong. I have. The hut has only a dirt floor. It won't take you longer than two hours to dig your way out. But by that time I will be a long ways away from here. Come."

He backed slowly out into the clearing. Carson followed him reluctantly, step by step.

The hut was a thick, windowless hump in the earth, shadowed by the moonlight. The door was closed. Guterrez knocked it open with the butt of his rifle, jumped agilely aside.

"Go in!" he snapped. His voice was suddenly harsh.

Carson heitated, watching him.

"Go in!" Guterrez repeated in a thin snarl.

Carson edged slowly into the hut's dank darkness. The door slammed behind him as soon as he cleared the threshold, and he heard the grate of the hasp, the solid click of a padlock.

The interior of the hut was pitch black—a thick, heavy blackness that was absolutely impenetrable. Carson

caught a trace of a thin, sickening odor that was like a cold hand laid against the back of his neck.

Guterrez's voice came, faintly muffled, through the mud walls: "Señor Carson, I have something else to tell you. I thought you might be lonesome waiting there in the darkness, so I left you a companion. He is about eight feet long and considerably bigger around than your arm. He is commonly known as a bushmaster. I hope you enjoy his company."

CARSON stood rigid. He could feel the sweat ooze slimily down his back underneath his shirt. The bushmaster is the most deadly snake in the western hemisphere. A gigantic species of the pit viper, its fangs are as big as a man's little finger and hold enough venom to kill within a few short moments.

Guterrez laughed savagely. "You see, I like my disguise, and you are the only one who knows it. I intend to stay a recruit for a while, and then when the chase dies down a little, go to Europe or your own United States and live the rest of my life in peace and luxury. Are you listening, Señor Carson? Have you found your little friend yet? No need to look for him. He will find *you!*"

Carson stayed flat against the wall, not moving, trying not to make any noise even with his breathing. The snake was somewhere on the floor, coiled in the darkness. It was long enough to strike him from any place inside the hut. He couldn't see it. He had no weapon to fight it with if he could. . . .

But sooner or later the thing would strike anyway. He couldn't stay motionless forever, and it would strike, even if he did. . . .

His muscles were numbly stiff. Very slowly, a little at a time, he began to move his left hand into his pocket. In his imagination he could see that flat, triangular head with its mottled markings, the lidless eyes.

His hand came slowly out of his pocket, grasping several matches between cold fingers. He began to crouch, forcing himself to bring his head and face closer to the floor and those deadly fangs. He settled his back firmly against the mud wall.

Perhaps if he struck the matches, the snake would strike at the light. Perhaps he could catch the head before it struck again. Perhaps! It was fantastic. The bushmaster moved like a streak of lightning. But it was the only thing he could do. . . .

The matches sputtered in his hand, flared into sudden flame. Carson drew in his breath, tensing himself, eyes searching frantically through the shadows.

He released his breath with a sudden startled grunt. There was another person in the hut. Another person sitting on the floor against the opposite wall, watching him with impassively smooth black eyes.

It was the Indian flower woman who had been in Mendigo's hotel bar that same morning. Her smooth brown face was indifferent, calm, emotionless. The long bright blade of a machete — a bush-knife — lay across her lap. The bushmaster's blunt venomous head lay on the ground just in front of her bare feet. It had been severed neatly at the neck. The rest of the snake's thick mottled body lay in a dusty heap in the corner of the hut, squirming a little with stubborn life.

There was a black gaping hole in the hut's wall at the back. Carson swallowed hard, staring at the woman in-

credulously. He knew what happened as surely as if it had been explained to him in detail, but it was unbelievable. The Indian woman had cut through the wall of the hut from the outside, chopped off the snake's head with the bush-knife, waited here. . . .

The matches burned Carson's fingers, and he dropped them on the floor. He fumbled in his pocket, found more, scraped them alight.

The Indian woman nodded at him slowly. She indicated the hole in the hut wall with a sideways gesture of her head. Slowly she turned and crawled through. Carson kicked the snake's head aside cautiously, then put out the matches and crawled after her.

The hut's wall backed up against the jungle, and they were deep in the undergrowth. The woman was a black shadow, waiting stolidly, until Carson stood beside her, then she circled quietly back through the brush. Carson followed numbly.

They came out suddenly in the clearing on the other side. Guitierrez was still there, sitting on a fallen log. He was holding a squat bottle in one hand, a black leather pouch in the other. As they watched him, he tilted the bottle up to his lips, swallowed in an audible gulps. He put the bottle down on the log, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Carson!" he yelled. "Señor Carson! I don't hear you talking with your companion. Hasn't he found you yet?"

He laughed jeeringly. Untying the draw-string on the pouch, he held it up and poured a white-fiery stream of diamonds into his other palm. He put his face close to the diamonds, crooning to them greedily, moving his hand so the moonlight shot glittering little streaks from their facets.

The woman deliberately walked out

into the clearing. Carson reached forward to stop her, but he was too late. He jumped forward after her.

Guitierrez heard them and swung around tensely, reaching for the rifle beside him. The woman was in the bright moonlight now, her features plainly visible. She stood still, staring stolidly at Guitierrez.

"You!" said Guitierrez numbly. "You!"

HE recovered himself with a jerk, swung the rifle up to level. The woman raised her right hand, palm held flat. She was holding a tiny round vial. With her left hand she pointed to the vial and then to the bottle beside Guitierrez. Then she pulled the cork out of the vial, turned it upside down. Nothing came out of its unstoppered mouth.

Her sign language was very plain. She meant that the contents of the vial she held were in the bottle from which Guitierrez had just drunk. She uttered one word. It was an Indian word, a queer jumble of vowels. Carson had heard the word before. He knew what it meant. It was the name of a poison made by Indian witch doctors from the steeped roots of certain swamp vines. It was a poison that they reserved for their worst enemies.

Carson had seen its effects. They were terrible. The poison acted on the membranes of the throat, swelling them slowly and inexorably until the victim died of long drawn out self-strangulation, his limbs twisted horribly, face a thick purple, eyes bulging out of their sockets.

The rifle dropped out of Guitierrez's stiff fingers, and the diamonds spilled on the ground in a sudden glittering stream.

"No!" he screamed. "No, no!"

The woman's head nodded slowly.

Gutierrez screamed again and clutched at his throat with both hands, digging into the skin with frantic fingers. His whole body twisted and jerked. Then suddenly he whirled around and crashed blindly into the jungle, running senselessly, crazily, trying to escape from the death he carried inside himself. The sound of his crashing progress grew fainter, faded.

The woman walked stolidly over to the log, began to gather up the diamonds that glittered like molten fire in the dust. She put them carefully in the black pouch, pulled the draw string tight. She stood up, looking at Carson. Carson stared back at her blankly.

She fumbled in the folds of her skirts, brought out a flat paper-wrapped package. Very carefully she undid the string tied around it, held it out toward Carson. He took it automatically.

It was a picture—a faded, old tin-type. It was a family group—the man and wife standing, the children in a neatly graduated row in front of them.

Carson counted the children—an even dozen. He looked at the face of the husband. It was Gutierrez. He looked at the wife's face. It was the same impassively smooth brown face that was staring at him now.

Carson remembered Valdón's words . . . "When I started with Pedro Gutierrez he was a half-witted lazy hulk of a peon, more than half Indian, with a peon Indian wife and a dozen brats. . . ."

Carson stared at her wide-eyed. She nodded slowly, took the picture out of his hands, carefully re-wrapped it. She reached under her skirts again and brought her hand out clutching the battered silver coin Carson had given her. She took a diamond out of the leather pouch, dropped the coin and the diamond into Carson's hand.

Carson blinked at the jewel incredulously. It was a perfect blue-white stone cut with a flat top that was almost the same area as his thumb nail.

"Here!" he said. "What—"

She pointed carefully to the coin, then to the diamond. "*Gracias*," she said in halting Spanish. Her meaning was again very evident. The diamond was her thanks for the coin, her gratitude for his kindness.

"But here!" Carson protested. "Why, this diamond is worth thousands—"

"*Gracias*," she said stubbornly. She nodded again, and with no more farewell than that, turned and walked steadily across the clearing, disappeared into the blackness of the jungle.

THE END

Coming Next Week

WILL O' THE WISP

A big new novel featuring King George III, Count Vergennes, Cagliostro, and our own Ben Franklin
Historical Romance and High Adventure by

H. BEDFORD-JONES



They were shouting with laughter, intent upon their horseplay

Annapolis, Ahoy!

By GEORGE BRUCE

Author of "The Rockets' Red Glare—" etc.

*Goat versus Mule—a dark kiss—and the guns of revolution. . . .
Milestones on the rocky road for our gallant Midshipmen Three*

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

IT was a big day in the life of John Cross, able seaman aboard the United States cruiser *Northampton*, when word came that he had passed the competitive examinations for admission to the Naval Academy at Annapolis. John Cross, called "Truck," had directed his life toward this day. There was a secret reason, buried deep in his soul, that made this achievement the most important step in his career. He was a big fellow, strong as an ox, and steady and hard-working.

His room-mates at the Academy were Richard Arnold Gates, Jr.—a pint-sized youngster of great enthusiasm—and a tall blond who introduced himself as Roger Ash. Young Gates was the son of

"Wolf" Gates, bigshot Wall Street operator. Ash, hard-boiled and handsome, was a transfer from Texas Southern Institute.

FOOTBALL drew the three together. Ash had been one of the most brilliant stars in small college ranks the previous year. He was an orphan who had to fight for an education. He had played football as a means of earning his room and board and tuition, and jumped at the chance of being appointed to the Academy. At Annapolis he would be the social equal of his mates, rather than a hired athlete. He would receive the kind of training that would fit him

This story began in the *Argosy* for October 24

for a big-pay job upon graduation. There might even be some millionaire's daughter who would be attracted by the glamor of a Navy gridiron hero.

Truck Cross had played center on the team that won the Fleet Championship. And Dick Gates, despite his diminutive size, had won honors as All-Prep quarterback. Young Gates had his heart set on football. He practiced daily during summer vacations, perfecting his kicking and passing and tackling. With the assistance of Graves, the perfect butler, he had memorized every rule in the book. He aimed to make up in skill and knowledge what he lacked in beef and brawn.

THEY lived together in harmony. Ash, who fancied himself as a lady-killer, appropriated a picture of Dick Gates' gorgeous sister, Patricia, for his own use—but Dick didn't mind. Ash had already proved his friendship by whipping an upper-classman who had hazed Gates illegally. The only problem among them was Ash's frank admission that he was using the Academy for his own ends. He intended to resign as soon as he had completed his course. He scoffed at the tradition which was such an important thing to Dick and Truck. . . .

The three report for plebe football and win places on the team. Truck Cross is a solid, steady influence in the line. Young Gates shows keen judgment in calling plays, and his ambidextrous passing is sensational. Ash is a whirlwind at the fullback post.

But Lieutenant Horth, the plebe coach, soon begins to notice that Roger Ash is not consistent in his playing. He is so graceful, such a natural athlete, that he makes every play look easy—yet he turns on the heat only when he chooses. Scrimmaging against the varsity he's a ball of fire—yet against plebe opposition he tends to slow down when the team is ahead.

Horth calls him on this, and Ash is defiant. He'll play the game, he tells the coach, but he doesn't want any of that guff about "dying for dear old Rutgers." As a consequence, Horth uses him only sparingly in the games.

The plebes are having a successful season, but the Navy varsity is taking the bumps. Head Coach Milton eyes the plebe array hungrily. "I'll have something when those kids of yours move up to the big squad," he tells Horth. "Wait till next year!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LADIES—GOD BLESS 'EM!

THE most beautiful girls in the world may be seen at Annapolis. They attend the almost weekly "hops" held within the tremendous area of Dahlgren Hall. They come to watch the winter sports program, the endless progression of events which begins early on Saturday afternoons and continues until after sup-

per formation. They see water polo, gymnastic contests, boxing, wrestling, lacrosse, soccer, football, fencing and swimming meets. For on any Saturday afternoon the various teams of the Navy may be engaged in athletic competition with half a dozen different universities.

The swimming team may be competing against N. Y. U. while the water polo team plays Penn. The wrestling team may be tugging with Syracuse while the boxing team fights it out with Western Maryland, and the basketball team takes the floor against Notre Dame. The small-bore rifle team may be firing against Michigan while at the same moment, in a different place, the fencing team is measuring foils with V. M. I.

It is a dazzling spectacle, dizzy in its scope. It is hopeless to attempt to see all of it. A like program occurs each Saturday, and after the athletic carnival there is a hop.

Mere men stand within the confines of the Academy in breathless amazement. Each girl, swinging by on the arm of some midshipman seems more beautiful than the vision who had just passed. The waves of beauty and charm piled up and up, until the mere man subsides into a state of complete helplessness before the onslaught of feminine magnificence.

Midshipman Water-Tight Door may stride along Stribling walk, "dragging" some soft voiced Virginia deb who would have caused the late Ziegfeld to turn hand-springs. But Midshipman W. T. Door seems to think nothing of it, to take it in stride. It always appears that the girl is attempting to create the impression—never Mister Door.

They come from every state in the union, these legions of beauty. They dress in evening gowns which are abbreviated to the point of reckless daring. They crowd into Carvel Hall, chaperoned by proud and smiling mamas who beam on the midshipmen. They are "dragged" through the buildings and walks of the Academy. The cruel blow to romance, though, is the fact that the escort—Second Classman

Josephus Gish, let us say—has seen so much superlative femininity during his three years at the Academy that a blonde angel, straight from the pearly gates and all aglitter with the morning dew, would evoke little more than a polite lift of eyebrow.

The fond mamas and doting papas, trying to be bluff and hearty, invite Mister Gish and Mister W. T. Door to dinners and teas and even breakfasts at Carvel Hall. They attempt to create a "home-like" atmosphere for the benefit of Mister Gish and Mister Door, whilst gorgeous daughter coos and laughs and flutters, and trains her guns for a direct hit on one small part of the Navy of the United States.

Usually, Mister Door and Mister Gish are very polite. They stand very straight, immaculate in blue service uniforms, caps under arms in the prescribed manner. They bow with that touch of the cavalier which causes a lady's heart to flutter—age notwithstanding. They listen politely to all that papa has to say about business, nodding agreement to the fact that Mister Gish and Mister Door are extremely fortunate to have the good old United States Navy behind them, rather than having to battle the manifold problems of the great world of commerce.

Oh, yes. . . . Yes, indeed, sir. . . .

Then Mister Door and Mister Gish suddenly remember a formation and arise very elegantly. They bow precisely, shake hands with the papa, and shoulder to shoulder stride down the steps of Carvel Hall and on toward Number Three or Number Two Gate.

Says mama to papa: "What lovely, wonderful boys!" She looks at daughter with a sigh, and daughter is guilty of a maidenly blush or an attack of giggles. Papa puffs expansively on his cigar and tries to imagine himself and his sixty-six-inch belly on the inside of a midshipman's uniform.

Going down the walk to Bancroft Hall, Mister Gish remarks to Mister Door: "My word, Featherstone! Where did you dig her up?"

4A—21

"It's only a hop, isn't it?" mumbles Mister Door apologetically. "It isn't June Week or a Class Hop or anything important, is it? We got to dance with *somebody*, don't we?"

But only charm-jaded upper classmen can afford to be *that* blasé. The lowly and envious plebes would doubtless have other views, except for the fact that to the plebe the beauty parade means exactly nothing, divided by four. Plebes are forbidden to "drag" until the night of the annual Masqueraders' presentation in February. When there are hops in Dahlgren Hall the plebes are cast in the rôle of onlookers, or pressed into service as ushers or messengers. The lordly Youngster, or Third Classman, the superior Second Classman, and the patrician First Classman pass by with their ladies fair and the plebe can only stare and gulp, and try to estimate the number of days until June Week and deliverance.

The glorious creatures trip by with a rustle of silk and a click of high heels. Their perfumes pervade the nostrils of the plebe. He is forced to wrestle with temptation and to remember that Naval Officers are fashioned of stern materials.

It is tough. Very tough. . . .

The chief event to which the plebe can look forward is the Christmas leave. He dreams of it. He marks the date of the beginning of his first leave on the calendar in red. Each day he looks at that crimson X, praying he'll live until that happy deadline.

The grinding routine of the academic year has him by the back of the neck and the slack of the pants. Five days a week there are four classes in the morning and two in the afternoon, plus a compulsory study period of two hours after supper. There is not more than a four-minute interval between the dismissal of one class and the march off to the next. Also, in the afternoon, there are drills. There are "awkward," "sub," "weak" and "extra-duty" squads. In the extra-duty squads are the midshipmen who have been "on report." They work off the extra hours

of duty meted out as punishment, after finishing all the regularly scheduled classes, drills and formations.

The plebes march from "Juice" to "Dago"—which is from Electrical Engineering to Spanish. He marches from Seamanship and Navigation to Math. From Math to Steam. And thence to the drill field where rifle and bayonet replaces the textbook.

He does this every day.

There is one break—Saturday. On Saturday there are merely the four morning recitations, plus a Regimental Inspection in the afternoon. From 1400 to 1840, when call to supper formation is sounded, Mister Plebe is practically a free man. Free within the limitations prescribed for the wanderings of the Fourth Class, which are limited indeed.

But Christmas leave—ah, there was something! To get away from the grind for ten whole days. From the Saturday before Christmas to the supper formation of January 1st. To throw clothes on the floor. To thumb your nose at 0630 and revel in bed. To slouch in a chair—to eat without having a ramrod down your back. Heavenly bliss!

Beginning with the first of December the tension and the anticipation of coming liberty filled the bosoms of the Fourth Class. There was one topic of conversation: "Where are you going to spend your leave?"

"Home, boy, home! Punkin pie! Roast turkey! Mashed potatoes and giblet gravy! Cranberry sauce and more punkin pie! Where am I going to spend my leave? Mister, don't be silly!"

It ran all over the decks, through Bancroft Hall: "Only ten more days to liberty! Only nine more days to liberty!" The refrain swelled and swelled.

TRUCK CROSS and Roger Ash and Richard Arnold Gates, Jr., sat in the room.

Ash was quiet. His nose was stuck in a book, but there was a queer light in his eyes. Truck sat on the other side of the

table, cramming Dago. Dick Gates was exploring the mysteries of steam engineering in his little cubicle.

Suddenly Ash flung his book on the floor. His eyes were hot, his face white.

"If those guys next door don't stop chattering about Christmas and leave, I'm going over there and guzzle 'em!" he said in disgust. "Christmas! Who the devil cares about Christmas? Who cares about a bunch of clucks running home to their mammas. The little sissies!"

He stared stormily at Truck.

Truck smiled, his big body relaxing. "Don't let it get you down, son," he warned. "Believe it or not, Christmas is a big thing in the Navy."

"Sure, a big thing for department stores and things like that. A cheap chisel, that's what it is. A bunch of people breaking their necks to buy a bunch of other people a lot of junk they don't want—and belly-aching about spending the money. Christmas—the time when some lunkhead gives his gal a diamond ring and gets a box of five-and-dime handkerchiefs in return. 'Not the value of the gift, just the spirit of the thing!' That's what she says. But if *she* got the nose wipers there'd be the devil to pay. It makes me sick!"

Truck shook his head.

"Aw, there's more to it than that. For instance, just think of the Fourth Class. Most of 'em haven't seen their folks for a year. Some of the boys are going to fly clean to Texas, just to see home and family."

"What for?" growled Ash.

A shadow came into Truck's eyes as he looked up. "By the way, Rog—where are you going to spend your leave? I haven't heard you say."

Ash glared at him. "What difference does it make?"

"Well, I thought if you didn't have any special plans, we might stick around the Academy. Go off somewhere for a couple of days together."

The frown vanished from Ash's handsome face. "You mean it?" he asked. "You aren't going anywhere either?"

Truck shook his head slowly. "Unh-unh. Can't afford it. Besides—I—well, I don't have a regular home to go to."

"Home?" grated Ash. "I've got no more home than a jack-rabbit. Never had. But it doesn't bother me until I hear a bunch of little punks yapping about it. I've been thinking for a month about how this place will look during the Christmas leave. The whole damned Regiment gone, and Roger Ash tramping around by himself, through empty halls—eating Christmas dinner by himself in an empty mess hall. That's a pleasant thought!"

Truck grinned. "I've been thinking the same thing myself—how lonesome it was going to be. But if you're going to stay—why, it's all set. We'll have a swell time!"

Dick Gates stuck his head through the door and frowned at them. "What are you guys bulling about?" he demanded. "You want me 'unsat' in steam? I got to study!"

"We've just settled where we're going to spend leave," said Truck.

"Where?" demanded Gates.

"Right here, sonny boy. Right in the bosom of the dear old Navy."

"You are like the devil!" snapped Richard Arnold Gates.

Truck and Ash exchanged glances. "The leetle one is unbalanced," said Ash. "Too much study has softened his brain."

"You two are the wacky ones," said Midshipman Gates with scorn. "You're coming home with me on leave—didn't you know that? Why, Mother and Dad settled that weeks ago. They insisted you had to come!"

"Didn't we know it?" begged Ash helplessly. He glared at Dick. "How in thunder would we know it?" he demanded.

"You don't think I'd be the kind of a slug who goes barging home for Christmas while his roommates pose as the hermits of Bancroft Hall, do you? Why don't you guys grow up and start thinking?"

"You mean that?" asked Ash. His voice was soft, deeper. Truck's eyes were fixed on Dick Gates' grinning face.

"What do you want—a formal invitation seconded by the Secretary of the Navy? Sure I mean it. I never had any other idea."

Ash strode across the room. He grabbed Dick Gates by the back of the neck, lifted him off the floor, kissed him in the middle of the forehead.

"Look at the little punk, Truck!" he said thickly. "He sits back there in his mouse trap and let's us sweat. Let's think we're going to be stuck in this monastery during Christmas leave, and never opens his yap. He lets us suffer like that. Get the broom, brother—get the broom!"

There was a thump of knuckles outside and the door flew open. The Midshipman Officer of the Watch stood inside of the room. The plebes froze to attention.

The MOOW's face was expressionless as he surveyed the room critically. His eyes rested for a moment at the shoes under Ash's bed. They were placed at the side, not under the end as regulations demanded.

"Hmmm," said the MOOW. "This room looks like a pigsty. Room out of order in two particulars—two shoes, right and left." He made a note. "Violation of regulations governing study, period." He made another note! He looked at them. "Carry on!" he ordered. He closed the door.

"The big lug!" said Ash. "Bet a dollar he puts us on report!"

"Who cares?" asked Truck happily. "We're going home for Christmas!"

Dick Gates smiled with them. There was a moist glint in his eyes and he swallowed hard. "Gee!" he said. "This is going to be the happiest Christmas in my whole life!"

CHAPTER XX.

TEN DAYS' LEAVE.

MRS. RICHARD ARNOLD GATES arrived within the limits of the Academy in an Hispano-Suiza sedan, and swept in regal splendor up to the

closest approach to Bancroft Hall. Passing midshipmen glanced at the equipage and the lady, nodded solemnly, and kept hurrying toward the gates with suitcases banging their knees.

Mrs. Richard Arnold Gates waited patiently. She had been punctual, arriving at the very moment Christmas leave began. It was a surprise. She was going to drive the dear boys all the way to New York.

She caught sight of three midshipmen descending the steps and was suddenly very excited. She thrust her head out of the window of the car and called in a penetrating voice: "Yoo hoo—Dickie! Here I am! Hurry to mother, darling!"

Dick Gates nearly fell down the steps. He stumbled, and for a moment was very close to disaster. His face was a brick red. Plebe classmates were grinning nearby. One or two of them were impolite enough to call in low tones: "Yes, yes—hurry to mumsy, darling!"

Truck Cross grinned. Roger Ash said, "What is that thing out there—the Queen Mary?"

The three marched up to the car. Ash and Truck stood very stiffly, saying the words that polite midshipmen should say in greeting.

"Aren't you surprised, Dickie darling?" demanded the beaming Mrs. Gates. "All the way from New York! But, after all, a mother is a mother, I suppose. Get in, that's a good boy. Get in, Mister Ash and Mister Cross! Give your bags to Johnson up in front. Oh, I'm so thrilled."

Dick said: "Please, mother, don't call me 'darling' and things like that. Not here, anyway—and not so loud."

"Why not, I'd like to know?" said Mrs. Gates, immediately on the offensive. She stared around at the hurrying mob in blue. "You always were my darling—and that's one thing the Naval Academy is *not* going to change! I'd like to see the whole United States Navy try to change it. The very idea!"

"And we can't ride," Dick said nervously.

"Can't ride?" moaned Mrs. Gates. "Why not, I'd like to know? It's your car—our car, isn't it? Just why can't you ride?"

"It's against the regulations, mother!" her son explained. "No midshipman can ride in a car inside the Academy grounds; and a plebe can't ride in a car within the city limits of Annapolis."

"What?" shrieked Mrs. Gates. "Why, it's absurd! It's the most stupid thing I ever heard of. Not ride in your own car—my guests—"

"Please, mother—" begged Dick. "It applies to everyone. It's a rule. You drive ahead. We'll walk up to the gates, toward the road, and you can pick us up."

"You'll perish with the cold!" declared Mrs. Gates. She looked very comfortable in a five-thousand-dollar mink coat. "I'm practically a cake of ice myself."

"Go on—" Dick begged desperately. He was glancing at his plebe classmates out of the corner of his eye. They were grinning. Ash scowled meaningly at a couple of them.

Mrs. Gates, ruffled and indignant, bade her man Johnson to drive on very slowly. The big car rolled at four miles an hour toward the gates. Behind it, shoulder to shoulder, marched Roger Ash, John Cross and Richard Arnold Gates, Jr. They were serious, straight faced, but other midshipmen were grinning. Voices called out:

"Where's the funeral, mister?"

"Pioneers Marching After the Covered Wagon?"

"I know—it's a bunion derby!"

The big Hispano rolled out of the gates, down the narrow crooked streets. At the end of the limits, the three marchers piled into the car.

THE Maryland air was crisp and cold, and the tires sang on the road. The brown December landscape was brilliant with the multi-colored leaves which still clung to the trees. The big sedan purred over the distance, eating up the miles.

Going through Baltimore the three mid-

shipmen pulled down the window curtains. They hunched in the seats in complete silence. Mrs. Gates looked at them in sudden alarm.

"But I can't see anything!" she protested.

"That's perfect," said her son. "You're not supposed to see anything going through Baltimore. It's an old Navy tradition."

Mrs. Gates uttered a distinct "Hmpf!" which expressed her opinion of all naval customs and tradition. . . .

When they were out of Baltimore, safe from the jinx, the curtains went up again. They rolled through Philadelphia and Trenton. At last New York—and then Westchester.

Ash and Cross stood for a full moment looking up at the magnificence of the Gates' home. The whole front of the big house was festooned in green. Laurel, holly, evergreen. The pine trees on the lawn were ablaze with lights. The multicolored illumination against the background of thin white snow turned that great lawn and its background of trees into a Christmas fairyland. There were great wreaths hanging in each of the windows and the wreaths were illuminated. There was a neon sign over the front door. The sign was a replica of the Naval Academy seal, crowned by the Trident. Over the seal was the running legend: "Merry Christmas to the United States Navy!"

Ash and Truck gulped hard, stared at each other.

"Wow!" said Truck in a subdued voice. "Is *that* something?"

Ash nodded. He was just as completely dumfounded, but he concealed it better. "Without a doubt," he said softly, "that is something!"

There were voices from the far-off door of the house. Pat Gates' voice calling: "Dick!" Then Pat's feet racing down the long flight of granite steps. She launched herself from the fourth step from the bottom, arms outflung, grabbed her brother around the neck. The two of them came close to disaster in the snow.

Ash absorbed the shock by grabbing them both. She kissed Dick on both cheeks, shook him, held him off at arm's length.

He grinned his embarrassment. She whirled on Ash. "Merry Christmas!" she greeted. Then, as if on impulse she threw her arms around Ash, kissed him on the cheek. She stood back, laughing—and recklessness was in that laughter.

Truck Cross felt her arms around him. His face flamed red. Her mouth touched his cheek. "Merry Christmas to next year's All-American center!" she said gayly.

The voice of Wolf Gates boomed from the top of the steps. "Merry Christmas! Come on in—what are you waiting for?"

Servants hurried down to unload the baggage from the car. The procession moved ahead, then halted at sight of an imposing figure. Graves, stiff and unruffled, smiling just the correct smile, stood in the middle of the steps.

"Welcome home, sir!" he greeted Dick Gates. "Very welcome home!"

Dick jumped up the two steps, hugged the astonished butler. "This is the guy who taught me all about football," he told Ash and Cross. "The man who listened to my home work and gave his professional opinion on matters of kicking and passing. He was my secret partner in everything."

He looked at Graves severely. "Sound off, Mister!" he commanded.

"Sound off, sir?" said Graves.

"Sound off," nodded Dick. "Let's see—what's the rule on use of hands and arms by the offensive team?" He grinned at Ash and Truck, and stood waiting.

Graves cleared his throat, looked at the moon for an instant, then his voice said smoothly: "Conduct of Players. Rule Number Ten, Section Number One, Article Number Two: The runner may ward off opponents with his hands and arms, but no other player of the team in possession of the ball may use his hands or arms—unless the arms be close to the body—to obstruct an opponent. Players of the team *not* in possession of the ball, may use their

hands and arms to get at the ball or the runner, but may not tackle or hold a player except in an actual attempt to get at or tackle the runner. When the ball is free, players who have a legal right to recover the ball may use their hands or arms—"

Dick's delighted laughter broke in. "I think you rate a 4.0 on that recitation, Mister Graves," he said. "By the way, what is the penalty for illegal use of hands or arms on the part of the team in possession of the ball?"

The butler's expressionless face uttered further words. "For illegal use of the hands or arms by players of team in possession of ball—loss of fifteen yards. For illegal use of hands or arms by players of the team not in possession of the ball—loss of five yards. For illegal use of hands or arms when the ball is free—ball goes to offended team."

Dick Gates grinned sweetly at Ash and Truck. "Just before I left to go to the Academy, Graves told me that some day he was going to make it a point to witness a football 'match.' He seemed very decided on the point."

"What?" asked Ash. "You mean he knows the rules like that—and never saw a game?"

"Never, sir," said Graves sadly. "I really feel extremely humiliated about it all."

The entourage went up the steps, into the house.

Wolf Gates shook hands with them warmly. "It's good of you chaps to give up your Christmas leave time to come home with Dick," he told them. "He'd have been miserable, being away from you for even ten days. We appreciate it."

For a moment Ash and Truck Cross stood with a lump in their throats. Then Truck said, "Thank you, sir. It is very kind of you to have us. . . ."

The big table in the tremendous dining room was glittering with the light of a thousand candles. They ate ravenously, like all midshipmen at table.

Patricia Gates, sitting across from them, seemed unable to keep her eyes off their

faces. Most of all she looked at Ash. Looked at the warm glow of candle light on his strong, handsome face. Looked at the glints of light in his curling hair. Now and then she looked at John Cross—but in a different way.

For the most part, Mr. Gates looked at Richard Arnold, Junior. There was a proud and happy something in his eyes.

THAT ten days flew. In the middle of the ten days was Christmas Day.

An immense tree, loaded with decorations. A dinner, on a table groaning with food. And after dinner, presents.

Patricia Gates squealed her excitement, tearing open tissue-wrapped packages. And at the very end, Wolf Gates took three small packages from the very top of the tree. He held them in his hands for a moment, studying Ash and Cross and his son.

"It's no easy job to find something that a very superior midshipman might like to have as a gift," he told them. "First, it has to be sea-going. Second, it has to be Navy. Third, it has to be practical—and fourth, it should be beautiful. So here you are—and a Merry Christmas from Old Man Gates to his three kids."

They opened the packages slowly. Mrs. Gates stood with a smile on her face. Patricia was on her toes, quivering with expectation.

Ash opened his package first. His fingers slid a chamois bag from a round enameled object. He looked at it. A watch. His face became white as his eyes darted to Mr. Gates' face.

"Gosh!" he said in a whisper. "It's the most beautiful thing—I ever saw. I feel—"

His eyes went back to the watch. His fingers shook a little. The back of the watch was in Navy blue and gold. In the center of the blue enamel, carved in gold in high relief, was the Seal of the Naval Academy. On the face of the watch, also in gold, was: "Roger Ash, USN."

As the big blond held it in his hands, the watch suddenly chimed seven bells. Chimed the hour distinctly and with a

mellow softness of tone. Ash's fingers tightened. "It—strikes—in bells!" he marveled.

Truck Cross stood with a duplicate watch, engraved with his own name, in his own big paw. After a moment he turned his face away, unable to speak or to face them.

The deep voice of Wolf Gates:

"Seeing that the three of you are shipmates—and that you are going to stay that way—forever, isn't it?—I figured you'd all like the same thing. . . ."

Truck's eyes suddenly turned upon Roger Ash. At the same instant Dick glanced at him. The queer red tinge came into Ash's face. It seemed suddenly that the watch was burning his fingers. He swallowed hard.

Pat said: "Come on—let's look at the light of the city from the sun porch. Christmas night—over all of New York. Just think of it, millions of people happy because it's Christmas. . . ."

SHE lead Ash out of the big doors, through other big doors, onto the great sun porch. They stood silently there for a long moment, looking down from the heights, at the red and green and blue spectrum staining the sky—the heavenly aura of a great city. Patricia's hand was resting on Ash's arm.

He turned his head, looked down at her. At that beautiful blond head, at the glistening eyes and warm mouth. Her young breasts rose and fell. The hand on his arm trembled a little. Suddenly she turned her face up to him. It was white, enchanting in the moonlight, and her eyes were live sapphires.

"Are you glad it's Christmas?" he asked, a huskiness in his voice.

"I'm glad because it's Christmas—and Dick is home—and his best friends are with him."

She lowered her head. After a moment he put his hand under her chin, lifted her face. He kissed her on the mouth. She stood quietly, her eyes closed.

"From the very day I saw you—and it

was only your picture I saw, the one I took from Dick and hung in my locker—I've wanted to do that. . . . When I've been playing football, and should have had my mind on the game—I've thought of you. Of what it would be like to do that. When I've had to cram for a recitation—I'd get up and look at your picture—and wonder if the day would ever come when I'd have courage enough to do that!"

"You had the courage?" she suggested strangely.

He nodded. "A fellow's dreams do come true sometimes. . . ."

They stood there, her head just above the top of his shoulder. Stood silently, hands joined, looking out on the heavenly aura of New York.

And back in the shadows of the French doors leading to the porch stood John Cross his face white and strained, his heart thudding in his chest. He had come out on the porch just in time to see Ash's head lower, and his mouth touch her mouth. Something exploded jaggedly in his soul, like a direct hit with a shrapnel burst. He was suddenly numb over all his body. Suddenly miserable, with a terrific sense of isolation, of loss. The overpowering sense of losing something he had never possessed.

The voice of Roger Ash was thundering in his brain: "A fellow's dreams do come true sometimes. . . ."

Yet there was a memory he had of that same voice saying contemptuously: "If any fortunes are going around looking for midshipmen, Roger Ash wants a crack at that fortune." Hearing Ash's caustic voice say: "In a couple of years—running papa's business." Hearing Ash's voice say: "I'm not going to refuse my commission. I'm just going to resign. . . ."

He turned away, into the inner room. There was a sickness in his heart. His legs were suddenly dead. The watch Wolf Gates had given him was like a ton weight in his pocket.

"S'matter?" Dick Gates asked with a grin. "You look all out. You're getting sissy, kid. Can't you take it any more?"

Truck Cross's mouth moved in a white

grin. "I feel awful tired," he said. "I guess you're right—guess I can't take it."

Pat and Ash came in from the sun porch. She was still holding onto his arm, her eyes glowing, looking more beautiful than ever. They were laughing together.

Truck sauntered out onto the sun porch, alone. He stood looking at the reflection of the lights on the snow. He felt very far away from everything within the Gates house. Very far away from Dick and Roger Ash.

The hunger of loneliness—

He heard a step behind him and turned slowly. He felt Patricia come up beside him, stand close. Her nearness burned him. There was a terrible desire within him to snatch her in his arms, to crush her against his chest, fiercely.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" she asked softly. "I never can see enough of that. It's like looking at heaven from far away."

His eyes were on her face as he nodded slowly. "That's what I was thinking and couldn't say," he said in a tight voice.

She put her hand on his arm. "Come in and dance with me," she begged. "I feel like dancing."

He looked down the length of his big body. He looked at the top of her golden head, not quite reaching his shoulder. "I'm not exactly built for dancing," he said. "Ash does the dancing for our room."

"I want to dance with you," she told him. "I thought all midshipmen had to dance—orders or something."

"Something like that," he admitted.

"Well, this is an order," she laughed.

She dragged him into the living room. The radio played softly. She held out her arms, and then she was moving with him, close. So close that he could breathe the fragrance of her hair. He closed his eyes. He could hear Ash's voice saying: "Sometimes a fellow's dreams do come true—"

Patricia's face lifted. "Your heart is pounding," she said. "Do I frighten you that much? Terrify you?"

He laughed down at her. "Don't tell the coach!" he begged. "I'll get on report for being out of condition. It must be the

exercise. I'd rather back up the line against the Army any day."

CHAPTER XXI.

"'TAIN'T NO MO' PLEBES!"

CHRISTMAS vanished suddenly. The ten-day leave swept away swiftly, like the winter wind. Now the three of them were standing in formation again. Here was the Academy once more, with snow driving in from the bay. Voices of the midshipmen officers publishing orders, snapping commands, and the voice of the midshipman Five-Striper, Commandant of the Regiment, snapping the familiar words: "Squads right and left—*march!*" A tremendous room, crammed with tables, and the Negro and Filipino mess attendants and waiters. . . .

There was the command "Seats!"—the command "Rise!" The chaplain saying morning prayer over the Regiment. There were the electric gongs and the song of the bugle—the falling in for formations and the march off to recitations. There was the staccato: "Hey, Mister!" of the upper classmen.

Nothing left of that precious ten days of freedom but a jumbled collection of memories. Somehow it seemed that the freedom had never really existed excepting as a dream. Only the blue-and-gold watches on the three fixed it as an actuality.

February came. Hops, athletic meets. . . . March. April. . . . The days seemed to glide by with a suddenly acquired velocity, all directed to a fixed point—Graduation Day.

The snow melted and the trees budded: the waters of the river and the bay changed from a steely gray to blue. On the dress parades the Regiment was like a precision machine in its maneuvers and response to commands.

Faces disappeared from the plebe class. Faces of men who were "unsat" and who "bilged" the class, washed out on academic grounds. They had one hope as

they packed to leave—that they could get a second appointment, enter again with the new plebe class. Then there was no room for memory. The highly geared routine moved relentlessly.

The grass of Farragut field came in green and thick.

And the excitement and buzz within the Regiment increased in volume and tension. June Week! Graduation! Each of the four classes stepping up one grade. Liberation day for the plebes!

Hundredth Night passed. That one night, one hundred days before graduation of the First Class, when the lowly plebes were permitted for two or three hours to command the First Class—and the first classmen. No forgetting the spectacle of a first classman, on his hands and knees, doing full bends the length of Dahlgren Hall, under the watchful eye of a broom-armed plebe who fanned the seat of his senior's pants with each bend.

Mister Weeks and Mister Kelly of the First Class waited for Mister Ash of the Fourth Class to come around and to get even for the mess table recitations they had forced on Mister Ash. But Mister Ash, passing them on the walk, merely glanced at them, grinning, and passed on.

Mister Weeks breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"Boy, do you get the breaks?" said Mister Kelly sourly.

Then the announcement: "Candidates for the Football Squad are instructed to report to the Head Coach, MacDonough Hall, for Spring Practice. This call includes men of the Fourth Class who will be eligible for varsity competition during the season of 1936."

"**A**T last!" breathed Roger Ash when the call was published. "I'm so hungry for a football I could eat one, bladder and all."

"I hope we make it," worried Dick Gates. "It kind of scares me when I think of going out there for the varsity. I don't feel any different than I did last year."

"What d'ya mean *hope* we make it?"

Ash reproved. "You're about the only guy in this room who is *sure* of the First Team. They don't need a quarter on the A-squad any worse than I need a right arm. You're a cinch. Besides, look at you— You're packing ten pounds more beef this year than last."

"And will he need it?" grinned Truck. "William and Mary, Davidson, Virginia, Yale, Princeton, Pennsylvania, Notre Dame, Harvard and the Army. On succeeding week ends! How do you like them dainties for the bill-of-fare?"

Ash took a puff of his cigarette. "By the time we get down to that Army game we'll be so numb from having guys hit us that we won't feel anything, anyhow. Those Army slugs will be like a bunch of push-overs." He frowned. "You know, I've always wanted to play against Notre Dame. I've always had the idea I could go places against a team that played the same formations we use."

"I'll be satisfied to stand still," said Truck. "Nobody goes *very* far against those wild Irishmen—not even the Navy."

"Well, it'll be different this year," promised Ash. "Let's go out and toss the ball around."

More than a hundred candidates answered that first call for spring practice. Lieutenant Milton and his assistant coaches were out on the field looking over the material. Practice gear had been issued, and the men were limbering up.

Milton stopped Ash and Truck and Gates as they trotted out of the gym. He smiled, shook hands.

"You've taken on weight!" he told Gates with a pleased note in his voice. "You must have been packing it away during the winter. How does it feel to get hold of a ball again?"

"Fine, sir," grinned Gates. "I guess we're all anxious to go."

"I'm glad to see you men out," said the coach. "Are all of you 'sat' in all your subjects?"

"Yes, sir," came the answer in chorus.

"That's fine," smiled Milton. "Just remember that a man who can gain ten

yards through the center against Notre Dame, yet can't gain an inch against the Academic Board, is a total loss to the team. Go on out there and toss the ball around. Take it easy."

They galloped off.

"I'm glad I'm going to play for him," said Truck. "I was afraid he might be relieved this year, sent back to the line. But I guess they're keeping him here."

The blocking and tackling dummies were up on the field and in the pits. The fourth day they were hitting the dummies, and grunting as they hit them. Milton was standing back with expert eye, watching the practice.

Then it was May. Days now! Hours! The swirl of June Week was already swamping the Academy. Carvel Hall was booked to the roof. Officers and guests were arriving in Annapolis even now. The gorgeous girls were congregating. The First Class walked around with a dazed look in collective eyes. The decorations were going up in Dahlgren Hall for Graduation Exercises.

First Thursday in June! The plebe class seethed with the excitement. The day of liberation, the freedom from bondage was coming!

THEN, one morning, the Midshipman Five Striper, stood in front of the last formation he would ever command as a Midshipman. He was the beau ideal of the Academy, the High God who walked with his head in the clouds of Olympus! He was the ultra-correct, magnified essence of everything a Midshipman should be. The Galahad who could do no wrong. He stood before the Regiment, eyes gleaming. He was stiff as a ramrod as he heard the reports:

Then suddenly he gave his last command. The traditional last command given by all Midshipman Five Stripers. He opened his mouth and bellowed: "The hell with 'em all! Squads East and West!"

There was roaring response from the Regiment as they milled down the steps in wild disorder to breakfast.

That day! Friends and relatives and mothers and fathers and best girls jammed the great space of Dahlgren Hall to its suffocating capacity. Fond mamas, with tears in eyes, surveyed the square of First Classmen in immaculate white. Lumps in their throats as they listened to the invocation of the Chaplain. The compact square of white sat at attention, hearing the last words which would ever be addressed to them as Midshipmen.

Then, the march to the front and center for the diplomas. The cheers from the class as the names of the Class Heroes were called. And finally, the Class, back in seats again, rising. A voice booming: "I propose a cheer for those we leave behind us."

Another voice led the cheer. The graduates bellowed it out until the high-flung rafters of Dahlgren vibrated with the booming wave of sound. On the third "Rah!" a suddenly released shower of white caps flew up into the air, whirling like white doves. Hands clutched for them as they fell.

At that exact second the entire plebe class—tense, waiting, on edge—suddenly burst into sound. The sound one might hear in a jammed insane asylum. The plebes ripped off coats, turned them inside out and put them on backward. They reversed their caps; rolled up pants legs, fell into a whirling, swirling snake dance that swept in and out and around the building and through the walks. With every step they howled.

Grinning upper classmen rushed out to see the plebe celebration. Bewildered guests at the graduation exercises paled a little and wondered what disaster had overtaken the Academy.

As the plebes rioted they yelled: "'Tain't no mo' plebes! 'Tain't no mo' plebes!"

And there *were* no more plebes! The Fourth Class, at the instant the caps of the First Class had rocketed into the air, became the Third Class. The Third became the Second, and the Second became the First. The day of liberty had arrived. No more plebes! There would be no more until

the new class was taken in for the beginning of plebe summer.

Dick Gates and Rog Ash and Truck Cross galloped around with the others. They yelled and screeched and rioted. They pounded backs, shook hands, acted like lunatics. They wrestled and fought and rolled over and over on the grass. They whistled and sang and cheered until the whole Class exhausted itself.

Then they got ready for the final hop of the year.

Pat Gates was dragged by the three of them. She was breathlessly excited. To each of them she was the most beautiful thing on the floor—with the exception of the Admiral in full-dress uniform.

CHAPTER XXII.

BATTLE WAGONS.

FARRAGUT FIELD, all the way to the sea wall, was a mass of struggling midshipmen in work whites and caps. It was dotted with crazy contrivances and vehicles of transport and burden, said vehicles piled high with the belongings of the Third and First Class. Here and there a laundry truck of canvas, with castor-like wheels, made rough going over the sod of the field, hauled by roommates whose gear it transported. Drag sleds, express wagons, skids—anything that would move and bear a load. It was like the sudden migration of a tribe.

Each year this spectacle was the preliminary to the practice cruise.

Out in the bay the *Oklahoma*, *Arkansas* and *Wyoming* stood in immense silhouettes, with fighting tops rising up to the clouds. They were gray, enormous, and the turret guns starkly outlined fore and aft, seemed surrounded by an ominous glitter. Three "battle-wagons" to be taken over by midshipmen. Three battle-wagons, regular crews reduced to a skeleton, to be manned by these eager youngsters dragging gear across Farragut Field.

Boats at the sea wall, piled high with kits and midshipmen, were shoving off.

Starting out for those mighty fortresses of steel, putting gear and men aboard, returning for more men and gear. The scene would continue until the mountain of baggage had been transferred to sea and the twelve hundred midshipmen of the Naval Academy were on board the three ships . . .

Dick Gates stood at the rail, looked back at the Academy. The planking of the *Oklahoma's* deck was under his feet. The salt air rushed against his face. His eyes were filled with a soft glowing.

"It sure looks beautiful from here," he said to Ash. "Takes something like this to make a fellow realize what a swell place the Academy is. Look at the sun on the green roofs—how green the fields look—how big those buildings are. Look at those planes on the water, and the S-20 riding there by the Santee Basin. You kind of forget those things when you're around 'em every day."

There was the clanking sound of the *Oklahoma's* anchor coming aboard. Her siren deafened them. Her decks pulsed. The water seemed to be suddenly sliding past the rail.

"We're under way!" said Truck Cross. His eyes swept the deck, gleaming. "Cruisers get away faster but that was plenty fast. This is one more sweet ship. I'm going to like her."

"I forgot," said Dick. "You're the only one of us that has ever been on a ship before. I never been on the deck of a battleship before—and here I am, almost an officer—"

"—and a gentleman!" reminded Ash.

TRUCK pushed Dick Gates with a big paw. "You'll never understand how far you are from being an officer until you stand your first watch," he told him. "There are a lot of officers, guys who have been out of this Academy for a long time, who still get the jitters every time they have a problem in navigation to work out on a bridge."

"What do we do?" Gates wanted to know.

"I have an idea that you'll either learn

the proper use of a holystone in the deck force, or you'll make a couple of swell burner cleaners in the fire room."

"What?" asked Ash. "I thought we were on this cruise to learn things—things about being officers?"

"How to keep a deck clean and how to clean a burner in a fireroom—these are things that every young officer should know," Truck grinned. "Did you gentlemen have the notion that this practice cruise was something like a yachting trip to Europe—a pleasure jaunt? Listen, we're the crew! The crew, get it? The gobs, the workmen who do it all. We polish the bright work, chip the paint, fire the boilers, run the engines, man the boats, drill in the turrets—"

"And if the Admiral has a headache, I suppose we chase around and get him an aspirin," said Ash disgustedly.

"Oh, no!" grinned Truck. "The Flag Lieutenant does that. We could never get that near to an Admiral."

"This is going to be one big pain in the neck," growled Ash. "I can see that without a telescope."

"Your ideas are sound, Mister Ash, but your knowledge of anatomy needs an overhauling. Said pain will be in the small of your back, more likely. That holystoning gets you."

"When do we get battle practice?" Dick Gates asked. "I mean, when do we get detailed into turret crews and all that?" He was peering at the jutting guns.

"Practically always," promised Truck. "Unless things have changed you'll be working those babies from reveille to taps—and maybe from taps to reveille. Gunnery officers like to keep crews on their toes with little surprises like that."

Green water broke over the bows of the *Oklahoma*. She led the line of three ships as she stood out to sea. The coast receded, and she was alone, in her element.

"I don't want to keep you boys in suspense," grinned Truck, "but it just goes to show you that class will tell. I snatched a look at the watch bill first thing I came aboard. It may interest you gentlemen to

know that you are going to serve your country in the fireroom, in the lowly capacity of Firemen Third Class which is lower than a whale's navel. You are going to be under the watchful, expert and particular supervision of one John Cross, who is on the bill as "burner man"—and a nice job it is, too. Said John Cross, in plain language, is going to be your boss—and will you boys learn about fire rooms from him!"

"What's all this burner stuff?" demanded Ash suspiciously.

"Well, my little fullback, there are fourteen burners under each boiler, complete with nozzle and appliances. The oil comes through, is mixed and forced into a whirling spray, and ignites from the jets of the burner. Now your chemistry will tell you that this continuous action of burning oil, under conditions of great heat, will form carbon. Carbon is very bad for burners. It clogs them, reduces their efficiency."

"So what?" growled Ash.

"So my job is to go around looking at the burners and deciding which must come out for a cleaning. A very important job, almost as important as water tender."

"Hmpf!" grunted Ash. "And while you're being so big and important, what do we do?"

"You," Truck smiled sweetly, "clean the burners which I cause to be removed."

"With what?"

"With a wire brush, a can of kerosene—and plenty of muscle oil!"

"Say, listen—" began Ash.

"What, mutiny already?"

"How many do we clean?" asked Gates.

"Let me see. . . . I should say about—ah, about twenty each during a watch."

"And that's supposed to make me a better officer?" grunted Ash.

"Oh, decidedly. It makes you understand the problems of the little Fireman, Third Class, who will some day come to you and say: 'Please Mister Ash—'"

"They won't come to me," declared Ash. "You know where the little Fireman can go, don't you?"

"Sure—right where you're going, when your watch is called," answered Truck.

"Why don't you pipe down?" growled Ash.

"And, of course," goaded Truck, "those burners come right out from under the boiler, all nice and hot. They have to go right back in as soon as they are cleaned, so there isn't a great deal of time to let 'em cool before you go to work on 'em. Most of the time the kerosene sizzles when they go in the bucket, and the guys who clean 'em usually get blisters on their hands and cuss a lot. But, after all, it's for the good old Navy."

"The good old Navy can go where the little Fireman goes," griped Ash.

"Also—" Truck Cross was enjoying himself—"it's about fifty degrees hotter down there than it is on deck. It's like being penned inside a sardine can. But of course you only have a couple of hours of it—each watch. You get used to it in time."

"And that's what you did *before* you came to the Academy?" asked Ash sarcastically. "That was the way you picked."

"Oh, yes. Nothing like the black gang."

"Gee," said Dick Gates. His eyes had been fixed on the turret guns. "Do you suppose we'll get a chance to shoot those things? We're going to Europe, remember, and Mussolini is kicking up an awful rumpus over there. The papers say there may be a war any minute. Wouldn't it be great if we got into an emergency or something?"

There was eagerness in his voice.

"Just another gunnery officer in the making," snorted Ash. "I can see it sticking out of his eyes. He's been hypnotized by those pea shooters ever since we came aboard."

"You said it!" Gates nodded energetically. "Gunnery, that's me—right down my alley. I'm going to be a shark at it."

"Disgusting little slug!" said Ash. "The peewee wants to go round shooting at people!"

"Well, what do you want to do?" asked Gates.

"I want to go on leave in Paris," said Ash. "Now that's something. Boy, I'm

willing to clean those burners, just for a crack at liberty in that dear Patee. The guy who thought up that kind of liberty is my kind of gazebo. I've had things to say to those French gals for a long, long time. . . ."

The *Oklahoma* nosed into the swells, hit them thunderously. Green seas broke over her bow, swept along the deck in a hissing torrent, gurgled in the scuppers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CRUISE SONG.

"Every cloud has a silver lining,
Every Summer Cruise its end,
Every drill will have its recall
Every trouble soon will mend.
And when the cruise is over,
And we sight old Bancroft Hall,
We'll go on leave a-shouting,
It's a good world after all!"

PARIS—and a sudden recall from leave. The emergency of which Dick Gates had dreamed. Orders came crackling through the air from Washington. On the *Oklahoma*, men were prying open the lockers of the midshipmen, transferring gear to the *Arkansas* and the *Wyoming*.

The *Oklahoma* was going to Spain. Trouble, grim trouble. Hundreds of Americans trapped in Spain, with the country in the throes of a violent and bloody revolt. No trains. No telegraph, no reports from consuls or government representatives. American Ambassador trapped in the zone of most vicious fighting, unheard of for days. Chattering machine guns in the streets of populous cities. Public squares littered with the bodies of the dead. Guns booming in the mountain passes as the rebels pressed on toward Madrid. Planes flying overhead, dropping bombs, shattering buildings and churches and human flesh.

British and German ships fired upon and bombed—mistaken identity. Tempers on edge. . . . Rattle of the sabre of Mars throughout Europe. Growling of mortal enemies, tramp of marching thousands.

Tension in Russia, Italy, France, Germany, the Balkans. Turkey marching into the Dardenelles to occupy forbidden ground. German battleships in the Mediterranean.

American midshipmen had hurried back to their ships to find their gear piled all over the decks, awaiting owners. The *Oklahoma* sailed for the trouble zone.

"There!" wailed Dick Gates. "That's what I call lousy. We get tossed overboard from the ship. We don't even go."

"It's a gyp!" moaned Ash. "Just get to Paree—and recalled. A swell liberty if you ask me."

The bows of the *Arkansas* and the *Wyoming* swung westward. . . . Then Hampton Roads and Norfolk, and four days liberty. . . . To sea again, this time at battle stations, for S.R.B.P. Steaming with gun crews tense and ready, waiting for the word. The boom and roar of the turret guns and the broadside guns in salvo practice.

The heel and roll of the great ship as the recoil was absorbed. The wall of hot flame and gas from the gun muzzles. The quiet commands of the gunnery officers. Midshipmen serving guns faster than men could serve guns. Midshipmen gun crews like mechanical figures, handling the immense engines of destruction as they might have handled so many toys. Rattle of hoists, thud of rammer against shell, ring of the breech block, quiver of the turret at the moment the guns were fired.

Then the boats were at the sea wall of Annapolis again. The *Arkansas* and *Wyoming* came over the rim of the horizon—and there was Bancroft Hall, and the radio range, and the dome of the Chapel. The cruise was home. The plebes—a funny looking lot—piled down to the sea wall to watch the boats come back—to watch the Third and First Class swarm rollicking ashore.

"What a sappy looking bunch of boots," said Dick Gates. "I wonder if we looked as silly as that at the end of *our* plebe summer?"

"Don't be funny," warned Ash. "You're still plenty silly looking."

He turned to Truck Cross, lowered his voice: "Ever think what a couple of guys like us are going to do with a month's liberty?"

"I'm going to stay here and study," said Truck. "I can use it. I'd like to go home but—"

"Home?" Ash frowned. "I thought you didn't have a home—like me. I never heard you mention home before."

"Well, it isn't exactly a home," said Truck. "It's more like a place where a guy comes from. There's just one reason why I'd like to go home. But the reason—well, you'd never understand."

"Don't tell me you've been holding out all these years—that you got a gal back in the old home town?"

The tips of Truck's ears got pink. "No—no," he said hurriedly. "Nothing like that. . . ."

"You big strong silent guys!" kidded Ash. "You bury things so deep in your manly bosoms."

BUT Truck did not stay at the Academy during leave. He didn't stay because a big Hispano was waiting at Carvel Hall, and with it was Mrs. Gates and Miss Patricia Gates.

"Mr. Richard Arnold Gates, Senior, instructed me to come down here and to bring his three sons home on leave." She smiled at them all. "Your father has been mooning for weeks now, Dick, just waiting for this leave. I think he's going on leave himself as soon as you get home."

"You'll be run ragged!" promised Pat. "I'm going to see to that."

She was staring at Ash's face as if seeing it for the first time, looking at his eyes and his hair and his smile. Truck Cross watched her. After a while he turned away. He was silent almost all the way to Westchester.

"Hey!" Dick Gates kept saying every ten miles. "Don't forget, you guys—we're youngsters! We're upper classmen. We're important people. The minute I go back I've got to see about my broom. I think I will have to get me a new broom—a nice

strong, new broom, and not for sweeping. That bunch of plebes I saw around the grounds are going to take a lot of whipping into shape."

He took a deep breath: "*Hey, Mister!*" he bellowed. He looked at Truck. "How does that sound for the word of command from a Youngster to a plebe?"

"It sounds like the noon whistle on a peanut roaster to me," said Ash. "If that ever stops a plebe, it will be only because he is too weak from laughter to proceed."

"How does the football team look?" asked Pat.

"Say, that's right!" marvelled Dick. "Listen, gang, we're varsity. We play Army!"

"That's what I've been waiting for," said Ash.

Pat Gates glanced at him quickly and curiously. She smiled. "Think of it: I'm going to be there, too, watching you play. How about it, Truck?"

He looked at her almost somberly.

"If the Coach thinks I'm good enough to use against the Army it's going to be the greatest moment in my life. If I only get in for one minute—"

"Listen to that guy!" begged Ash. "He's got the center position in his hip pocket right now. He's not below 3.0 in any subject, and he went through a whole plebe year without getting more than fifty demerits. You ask me right now, and I'll tell you that Milton and his gang are building the line right around the big hunk on your left. He's the best center the Academy has seen in years—and they know it!"

Truck's ears reddened.

"I know one thing!" said Mrs. Gates positively. "Richard Arnold Gates, Senior, had better see that we get tickets to all the games in advance. I'm going to live at Carvel Hall during the whole football season."

They looked at her for a minute. Dick grabbed her. He waved his arms like a cheer leader.

The three of them yelled in unison: "Yea! Navy!"

A traffic cop started to put his whistle to his mouth to stop the car. He was shocked, surprised, outraged. But before he could make up his mind, the big Hispano was a block away, and Mrs. Gates was somewhat disheveled from the mauling.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The First United States Navy

THE ink on the Declaration of Independence was hardly dry when our Founding Fathers decided that something should be done about a navy. So they set out to buy one. There wasn't much hard cash in the national treasury—the resulting purchases were poorly built and badly fitted—but a seafaring force was gathered nevertheless. This first armada consisted of two ships of twenty-four guns each; six brigs carrying from ten to twelve guns; two schooners each with eight guns; and four sloops, three of ten guns and one of four guns. This paltry group to oppose the almost six hundred sail that bore the proud flag of Britannia!

On December 22nd, 1775, a personnel of officers was selected—men, evidently, who didn't mind fighting against the odds. Among these was Lieutenant John Paul Jones, hero of the battle between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis*. Another was Ezekiel Hopkins, the first and last active commander-in-chief of the navy. Commander Hopkins didn't get along with Congress, it seems, so they dismissed him early in 1777. The title has not been revived since that time except in the person of the president.

—Richard V. Whyte.

Men of Daring

Big Game Hunter

AN UNERRING SHOT WITH A HIGH-POWERED RIFLE, HE KILLS ANIMALS NOT FOR LUST OR THE THRILL OF IT, BUT TO COLLECT CERTAIN FAUNA DESIRED BY MUSEUMS. HE MAKES FREQUENT TREKS TO THE EARTH'S INACCESSIBLE FAR PLACES, SOMETIMES TRAVELING THOUSANDS OF MILES FOR A SINGLE RARE SPECIMEN.



AN ENGLISHMAN BY BIRTH, NOW PAST 50, VERNAY HAS BEEN A COLLECTOR MOST OF HIS LIFE, DEALING IN ANTIQUES, WITH A SHOP IN NEW YORK AND ONE IN LONDON.



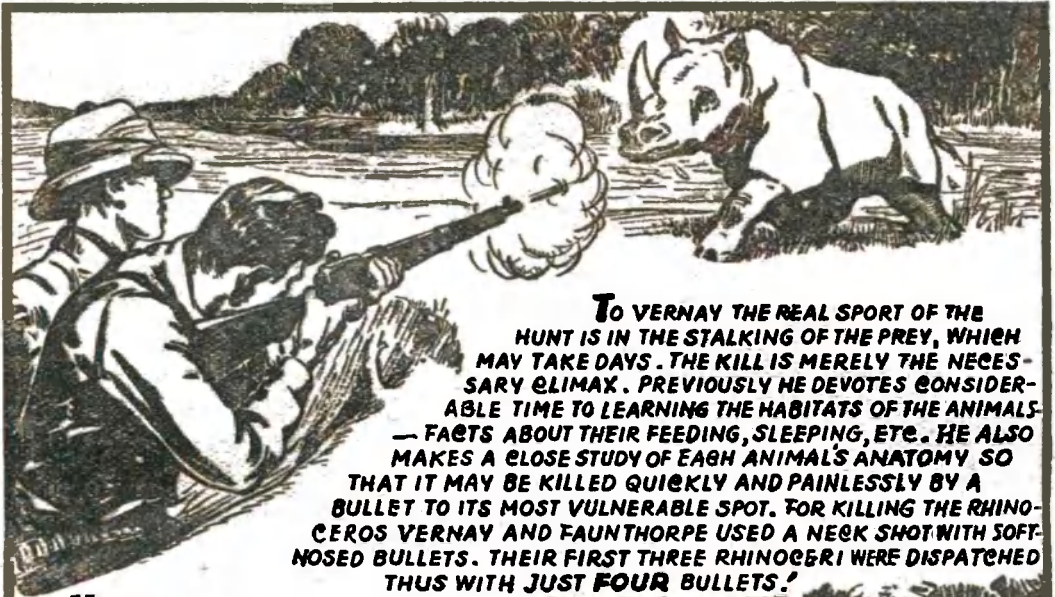
Arthur Vernay

IN 1921 HE WENT HUNTING IN INDIA WITH COL. J. C. FAUNTHORPE, ONE OF THE WORLD'S FINEST SHOTS. HE BROUGHT BACK SOME EXCELLENT MAMMAL SPECIMENS REPRESENTATIVE OF SOUTHERN ASIA FOR THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY. FROM THAT START HE UNDERTOOK FURTHER COLLECTING EXPEDITIONS AS A REGULAR SIDE OCCUPATION.



HE HAS HAD SOME AMAZING ADVENTURES AND CLOSE CALLS. ONCE IN NEPAL, HE TRACKED A HUGE BULL RHINOCEROS TO HIS EVENING MUD WALLOW. VERNAY'S FIRST SHOT HIT TOO HIGH. INFURIATED, THE BEAST CHARGED HIM, BUT AN ACCURATE SECOND SHOT DROPPED THE RHINO DEAD IN ITS TRACKS.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week



TO VERNAY THE REAL SPORT OF THE HUNT IS IN THE STALKING OF THE PREY, WHICH MAY TAKE DAYS. THE KILL IS MERELY THE NECESSARY CLIMAX. PREVIOUSLY HE DEVOTES CONSIDERABLE TIME TO LEARNING THE HABITATS OF THE ANIMALS — FACTS ABOUT THEIR FEEDING, SLEEPING, ETC. HE ALSO MAKES A CLOSE STUDY OF EACH ANIMAL'S ANATOMY SO THAT IT MAY BE KILLED QUICKLY AND PAINLESSLY BY A BULLET TO ITS MOST VULNERABLE SPOT. FOR KILLING THE RHINOCEROS VERNAY AND FAUNTHORPE USED A NECK SHOT WITH SOFT-NOSED BULLETS. THEIR FIRST THREE RHINOCERI WERE DISPATCHED THUS WITH JUST FOUR BULLETS.

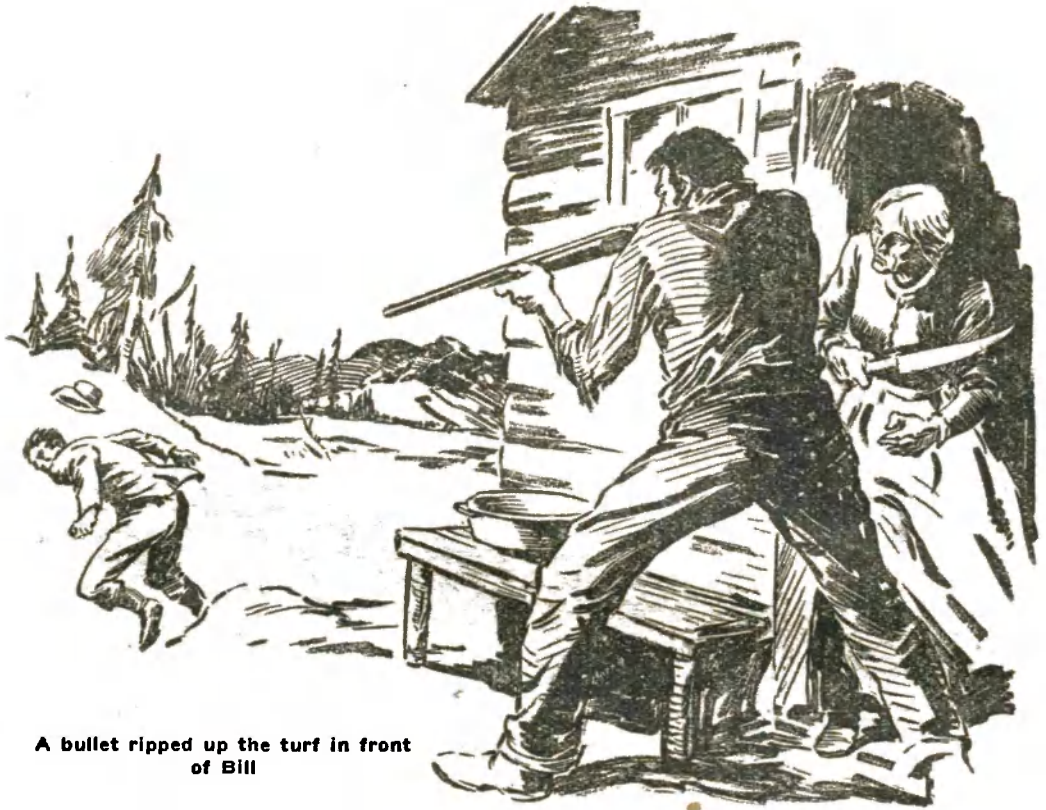
USUALLY VERNAY SETS OUT TO BRING SOME CERTAIN RARE CREATURE BACK, AND HE PERMITS NOTHING TO DIVERT HIM IN THE PARTICULAR QUEST. FOR SIX YEARS HE SEARCHED THE EAST INDIES FOR A SPECIMEN OF THE ALL BUT EXTINCT SONDAICUS, OR ONE-HORNED MALAYAN RHINOCEROS. TWO EXPEDITIONS INTO DENSE JUNGLES WERE UNSUCCESSFUL, BUT IN 1932, HIS PERSISTENCE WAS REWARDED. IN TORRENTIAL RAINS HE PENETRATED A LITTLE KNOWN FOREST *BACK OF THE BEYOND *IN PENANG, TO SHOOT A FINE SPECIMEN OF THE RARE BEAST.



A SAFARI 250 MILES INTO INTERIOR PORTUGUESE WEST AFRICA IN 1925 YIELDED A COLLECTION OF 8,000 SPECIMENS, INCLUDING 1200 BIRDS, 2000 REPTILES, 800 FISH AND HUNDREDS OF STRANGE MAMMALS. YET, HAD HE FAILED TO GET THE FIVE RARE YELLOW ANTELOPES WHICH WERE HIS ESPECIAL OBJECTIVE, HE WOULD HAVE CONSIDERED THE ENTIRE EXPEDITION A LOSS. HE GOT ON THE TRACK OF A COMPLETE FAMILY, OR HABITAT GROUP, OF THE ANTELOPES NEAR THE END OF THE HUNT. BAGGING THAT PRIZE PROVED MORE EXCITING TO HIM THAN SHOOTING THE FAMOUS *ROGUE *ELEPHANT OF INDIA THAT ALMOST GOT HIM IN A CHARGE AFTER AN INEFFECTUAL FIRST SHOT.

VERNAY SELDOM MISSES A FIRST SHOT, BUT WHEN A SECOND HAS BEEN NECESSARY, IT HAS ALWAYS FOUND ITS MARK.





A bullet ripped up the turf in front of Bill

Not Dead Enough

By WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE

Author of "The Size of a Man," "Hipboot and the Genie," etc.

Grammy Mehitabel Bushby claimed to be the worst old hellion on Crowquill Mountain—and she could prove it

LIKE a giant slug the two hundred and fifty pounds of meanness which was Hedgehog Joe Bushby came out of a thick clump of lilac bushes and crawled through the darkness toward the Noland front porch. He got there with no more sound than the occasional rustle of a dead leaf, and from that listening post he could hear everything that was said by the two men and the girl who sat above him.

It was a quiet, velvet-soft night of early summer and even the breathing of old John

Noland came down to Bushby. Amy, his pretty granddaughter, was there, and so was young Bill Stewart. Hedgehog Joe had an excellent reason for wanting to know just why Bill Stewart had come down from Crowquill mountain to call on a prosperous farmer like Noland. The reason was strong enough so he was willing to risk a charge of shot in his back if the old man discovered him prowling.

"My boy," said John Noland's age-cracked voice, "I knew your father, and

he was an honest man. I've heard that you're straight as a yardstick even if you do live on Crowquill with the Bushby clan and such-like trash."

Bill Stewart swallowed hard and felt funny inside. He could not remember when he had had a compliment for any moral quality. People said you might just as well have a mule kick you as to be hit by Bill Stewart, but that was different.

"I play square," he announced, huskily, after a moment.

The head of Amy Noland turned quickly and he heard her murmur something to her grandfather. Bill could see only their forms outlined in the light that came out from the house windows, but he knew she had hair the color of ripe corn and eyes which looked through and through a man. He had known that a long time.

"Amy says you'll do," said John Noland, "and she can see under a man's hide. Well, my boy, I'm looking for somebody who'll keep his mouth shut, go up to the Canadian border and bring a man down here, straight through the woods. He may have to take him back again. I can't tell about that until I talk with the feller. Do you know what line-bound is?"

"Yes," answered Stewart. "It means a man who's done something so that he can't come back across the border into this country."

"That's it. Bob Noland, Amy's cousin and my grand-nephew, used some money that didn't belong to him and he can't come back. He's writ me a letter asking if I won't straighten things out for him.

"I haven't seen the boy since he was a little shaver and I don't know a thing about him. This means quite a lot of money and I wanted to look Bob all over before I put it up for him.

"Here's a slip of paper with the name of the place where he's waiting. He'll have to have a guide, for he's no woodsman, and he wouldn't dare to take to the roads after he crossed into the States. Do you want the job at five dollars a day and expenses?"

For a moment Bill Stewart found it hard to speak. He would have taken that job

for nothing and paid his own expenses. It was all of a year now that he had been wishing he could risk his life or do something like that for the clear-eyed girl who lived in the Noland farmhouse and who was a hundred respectable miles above him.

"Yes, sir," he managed at last. "I'll take him both ways if you say so, even if I have to carry him on my shoulder in a barrel!"

Amy Noland's laugh rippled on the night.

"I told you, Grampa!" she exclaimed.

Under the porch Hedgehog Joe Bushby began to wriggle backward an inch at a time. He had found out what he had wanted to know and he had to go home with the news in a hurry.

THE cushioned rocking chair of Grammy Mehitabel Bushby was within easy reach of the rack of rifles and shotguns behind the stove. She could look out through a nearby window, tend the kitchen fire, and get a gun if she needed it—all with a minimum of effort.

Suddenly Grammy stopped rocking. Her blackened clay pipe turned so that ashes spilled into her lap. This was a supreme moment. Her black eyes snapped as she rose and darted a glance at the egg-shaped face of Hedgehog Joe, who fidgeted on a creaking chair.

"I'm going to do the talking," she whispered, hoarsely. "If you say a word I'll cut your liver out and fry it!"

When Grammy opened the cabin door she was bent nearly double and her gnarled hand was pressed to the small of her back. Bill Stewart was just swinging along the road with the look of a man who walked in a happy dream.

"Good morning to ye, Bill," groaned Grammy. "Will you step in and reach down a bottle of linnerment for me from the top shelf in the pantry? I got a turrible crick in the small of my back!"

"Sure!" said Stewart.

He did not see Hedgehog Joe until he had crossed the threshold. Then Hedgehog prodded him forward with the muzzle of a rifle. Bill heard the bar drop into

place across the door behind him. He also heard Grammy's chuckle.

"Put your rifle on the table and go set down," ordered Hedgehog.

Bill Stewart had snapped out of his dream at the first touch of Bushby's weapon. He obeyed orders, letting himself warily down upon a chair.

"Have you gone crazy, Hedgehog?" he asked.

"Don't give me no back talk!" rumbled Hedgehog Joe. He set Stewart's rifle and his own in the corner beside Grammy and straddled his mighty legs out in the middle of the room. Hands on hips, he loomed there—taller by a head than Bill Stewart and seventy-five pounds heavier.

Grammy reached over the arm of her chair and picked up Bill's rifle in hands which were as used to firearms as they were to skillets.

"You want to kind of remember, you big lummo," she said to Hedgehog, "that you can ketch more flies with molasses than you can with vinegar!"

"I got the molasses and I got the vinegar, too!" Hedgehog assured her, over his shoulder. His murky eyes did not leave Stewart's face. "Gimme that paper you got from old man Noland last night!"

This was so totally unexpected that Bill Stewart's hand automatically went to the pocket of his jacket. He had been trying to remember whether the Bushbys had any cause for a grudge against him, wondering if some desperate need had driven Hedgehog to a hold-up, but there had been no suspicion in his mind that the giant had any knowledge of his errand to the north. He still couldn't figure it out.

"What for?" he asked, after a moment of silence.

"On account of I say so!" Hedgehog told him. "I want to know where Mr. Bob Noland is at!"

"You," said Stewart, calmly, "can go right straight to the land where they don't shovel snow!"

The large face of Hedgehog Joe grew richly dark with rage but he remembered the counsel of Grammy Bushby. His fist

jerked, and then went into a pocket. It brought out a wad of dirty banknotes.

"Here's twenty-five dollars," he said. "You can stay home and lemme go and I'll bring Noland down to the old man and you won't have nothing at all to worry about."

"How do you know so much?" asked Bill.

"That's my business! Is it a deal, or have I got to scramble you like a mess of eggs?"

Bill Stewart had been brought up in a neighborhood where a man hit first and thought about it afterward. He knew without thinking that he was not going to let John Noland down; and he had never liked Hedgehog, anyway. His right fist rose and perfectly coordinating muscles drove it against the jaw of Joe Bushby with a sound like cracking wood.

Hedgehog Joe went backward, with greenbacks dribbling from his fingers, until he stepped on Grammy's foot. She lashed a sizzling word or two at him and his head cleared. He snatched Stewart's rifle from her unresisting hands and pumped the lever of the weapon.

Bill Stewart halted between two steps, balanced on his toes, with his stomach muscles quivering. For the muzzle of his own gun was no more than a foot from his shirt front and there was murder in the face of Hedgehog Joe Bushby. His breath sucked in.

"I guess you ain't going to be missed if you don't never come back from that trip of yours!" panted Bushby.

IN the deadly silence Stewart's muscles knotted and curled. Grammy scratched a match noisily on the stove and lighted her pipe. Stewart's glance flickered toward her. It came back to Hedgehog's glaring eyes. A slow grin lifted the corners of Bill Stewart's mouth.

"Shoot and be damned!" he said.

The hammer of the old-fashioned rifle clicked down—and there was no explosion!

Bill Stewart started forward. Hedgehog lowered the gun with a yell of rage and

sprang away from a fist that brushed his nose. Then he as well as Stewart saw that the lap of Grammy Bushby's funereal dress gleamed with the brass jackets of rifle cartridges.

"I figured you was going to give his shooting-iron back to him so I emptied the magazine," she told Hedgehog, calmly. "You're just fool enough! And then he could argify some more! You don't think ahead! You don't think at all, no more than a side of beef!"

She had put her giant descendant in the wrong. For an instant he looked stunned, bewildered. Then he snatched a cartridge and opened the magazine of the rifle. But when his fingers thrust that little death messenger into the chamber of the rifle he took his gaze from Stewart and glanced down.

Bill Stewart swung nearly clear of the floor, pivoting on one foot. At the same time his fist shot out. It struck the mouth of Hedgehog Bushby with a force that smashed flesh against teeth.

Bushby staggered, and for a moment his eyes glazed. The rifle banged to the floor, exploding harmlessly. Stewart drove blows to his bulging middle, each with a lifting force that started at the floor. Hedgehog went reeling to the wall and Bill stepped in to finish him.

But at that instant naked steel flashed before his eyes. He leaped aside. The point of a butcher knife in Granny's skinny fist drove for his ribs. It slashed through shirt and skin and as he grabbed at the knife the old woman's other hand plunged into his jacket pocket.

"I got it, Hedgehog!" she croaked, waving the slip of paper that John Noland had given Bill the night before.

Stewart snatched at the paper and missed. Hedgehog had the rifle again and was jamming another cartridge into it. The butcher knife cut the air around Bill's head, and it was time to go. He ripped the bar away from the door and plunged out.

That hundred yard dash to the cover of the woods seemed a mile long. A bullet ripped up the turf in front of him. Another

slithered through the leaves overhead. Then he was far enough among the tree trunks to be safe.

There he stopped and tried to think his way out of this situation in which he had suddenly bogged down.

He could not see that there was any use in going back to John Noland. There would be time enough later to tell the old man what had happened and let him make what he could of it. Apparently the thing for Stewart to do was to get to Bob Noland as quickly as possible and do the job for which he had been hired.

Stewart had left his rifle in the Bushby cabin but he could get along without it. He did not need the slip of paper for there had been only the name, "Dykeman's Rest," written on it.

What business Hedgehog Bushby and his clan had with Bob Noland was beyond guessing. But Stewart saw that he must get to the Border and Dykeman's Rest first if he could. For the return trip through the woods he would take his chances with any number of Bushbys.

BILL STEWART paid the driver of a rickety car which had bumped him over ten miles of little used dirt road the last stage of his journey. The outside of Dykeman's Rest did not seem so very bad to him, used as he was to the weathered and ill-kept structures of his own mountains. But the moment he entered the grimy main room, with battered furniture and a table of half emptied glasses, he felt that something was wrong.

Why had everybody vanished as he came up the sagging steps on the American side? There had been more than one person in this room. He knew that from the sound of swift movement that he had heard, and from the glasses.

A scarred door opened and the frowsty head of a brightly rouged woman appeared.

"You looking for somebody?" she asked.

"Robert Noland," Stewart told her.

"It's all right. I was sent to see him."

The head bobbed out of sight. A full minute passed. Voices rumbled, quieted,

and then a step sounded beyond the door where the woman had appeared. A young man.

Stewart found himself looking at someone who might have answered a general description of himself, but who really bore little resemblance to him. They both owned blue eyes, brown hair, and were approximately the same height. But the eyes of the stranger were a little watery and uncertain. His hair was rough and lusterless, like the coat of a dog that is out of condition. Bill Stewart's weight was all in his shoulders but this man was thick through the waist.

"I'm Noland," he announced. "Bob Noland."

"Your Uncle John sent me to take you down to see him. Ready to start now?"

"Yes, the sooner the better. I'll go get my pack."

Alone, Stewart sat down. Minutes passed. He began to wonder whether he could get a bottle of beer that would be fit to drink in this place. He rose and went to the door where the woman had appeared. His light, woodsman's tread was nearly noiseless and he swung the door open without any warning to those who were in the room beyond.

The young man with whom he had just now talked stood with a light pack swinging from his hand while he listened to a whispered monologue which Hedgehog Joe Bushby emphasized by shaking an enormous finger under his nose.

They saw Stewart as soon as he saw them. Bushby spun halfway around and his glance went to a corner where a rifle leaned against the wall. But Stewart was unarmed and he tried to keep his voice down.

"Come out here, Hedgehog!" he said. "I think I'd better talk to you for a few minutes!"

Hedgehog hesitated for a moment. Then he half turned his head and shouted.

"Might just as well give it to him here as in the woods, boys!"

The report of a rifle clamored in the room. Fire seared Bill's arm with a line of agony. He reeled, and saw two of Hedgehog's kinsmen emerge from behind a

curtain at the rear of the room. Thick-bodied Monk Bushby and lean, malevolent Lige Flanders both had rifles. A wisp of smoke from his gun muzzle told that it was Monk who had fired.

Stewart went backward half a dozen steps under the shock of his wound. He brought up against the table in the front room with a crash of glass. His left arm was still good. He swung the table by a leg and drove it against the bulk of Hedgehog as the three men came charging at him.

There was a moment of satisfaction in which he saw the big leader's face twist with pain. Then Monk and Lige were on him from both sides. His left fist smashed against Monk's teeth, and Lige took that moment to bring down the butt of his rifle.

For Bill Stewart the room was blotted out by a pain swift and tearing as a bolt of lightning.

WHEN Bill Stewart awoke the darkness around him was complete. As he fought back waves of suffering it seemed as though he could feel and smell the blackness which encased him. There was something hideous, menacing about it.

He reached out and his hands touched cold stone. In sudden panic, he tried to sit up. His already aching head was thrust back as though the hand of a giant had reached down and slapped him. He lay still for a moment, trying to remember what had happened.

There were matches in his pocket. He scratched one. The little flame burned up in still air, threw out a momentary brilliance, and touched Stewart's fingers. He rolled to his side and with a trembling hand scratched a second match.

This time there was no doubt in his mind as to what he saw. He was entombed in a chamber of rough rock, not much bigger than a coffin. Beyond his feet the walls ran together. A little way from his head the entrance had been blocked by stones.

After a moment Stewart got hold of himself. It was damp and chilly in this place

but he wiped perspiration from his forehead. The Bushbys had thought that he was dead and they had buried him. But maybe he could get out. He set to work. . . .

When the first stone came away from the mass that filled the entrance of the little cave Bill felt infinitely better, as though he stood already under the open sky. The wound on his arm was little more than skin deep and the nerve paralysis of the blow had gone. He could get out. . . .

The last rock, and the biggest of them all, Stewart pushed to one side by bracing his feet against the cavern wall and shoving with all the power that was in his arms and shoulders. He crawled out and stood erect in the slanting sunlight of late afternoon.

The rays streamed the length of a rock-walled ravine. In a crevice at the foot of one wall Bill Stewart had been laid away with only a remote chance that his bones would ever be found. The Bushbys had every reason to believe that they were in the clear so far as he was concerned.

UNDER the lamplight in the living-room of the Noland farmhouse Amy Noland knitted with ears alert, eyes flashing covertly now and then at the two men on the other side of the table, and with every nerve tense.

John Noland had aged within a few hours. His shoulders were still back but his head was bowed and his time-scarred face had set in despondent lines. He looked up at last, after a long moment of silence, and stared at the young man who sat uneasily gripping the arms of his chair.

"Bob," said the old man, "I have wanted to help you and I am still willing but the time hasn't come yet."

"You mean you won't do anything?" The young man was a little hoarse; his eyes had become china blue and hard. "You say you got the money ready before I come but you won't give it to me to pay off them guys?"

There was a certain undertone of menace in his voice, of insolence. John Noland

looked at him shrewdly with a faint, sad smile.

"I don't believe your story about Stewart," he said. "That he borrowed some money from you and stayed in Canada because he had been mixed up in a shooting scrape. He's not a man to run. I know him well enough to be mighty sure of that.

"And that isn't all, Bob. You aren't here because you want to come back to your own country and make a fresh start! You're here to get some money out of John Noland. You aren't willing that I should settle this thing for you. You want to handle the money.

"And if I should give it to you and you did pay up it would be only to get into more trouble. My boy, you're still as crooked as a ram's horn and until I see that you've changed, that you want to do right by your fellow men, I'm not going to spend three thousand dollars on you! You'll have to go back where you came from!"

Amy Noland suddenly dropped her knitting and lifted her head. Her lips parted. She seemed to be waiting, breathless, as one waits for a clap of thunder. The young man, darkly red now, got up slowly.

"Grampa!" whispered Amy. "There's somebody in the kitchen!"

The doorway filled with the gross bulk of Hedgehog Joe Bushby. He stepped into the room, and silently behind him came the gangling Lige and the apelike Monk, whose fists swung at the level of his knees.

"What do you want here?" demanded John Noland, rising to his feet. Amy came softly up to him and flung her arm over his shoulder.

"That rat there knows!" Hedgehog nodded toward Bob Noland. "Wrote to Grammy and me and had us find out all about how much property the Nolands had, and Grammy thunk up a scheme for him, and then he tried to come down here unbeknownst to us and get the money from you all for hisself!"

"So that's it!" exclaimed the old man, bitterly. "I'm sorry he has Noland blood!"

"Where's the money?" demanded Hedgehog. "I knowed he wouldn't be able to talk it out of you! We was waiting outdoors so he couldn't try to double-cross us ag'in!"

"In the bottom drawer of that secretary in the corner," answered Noland. His face was swept by contempt. "Take it and get out!"

Bob Noland flattened himself against the wall as Hedgehog swaggered past him, but there was hatred in the shallow blue eyes, and a gleam of cunning replaced the fear that had come into them when Bushby started in his direction.

Young Noland waited until Hedgehog straightened up with a fat envelope in his hand, an envelope bulging with banknotes so that the green edges showed. Then he made a terrier-like dive and snatched the money from Hedgehog's clumsy fingers. At the same instant his shoulder struck the big man in the ribs and sent him headfirst against the secretary.

Before either Monk or Lige Flanders could move Bob Noland had lunged through the screening of a window. They heard his feet strike the porch once. Hedgehog righted himself with a bellow of rage.

In that moment when everything was off balance John Noland, who had been a fighter of another generation, struck. One bony fist landed on the nose of Lige Flanders; the other battered at an eye.

Monk Bushby knocked the old man down and at that blow Amy hurled herself upon him. Monk's lips drew back in an animal snarl. He snatched up an iron doorstop. She reached for his eyes. He swung her away at arm's length and the doorstop went up in a swift arc.

Hedgehog Bushby was coming across the room at that moment, more concerned with chasing young Noland than with the fight. But suddenly he stopped and pawed at his eyes to clear away the picture that had registered all at once in his brain.

It seemed to him that a hand had reached out of the air to grasp the uplifted arm of Monk, and that as Monk became motionless a face looked over his shoulder. The

face was that of a man whom Hedgehog Bushby had helped to bury behind something like half a ton of loose rock!

HEDGEHOG could not brush the picture away. But it changed. Monk's arm came down suddenly back of his own neck in an impossible position. A shriek broke from his ugly mouth. The next instant he writhed on the floor with a dislocated shoulder.

Alive or dead, that ragged, hollow-eyed man was Bill Stewart. One side of his face was crusted with dried blood, just as it had been when he was buried, but he could fight now. And the rifles were beyond him, in the kitchen!

His fists crumpled Lige Flanders in an instant. He dropped to one knee, and rose up with Lige on his shoulder. Lige went against the wall and his head seemed to telescope down into the collar of his shirt.

When Bill straightened up again Hedgehog was upon him. He pounded at the broad expanse of Hedgehog's body. His fists sank in, but at the same time a sickening blow found his head.

It was as though a swinging beam had caught him. He went over a chair and slid along the floor with the lamp a dancing blot of light. The whole room spun. It began to darken.

Stewart forced himself to his feet. But he sagged as he stumbled forward. That dark shape coming was Hedgehog, and this would be the end. A wall stopped Bill and he clung there, trying to turn. His eyes cleared.

As he straightened up a howl of pain that was like the cry of a maddened beast filled his ears. He looked, and saw Amy Noland springing back out of the reach of Hedgehog with a pair of scissors gleaming in her little fist. Bill leaped, and struck, at Hedgehog, and felt a rib crack beneath his fist.

He braced himself as Hedgehog turned from Amy. It was now or never! His shaken legs would not carry him in and out in the quick attack and retreat which

this fight demanded. He picked out the third button of Hedgehog's shirt and drove his fist at it just as another of the sledgehammer swings started for his head.

It seemed to Bill Stewart that his fist actually entered the body of Hedgehog as he put his weight behind that blow. He had found the soft spot just under the breast-bone. He heard a rush of air from Bushby's lungs. The swing stopped. The log-like arm fell.

Bill drove his left fist at the same target. He snapped a glance upward. Hedgehog's eyes were rolling. The man was an inert mass of flesh, unconscious on his feet. He tipped forward, and fell with a force that rattled the windows.

And that, Bill Stewart realized, was all of them. . . .

Reaction set Stewart trembling from head to foot. A torturing thirst possessed him. He groped for the back of a chair and began to move slowly toward the kitchen doorway. Water was out there. That was all he could think of now—although he knew that the arms of Amy Noland were helping him, that her father had recovered and was coming from another room with a rifle.

A cry from Amy brought Stewart's head up as he stepped into the kitchen. There, with the outside door open behind her, stood Grammy Mehitabel Bushby. She leaned upon a knotted cane with her toothless grin and her polished black eyes turned upon Stewart.

"Look out for her, Amy!" he cried, thickly. "She's dangerous!"

"You bet I be!" chuckled Grammy, pridefully. "I'm the worst old hellion on Crowquill mountain! Young feller, ain't you kind of glad I took the ca'tridges out of that rifle?"

"What?" mumbled Stewart. A swift thought came to him. "Did you empty the magazine so that Hedgehog couldn't shoot me?"

Grammy Bushby wiped her nose on her sleeve and sat down.

"They ain't no sense in that kind of

a murder," she said. "Besides I got a weakness for good-looking young fellers!"

The old woman looked around with hard, glittering eyes. John Noland stood in the doorway with a rifle in his hands and Bill Stewart was within reach of the three Bushby rifles stacked in a corner. Grammy Mehitabel sighed.

"Mr. Noland," she said, "what be you calculating to do with that kin of mine that Bill has been lambasting around? I see it all through the winder."

"It looks to me as though they'd go to jail," Noland told her.

"I figgered so!" Grammy's toothless jaw worked with emotion. "Mr. Noland, if you was to get back all them three thousand dollars that Bob took through the winder with him would you kind of let Hedgehog and them other two numbskulls slip out the back door?"

John Noland struggled with that thought in silence. Amy slowly nodded.

"I'm willing to overlook what they tried to do to me," said Stewart, "if it means that Mr. Noland will get back his money. But how do we know you can get it?"

"On account of I knocked Bob Noland over the head with my cane and took it away from him after he come through the winder!" answered Grammy. "The last I see of him he was legging it toward Canady!"

She pulled the fat envelope out of the front of her dress and put it down, with a sigh, on the kitchen table.

"Hedgehog, Monk and Lige all put together ain't worth three dollars, let alone three thousand," she said, "but I suppose I got to save their wuthless hides on account of they being relations."

She turned and looked at Bill with a look about as near to admiration as her toothless face could produce.

"Bill Stewart, if you and me was to plan some deviltry together we'd put it through like greased lightning, and no botch job murders, neither! Why, them three didn't even have the sense to kill you dead enough so you'd stay dead!"

"Orders to attack!" Carey panted. "Swing aside that barrier!"



The Last Crusade

By MARTIN McCALL

There was heaven on earth in this tropic Valhalla, yet Captain Carey of the Scouts had to risk his life to flee from it

LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

THE disappearance of Captain Joe Rucker of the Philippine Scouts was the major sensation of the post at Parang. The big blond Englishman led an expedition up-river, and but one man returned alive from it. This survivor, badly wounded, lived just long enough to gasp out a tale of massacre by a strange tribe—the entire squad wiped out.

This complicated matters for Captain Carse Carey, who was Rucker's best friend. There was a girl at the post—Helen Reiner was her name—who had attracted Carey's interest from the first. She was the daughter of an ex-sergeant, a simple unpretentious girl, but there was a quality about her that struck to Carey's heart. Rucker, full of theories about the importance of caste and breeding, joked him mildly—until one night Rucker was thrown in contact with the girl. A crazy Malay ran amok, and suddenly Helen Reiner was in Rucker's arms, kissing him.

Carey could understand a sudden love like that. He was Helen Reiner's chief consolation in the sorrow that came to her when Rucker's death was reported. She told him frankly that she could never forget the Englishman, but Carey didn't mind. Months passed, and his happiness hit its peak when the Reiner girl agreed to marry him. The engagement was announced.

THEN Rucker reappeared. His body was weak and wasted, his back and chest covered with curious scars, but there was still life in him. He was wearing a queer golden disc in one ear, and the doctors said he was suffering from amnesia. He did not seem to remember the months he had been gone. He refused to speak of, or to see Helen Reiner. When his health returned he flung himself into a furious training of his company of little brown soldiers.

The medico asked Carey to be patient with the

This story began in the *Argosy* for November 7

Englishman. Treat him as if nothing had happened. Humor him. Let him tell his story gradually.

Carey persevered along these lines, and managed to break down Rucker's reserve one night in a drinking brawl. The Englishman muttered strange words: "Gold—a hidden kingdom—beautiful women. . . ." But Carey was so groggy with liquor by that time that he couldn't remember the details of the story.

THE next day news was received that Fort Pikit had been attacked by a raiding band, the garrison slaughtered and guns and ammunition stolen. Carey and Rucker, with their two crack companies of Scouts, were ordered to take the trail. Rucker, as senior captain, was in command.

Swiftly he led them up-river, scoffing at safeguards and refusing to stop. He seemed possessed by a strange eagerness, disdainful of risks in this normally hostile country. Carey became convinced that the man was insane.

No other word for it.

But Rucker led them straight and true into action. They pushed into the hill country, into an atmosphere that was crisp and invigorating after the heat of the lowlands. An unseen force attacked them as they approached a great cataract. These attackers were "Sunshiners"—renegade whites and natives who lived by pillage. "Don't go in there!" these renegade voices warned as the Scouts charged ahead. "They'll slaughter you!"

But Rucker pushed straight on for the great falls. Suddenly, behind the spill of water, a great portal swung open to reveal an opening in the sheer rock. Under Rucker's urgings they entered. The last words that Carey heard from outside were a bellow from one of the Sunshiners: "If you need help in getting out, just send up a signal!"

CAREY found himself in a valley that was strange Paradise. Here was matchless climate and an unusual civilization. The natives were tall, strong, handsome, and they addressed Rucker as "His Highness." A beautiful girl came to wait on Carey in the bungalow to which he was assigned. Her name was Marpit, she said simply, and she was to be Carey's wife. She called him "Sir Carse."

Carey, bewildered, sent for the old priest whom he had met on the way in. He pleaded for an explanation. The priest said that his name was *Fraile* Augustino, and that he had been a missionary in the early days of Spanish domination. He had found this valley by accident, and the natives had befriended him. He had returned to Manila, gathered a group of friends, and returned to establish a kingdom of the highest mental and physical type. Among his converts were Wodenham, an Englishman, and Spaniards of noble blood. Marpit, he explained, was Wodenham's daughter.

"But it can't be," Carey protested. "You are not old enough—"

The priest produced an ancient prayer-book as proof. "I am eighty-nine, my son," he said. He looked no more than sixty.

CHAPTER XIII.

REVOLT IN PARADISE.

YOU have an object lesson before you," the priest said. "Later I will have you talk to the others of the original band. My own brother is ninety-four. I feel certain that Wodenham, though he was thirty-five or more when he came here, would still be living were it not for a fall he had from the cliffs of the upper river. The girl, Marpit, is his granddaughter, as is, of course, her sister Meesha. Wodenham's only child—a daughter, Doris—married the chief, Bulacan, at present the reigning prince. But Bulacan is now old; and on Rucker's coming the decision of the Inner Circle was unanimous that your friend should succeed upon his marriage with Meesha."

Carey's head was whirling. Could this quiet old man talking so tranquilly to him of princes and dynasties be sane? Impossible.

"Just what is the Inner Circle, Father?"

The old man smiled tolerantly.

"Wodenham was arrogantly English, I must explain to you. At first I had some difficulty in subduing his racial prejudices. But as time went by and he became convinced of the superior blood of these upper people—the high caste light ones you have remarked on—he grew to my idea. At his suggestion we started what is called the Gold Book—a sort of local Burke's Peerage or Almanac de Gotha. Therein are inscribed the nobles, or people of the Inner Circle. These may inter-marry. They are the band I led here, plus the admitted blue bloods of the upper tribe."

"I see," Carey said dryly. "And Rucker? How does he qualify?"

The old man raised his heavy eyebrows.

"He is of noble birth, and an officer. Your own name, Captain, you will find is the last name in the Gold Book."

CAREY controlled himself with an effort. No use blowing up. He was surrounded by an insane, if benign, conspiracy that might threaten unbelievable

consequences to him and the innocent men who had been led here by Rucker. It appeared now that Rucker had never intended to carry out the orders given him at Parang. The maurauders they had encountered must have been of the band that had massacred the troops at Pikit, yet Rucker had merely shaken them off as an incident of his race for this mad kingdom in the hills.

Carey's jaws clamped. Before he again met Rucker he must learn what he could from the garrulous priest. He tried to seem normally interested as he said:

"But Rucker—why should he supersede older men here?"

This was evidently a question the priest relished. His eyes lighted. He squared his strong shoulders.

"The church militant, my son! History has shown that only the fighting Christian controls the uninterrupted practice of his faith. Though I do not condone, I point to Cromwell—to the Crusaders, from whom we take our own name. Though ours is a strictly defensive crusade.

"His Highness very early showed us that we should be organized to be certain that our kingdom should never be despoiled. He it was who pointed out the ultimate spreading of our creed to the entire archipelago. He brought us word from the outside world that amazed us. We learned that the United States had declared an anomalous dominion over the Islands, and that complete freedom of the people was imminent. This would produce chaos, he pointed out—precipitate a civil war which would set the war-like tribes of Mindanao in motion. We saw the inevitable. Fugitive bands driven to these mountains would ultimately discover our retreat, overwhelm us with superior arms—"

"But how did Rucker get here?" Carey interrupted. "I understand he was attacked miles from here, his men massacred?"

A shadow seemed to pass over the priest's face. For a long time he sat, unstimulating, his eyes staring away through the window. At last he said in a stifled voice:

"I said before that not one of the

original band broke his word. That is true. . . . But, much against my will, the brother I have mentioned insisted on bringing his soldier servant. Wodenham also protested, pointing to the lower caste of this man—for it was his idea that the Europeans, in order to maintain their control in an hereditary sense, must be homogeneous as to breeding. In a way, he foresaw what happened.

"The man married one of the Outer people, a fine self-respecting girl. There were several children. The youngest, a son called Juan, became a bad one; as so often happens with *mestizos*, he inherited the bad points of both races. He resented the physical drill hours. Some atavistic sense flamed in him at the sight of gold. He bedecked himself with the stuff, kept it loose in his pockets. He even worked it into coins of a sort. And I learned with sadness that Perez, the soldier servant—in spite of the strict orders against talking to the second generation about the outer world—had let out enough to arouse Juan's curiosity and cupidity.

"This stupid old man, though satisfied beyond his own wildest dreams—my brother had brought him out of sentiment and asked no work of him—loved to boast to his children of the great part he had played in the outer world. A harmless enough diversion, you might say. But to our disciplined and idealistic theory, it was to prove almost disastrous. And it proved my own and Wodenham's conclusion that the word of the lower orders cannot be depended upon. . . .

"In due time this throw-back son became a troublesome, braggart man. A huge surly fellow who assumed the airs of a bullying leader among the Outer people. Wodenham came to me, extremely worried. He at first suggested that Juan be put under restraint. I hesitated. Finally Wodenham insisted that the boy be done away with. Juan had the impudence, it seems, to sue for the hand of the Princess Meesha.

"I must explain to you, my son, that as Archbishop I have certain temporal powers under the New Constitution. The

laws of succession, and certain disciplinary powers, are subject to advisory action by me.

"I pleaded with Wodenham, who was terrifically wrought up, to let me talk to the boy. This was the first case of friction that had occurred since our coming. I spoke to the boy. He was defiant. He said he was as good as any of the rest of us. That he would have the Princess Meesha if he had to arouse the Outer People.

"There is no telling what might have happened had Juan been able to keep his head. Civil war, perhaps. But he made the mistake of seizing the girl one day while she was alone with her sister by the falls. Wodenham heard her cries. Even though old, he was one of our most powerful men, acting even then as head of the physical instruction. In the struggle that followed the two men worked close to the cliffs overhanging the falls. They went over together—Wodenham to be crushed on the rocks below; and Juan, by some perverse miracle, striking the water cleanly.

"THE evil miracle persisted," the old priest went on slowly. "Though the sisters actually saw him carried over the boiling falls, Juan evidently came out alive at the bottom. In some manner the water must have cushioned his fall. At any rate, he at first attempted to corrupt the gatekeepers at the opening under the falls. He promised to lead them to a wonderful world outside. A few of his closest friends—for the man had a certain personality and genius—were foolish enough to make it out and join him. They brought raw gold, as he directed. His idea, it seems, was to gather a band on the outside, arm them, and take this place by force. His was the band that attacked His Highness and later the blockhouses. The idea was to get modern arms. And the idea is good. . . ."

"But how did Rucker get in here?" Carey asked, now really interested.

The priest made the sign of the cross. "God intervened. He showed the light to

His children. . . . Inflamed by Juan's words, the dozen or so Crusaders with him attacked the Scout party ferociously. Most of the native soldiers were killed almost at once. But, seeing that the leader was a white man—they afterward told me he looked so much like 'our King,' meaning Wodenham—they dared not strike him down. A white man, you must understand, had come to mean something sacred to these people. . . . They became very sad after the fight. Already they were homesick; and saw nothing of the wonders of the outer world Juan had described. Also, they distrusted and hated the squad of white beach-combers Juan had picked up while scouting the Cotobato River barrios."

"Ah!" Carey said. "I'm beginning to see. This Juan is the leader of that gang that jumped us and attacked Pikit. I thought I heard the voices of white men."

"Yes," the priest said sadly. "Sunshiners, I think you call them. God's children gone astray. The heat and the native liquor have decayed the souls within them."

"Some of them probably good American soldiers once," Carey said half aloud. "A pity!"

"The rest you must guess," the priest went on. "To the last man, our people refused to go on. They were in the majority at the time, and they defied Juan. Carrying His Highness with the greatest care, they made their way back here. Penitently, they pleaded at the entrance. I, myself, talked with them and gave the order to admit them."

The priest was smiling happily. Carey nodded.

"I can more or less guess," he said, "what happened to Rucker in the time he spent here. Grateful and all that. But he came back. . . ."

Carse Carey was on his feet now. He meant to state his platform without mincing words. As for the unfortunate, paranoiac Rucker—well, what was a pa! for if not to stand by in danger? This trip here, of course, was a violent recurrence of the mental illness that had overcome the Englishman earlier. The medico had said

to expect it. It would gradually lessen; finally cease altogether, in normal surroundings. The thing to do was humor Rucker, but appeal to the normal powers here. This priest, unquestionably, was honest. Cracked, of course, but consistent—

"He came back," Carey repeated steadily. "Back to his own people—to the woman he had asked to marry him."

The beat of Carey's heart pounded in his ears as he said this. He loved Helen Reiner and he wanted to go back to her. Even the few days he had been away from her seemed ages. Yet as he faced the determined priest, intent upon saving his friend, he used the argument that cost him most.

How easy to leave the Englishman here and go back to a Helen who could never again think of Rucker! The deluded man would be happy here. He had the girl, Meesha, and his mad dreams of grandeur. He would want his friend to stay with him simply as a matter of friendship. In bringing Carey here, he was merely discharging what he thought was an obligation. If Carey made this clear to Rucker, thanked him and said he wanted to return, Rucker would agree. The easiest way—

But Carey never seemed able to take the easiest way. He said now: "If he stays here now, he will only go back as he did before. His mind will clear—"

The priest's face had become stern.

"He is not mad, my son. And you are wrong when you say he went back because—"

Carey's anger was rising. He eyed the priest, grim-faced.

"He came back next to dead. Came back with a damned gold thing forged in his ear, mutilated with savage designs cut in his chest and back. A hell of a kingdom—"

The priest had been sitting almost indolently, hands on knees. Now he sprang to his feet, eyes flashing.

"My son! My son! You are profaning without thought or knowledge!"

"I know enough!" Carey cried. "I know Joe Rucker—I've fought with him,

lived with him for over ten years. He's a loyal friend and an honest soldier. You've made—"

"Quiet!" the priest stormed. "Control yourself. Do not say things for which later you will be sorry. He did not run from here. He left, after counsel among us, on a mission of great importance. I thought that you already knew. . . ."

"On the way out he was taken by the renegade band. Juan, sensing that he had won the confidence of us in here, tried to make him betray the kingdom: go back and open the way for his band. His Highness refused. They tortured him. The marks you saw on his back were cut in that form, facetiously I believe, to represent the chevrons of the Scout sergeant who was killed and the marksmanship medal found on the chest of one of the dead soldiers. His Highness, through the help of one of the American renegades who appears to have retained a spark of his old loyalty for an officer, escaped with the man. The beachcomber was killed; but His Highness, delirious as he was, was guided by the hand of God. He made his way back, as you know. . . ."

THE priest, breathing hard, stood staring at Carey. As the Scout officer was about to speak, the girl Marpit entered the room. She walked straight to Carey. Simply, with no sign of self-consciousness, she took his arm, smiled up into his face.

"You promised to go to the river with me to swim," she said.

Carey looked at her. She was almost as tall as he; her brown eyes, almost level with his own, were fixed warmly upon him. In spite of himself he smiled.

"Isn't it cold for swimming, Marpit?" he asked gently.

She stared at him, puzzled. "Cold? Why, the water is always much colder than the air. It never changes. It is delightful."

The priest said gloomily: "Clean red blood. . . . Yes, you will come to know."

The girl tugged at Carey's arm. "Oh, please come along! Before His Highness

arrives. He had just finished his inspection of the soldiers. I saw his white horse—”

“Rucker is coming? I must see him at once.”

Her lovely face clouded and she clung closer to him. The priest looked from one to the other. From outside came the sound of hoofs, galloping.

“Oh, hurry!”

Carey ignored her. He stood tensely, watching the door. The hoofbeats continued their gay tattoo. The girl, her head half-turned to listen, clapped her hands like a child.

“He’s going to pass by!”

Carey pushed by her, striding swiftly to the door. By the low steps stood an orderly—a sturdy native armed with a bright hilted sword, and clad in a breech-clout of mountain cat. The soldier came smartly to attention, not looking at Carey

The little house stood on an abrupt rise, a pine-clad hillock, so Carey could see the entire town from where he stood. A faint cloud of dust was setting on the plain below, and through it he watched Rucker’s cantering white horse. It was as large as an American cavalry mount, beautifully turned out. The morning sun flashed back from the gold trappings. A band of young nobles, in capelike coverings of multi-colored silks, galloped behind their leader.

Carey, watching there, flamed with resentment. Why had he been left here alone for a day and night? Escorted abroad by untalkative, lynx-eyed old men? Why didn’t Joe Rucker come clean with him?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE QUALITY OF COMMAND.

FILLED with a deepening foreboding, Carey thought of his men. Upon arrival, the two companies had been marched to barracks under Rucker’s supervision. All unmarried men of a certain age, Carey understood, lived in these barracks and spent their days in ceaseless and intensive military drill. Inner Circle

men provided the officers. All the other men of the community devoted a certain part of their time to “refresher courses” designed to keep them prepared for emergencies. Grand defensive maneuvers were conducted after the harvest, in which various schemes for repelling an attacking force were worked out.

All this Carey had picked up in talk he had heard on his sight-seeing trip.

From where he stood he could look down on the long regular rows of barracks. His men were there and it was his duty to go to them. Yesterday, after his late awakening, he had gone down to look them over. They were comfortably installed, and of high morale. The food, they said, was wonderful.

Already the high thin air had worked its miracle in them. In spite of the tough marches of the days before, Carey could hear them skylarking in the barracks rooms. No drill for that day—Captain Rucker had sent down an order to that effect, the first sergeant had said. Then Carey had looked sharply at the Top. He was of the highest type of Illocano, and he had served with Carey in the company ever since the officer had come to it. His loyalty was unquestionable.

“So Captain Rucker sent an order down, eh?”

The sergeant coughed. “Without doubt he tell the Captain himself, first?”

But Rucker had not told Carey first. And now Rucker had “been inspecting the troops. . . .”

Carey’s teeth tightened about his pipe stem. He stared down at the beautiful little town below him. In spite of the fear and anger in him, his admiration was aroused. With that admiration came a growing realization of the perfection of the system that enveloped him.

The town proper was laid out with perfectly circular streets, paved with white slabs of stone. The streets were broad and spotlessly clean; the circles cut by radiating avenues which spoked out from a central park of fountains, ornamental shrubs and hedges and gardens of gorge-

ously colored flowers. The gold-domed chapel stood in its center.

The houses were one-story bungalows on the pattern of the house he had been assigned, only somewhat smaller. He assumed that they were the abodes of the Inner Circle people. He had gathered that ostentation was taboo. A sort of paradoxical socialism seemed to prevail. Worldly goods seemed to be apportioned equally. Save for the sharp social division between the two classes, there was little distinction as to rights. The upper class, or peerage, dressed in distinctive garments at certain formal occasions and "after the hours of the sun" as they said. During those hours—when the ultra violet rays were most effective—both classes must go abroad dressed merely in the appropriate waist dress.

Each class mated with its kind. It was simply inconceivable for a peer to marry an Outer people girl or for a man of that class to marry a girl of the Inner Circle. The schools, churches and other public institutions were used in common by both classes. There was no feeling of superiority nor of inferiority noticeable in anyone. It was as though a clan of deer and elk lived in peace and mutual respect in the same valley, the elks benignly leading the deer when leadership was necessary.

So much Carey had figured out on his trip of inspection the day before.

AS he stood there now, reflecting, he noticed a figure moving toward him up the slope. A soldier—a Scout soldier—and the man was running. Carey watched him come on with a sudden thrill of premonition. He heard Marpit stepping lightly behind him, felt her hand on his arm. He heard the priest's voice, questioning. He paid neither heed. He leaned out, staring—and now he could see that the man was his own first sergeant.

He shook off the girl's hand, started running down the hill. At the base of a great pine near the foot of the slope he met the panting soldier. The man slowed to a walk; breathed deeply; halted and saluted.

"What is it, Sergeant?" Carey asked as quietly as he could.

"*Mucho molesto, Capitan,*" the man said simply. He stared at the officer with dog-like trust. "I do all I can, sir, with the talk. But—" The old man broke off with a hopeless shake of the head.

"But what?" Carey rasped, sharp fear contracting his heart.

"But I am one of them—a Filipino. So they cannot *comprende* why I do not like this thing."

"What thing? Damn it, Paduan, what's happened?"

"First the Feefity-third company—he—those soldair cheer. Becose I theenk they lof theese *Capitan* Rukair. I say, 'Quiet. Pipe down, you men' to the company. Bot they hear thees words of *El Capitan* Rukair, too. So they make loud noise of shouting. 'Yes, yes,' they shouting, very loud. So I come here fastly—"

Carey had taken a grip on himself now. So it had come. Rucker had filled them up with his own madness. In all the Scouts there wasn't an officer who could sway men with his voice like Rucker. . . .

Carey tried to breathe slowly. He studied the face of the old soldier before him. At last he said slowly:

"Paduan, how many? . . . You, I know, will follow me—"

The sergeant dropped his eyes. For a long time he stared at the ground, his breath still coming fast. It was worse than Carey thought.

"I'd better go down there with you," he said.

The first sergeant looked troubled.

"It is bad now, sir. Maybe more better the *Capitan* wait. Theese word of the *Capitan* Ruckair maybe is wrong."

"What did Captain Rucker tell them?" Carey asked trying to control the rising tone of his voice.

"He say all stay here now—all officers and all men. Marry with theese hill peoples. . . . Soon the Philippines he be free, but Maneela *politicos* he own everything. No more es-Scout soldier, no more pay. Soldier go work in rice paddy for theese

ilustrado. Bot us two company es-Scout stay here. Whane *Americano* go 'way soon an' before es-Scout put away rifle we get them all up here. Make wan beeg army, all es-Scout. Geeve the fear to all bads peoples in Islands becose we have good army. Officers in es-Scouts and good non-coms take charge of provinces. He be *governador*, *presidente*, good *politico*. *Mucho* gold to buy rifle and gun and ships and all from other country. American peoples say we good. Other peoples say we good. We are thane proud, reech Filipino nation."

As the old man talked his little black eyes blazed. Carey licked his lips; his heart seemed to have stopped beating.

"The *Teniente*—DeRissac—"

The sergeant smiled patiently. "I see heem once weeth vary beeg womans in the park."

"Yes, of course," Carey said. "The men, Sergeant—what do they say?"

"Ah, *senor!* *Locos todos*—all crazy. They like stay theese place forever. Many already have the woman—"

Carey looked sternly at the man. "They already have woman at home?"

The old man shrugged. "*No importa*—it matters not. They are the es-Scout."

Carey's mind was made up. The wild beating of his heart seemed to choke him as he tried to speak coolly. "Go back—back to the barracks. Have the men fall in. I'll be down as soon as I get my equipment. They're to be ready to march."

The old sergeant met the fierce eyes of his officer. He knew that look, knew there was no arguing with it. He saluted. "Yes, sir!" He turned smartly upon his heel and walked rapidly down the hill.

CAREY raced up the slope to the little bungalow. As he came close he saw that Rucker—unaccompanied save for an orderly—was standing on the threshold talking to the priest and Marpit.

Carey's blood was seething. More than the act of disloyalty, the open mutiny that Rucker contemplated, was the public slight he had put on Carey. He had ignored his

fellow officer throughout; had done the unpardonable by going over Carey's head to his men. This thing was going to be decided right now!

The group in the doorway turned as they heard his approaching footsteps. The glance of the girl was warm as it rested on Carey. The priest stared mildly out through the door. Rucker's face lighted.

"Looking for you, Carse! Sorry I've been so busy—"

Rucker had half-turned, had reached out a friendly hand. Carey brushed through the door, his eyes bleak, his jaw set hard. He moved as though none of them was there. Rucker stared, the smile fading from his handsome face. The priest's countenance became gloomy. The girl, walking quickly after Carey, reached for his arm. She spoke softly to him, her eyes anxiously wide.

Carey flung her hand from his arm with a savage flick of wrist. He stamped to a corner of the bedroom where his pistol belt and haversack were hung. Without a word he slung on his equipment.

"Carse—" Rucker said.

Carey paid him not the slightest heed. He went on buckling the belt.

Rucker strode close to Carey facing him. His eyes were warm with genuine concern. "Look here, old man—"

Carey drew the pistol from its holster. He snapped out the slide, saw that it was loaded, and packed it back with a slap of his palm.

"What's wrong, Carse?"

Carey could control himself no longer.

"What's wrong? Damn you, Rucker, you leave my men alone! You've started a mutiny down there with your insane drivil. I thought at first you were harmlessly cracked. I was told to humor you. But I'm not going to humor you to the extent of having two companies of United States troops filled up with a line of hooey that has them deserting en masse!"

"Listen, Carse," Rucker said evenly. "Keep your head. . . . I couldn't ask you to tell them. I know your unimaginative nature. Much as you might want to you'd

think of that silly oath of allegiance. So I did it for you. They've agreed to stay to a man. They'd be fools not to. What is there for them back there? Fifteen pesos a month and chow. Cheap woman they pick up in the *barrios* as they go. No retirement promise from the government. And now with this last news—independence due any minute, the lot of them kicked out by a bunch of politicians in Manila—”

Carey, white to the lips, moved back from Rucker's persuasive advance.

“Do you think I'm insane, too, Rucker? Listen, we won't be gone a month before there'll be battalions of troops up here after us. Those renegades out there will get word down the river. They'll send planes out to reconnoiter. If it takes the whole corps of Scouts, they'll fight their way in. They'll have bombing planes and artillery—every American outfit in the northern islands, if necessary!”

Carey paused, breathing hard, his eyes blazing. Rucker smiled.

“We've been together too long, Carse, for me not to understand your every thought almost before you speak. You know I don't go off half-cocked.”

“Not before you become cracked,” Carey sneered.

Again Rucker smiled. “I'm not cracked, old boy. Back there the past few months I was slowed up mentally, I'll admit. I'd been through a tough thing. But never fear I knew what I was doing. I went back there, Carse”—Rucker's face stiffened—“with the deliberate intention of bringing this force back. As a nucleus for the future army. I dared not trust even you. I wanted you to see all this for yourself. I knew your common sense would do the rest.”

THERE was a pause. Carey's hoarse voice rasped the silence. “You say you know me,” he said steadily. “Know just how I think. . . . Do you really believe I'd betray my country—my oath, Rucker?”

Rucker smiled, a harsh, twisted smile. “Don't be an ass, Carse. Don't talk

like a schoolboy. What has your country done for you? You're a damned sight better officer than any of the regular line officers I've ever seen in your army, but you're not one of them, are you? When the war came they didn't send you to France, did they, or give you the chance the others got for promotion?”

“No—they left you here in this stinking, swampy, fever-ridden hole to eat your heart out. They recommission you every four years, after an examination, if you've been very, very good the past four. You've reached the highest rank the Scouts have to offer. And after thirty years of fever, of bullet holes through your carcass and barong slashes through your bones, they *may* retire you as a non-commissioned officer.”

“I knew that when I came in the Scouts,” Carey said quietly.

“Don't kid yourself, Carse Carey. You're no more an American officer than your lowest private. You're just a chestnut puller—a mercenary, a soldier of misfortune, leading a band of foreign mercenaries into actions too nasty for American troops to tackle. Your brother officers are almost all foreign born. . . .” He looked sharply at Carey. “When does your commission expire?”

Carey started slightly. He made no answer. A triumphant smile twisted Rucker's face.

“Don't worry, I've had all this figured. I know. We came in together, and we've both just gone over the last four years. If we were back at that beastly post we'd be under orders now for Manila for examination. Carse, two days ago our contract expired. I have never had any intention of being sworn in again—not since I've seen what real living was like.”

“You've—what does Kirk say?”

“Kirk?” Rucker repeated. “Kirk does what I say—always has. You know that Carse.”

“He's Irish born,” Carey said grimly.

“And DeRissac's a well born Frenchman. I've spoken to both of them, Carse. You couldn't drive them away.”

"You went to my subordinates," Carey said passionately. "You sneaked about my dumb little soldiers and that Frenchman—"

He cursed DeRissac's name.

"Easy, me lad—ladies present!" Rucker said. "Your future wife, you know."

Marpit, who had been listening eagerly, asked curiously:

"What was it, Sir Carse? What sort of Frenchman?"

"My future hell!" Carey said coldly. "It's a crime for you to fill this girl up with all this idiocy, Rucker. You know I'm going to marry Helen Reiner."

"Helen Reiner—Helen Reiner," Marpit repeated. The words rolled oddly from her tongue with a harsh foreign sound. "The name of a woman?"

"Yes," Carey said, and faced her.

"He wants to go back to her," Rucker said. There was a sneer in his voice.

The priest made the sign of the cross. "Your woman is here," he muttered as though praying. "What more could you ask of God?"

"What sort of woman?" The girl thrust herself between the two officers. She seized Carey by the upper arm. Her face had become pale, her eyes dark with passion. "You are my man, you hear! What woman is it you speak of?"

"A woman of the outer world," Rucker said.

Marpit shook Carey. He was amazed at the strength of her fingers as they bit into his muscles. "Is she like me? Strong and beautiful? Has she a body like mine? Will she bear you heroic sons?"

"No!" Rucker said. "She is the size of a child of twelve, with the chest and the hips of such a child. Her face is white, colorless from the heat. Her father and mother are the—"

White to the hair, Carey threw the girl from him and lashed out at Rucker. The priest, chanting low prayers, raised the cross before him. The girl, taken off balance, staggered back across the bed. Rucker, caught by the blow on the cheek bone, reeled and almost fell. Carey was

on him like an infuriated cat. Right and left he lashed out again and again.

Only Rucker's magnificent muscular control saved him from going out at once. He covered up, retreating before Carey's savage attack.

Almost insane with rage, Carey pressed in. Everything was forgotten now save the hatred this one-time friend had lighted in his heart. Though an excellent boxer, he forgot all science in his madness to hurt and maul as quickly as he could. And so, all except one of two of the first blows spent themselves impotently on Rucker's protective arms.

Rucker drew breath behind his defenses and craftily continued to give ground. The Englishman himself was aroused to complete hatred now. His pride outraged by Carey's contemptuous attitude toward his assumed nobility, Rucker was determined to dominate the situation once for all.

But for the ferocity of his onslaught and his complete absorption in it, Carey might have wondered that the priest and the girl made no attempt to assist their acknowledged king. But the law of the land was clear and insistent on that point. Physical combat between two able-bodied men, be they peasant or peer, must never be interrupted. There were no stale feuds in the mountain kingdom.

Had it not been for a bit of silk there is no telling how the combat might have ended. Each man was powerful physically; each was in perfect shape and skillful with his hands.

But a spasm of morning breeze puffed in through the open door. The silk cape, caught with a jeweled pin of gold at Rucker's throat, leaped up with the breeze, blinded Rucker briefly, confused his moving hands. That instant of blindness gave Carey his chance. He steadied himself, measured his distance, and struck with all he had. His right landed flush on Rucker's jaw, and the Englishman dropped soundlessly on the thick grass mat at his feet.

A clean knockout.

Carey, without a look about him, strode through the door and down the hill.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MUTINOUS MUTINEERS.

THE barracks building in which his company was housed was built on the pattern of the regulation barracks seen all over the Philippines, save that the construction was far superior and the material of beautiful hardwood. Rucker's work, Carey reflected fiercely, as he hurried towards the long edifice.

As he came closer he heard the loud voices of the men. And he realized, in spite of the chaos in his brain, the mistake he had made. He should have covered up before Sergeant Paduan, pretended that he was in the thing up to the hilt. Used his head, in other words, instead of letting his temper run away with him as usual.

Had he done that, he could walk calmly into the barracks now, order both companies to fall in for a practice march, get them out of this infernal Utopia before they quite realized what was up. It was only a short march to the Falls. The guard there might let them through. If they didn't—well, over two hundred Scouts could clean them out in one volley.

Still, he could hardly have figured on Rucker being out of the picture, as he now was, for the time being. . . . Might be a chance yet to try the practice march plan. Depended on what that dumb old, grand old Paduan had said to them. . . .

When Carey got to his own barracks there was not much doubt as to what the dumb Paduan had said. Like most natives, old Paduan had nursed a not-too-secret suspicion that another Rizal had been lost to the people when he had become a soldier. He fancied his oratorical leanings; and in the countless opportunities for exercising them—Scout first sergeants translate all orders from officers to the men—he had developed both a style and a conviction of genius.

Today he had given himself free rein. He had lined up the company and hurled at them his philippics. He had exhausted the cardinal virtues in his search for the keynote of human appeal. Mothers,

fathers, country. Wives (tongue slightly in cheek here), children, homes. Duty (somewhat less tongue) and the grand appeal that never failed to sway a Scout soldier—*El Capitan*.

In that last was, in its entirety, the essence of the loyalty of the native soldier. The same is true of the colored soldier. It is the natural yearning, atavistic perhaps, of the simple man for a flesh and blood god to fear and love.

Carey arrived during the ponderous peroration. His quick eye noted that Paduan had exercised some craft at least, for the men were in marching order and the ranks were filled. At sight of his captain the old sergeant halted on a high note, faced about and reported the company.

The sight of that straight businesslike line, the rows of attentive faces, steadied Carey. Just as usual they looked. All the surroundings, the dreamlike hours that had gone by, seemed blotted out by a mere glance at that familiar sight. Here was an instrument which functioned to the slightest wave of his hand; the lightest intonation of his voice. A machine-like perfection that for ten years had answered to his very thoughts.

Carey stood in his appointed place facing them. He took the first sergeant's report as he had taken it hundreds of times before. He returned his salute with impeccable smartness. He watched the old man move briskly and with the prescribed precision to his post before his platoon.

Then he noted that Lieutenant DeRissac was not in the formation.

Time was the important thing here. The ideal would be to take charge of both companies, Kirk in command of the other, and march swiftly away before Rucker could take action. But his common sense warned him that soon Rucker would be on his feet. Mount up, he would, wild with chagrin and anger. They would not have marched far before Rucker would certainly send his own company back. And there was no doubt in Carey's mind what Rucker's men would do when they heard

their master's voice. His word was law to them. And then, what about the effect on his own men?

No—the best he could hope for was to push on with what he could save of the command. His duty, however, demanded that he at least make an effort to salvage what he could of the other outfit.

“At ease!”

The double rank relaxed. The eyes of over a hundred men watched him. Swiftly, he strode across the company street to the barracks next door. He met Kirk just coming out of the orderly room. The fellow had always seemed dumb and uninteresting to Carey. Never said much, never seemed to enjoy anything. Now, however, his face was beaming. His eyes, bright with excitement, danced in his face.

“Morning, Captain. Faith! Isn't this great up here? I suppose—”

“Have the company fall in! Captain Rucker's orders.”

Kirk fell back before Carey's stern preciseness.

“I'm marching in the direction of the falls. Those renegades out there are trying to force an entrance. Come on as fast as you can with your outfit.”

Carey turned away abruptly.

Kirk was unendowed with any virtue to a great degree save the one and most important: to obey a military order without thought. Years of service with Rucker had seen to that. Without hesitation he passed the command to the first sergeant—and as Carey hurried back to his own company, already the whistle was shrilling through the barracks of the Fifty-third.

Carey went back to his own men at the run. He gave the order to load, the command *Fours Right*, and led the column straight to the West. To hell with the woman-chasing DeRissac! Time was too precious to wait to collect him. He'd hear of the troop movement no doubt, find a mount and overtake them. For one thing could be said of the Frenchman: he never ducked a duty; and the more dangerous the duty, the more desirable it became to his reckless nature.

CAREY remembered the route toward the falls from the march in. The road was straight, lined with great overhanging trees and well paved with the white local stone. The distance was some five miles, over an hour's march from the town.

Carey led the way, the men swinging alertly behind him. They turned as they passed through the great gates of the military enclosure which was just to the west of the town. A few curious natives gazed at them with mild interest. Bullock carts passed, loaded with cord wood, fruit, and vegetables from the great farms that lay off in the valley. The air was crisp and cool; the morning sun reaching toward the zenith.

It was a swift pace Carey set, and the little brown soldiers were well put to it to keep up. But they sensed action. The exotic surroundings, the golden future that loomed ahead of each, the desire to shine as heroes in a local battle, spurred them on. Had they been at Route Order, even the terrific pace would not have kept them from singing aloud.

Carey glanced back. Kirk, at the head of the Fifty-third company, was coming on some half mile behind. So far, so good—but only a miracle could win them through without interference by Rucker. Their only chance was that the blow he had struck might have been serious—might have killed the Englishman, in fact. He had gone down with a sinister completeness; made no move as he lay sprawled on the floor. And Carey, still boiling with rage at the memory of those words Rucker had used about Helen Reiner, prayed as he marched that he had killed the man.

“The swine!”

“You speak, *Capitan?*” The platoon sergeant looked at him curiously. Carey turned and saw a horseman coming at the gallop down the road. His heart jumped.

The miracle had not happened. Here came grim showdown, riding fast. His men, inflamed with the promise of this fairyland, would learn that he had lied—was misleading them—

Down the ruler straight road the horseman flew. Now he was abreast the other company. He pulled up the flying horse, and Carey could see him lean over and speak to Kirk. Carey's jaws clenched. . . . Now the other company would turn about or halt. Rucker would come storming ahead. He hated the thought of his men seeing this thing that must again happen between him and Rucker—

The sergeant looked back and turned with a grin. "Teniente—" he said.

Carey exhaled a great breath of relief. He saw, indeed, that it was the wild Frenchman, racing toward the promise of combat. DeRissac, too, had a woman back there he wanted to impress with his prowess.

The lieutenant rode up, turned the horse loose and reported. "Saw the Fifty-third moving out, Captain. Eez the trouble already, eh?"

"Take the rear," Carey said curtly. "Send the first sergeant up here."

DERISSAC took his post at the tail of the column. Sergeant Paduan came trotting forward and walked beside Carey. The captain moved slightly from the leading set of fours so as to be out of earshot. "Sergeant, I'm going to fight my way through if necessary. Are you with me?"

The old man looked Carey squarely in the eye. "Like always, *Capitan*," he said simply.

"Thank you, Paduan," Carey nodded. "I knew that. Will there be any others?"

"I have talk," the soldier said cautiously. "I tell one—two—a few maybe can trust. Sergeant Gruspe, he is the 'osban' my *nina* Dulce. He lof to her. He say go back."

"Gruspe's a good man."

"Sergeant Padilla. . . . You can know, *Capitan*, that theese man hav' the *primero* cock—the fighting chicken of the best. Two years now he nevair lose one *combate*. So Sergeant Padilla he say go back to that chicken."

"I lost ten pesos betting against him in

the *gallera* last Sunday," Carey said dryly. "It's an ill wind, eh?"

"There is the *cabo* Blanco Pena. That time the es-tomach go to bust and the *Capitan* take him to the 'ospital and put him to sleep an' take that devil from him—"

Carey laughed grimly. "The medico cut the appendix from him. I just stood and held his hand."

"He nevair see that medico," Paduan said simply. "He see the *Capitan* standing there, he say. So—"

"All right. Who else?"

"Valencia. *Capitan* shoot him weeth the peestol at Baksak. Shoot heem in the rear because he have *temor* those Moro *balas*."

"Because I shoot him in the backside for skulking he sticks by me now in the faee of certain death," Carey said gloomily. "Well, it's like them. I suppose some bird I've been really kind to will knife me in the back."

"Benata, the *Capitan* lift away from those Moros in the *combate* at Malabang, he say anytime he die for the *Capitan*. He go back."

"Thank God for some normal gratitude," Carey growled. "I got a slash in the side for picking up his worthless hide. . . . Any others?"

"I have the fear to ask of the privates. Too much big promise here for them. Many *bonitas delagas*. More pretty than has the ladies they live with in the es-Scout *barrio*."

"And that's a fact," Carey said. "I'd want to stay here myself if I were in their place. But it's wrong, Paduan. Too good to be true. Just as if you won the grand prize in the big lottery. It would make a fool of you in the end. These men aren't used to beautiful women and the fat of the land. They would lose discipline. No fighting to keep them hard. It's up to us to save them from themselves."

"Bot eet ees very nice here, *Capitan*," Paduan sighed. "My old woman she like all these flower . . ."

Carey went back to the head of the column. Paduan strode, puffing, at his

side. Kirk, imbued with the vicarious glamour of Rucker and his prize-winning company, tore along after the leading outfit. The miles fell behind and Carey's hopes rose.

He anticipated little trouble at the barrier. The two organizations, with their officers, should excite no suspicion. Carey had learned enough of the history of the place to realize that Rucker's success had been occasioned by his military genius. He had come with these soldiers of his to protect the kingdom—to fight its battles. Presumably his followers were in the matter heart and soul. And it would be quite conceivable for him to delegate the actual fighting to his next of rank. A king, newly returned to his people, would have many affairs of state to occupy his mind.

And in the event that the leader of the guard should demand an order from Rucker, Carey intended to use force. He had two well-armed fighting companies. The Crusaders were armed only with spears, bows and arrows, and a short Roman sword. A few had the ancient Spanish muskets that had been brought in by the original band of white men. In addition they had the Springfields that had been taken from Rucker's mapping detail. The element of surprise would be with the Scouts. A quick assault, a rear guard to protect the column through the tunnel under the falls, and they would be free. The Crusaders would not follow outside.

The main danger would be in the reaction of the Scout soldiers. Give them time to figure the thing out and they would refuse to fight. Subterfuge would have to be used. They could be told that the guards at the barrier had refused to aid them as ordered. That they had mutinied. Anything as long as it was quick and followed by orders that they would automatically obey.

His chief fear—something that was almost bound to happen—was that Rucker would appear before they won through the barrier. There would be the devil to pay then; no telling what would happen. But Carey had to take the chance.

He gave the command *Route Order*. Out of the ensuing informality he would get some idea of what harm, if any, Paduan's plea for return had done.

AT the word an excited babbling broke forth, as usual. But now it contained a sharper edge. Less laughter; more conciseness in the oaths and boasts. . . . Listening for minor notes in the uproar, connected thoughts, Carey picked up enough to tell him that, so far, he personally was not suspected of turning a good thing down. In the manner of the Scouts the men spoke freely in the dialect. In excitement they had no guard for their enthusiastic talk, though it was generally known that *El Capitan* "knew the words."

Carey listened:

"Old fool! A young woman would scare him to death. He's been a top sergeant since—"

"Sure thing! A big good-looking guy like him! Say, kid, he's going to be king next—next after Rucker. Pretty soft for us then. That loud-mouthed Fifty-third company will pipe down then. They got so they think—"

"Say, if Corporal Batta had his monkey brain out of the *barrio* when he was giving his squad orders in the test—and that lousy Pinac, standing right up on the sky line—we would have beat them at that."

"Old Paduan can throw the bull all right. If anybody squeals to the Captain he's going to lose his stripes. He must be nuts to want to leave a place like this—"

"Just bull. Just wanted to hear himself sound off. He's a good guy. Watch him now when this scrap starts. He'll forget all about his old woman and his kids. . . . Why, she must be thirty-five if she's a day. A hag, I tell you. Mine's twenty and got more wrinkles than a turtle's neck—"

More words and loud laughter. . . . Well, Carey reflected, poor old Paduan's line hadn't taken. They seemed to have looked upon it as a mere practice in elocution. Certainly no suspicion attached to him.

And it was obvious that an increase of feeling had sprung up against the other company because of the superior airs its recent successes had inspired.

The march went on. Where was Rucker? Nerve racking business, this. Though the morning was cool, his men dry, the sweat poured down his face. He was conscious of a terrific strain. Like waiting in an exposed position for the explosion of a mine, the exact site of which he was ignorant.

From the talk he had overheard among the men he was certain that he would have mutiny on his hands if his plans were guessed. He wondered if even Rucker could have led his men back from this fairyland. He decided not. No one in the world could. When two hundred men abandoned home, family and all that had been natural to them since birth as decisively as these men were doing, no power on earth could stop them.

Struggling with his thoughts, Carey wondered how much of this decision was the result of deliberate reflection, how much mob psychology. They were like a band of hardy savage children, he well knew. On occasion he had swayed them to his will with a few brusque words and decisive example.

Once they had fallen back from a Moro *cotta* under a terrific surprise fire. Down the hill at a run; back into the jungle edge. Such a thing had never before happened. Carey, more shocked at the apparent cowardice than at the efficient Moro fire, stormed insults at them, tried to shame them. They just stood there, looking at him like uncomprehending school children. By accident he had learned a lesson that day.

"Non-commissioned officers fall in, in line!"

Instantly, the top sergeant on the right, the rest in order of rank from right to left, the non-coms fell in. Carey raised his pistol above his head.

"Follow me!"

Boiling with rage and humiliation, Carey led them to the very walls of the *cotta*.

The little band had not gone twenty yards from cover before the whole pack was yelling at their heels. They stormed the walls and took the place in that one rush. . . . Melodrama! Exactly what they wanted. They ate it up. DeRissac's stuff. . . .

NOW, far down the white ribbon of road, Carey could see the orderly barracks of the reserve troops. He had learned on the way in that a force was always stationed here, ready for a surprise attack. How many he did not know—nor did he greatly care.

They would be through drill by now, he decided. Unarmed, lying about the barracks waiting for the light noon meal. March by them without explanation, would be the thing. Then nothing to face but the actual guard on duty, say some fifty armed men, scattered from the inner wall to the far end of the tunnel and the outer barrier.

But where was Rucker?

Looking back over his shoulder for the hundredth time, Carey saw no sign of the other captain. The sight of the goal ahead spurred him on. He called the men to *Attention*, increased the pace. He wanted their eyes straight ahead, their interest centered on him. It would never do to allow them a chance to note that the reserve troops were lounging about, after they had been told that the renegades were at the gate. . . .

With beating heart, Carey led his men at last through the neatly arranged little garrison of the reserve. There were two sets of barracks, one on each side of the road; and ahead lay the inner trenches of a defence system. Only one glance, and Carey had guessed that it was the work of Rucker.

They were in luck. The street between the barracks was deserted, the porches of the buildings empty. Remembering that Rucker had established the training plan here during his earlier stay, Carey now decided that it must have been predicated on their own system. At this hour, therefore, non-coms' school would be in prog-

ress. The men would be cleaning their arms.

They passed through the place unhindered. They approached the reserve trench system. This also was deserted; for an alarm at the outer entrance would give ample time for troops to man this place from the reserve barracks.

Carey strode on, his heart gradually lightening as the final goal drew closer. His men would think that the reserve troops were already pushed out toward the enemy. He must hurry on before they began to wonder why there was no sound of firing.

Again he glanced back. The Fifty-third company was closing up; only some three hundred yards now separated them. For the first time in his life Carey warmed up to the dumb Kirk. If Rucker failed to materialize inside of the next few minutes this whole thing would subside to the importance of a bad dream.

Once outside he would hike them like the very devil, the story being that they were moving against the stronghold of the enemy in a surprise attack. He would twist them about in the jungle, carefully noting their course with his own compass. In a few hours they would be so tangled that none of them would dare break away from the command. They would not be able either to find their way back here nor back to Parang. If he knew his men, Parang, with all its faults, would look good to them then.

He heard a low call from Paduan, and something in the man's voice sent a chill through Carey. It took a terrific effort of will for him to turn his head. For he *knew*—knew that when he turned he would see Rucker.

He snapped his head about, not decreasing his pace. Far back he saw at once two mounted figures coming on at a terrific pace. At first almost a feeling of relief shot through Carey. Somehow he had expected that Rucker had delayed pursuit to collect a force of fighting men about him. Or that Rucker was dead. He was surprised at the paradoxical surge of relief,

thankfulness even. Not because Rucker came without troops so much, but because Rucker was alive.

Only then did Carse Carey realize the depths of feeling aroused by true friendship between man and man. He had beaten Rucker back there, and now he would beat him again. But he knew, in that first sight of Rucker pounding toward him, that no matter what happened he would always love Joe Rucker.

A wild shout went up from the Fifty-third company. Unorthodox, inconceivable from any other company in the Scouts thus to cheer their captain when marching at *Attention*. But Rucker and the Fifty-third company were like no other combination in the world, unless possibly Napoleon and his Guard, Pancho Villa and his savage Dorados.

At sound of that deep-throated yell Carey's heart sank. That brilliant fighting machine back there was with Rucker to a man. Squad for squad they equalled his own outfit—some said they were better. The garrison test said so, anyway. And what Rucker desired in this case, the men also desired. Whereas, in his own company, the few who might rally about him would do so only because of a sense of personal loyalty.

CHAPTER XVI.

“FIX BAYONETS!”

THE group of thick-foliaged trees that marked the inner entrance of the tunnel loomed up ahead. A few hundred yards only. Carey could even see the guard squad lounging about in the shade. Too late now, though, to bluff his way through. Rucker would be up before his leading squad quite reached that beckoning goal.

Carey looked back. Rucker and his companion had come up with the other company, and now Carey saw that it was the girl Marpit who bestrode the second horse. Tense and heart-breaking as the turn of events had become, he couldn't

help marveling at her grace and beauty as she raced neck and neck with Rucker.

The pair swept by the Fifty-third company without checking. Rucker had no intention of wasting time with idle questioning. Plain enough what was going on here. . . .

As Rucker came up, Carey ignored him; made no attempt to slow his company's pace. Rucker brought his mount down to a walk beside Carey. Instead of the wild outburst to be expected, Rucker spoke quietly:

"Drop back, Carse. Don't want the men to hear this." There was no rancor in the words; if anything a hint of pleading.

Carey didn't even look up. He eyed the entrance ahead. Only a few hundred yards now.

"Halt them, Carse!" A firmer note in Rucker's voice.

Carey strode on, looking straight ahead.

Then the unexpected happened. Carey heard a sharp cry; the thud of feet hitting the ground. Marpit, panting a little, ran up to him. Planting her feet apart, she turned and faced him, her bare rounded arms outstretched. The arms went about him. She held him there, sobbing against him, while the company clumped on by. A low murmur of admiration and approval went through the rank. This was something like! The Captain's woman. *Que linda!*

"*Mon Dieu!*" DeRissac breathed with uncontrolled admiration. "He eez fastair than I thought, that brave!"

"No, no, no!" Marpit sobbed.

With all his strength Carey fought the girl off.

"Halt that company!" Rucker yelled at DeRissac. The Frenchman looked back uncertainly.

Free of the girl's straining arms, Carey looked swiftly about. The Fifty-third company had halted in the road, they were standing at ease, and Kirk was lighting a cigarette. In passing, Rucker must have given the order. The worst mistake he could have made, Carey exulted as his mind raced.

Before Carey could countermand Rucker's order, DeRissac had blown his whistle, held up his hand as a signal to halt. The ranks stilled, the rifle butts thumped lightly on the ground. Rucker rode up to the company. With swift, decisive words he explained the situation. Their Captain, he said, was still suffering from shock. A bullet had grazed his head on the way in. He remembered only Parang. The doctor had ordered him to bed and he had escaped. He would be all right in a few days. The lieutenant was to lead the company back. There was no attack to fear.

The men looked at one another. Things like this had come to them before. Bright in their minds was the picture of Private Centilla, one afterwards called Bobo, the Fool. Hadn't he, after the selfsame sort of wound at Lake Lanao, gone about for days shouting that he was a Moro Dato with a *harem* of twenty wives? And right now he was standing here in ranks, still denying it, sane as any of them.

And this queenly woman, Very simple to see what had been going on there. The captain was most obviously leaving a real home here. Most assuredly he was for the moment cracked as El Rukair declared. It was well known that these two captains were bosom friends. Hadn't they lived together for many years?

Yes, *El Capitan* must be *loco*.

There was no doubt at all in DeRissac's mind after a hasty reconnaissance of the shapely form of Marpit. Any man running away from that was in a bad way mentally. . . .

Carey, livid, stared about him. The eyes of his men met his: kind, friendly, sympathetic eyes. Marpit, hope dawning in her face, stood quietly by, her hands at her sides. Rucker still sat his horse. He was trying to appear casual, light even; but Carey, who knew him better than any other, saw the strain and anxiety under the pleasant mask he had made of his face.

The old sergeant, Paduan, his only intelligent ally, Carey noted, had moved unnoticed close to his side.

AS Carey's mind raced hopelessly, seeking a solution, a course of action that would at least give him a breathing space, he took in again in a swift glance the terrain about him. Like all trained officers, he had automatically noted the features of the passing landscape as they marched along. He oriented himself now.

The near end of the tunnel was possibly three hundred yards away. The road upon which they were halted ran directly into the thick growth of trees which hid the opening, then turned abruptly to the left and burrowed sharply down under the falls. The river swept in close to the road here, made a deep bend and followed the road to the falls.

Rucker's company was halted some distance beyond the inner reserve defences, about three hundred yards from his own. Just ahead of his own leading squad was another line of entrenchments: a series of platoon pits, wired and with splinter-proof covers. The ground from the river to the sharp encircling ridges on the right was almost level meadow land. At the present moment it was dotted with huge stacks of harvested hay, incongruously sprawled about the trenches.

In his desperation, thousands of wild schemes seemed to shoot through Carey's brain. Everything that had happened in the past few mad days passed in fevered review through his tortured mind. He was grasping at straws; ready to stake all on the wildest throw, the flimsiest inspiration. But two vital points were maddeningly clear to him: he must have time to get at his men; and he must, for a few moments at least, remove them from Rucker's influence.

Rucker's explanation had rung true. Having come this far without a sign of the enemy which they had been led to believe was battling at the very doors of the place, the Scouts must doubt his own word against Rucker's.

Then, like a powder flash, a desperate idea came to Carey. Deep in his heart he knew that no matter what had gone before,

Rucker wanted him. Wanted the pal of his youth, the only man with whom he could brag and reminisce of the wild days gone by. That was the weakness of the man. His only outlet. He had never been a mixer. He had to have Carse Carey's stolid, unimaginative approval and steady influence. It had always been so. . . .

Carey looked up into Rucker's troubled face.

"All right, Joe. . . . Sorry I lost my head back there. You were right, of course. I acted instinctively—like any man when you knock a woman."

Rucker's fine eyes blazed with warmth. There was a boyish eagerness about him as he reached down impulsively and held out his hand.

"A hardy bash on the jaw you gave me, old man! All over now, eh?"

"All over," Carey agreed. "Now listen, Joe. . . . This thing, so sudden and all—well it—"

"I know—I know! You had to assimilate in a few hours what I had a year to digest. And then all that rot about oaths and duty to your men. Well, you see how they feel about it. Even the *tenientes*."

"I thought it all over marching down," Carey said heartily. "As you say, our time is up. We've done our job in the Scouts. Even left a month's pay back there. And what the lieutenants do is their own affair. There's just one thing. For the first time in my life I've given my men a bum steer. Now you've complicated it by saying I'm off my bean."

"Sorry, Carse. Couldn't see any other way out at the time."

"All right, Joe. I'd have done the same, I guess. But you see, don't you, that I've got to make it right with them? Save face as the *chinos* say."

"By all odds!" Rucker said warmly. "Anything you say, Carse."

"Then here. . . . Let me take them over there and give them an *habla*. After all, I'm their captain. Let the proposition come from me. Let me at least go through the form of asking them if they want to stay.

When they learn that I'm for it there won't be any *reclama*."

Rucker's face was wreathed in smiles.

"Go to it," he said, and he turned his horse about and rode back to his men.

Carey wanted to ask Rucker to march his men back, but his natural caution warned him not to go too far. The Englishman was no fool. And at this critical time, the least bit of suspicion might ruin all.

He turned to Paduan who was staring at him with bewildered eyes.

"Move the company down the road and along that line of trenches," he said aloud. Then, as the man made to obey, he said in a low voice:

"Send the men you can trust to set fire to those near haystacks. Tell them to get behind them, far side. Work fast and keep out of sight."

The old man's face was still puzzled, but he saluted and made off at a run.

CAREY started down the road toward his now moving men, careful to proceed with a studied casualness. He had not taken two steps before he felt an arm thrust through his own. A strand of hair blew across his face as he stared angrily into the smiling features of Marpit.

"Go back," he said. "Get your horse and ride back."

She held his arm closer against her yielding body. The sun gleamed on her white teeth. "No," she said.

Carey was desperate. This girl must not hear what he must say to his men. She might ruin everything. And soon bullets would be whipping across this sun-bright meadow.

He turned and faced her. "Marpit—don't you want to please me?"

"Anything," she said, her eyes shining. "Yes, anything you want." She laughed deep in her throat.

"Then go back!"

She just smiled at him. The smile of a child who is being upbraided by a doting mother. "Your poor head! You still suffer. Now later I will make you cold tea

with lime. And I will soothe your head. . . ."

Facing back up the road as he was, Carey could now see the men of the Fifty-third company staring. Some were pointing. There was a crackling sound behind him, and he turned swiftly to see smoke rolling from the nearer stacks. One already was furiously ablaze, black smoke spouting above it towards the blue sky.

"The forage master will rave," Marpit said mildly. "Those soldiers throw lights from the tubes they put in their mouths. Sir Carse, why do they blow on such things? They—"

Carey swung away from her, and with quick strides made for his men. They were lined along the *parados* of the trenches as though awaiting an inspection. The blazing stacks being behind them, they were as yet unaware of that diversion.

Carey faced his men. He spoke swiftly in the dialect; no time for translation by the first sergeant now. Habitually this was done, because theory had it that the natives lost respect for a white man who would descend to the use of their primitive tongue.

Carey knew his subjects. Ten years of stress with them had marked home certain deeply-seated traits. Fierce pride, a passionate appreciation of the recklessly dramatic—these were sure fire instincts.

With a theatrical gesture, Carey whipped off his campaign hat. He had time to congratulate himself on the years—old custom that sent him to the barber for a close haircut always before taking the field. Now he twisted about so that all the men could see.

"I have not been wounded in the head. See, there is no mark."

Simple these people were. They understood only what they saw. The last voice to sway them was invariably the truest. A low murmur of wonder arose from the ranks. "*No hay herido*—no wound!" some of them chanted.

"I tell you there is an enemy at the falls. You hear no shots now for the falls make a great noise. But they will come

closer. And if we are not quick they will trap us in here."

Mutterings of alarm ran through the ranks. Paduan, standing by the flank of the company, took his cue. He pointed dramatically at the now freely burning stacks. At least half a dozen of them were pouring forth dense black smoke which rose straight towards the heavens.

"They have lit the signal fires, Captain. That means that the enemy is at the very gates."

And as though Paduan's own words were in truth a signal, there came to them above the dull beat of the falls the sharp sound of rifle fire.

"When you want us—send up a blaze from back of the falls. . . ."

The words rang exultantly through Carey's head now. The renegades on the outside had been watching that entrance like a cat watching a rat hole. Lusting for the incredible wealth they knew to be in the valley, they would take any risk now that they figured they had a chance at last. No doubt they believed that the Scouts, having loaded themselves up with loot, were having difficulty in making their way out. For though the two companies were well armed and trained to the last minute, there were thousands of valley dwellers available to dispute their passage.

So Carey thought must be the situation.

AND now Carey saw that his men were again *his*. Growls even arose from some of them, growls hostile to Rucker and his obviously untrue statement of their captain's condition.

Swift action now!

"The men of the Fifty-third company talk against you," Carey snapped. "They want you to go back, leaving to them the glory of this battle. They sneer because they beat you in the battalion tests. Their captain, pretending to be a true friend to me, has betrayed me. Betrayed me because he wants his men and himself to have all the wealth and honors here. You are to soldier—his men are to become officers and governors."

Swinging about, Carey pointed to the other company dramatically.

"Are those men better than you? Will you stand their jeers and taunts forever?"

A rising roar of protest came: "No! No! . . . We are better. . . . The year before we beat them!"

The time had come. Avoiding DeRissac's startled, unbelieving eyes, Carey played his last card.

"Sergeant Paduan, hold this trench with the first platoon! The Fifty-third company must not advance! I will lead the company through the tunnel and attack the forces outside. Cover the other company at once and warn them not to advance. Fall back as soon as we pass through those trees. . . . Rest of the company, in columns of twos, follow me!"

A loud cry of approval came from the men. Carey silenced DeRissac's stumbling words of protest with a fierce oath. "Get up there in front! I'll shoot you in the back if you don't jump!"

The Frenchman sprang out in front of his platoon. Carey, on the flank of the second platoon, urged his men forward. He glanced over his shoulder.

Rucker was standing in front of his men, who were still sprawled about the rear trenches out of ranks and resting. The horse, Carey noted with relief, was not in sight. Held in the rear probably by an orderly. Paduan's men were already deploying along the trench in a rapid and orderly manner. Carey exulted. He was going to make it!

His only regret was that he had been left no choice about his rear guard. He, himself, could not have stayed: the big job lay ahead. A delay or failure at the entrance would be fatal. And had he left DeRissac, Rucker would most certainly have argued the Frenchman into surrender, pointing out the certainty of unnecessary bloodshed. But an order to Paduan— Ah, that was a different matter.

As Carey ran, he was conscious of someone at his side. Wild, pleading cries, then a hand pulling at his shirt. He half turned and saw the agonized face of Marpit. He

tore her hand away. "Get back, you fool! There'll be bullets in a minute."

"What do I care for bullets! . . . Oh, Sir Carse, why didn't you tell me you wanted to be king! I would have helped you. There is no need of this madness to prove your valor. I already know. Before me you struck down—"

"To hell with that!" Carey gasped. Behind him sounded the banging of rifles. Scattered shots at first, then the determined nerve-shocking thumping of a controlled rapid fire. The snap of bullets came, viciously, like the sharp crack of a whip end over their heads.

"Fix—bayonets!" Carey yelled to the racing men.

As they tore forward the bayonets came ripping from the scabbards. Then men jabbed at the jerking rifle muzzles with the handles of the flashing steel. The trees were just ahead. Excited figures, naked, brandishing spears and wicked-looking swords, appeared at the edge of the wood.

For a breathless instant Carey hesitated. It would never do to be forced to delay here. Although an action with these few could end in one way only, some of them were bound to escape and take the word of warning back into the tunnel. And Carey's plan depended upon surprise and an uninterrupted movement through that narrow labyrinth. He shouted out in Spanish:

"We come to attack those dogs outside! It is the order of His Highness that we speed. Clear the way through ahead of us!"

For a few tense moments he feared his ruse might be spoiled because of the fire in his rear. But it appeared that the significance of the fusillade was lost upon the guard troops in the wood. The voice of a leader called out to them. With perfect timing and great agility they leaped into a column formation. They shouted back reassuring words, then disappeared through the trees.

"Thank God!" Carey panted.

He had no desire to have the blood of any of these fine and simple people on his conscience.

CHAPTER XVII.

NO SURRENDER.

AS CAREY led his men under the cover of the trees, he shot a last look back over his shoulder. The gleaming, expectant eyes of his men, peered back at him. In answer to his quick question the corporals reported: No casualties . . . which was strange—very strange. At that range, and bunched as they were, Rucker's company with its forty qualified expert riflemen, could not have failed to bring down some at least. Puzzled, Carey looked back across the open ground. He was startled to observe Paduan, with his deployed platoon apparently intact, trotting doggedly towards the wood.

Well, no time to figure riddles. . . .

He gave the order to double time. Placing himself at the head of his men, pistol in hand, he started for the entrance to the tunnel. The girl, Marpit, ran easily at his side in silence.

Into the wood they ran. Then, turning abruptly to the right, they followed the wide smooth road towards the roaring river. A low roof-like affair appeared through the trees. This was the cover placed over the exit shaft, a tunnel that led straight down through the solid rock at an angle of some forty-five degrees. An eager guide met them here, and raced on ahead with a blazing torch held high above his head.

Over the steps of smoothly-cut rock the company clattered. The rush of the falls died out above them. The air became clammy cold. Wet dripped from the gloom of the roof. In the eerie light cast by the torch they could see long icicle-like tenacles like the teeth of subterranean monsters reaching down towards them.

At last they came to a level floor and Carey knew they were under the river. With a gasp of relief he noted that the spiked barriers at the foot of the steps were pushed aside. Had alarm been spread ahead, these barriers would have been closed. . . . He shuddered as he thought of the carnage which would have ensued.

Now they were racing under the river.

"Close up! Close up!" he could hear the non-coms panting. The canteens rattled as the men crowded on.

Hours passed, it seemed to Carey, and still no turn to the right which must be made before they again descended, this time on the far side of the river and to the outlet under the overhanging rocks of the falls. Suppose Rucker beat him to it? Swam the river above—shouted from the cliffs over the falls to warn the men below? The river was boiling back there—jagged rocks and treacherous rapids—but he knew Joe Rucker. A thing like that wouldn't stop him.

Carey spurted, yelling back to his men.

Now they were at the turn. The light went out around it, leaving before them a smoky dusk. More steps—fresh, clean damp air. Again the muted roar of the falling torrent. Voices now—shouts and the steady sound of firing.

Then they were down the steps. A rainbow light half blinded them. The splintered light of the high sun beat into their eyes through the veiling mists of the falls.

THEY were in a square chamber. The roar of the rifles of the defending Crusaders shattered against their eardrums. The half-naked men stood behind a breastwork of stone and iron spikes, firing out through the misty screen of spray. The leader, a smiling giant, who from his features and coloring Carey concluded was of the Inner Circle, shouted to him in Spanish.

"They are many. They sound like a thousand rifles. Pray God we have order to go out!"

"I have those orders!" Carey shrieked above the racket. "You are to remain, guarding the gate."

A look of intense disappointment clouded the fine face of the native. "So be it. Our king had spoken. God go with you, Sir Knight!"

There was no time to lose. No chance or room to deploy properly. Carey banked on the misconception of the renegades as to his true motive in leaving the place to

see him safely out into the open. But he must wait for the faithful Paduan. And any minute Rucker, the most resourceful officer he had ever known, might checkmate him.

Suddenly he heard the men yelling. Welcoming Paduan's platoon. He turned and saw the grinning brown face of the man himself.

"What happened?"

Paduan's features were as puzzled as his own. "They shoot bad. All misses. So I do not shoot, myself, to heet." He shrugged. "I do not know—but I theenk they frate to make my men very angry."

"Where are they now?" Carey demanded.

"I las' see wan platoon he run by woods. Go like to edge of falls through the trees. Othaire he come in column fours, march right down the road toward the hole in the ground."

Like lightning Carey saw Rucker's plan. From above the falls, on the near side of the river, the crazy Englishman would have a platoon firing any minute now. They could command the tunnel outlet. The others, coming in behind, would have him in the rear. Why Rucker hadn't shot to kill, he was not quite sure. Probably wanted to outwit him if possible before initiating the horror of Scout killing Scout.

No time to lose. . . .

He indicated the barrier to the Crusader captain. The man nodded, smiling. Ready hands swept aside a cunningly contrived wicket, wide enough for the sortie to be made in column formation.

Carey, standing by the barrier, made one last rapid reconnaissance of the ground before him. Luck had been with him up to now, but out there were desperate men. The volume of their fire proved them far stronger than he had expected—and worst of all he had detected the short bursts of a machine gun savagely punctuating the so-far ineffective fire against the screened barrier. Two machine guns had been taken at Pikit; those of course. His own company had none.

Through the mist from the falls Carey

saw that the ground before him was open. To the right was the foaming, broken water of the river. Jungle close in almost to the bank of the far side. But on this side the land lay level. Clumps of meadow grass and occasional bunches of brush and stumps afforded the only cover for some three hundred yards. This field of fire had been cleared, of course, by the Crusaders to protect against such an attack as was now in progress. Beyond the open space were large smooth boulders, choked about with rank grass that gave cover to the renegade attackers. Behind these spread the great trees of the jungle.

Call out to the renegades just before darting forth, Carey decided. Warn them in English not to fire. Before the men at the barrier could figure this, his men would be clear. Deal with the renegades when he came into them. . . . Yes, that was the best scheme. And not a second to lose, for Rucker himself would be at his back any minute!

Carey ordered the bugler to blow *Attention*. The high notes rang out above the distant firing. Then he directed the man to blow *Cease Firing*.

The renegade commander understood. The attackers' fire ceased. Carey ran out to the river's edge in plain view of the enemy. He waved his handkerchief above his head. A man leaped over the rocks, came trotting toward him. Carey could see that the fellow was white and that he wore clean, white civilian clothes.

"I'm coming out with my men! We're on the run. Don't fire!"

Now Carey could see the man's grinning face: a hideous blotched face above a gross body.

"Lay down your arms, Captain. We ain't takin' no chances."

Carey's heart sank. Why hadn't he thought of that? A tough spot he was in now. . . . One glance at the fellow, and a swift review of what had happened to the men at Pikit, decided Carey. It was a gamble now—a desperate gamble. He had been in many a tight fix before, but never had he been caught, as he now was, between two

steel jaws whose closing would be only a matter of seconds.

He was aware that Paduan stood beside him; and with growing annoyance that Marpit stood shoulder to shoulder with him. He spoke swiftly to the soldier without turning his head:

"Bring them out at the double and deploy them in that bunch of brush to our left. I'm going to run for that big white rock. Have them open up at once!"

"I go, *Capitan*," said the little sergeant. His grin was eager.

THE next few seconds were an agony of desperate excitement. Carey made the rock. His men were already down before the surprised leader of the renegades had time to get behind his own men so that they could open fire. Then a rifle-roar broke the peace of the morning, dwarfing the deep voice of the cataract.

Carey had thought that the volume of his own fire would give him prompt fire superiority, permit him a rapid advance. For his rear was of a necessity unprotected; exposed brutally to attack from the inner barrier. But as yet no gunshots came from there.

From in front, however, the two machine guns opened with telling effect. His men were falling with alarming regularity, a spirit of panic was spreading. Troops who know that their flanks or their rear are unprotected can never give their undivided attention to the front—and Carey's men were lying exposed on a level field. The renegades were under an almost perfect cover, both from fire and sight.

There could be only one end to a prolonged skirmish, and Carey was instantly aware of that. He must assault at once with the bayonet, or seek instantly a decent position. Three hundred yards of open advance, unsupported by an adequate covering fire, was unthinkable. Assuming that his men would follow him to the end, which he knew to be the case, he still could not arrive at the enemy line with more than a handful of men. They would be shot down by overwhelming numbers.

Off to the left Carey noticed that the jungle edge was only some two hundred yards away. A flank movement under this fire would be bad. Losses would be many. But it was his only chance with his rear open as it was. He blew his whistle, indicated to the squad leaders the new position.

"By squads—to the left. . . . Rush!"

Away went the left squad, the men bending from the hail of pursuing bullets, scuttling for that haven of green like startled lizards. So sudden was the movement—so unexpected and so astoundingly well executed by troops assailed as were they—that the plan succeeded. . . .

Panting, Carey threw himself down behind what was left of the company back in the jungle. He had been unaware of Marpit during that rush, but here she was, crouched beside him. A line of Scouts watched the edge overlooking the meadow. A hasty checkup showed that some twenty men had been left behind. DeRissac had been killed at the first fire. And now reports came in that the Crusaders from the barrier had rushed out and dragged the dead and wounded back into the cover of the falls. Carey wondered briefly at this.

Now what to do? Somehow he had to march these men back over the miles of jungle to the river. Make his way down to the Cotobato and thence home. A tough assignment, but it had to be done. As Carey saw it now, the thing to do was put distance between him and the renegades—trust to his compass, and his memory of the route up, to get him back by furtive night marches.

He crept out to the jungle edge to reconnoiter. To get at him promptly, the renegades would have to abandon their protected position. Have to face his fire in the open, with the prospect of a flanking fire from the barrier into the bargain. Their machine guns wouldn't help them. The ground was so level that their own men would mask the assisting fire.

Carey smiled grimly. See how they'd like it, the slinking killers!

As he was lifting his field glasses for a

closer look at the barrier—for he was still worried about Rucker—he was aroused by the shouts of the Scouts. Marpit was pointing. Clearly now he heard fire coming from the upper part of the falls. A quick adjustment of the glasses showed him a Scout platoon deployed far above on the opposite side of the river. From that height they were pouring a destructive fire into the renegades over the top of the rocks.

And then Carey saw Rucker.

THE Englishman's flowing cape—mark of jungle royalty—had been cast aside. He was naked to the waist and his white body gleamed in the sun. His men, deployed as skirmishers, their bayonets flashing, were at his back. With a wild yell they burst from the cover of the barrier chamber, and at Rucker's flying heels they made for the renegades' position.

Cold steel charging—

Fascinated, Carey watched. He was conscious of a tightening in his throat, a stifling beating of his heart. Great God, what a sight! Rucker, the king, the leader of men, the *captain of his company* above all and to the last, running gloriously into that searing blast of machine gun fire!

As he stared with shining eyes, Carey blew his whistle. Wild with impatience, it was all he could do to keep from racing alone to Rucker's assistance. There was little chance for those two platoons, charging across that long open space, unless a secondary attack came to aid them almost at once.

The men came up, the whistles of the platoon leaders shrilling furiously. Bayonets slithered through encumbering vines. Men tripped and swore and fell sprawling. At last they were off, another thin line edged with the bobbing teeth of glittering bayonets.

Carey could see the men of Rucker's little band falling as though every other one had stepped suddenly into a treacherous hole. He heard himself, with mild surprise, screaming above the clumping feet

and the rattle of the guns. He watched that terrible white form that was Rucker, now far ahead of his men, and saw the flash of the sun reflecting from the pistol that he waved aloft. He prayed as he thought of the perfect target Rucker made—a target that loomed larger every instant as Rucker's flying feet ate up the distance between him and the stubbornly firing renegades. . . .

But above all Carse Carey's thoughts came the awareness, strangely free from annoyance now, of the silent woman who was running at his side. He found time, even then, to regret a little. To feel a little sorry for himself that he could not be as Rucker was. That he did not want to stay here in this heavenly place for life with such a woman as this one by his side. . . .

Then he saw Rucker go down. And he knew by the way the bright head struck, tumbling, that this was Joe Rucker's last fight. Through a mist of madness he heard the awful roar that went up from all that was left of the Fifty-third company behind him; and it was echoed from the last platoon, which was even now rushing out from under the falls to be in at the death. . . . Carey's own men were in close now. He could see the renegades rising up from behind their cover.

"No quarter!" he heard his own voice screaming passionately above the uproar. But the words were unnecessary—merely a spoken *motif* for the fury of this hellish play. He saw what was left of Rucker's men ripping horribly with their bayonets. He felt his pistol getting hotter in his hand. . . .

And then with the empty thing jerking impotently, he felt a weight against him, a grip of closing fingers. He looked down. Marpit, trying to cling to him, slipped down against his legs. Half sitting, her arms reached weakly about his knees. Blood was bright on her bare chest, the waves of her thick hair stuck against it. Her eyes, slowly losing their brightness, were fixed steadily on his face.

She lifted her chin; and he bent and kissed her.

AS the men were falling in under the commands of the non-coms, two of his men laid Rucker down at Carey's feet. Rucker's first sergeant, bleeding and torn, stood above his captain. His gnarled face was twisted with grief. Tears coursed down his grimy face. He knelt and held Rucker's hand as Rucker turned his white face toward Carey.

The big Englishman tried hard to smile. Carey knelt and took his other hand. He couldn't say anything. He didn't think Rucker could manage any words either before he died. He swallowed and choked, trying to say something. Vaguely he heard Rucker's voice:

"Bury me here, Carse. . . . I wasn't a king—and I wasn't—a captain. . . . I muffed both, eh?"

Carey squeezed the cold hand.

"You're the best friend a man ever had, Joe—"

He couldn't say another word. But he knew from the glow that came into the blue eyes that he had said what Rucker most wanted to hear. Rucker died as the glow in his eyes died. . . .

When the sad notes of *Taps* had died away, rung back from the towering cliffs, Carey turned towards the quiet lines of the two companies. The first sergeant of the Fifty-third company stepped from his position in front and saluted Carey.

"The *teniente* is killed and the *Capitan* tale to me the *Capitan* Carey orders his orders. . . ."

He waited expectantly, his hands fixed at his sides. Paduan, too, had come close, and Carey looked from one to the other, saying nothing. At last he spoke softly:

"We come to this place and we fight these men lying dead about us—the men who attacked Fort Pikit. That is all that has happened. You are to tell that to the men."

The two sergeants nodded. They understood.

"The men will believe what we tell them," old Paduan said softly, but there was a grim glitter in his eyes.

"It is so," the other sergeant said.

Carey's body straightened. There was a weariness in his heart and in his bones, a glaze that misted his eyes, but his voice was brisk and decisive:

"Take your posts! . . . Point out, Sergeant Paduan! We march at once back to Parang."

"Si, Senor Capitan."

A few words, a sharp command, and the column moved off towards the west. The last squad touched the jungle edge without a backward look at the silent, deserted wall of rock that guarded the entrance to the valley. The sound of the falls faded as the great trees swallowed them up, and at last died out behind them.

THE END.



WILL O' THE WISP

Brian Desmond, the swashbuckling Ace of Swords, spied for France—in the name of England's king! Beginning a big and colorful novel of romance and reckless adventure in the deathless days when France and England warred and America fought for freedom, by

H. BEDFORD-JONES

TREACHERY AT PORT FEAR

The author of "Bengal Fire" tells a new tale of danger by land and devilment at sea. Tread lightly, you bone-diggers of the Caribbees, for the ghosts of Captain Kidd and Blackbeard did not die upon the gallows tree! A complete adventure novelette by

L. G. BLOCHMAN

HIGH STEEL

There was a bridge to be swung above the boiling Kildeen Rapids, and there was Anne Morgan, tall and slim-hipped and beautiful. . . . "Women and steel don't mix," the Old Man said—and high sky and deep water proved it. A complete action novelette by

T. T. FLYNN

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—NOVEMBER 28th



Vander poised, ready to dodge

Party at Midnight

By L. W. CLAFLIN

Tough guys and ten-ton trucks are a lot the same: they may be good, but they can't go far on a cracked crank-case

AFTER midnight, when traffic on the Pike had quieted down, the Halfway Garage presented a singularly deserted appearance. The feeble glow from the globes on the gas pumps cast a grayish light over the front of the big, barn-like structure, revealing in indistinct outline a pair of huge sliding doors. Set into one of these was a smaller door under a neatly printed sign, white letters on a black background. It read, *Night Service*.

Inside the garage a single light burned—and that hung under the hood of a car. Chris Vander, the night man, saw no need to advertise his presence. He had work in

plenty. And he welcomed no interruptions.

Some impudent grease monkey on the day force, convinced of his skill as a mechanic because he could at last change a tire without pinching the tube, had tampered with the ignition on a sixteen-cylinder job. Miraculously, the car still ran. But a gallon of gas drove it just two miles, and there wasn't power enough in all sixteen cylinders to pull the leg off a flea.

Wearily, Vander rigged his light under the hood and went to work. It was a slow, painstaking, back-breaking job. From time to time he shook his head angrily,

said words that would have crisped the ears of the grease-ball responsible had he been anywhere near to hear.

But he wasn't. In fact, there was no one to hear. Outside that small circle of light there was nothing except the thick blackness of midnight.

At the end of half an hour Vander was still working, and occasionally swearing, when a distant sound drummed in upon his consciousness. He thrust his head up out of the light, listening. Far down the Pike a motor throbbed, heavy, rumbling.

He straightened up, scowling impatiently. His ears, skilled in the language of motors, had brought him bad news. There was a discordant note in the growling bass of that motor. As it drew nearer it became more distinct. There were sharp gaps in the sound, holes where the motor went silent, then burst forth again with a roar.

He slipped a thin ignition wrench into his pocket, sighed wearily.

"Trouble," he muttered disgustedly.

It was a heavy truck, he could tell that by the sound. It blazed out suddenly in a series of angry backfires. Gasping, choking, it staggered on up the Pike.

In front of the garage it stopped, the motor racing jerkily.

In another minute they'd be punching the night bell and yelling for service. He started down across the floor, heading for the big doors.

THE night bell clanged suddenly, filling the garage with echoing sound.

Overhead, the night light flashed on, bathing the whole interior in a deep wine-red glow.

He ambled down to the door, found the switch and turned on the forward lights. At that instant the night bell clanged again, and the big light flashed red.

"Keep yer shirt on," he yelled through the door.

He snapped over the bolt that locked the small service door, yanked it open. A man squeezed through.

He was of medium height, lean and wiry.

His thin shoulders hunched high about his ears, and his head sat deep between them as though it joined his body without the use of a neck. His eyes were tilted slits, slanting like those of a Chinese. Every movement was swift, jerky.

He spoke hurriedly, almost breathlessly.

"Listen, buddy, stir yer hump and get them big doors open. We got a truckload of trouble out here. And we're in a hurry, see?"

Vander's jaw tightened stubbornly. "In that case," he advised coolly, "keep right on going."

"Whadda you mean?"

"I don't hurry for nobody."

The man stared at him, faintly surprised. He took a jerky step forward.

"Now listen," he barked angrily, "I ain't got no time to waste on wise guys. If you wanta be tough, you'll get plenty of that. I got a guy in the cab that's so tough he bounces. And we ain't taking any slop from a tramp like you. So . . . open up."

Vander eyed him coldly. "A guy in the cab, eh? Well, he'd better cut off that motor before it rips itself apart."

"He will like hell. If we shut it off now it'll never start again. You'll open up and let us in, that's what."

He turned away, pushed open the door. Vander called him back.

"Wait a minute. Who you driving for?"

"Whadda you care?"

"This ain't a free service station. If I have to work half the night on that barge of yours I want to know who's going to pay for it."

"Oh, worrying about the cash already?"

Vander shrugged. "Suit yourself, feller. I got plenty to do. You and your bouncing tough guy can fix your own truck. If you know how."

"Now wait a minute. Don't get thick about it. It's one of Pesner's trucks."

Vander nodded. "From Pesner's Mills, eh? A load of silk?"

"None of yer damned business what it is."

Vander eyed him shrewdly. "You're a new driver."

"The hell I am. I'm a regular. This is a new route for me."

"Uh-huh. What's your number?"

"Whadda yer mean, number?"

"You ought to know."

"Huh? Oh . . . that. We don't bother with that no more. Mine's six, I guess. I dunno."

Vander thought a moment, shrugged. "Okay. Run it in."

HE turned away. The slant-eyed man ducked out through the service door. Vander unlocked the big doors and rolled them back.

The truck was a huge, six-wheel job with a tremendous box of a trailer that looked like a small barn on wheels. It turned in off the road, headed up the ramp. The motor coughed, thumped, gasped a couple of times and the big truck staggered up the slope like a wounded animal. At the very peak, with the front wheels already in the garage, the motor fluttered weakly. Then . . . *phlut*, a slobbering, muffled backfire through the intake, and the giant's strength was gone. It rolled back heavily into the road.

Three times it tried to climb the ramp; three times it failed. Exasperated, Vander leaped up into the cab. There were two men in it, the second one a vague shadow on the farther side.

"Shove over," yelled Vander.

He jammed it into low, trod on the gas and let the clutch bite. Stumbling, halting, the big truck staggered up the ramp, poised for an instant, and rolled into the garage.

He dropped it into neutral, leaped down to the floor. There was a queer, hard expression around his mouth.

"Back it up a little," he yelled.

Gears clashed, the motor picked up, and the truck jerked ahead a few feet.

"Cut it," he shouted. "Leave her there."

The man with the hunched shoulders cut the motor and scrambled down out of the cab. He ran around front and lifted the hood. After much jerking and yanking he pulled it off entirely.

"Okay," he said briskly. "Let's go."

Vander turned his back on the truck and sauntered up the floor.

The hunched one sprang after him. "Hey, where the hell are you going?" he yapped.

Vander ignored him, ambled leisurely up the floor. The other turned back, scuttled up into the cab. Voices murmured, rose angrily, and died away. The man backed out, and dropped to the floor.

Presently Vander came back carrying a steel toolbox under one arm, his trouble light draped over the other.

He plugged in the light, rigged it over the motor. Then for the space of several seconds he lounged across the fender, studying the scene before him.

Plastered against the side of the block were several splotches of silvery metal about the size of a dime. Some were smaller. Just where the intake flared to the ports, something had struck the casting a blow that had cracked the metal. One clip had been ripped off the distributor, and a generous chip split out of the brittle composition. The cap was sprung to a slight angle, teetering sufficiently under the vibration of the motor to fritz up the ignition in grand shape.

He opened his knife, scraped off a splotch of the shiny metal. It was a mere flake, tough and malleable. He rolled it between his thumb and finger. And he knew that it was lead.

The slant-eye watched him suspiciously. "What yuh doing?" he wanted to know.

Vander eyed him in silence. He straightened up, stepped around in front of the truck, found the hood folded up like an accordion. He jerked it out flat on the floor.

ABOVE the row of vents, on one side, three jagged holes gaped in the thin metal. Vander squatted over them, studied them, poked his little finger into them.

In all that big garage there was no sound save the sharp irregular ticking of the exhaust manifold, contracting as it cooled.

The slant-eye cleared his throat, said jerkily. "Well, stop the puttering and get to work. We want a move."

Slowly Vander rose from his haunches, turned. His eyes were hard, challenging.

"Somebody plugged this truck with a gun," he accused.

Up in the cab the second man stirred. The hunched one stared at Vander, his slant eyes narrowing.

He said sourly, "I guess I oughter know it. If anybody does."

"That so?"

"Yeah, that's so. I was in the cab when it happened. Some wise guy figgered on jacking a load of silk worth plenty of dough. But he wasn't smart."

Vander nodded. "Tricked him, eh?"

"Betcha. Just when he figgered I was gonna stop, I swung the load on him and damned near rolled him down."

Vander looked faintly surprised. "Quick handling," he conceded, "on a buggy this size."

The hunched shoulders shrugged disparagingly. "Hell, I'm used to it. It ain't the first time, you know."

"No?" Just that single word, but it dripped scorn. And disbelief. It caught the slant-eye unprepared. He started, yapped at Vander.

"Whadda you mean? Whadda you mean by that, huh?"

Slowly, deliberately and coolly, Vander told him.

"You're a damned liar," he said.

It was only an instant that the hunched one hesitated. His eyes darted up at the cab, back again at Vander.

"So," he said harshly, "it's trouble you want. Well, buddy, you'll get it. I gotta—"

"A guy in the cab," Vander cut in, "that's so tough he bounces. Yeah, I heard that before. What about it?"

The slant-eye opened his mouth. Keeping his eyes on Vander he turned his head slightly to the left, flung the words over his shoulder.

"Gubber," he snapped. "C'mere."

There was a disturbance inside the cab

and a man came backing down. He was well over six feet tall, with a breadth of shoulder that astonished even the imperturbable Vander. Here was a giant, a man mountain of bone and muscle with no single ounce of superfluous flesh.

He wore a heavy blue overcoat with the collar turned up around his ears. His hat sat low on his head, so that between his hat and his collar nothing showed but a white triangular patch. His skin was pasty and badly pitted. His eyebrows were black and heavy.

He swung his tremendous bulk forward in long strides, towering head and shoulders above the smaller men.

"Whatsa matter, Chink?" he growled, looking down at them. His voice was like a low note on a bass fiddle.

Chink, with the hunched shoulders, stepped back beside the big man. He kept his eyes on Vander.

"We gotta wise guy on our hands," he jeered. "He wants to be tough."

"Tough, huh?" He swung around, glowering down at Vander. "Don't start getting tough with us, grease-jack, or I'll cave in yer blasted skull."

Vander emitted a faint snort. "Who'd fix your truck?" he asked coolly.

HIS impudence infuriated the big man. He jerked monstrous hands out of his pockets, hands that could rip a man's head from his body.

Vander poised on his toes, ready to dodge. But Chink threw up a restraining hand, said, "Wait a minute."

"What's the idea," he asked Vander, "of calling me a liar? You think this ain't my truck, huh?"

"I know damned well it ain't," stated Vander flatly. "You don't even know how to drive it. Three times you tried to push it up that ramp when—"

"The hell I did," cut in Chink. "I had it right back in low all the time."

"Back in low, eh? Listen, truck-driver, when you pull the stick back on this truck it doesn't go into low. But that's news to you, ain't it? Never heard of a shift with

four speeds ahead. And let me tell you something else. When I asked you to back it up a little you tried to shove it into reverse. But the truck jumped ahead. Because you didn't know where to find reverse. And you don't know yet."

Chink ignored the remark. "What are you driving at?" he parried.

"Don't act dumb," Vander told him. "You know what I mean all right. You snatched this truck off the road. You're the guys that drilled the slugs into the motor, and you weren't in the cab when it happened, either."

He paused. There was real concern in his voice when he asked, "What have you done with the driver?"

Gubber's deep bass rumbled menacingly, "Whadda you care?"

"He's a friend of mine. I know the truck." He hesitated, his jaw tightening. His voice rose slightly. "And he's got a swell wife. And two of the finest kids that ever breathed."

A sneer crawled across Chink's ugly face. He glanced up at Gubber.

"Yeah?" inquired Gubber nastily. "Well . . . in that case he shoulda been more careful. He was kinda dumb, that friend of yours. Too dumb to live."

Vander's breath stopped, choked off by his tightening throat. He stared, slowly digesting the full meaning of the words. His lips framed a question, relaxed in silence. Chink was leering at him.

Anger flared in Vander's eyes. He said savagely, "If you put the buzz on a swell gent like Charlie Fletcher . . ."

"What'll you do about it?" snarled Chink.

Gubber answered for him. "He won't do nothing," the big man rumbled.

After a short pause he continued. "Yeah your friend was too dumb to live. But you're too smart. You know too much. You see too much. You ain't a safe guy to have around. See?"

Chink looked faintly worried. "Hey, not now," he said anxiously. "The truck, first."

Gubber nodded slowly. "Yeah, I know.

The truck." He stepped aside, jerked an elbow at the uncovered motor.

"Get after that truck. And be damned quick about it."

He drew his right hand out of his pocket, clenched a mammoth fist.

Vander stepped across in front of him. There was no other way to go. His body tensed against the expected blow. Gubber drew his fist back, growled. Vander slipped by.

LEANING into the motor, he lifted off the broken distributor cap. It crumpled in his hands. He fitted the parts together, checked the firing order by the position of the wires, then jerked them out of their sockets. He swung on his heel, started for the stockroom.

"Hey," snapped Chink, "where the hell do you think you're going?"

Without halting he said stubbornly, "I got to get parts."

Gubber followed him over to the stockroom. Vander unlocked the door.

"You don't need to come in here," he said bluntly.

The big man seized him by the shoulder, shoved him in through the door and came in after him. Vander disappeared among the high metal stacks. He found a code sheet where parts were listed alphabetically. He ran a grimy finger down the list, across a dotted line to a code number, 1635.

In stack sixteen, compartment three, fifth shelf, he found what he needed. When he came back Gubber had pushed his way into the office. He was standing over the safe.

He looked up as Vander stepped in, and shouted, "Chink, c'mere."

Chink came running. "Whatsa matter?"

Gubber pointed to the safe. "How about it?"

Chink was doubtful. "I dunno."

"It ain't very big. Oughter be simple."

Chink shook his head. "Looks like a tough one to me." He knelt in front of it. Gubber squatted beside him.

Vander stepped back, slipped silently out of the stockroom. The door made only the thinnest squeak when he closed it. A short distance down the wall to his right set a phone. He streaked for it, caught it on the run. He jerked off the receiver, crooked his little finger into the dial.

At that instant the stockroom door burst open, belched out Gubber. He caught sight of Vander, bore down on him like a charging elephant.

Vander dropped the phone, dodged, but the big man caught him in a crushing grip, swung him off his feet and hurled him like a wooden puppet across the floor.

He landed on the cement, striking on his hip with a crash that seemed to crush every bone from his knee upward. Driven on by the terrific momentum he slid under a car, scraping the skin from his face. He lay there, crumpled and hurt.

Furious, Gubber ripped the phone from the wall and hurled it under the car. It struck Vander between the shoulders, driving the breath from his lungs. Still raging, the big man stormed over, hauled Vander out and jerked him to his feet. With his broad heavy palm he clipped him a stinging crack across the side of the head. It almost smacked him out like a light.

Still fuming and cursing, Gubber whirled him around, faced him toward the truck and catapulted him down the floor. Vander shot forward, stumbled, and lunged down. He stayed there for a moment, sick with pain. His stomach tightened, retched weakly, relaxed.

He struggled up to his knees, swaying dizzily. Slowly, grinding his teeth against the pain, he staggered to his feet, stumbled drunkenly down to the truck. He drooped over the fender, badly hurt, fighting for consciousness.

Wearily he drew the distributor cap from his pocket, still unbroken. Then, with hands that quivered in pain, he went silently, grimly to work.

Chink stood in the stockroom doorway looking anxious. He said, "Gubber, you wanta watch it. If he wasn't tougher'n all hell you'd of killed him."

"I'll kill him, all right," raged Gubber. "One more stunt like that and I'll break his back into forty-nine pieces."

Vander, his hands shaking, eyes dimmed with pain, went silently on with his work. Gubber hovered around watching.

IT took a long time and considerable ingenuity to work on a clip that would hold. And when it was done it was a sleazy job. The wiring was much simpler, though Vander fumbled a good deal.

At the end of twenty minutes he straightened up from his work. As the pain died away, anger had crept in. But he kept it down; thinking, planning. . . .

Gubber towered over him, glaring down. "Done?" he rasped.

Vander nodded. "Guess so," he said shortly.

He climbed stiffly up into the cab, started the motor. It grumbled at first; then as he fed it gas, it roared reassuringly.

But Vander's ears were not deceived. Underneath the heavy volume of sound he sensed a thinness of power, the subtle gasping of a big motor smothered for lack of an adequate mixture. He remembered then the crack in the intake.

He cut the motor and climbed out of the cab. Chink appeared in the stockroom doorway, attracted by the sound of the motor.

"Got her going, huh? Listen, Gubber, this box has got me licked."

Gubber shrugged. "Okay," he said, easily. "We'll take it with us."

"Yeah? Where you gonna find room?"

"We'll make room, all right. We can haul the stiff out. Shoulda dumped him down the road, anyways. Leave him here."

He turned to Vander. "Come on." He walked around behind the trailer, jerked open the doors at the back.

Vander's jaw sagged, his eyes widening. Just inside the doors, wedged against the bales of silk, lay the crumpled body of a man. It was in a curled-up position on its back, knees doubled and jammed up under the chin, like the embryo of a chicken coiled up in its egg.

As the doors opened the legs uncoiled slowly, fell limply over the tail of the truck. The truckman's jumper, from the right shoulder down, was stiff and caked with an ugly brownish stain.

He saw the face, gasped, "Charlie—" and cut it off short. He swung around to Gubber. "You damned dirty—"

"Lay off," snarled Gubber, "or I'll smack yer one fer keeps." He raised his hand, a bludgeoning threat. "Pick up his feet."

Vander stepped up to the truck. "You get the hell out of here," he flared. "I'll take care of him."

Gently, carefully, he lifted the limp form and carried it across to the stockroom wall. He kicked two padded creepers into line and eased his burden onto the rude bed.

He dropped down swiftly. This Charlie Fletcher was only a lad, with a fine clear skin and delicate features. He looked more like a concert violinist than a truck-driver.

He was still breathing, quietly and evenly. Vander's hopes rose. He wasn't hurt too badly, after all. The wound on his shoulder had clotted, and the bleeding stopped.

Chink was struggling to get the hood back over the motor. He looked across at Vander, yelled, "Hey you, c'mere."

Vander rose, crossed slowly. Just then Gubber came out of the stockroom carrying the safe. Vander knew from experience that it was a load for any two normal men. He watched Gubber carry it with careless ease. He took it around behind the truck, shoved it inside and slammed the doors.

He came forward then, his big hands sunk in the pockets of his coat. He nodded to Chink, growled, "Okay."

Chink seized Vander by the arm. "You come with me," he commanded. He led Vander across to the stockroom wall, faced him against it with his back to the truck. He swung away, nodded to Gubber.

"The works," he said briefly.

Vander's back crawled. He knew what it meant, could almost feel the slugs ripping into his body. He spun around and leaped away.

GUBBER was standing by the truck, his hand raised. The overhead light glinted dully on the automatic in that hand. As Vander leaped he moved the muzzle of the gun slightly to keep him in line.

"Don't be a sap," choked Vander desperately. "You put the blast on me and you'll never move that truck."

"Why not?" sneered Chink.

"It ain't running right, that's why."

"That's a gag," snarled Gubber. "I heard it running all right."

"Sure," Vander argued hastily, "you heard the motor running. But wait until it gets a load on it. You'll see. It'll die on your hands." He paused, gulping nervously. "You don't believe me, huh? Okay, try it. See for yourself."

Chink looked questioningly at Gubber. He turned back to Vander.

"So you was gonna pull a fast one on us, huh? Gonna leave us strapped here?"

"Your own fault," snapped Vander. "You wouldn't give me time to finish the job."

Gubber growled, deep in his chest, "What's the matter with it?"

Vander's eyes narrowed. He said stubbornly, "I'm sick of talking into the muzzle of that gun."

Their eyes clashed in angry silence. Slowly the big man lowered the gun.

"C'mon," said Chink. "Show me. And talk fast."

They crossed to the truck. Vander pointed out the crack in the intake.

"If you think you're going to move a load with a hole like that in the line, you're cracked," he told them. "It wouldn't pull your hat off."

"Yeah?" queried Gubber. "Whadda you gonna do about it?"

Vander shrugged. "What d'you want done? I can put in a new one. Or I can plug up the crack with a metal paste so it'll last for a while."

"Which is quicker?"

"The paste. If it stays."

"Do it, then!"

Vander turned, sauntered down toward

the back of the garage. Gubber tagged along, prodding him from behind.

"C'mon, c'mon," he snapped. "Get the lead outa you. This ain't no parade."

From a fifty-gallon drum Vander drew about three quarts of gasoline into a large shallow pan. On the way back to the truck he picked up a handful of cotton waste and a section of quarter-inch welding rod, flattened at one end like a spatula.

With a scrap of waste dipped in gasoline, he scrubbed the area around the crack until the metal shone with a dull polish. He lounged carelessly against the fender while he mixed the paste. Then, pressing it firmly and tightly into every pore, he plugged the crack to the perfect air-tightness of what looked to be a permanent job.

Chink watched him put down his tools and wipe his hands.

"Done?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "But it's got to harden."

"How long will that take?"

"About an hour."

GUBBER glared at him, his dark eyes blazing. "An hour, huh? Why didn't you put in a new one? You said this was quicker."

The dull deadly menace in his voice sent little chills prickling along Vander's spine. The deep bass voice rose to a snarl. "You think we're gonna stand around here for an hour, you damned grease-jack? Trying some of your tricks, huh?"

"Keep your shirt on," said Vander hastily. "I can hurry it a little if you want. But don't blame me if it cracks."

He twisted a wad of waste around his spatula, dipped it in the gasoline. He stepped back, struck a match, and the spatula was a tiny torch. Slowly he waved this back and forth under the damp paste.

"Hold it still," commanded Gubber. "Give it some heat."

"Sure," retorted Vander. "And ruin the job."

Gubber loomed over him.

"Do what I tell you. And shut up."

Vander straightened up, turned to face

him. The torch flamed above the panful of gas.

"Who's doing this?" he snapped. "You or—"

With a sudden deft flick of his thumb, he shot the burning torch down into the gas. Instantly the big pan flared in a rising wall of flame. He leaped on it, seized it in his grimy hands. With an upward, scooping motion he sloshed the flaming liquid up over the big man's chest and into his face.

A burst of fire enveloped Gubber's head and shoulders. Flame leaped over his face, sprouted from his hair. He gasped, sucked in the living fire and screamed as its tiny fangs slashed at his throat, seared his lungs.

He thrust his big hands into the flame, clawed at his screaming throat. Bellowing in agony, his eyes seared by the blast, he staggered blindly, lunged into the truck and crashed down.

But Vander had not waited for this. He whirled on the astounded Chink. Here was a man of his own size, a man he could meet on equal terms.

He plunged joyously, madly into the fight, grim and silent, fists swinging with murder in every blow. Caught in the full force of the onslaught Chink whirled, leaped up to the cab. From this vantage point he lashed out a vicious kick that caught Vander a cruel blow, low on the chest. The breath shot out of his lungs; his ribs caved, shrieking with pain.

Chink leaped, hammering Vander's face with both fists. They crashed down, rolled; hammering, clawing, kicking like wild beasts. And subconsciously, as they struggled there, each realized that this was a fight to death.

They rolled again, halted with Chink on top. He lunged for Vander's throat, found it. Vander jerked his head forward, sank his teeth deep into the corded wrist.

Yowling, Chink loosened his grip. Vander arched his back, toppled him over. They rolled again, and Vander landed on top.

He grabbed the hunched shoulders, jerked Chink to a half-sitting position. Then, with all the strength in his enraged

body, he slammed him back against the floor.

Chink's head crashed against the cement with a dull *konk*. His eyes popped open—wide, staring. His jaw sagged.

VANDER sat back, breathing hard. Slowly he rose to his feet, his eyes on Chink's slack face.

"Lordy," he muttered, "that crack didn't do him no good."

The garage was ringing with the sound of Gubber's hoarse bellowing. He writhed on the floor, kicking blindly, screaming, gasping for air.

Vander reached into his toolbox, brought out a short bar of steel. He swung it at Gubber, missed, and the big man rolled under the truck. He hiked around to the other side, waited there, grim and silent, the bar ready. Gubber rolled back out on

the same side. He struggled to his feet, poised there, clawing, roaring.

Then, like a lunging fullback, he charged toward the stockroom wall. Head down, blind as a bat, he crashed headlong into the solid wall of cement blocks.

For a brief second he hung there; then he crumpled to the floor—black, charred and smouldering.

Vander stared. With the back of one grimy paw he slowly rubbed the tip of his nose. The fingers of his other hand relaxed, and the bar of steel clanked on the floor.

Abruptly he swung away and started for the office phone, his eyes still fixed on the crumpled figure. A smile of derision stretched his swollen lips.

"Tough, huh?" he muttered disdainfully. "Mebbe so. But unless I'm cock-eyed—he didn't bounce."

THE END

We Walk Too Much

ALARMISTS who predict that, because of automobiles and other walk-saving machines, man will lose the use of his legs in another hundred thousand years, can stop worrying right now. Likewise those doctors who are always advising you to walk a mile a day for exercise had better start speaking in whispers. For Dr. Joseph Lelyveld, director of research for the National Association of Chiropractors, has been finding out things about walking, to wit—that if there is any kind of exercise the human animal gets plenty of, it's walking. And that goes for man, woman and child.

Speaking in round numbers, the doctor finds that the average human takes some 18,098 steps a day, covering eight and seven-eighths miles. Of course, that's only the average. A schoolboy will do about fifteen miles a day, and a farmer hard at his spring plowing may cover twenty-five. The average woman shopper covers better than eight miles in that one activity alone on a shopping day. So of course we don't all come close even to the eight and seven-eighths average. Nonetheless, the average housewife, without leaving her home, goes as far as from Boston to San Francisco every year. And the business man, who, everybody agrees, gets practically no exercise at all, nevertheless walks as far as from Boston to New York every three or four weeks—in his own office.

This news is enough to tire anybody. . . .

—James F. Lambert.



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



LET'S all take down our hair this week and open our hearts. Recently, the poor old Editor has been sitting up here in the office letting the readers bawl him out for all sorts of things, for not having enough serials or having too many, for the choice of his stories, for mistakes that creep into the tales that are published in ARGOSY. The Editor has just been taking it on the chin and has not been talking back. Even now he is not in a very combative mood, but he does feel like sitting in with the crowd. So let's open our hearts.

There is a lady here in the office (not really here, only her astral body and a letter) who has beaten us to this-hair-taking-down business. We'll give her the floor.

MARTHA FETZER

Always I read the *Argonotes*. Always I have resented the attitude of those critics who seize on some triviality of subsidiary detail to mangle the major of the ensemble story.

Always, also, I have especially resented the voices of ladies lifted in such derisions. If ladies are going to ride in the posse, where they ain't no real right to be, let them sing mighty small.

But I sweep both these unusualnesses of my sentiments aside, to object to your story of Sidney, the Morse-Code-trained rattlesnake. The story is fascinating, but there are two statements in its unfolding that are reprehensibly inaccurate. One is this: Sidney is stated to have failed on the code for O. No rattler ever falls down on the code for O. From the first time he buckles on his license-plates the rattler is trained to signal accurately to all comers and on all occasions, the message I O U P D Q and all comers on all occasions have answered "All Clear."

When this story is edited by its authors toward its deserving competition for a Nobel prize, I beg

that there be made alteration according to this, my true observation.

Danville, Penna.

WHAT was a terrible mistake on our part and, we might as well break down right now and admit that our acquaintanceship with rattlers has been scant indeed. Only once have we met up with one and that's when our Uncle Chandler was bitten by a sidewinder and died. What the snake said to Unc, we do not know. But it sounded pretty nasty to us. Ever since then we've wanted to know Morse code.

But we are also badly informed on that! However, we do know praise when we see it. Here is a batch written by our old friend

J. A. BLUNDON

This is the first time I have written to you and possibly it will be the last, and it is possible I should not address you now, if it were not for the fact that so many readers are telling how long they have read the ARGOSY, and mentioning their likes and dislikes. For myself, I have read the ARGOSY for better than forty years, since the days of the "Golden Argosy," and in that time I have "squandered" in the neighborhood of \$200 for said magazine. I have missed very few issues in all these years. I have traveled extensively within the boundaries of North America and oftentimes within the pages of ARGOSY I can see again the scenes and places that I once knew, and often meet the name of some person whom I also knew, and that is one of the many things I enjoy about ARGOSY. I almost always manage to get my copy of ARGOSY whenever I can, and each week I read it from "kiver to kiver," even the ads.

Of course, there are some stories I like better than others, but as a whole I have no fault to find. I find mistakes in diction, mistakes in spelling, mistakes in scientific subjects, but what are a few mistakes? The magazine as a whole

suits me right down to the ground. If it did not do you imagine I should have spent my money all these years for it? Well, hardly!

You know the old saying: "Every knock is a boost," so let the knockers keep on knocking, and the boosters keep on boosting. As for me, I shall keep right on reading the ARGOSY as long as I have eyes to see with and a mind to understand. I have no favorite authors. I like them all. I get lots of enjoyment out of ARGOSY each and every week.

Now see if you have any other readers who can better my record. I can safely say that within the past forty years I have not missed more than fifty issues of the ARGOSY.

Wheeling, W. Va.

THAT forty-year record is a fine one, indeed — but what do you mean, J. A., by saying that you "squandered" your *dinero* on ARGOSY. When you get a bargain like ARGOSY you should use the word "invested." For that matter, you practically stole ARGOSY for ten cents.

Just to show you that we are not alone in this attitude we're printing a letter from

VINCENT H. REED

I have just finished Theodore Roscoe's novelette, "King of the Beasts," which I consider one of the most interesting stories that I have ever read in ARGOSY or any other book. The story was so interesting and enjoyable that I was unable to leave the book until I finished. I have been reading ARGOSY for many years and although I enjoy almost every story, the above mentioned was the best. I have never written to this department before, but after finishing this story I took the liberty of writing to encourage more stories of this type rather than the almost impossible types that often appear in the book. Nevertheless I shall continue reading ARGOSY because it is the best light reading that can be gotten.

Mount Vernon, N. Y.

AH! Our friend! We wish we could fill our book with stories like that. Or, we should say, we're glad we do! Maybe this praise party is going to our heads. Whether it is or not we're going to subject ourselves (and you) to more of it. At the meeting this week I was a defender of the defenseless.

FREDERICK KOCH

In reading your viewpoints on *Argonotes* I sure would like to defend W. C. Tuttle in his wonderful stories. I read where Mr. Louis Grobman condemns Mr. W. C. Tuttle. I will admit I did not care for the Dogieville novelettes, but sure love the *Henry* stories, also his last novelette, "No Law in Shadow Valley." Let's have more. Don't you think it is near time for a *Mr. Hazeltine* story by George Worts? I also like the Legion stories by Theodore Roscoe. I am sorry your book doesn't come out twice a week, as the week seems long waiting for the next book. I hope Mr. Louis Grobman will see this *Argonote*. He should remember if you can't boost don't knock. Long live ARGOSY, and I shall always read it as long as I can see to read.

Philadelphia, Penna.

WE like the attitude of the cryptic gentleman known as

D. M. R.

I thoroughly enjoy the stories in ARGOSY—some appeal to me more than others, but I mostly read them all.

I like the stories because they are pure fiction, creations from the brains of the authors, staged here and there, characters from all classes and stations of life, merged into a tale that's different from our daily grind.

Stories in ARGOSY are not supposed to be based on facts; if they were, they wouldn't interest me so much.

I really like best the fantastic stories and *Jimmie Cordie*, *B. Bell Williams*, *Gillian Hazeltine*.

I just start at page 1 and go back and I have a happy time until I reach the *Argonotes*, then I get mad. . . .

And I want to know why you try to hamper the authors by publishing the letters of the fellows who read fiction with an encyclopedia under the magazine. Who cares a hang whether the dates are correct?

Must an author create a plot in India and have to trot over there and verify each statement?

Must he make history out of fiction?

Can't he create a story in any country, from any race of people? If you buy those stories and like them well enough to publish them in ARGOSY, it seems they suited you. And, mostly, they suit us. So why don't you stick by the authors and refuse to show those letters from birds with a yen to show up their superior education—refuse to publish them and then the argument stops. Don't make an author apologize to those gentlemen, or offer corrections. It's fiction. Let's keep it that way.

Louisville, Ky.

NOW with that boost behind us we'll take a knock and then tell you folks what you can expect in days to come.

MRS. R. H. LUDVIGSON

I have a big bone to pick with you! I have been a reader of *ARGOSY* for 12 years. My whole family enjoys it, my husband, my father and my ten-year-old son. We always read the *Argonotes* and get a big kick out of it. Feel sorry for your editor as you can't please everyone. Everyone likes different types of stories. When I buy my *Argosy* every week I read it from cover to cover whether I like the type of story or not as somewhere someone else enjoys it. Same way with the serials, some like a lot, some don't, and you can't please them both. But I sure don't agree with Mr. Briggs to let such characters as the *Montana Kid*, *Mr. Hazeltine*, *Singapore Sammy*, fade out of the picture. I am very fond of these stories and I am sure I'm not the only one.

Now to the bone I have to pick with you. Do you know that Aug. 25, 1934, is the last time you gave us a *Peter the Brazen* story? What's wrong? Will be watching for your answer in the *Argonotes*.

Venice, Calif.

YES, we know it's been years since Peter petered out. And we promise to do what we can to bring him back. In the meantime, though, look at what's coming.

Will o' the Wisp—A five-part novel by H. Bedford-Jones starts in the coming issue of *ARGOSY*. It's a lusty and lively tale of ageless days of high adventure in old France. You'll meet everyone from King George the Third to Ben Franklin. But, more thrilling than these men of history, is Brian Desmond, that devil-may-care knight of the sword, that man of a thousand faces, the cleverest spy in the kingdom!

Hades—A three-part thriller by a new writer, Lester Dent. Here is the most unusual cast of characters you have encountered in recent fiction. Thrills and chills and eerie mystery when the seekers for Hell find what they feared to find.

Do You Want a WATCH or DIAMOND?

Thousands have found it easy to own America's finest diamond rings, watches, silverware or jewelry by the Santa Fe Plan. Bulova, Hamilton, or Elgin watches—brilliant blue-white diamonds—silverware from world-famous companies, and the great Santa Fe Specials—offered to you at startling cash prices on confidential liberal credit terms.

A Few Cents a Day is the Santa Fe Way
That watch or diamond you've always wanted, longed for—you needn't wait any longer for it. The Santa Fe will trust you—get you wear the watch or diamond you want while you pay only a few cents a day.

TURN PIN MONEY INTO DIAMONDS

Gifts for Every Occasion

Don't Pay Extra For Credit!

No honest person should pay extra to have someone trust him. The Santa Fe trusts you the way you want to be trusted—straight from the shoulder without any extra charges, extra fees, or taxes. You pay only the low advertised cash price in small monthly payments. Send for 1937 Catalog NOW!

FREE to Adults—Send for this beautiful book today. Sent ABSOLUTELY FREE to adults. Send your name and address, and the beautiful catalog will come to you by return mail. Do it now while you think of it.

SANTA FE WATCH COMPANY
Dept. B-57, Thomas Bldg., Topaka, Kans.

DOWN GO TIRE
on **GOODYEAR PRICES**

FIRESTONE-GOODRICH
U. S. and other makes **\$1.85**
28-4.75-19

We will not be undersold. These low prices are unobtainable for Standard Tires repaired by our Improved Method and skilled workmen. Our 20 years' experience assures complete satisfaction. Buy now before prices advance. For a limited time get a Genuine RAY-O-VAC Lantern absolutely free with each order for 2 tires. Don't delay—order today!

BALLOON TIRES		TRUCK	
Size	Tires Tubes	Size	Tires Tubes
28x4.40-21	\$1.85 \$0.85	30x8	\$3.50 \$1.00
30x4.50-20	1.85 .85	32x8	6.25 2.75
30x4.50-21	1.95 .85	34x7	8.25 3.25
28x4.75-19	1.85 .95	36x7	9.45 3.95
30x4.75-20	2.10 .95	38x7	9.65 3.95
30x5.00-19	2.25 1.05	40x8	11.60 4.15
30x5.00-20	2.40 1.05		
30x5.00-17	2.25 1.05	HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES	
28x5.25-18	2.45 1.15	Size	Tires Tubes
28x5.25-19	2.45 1.15	30x8	\$3.50 \$1.00
30x5.25-20	2.50 1.15	32x8	6.25 2.75
31x5.25-21	2.80 1.15	34x7	8.25 3.25
5.50-17	2.75 1.15	36x7	9.45 3.95
28x5.50-18	2.75 1.15	38x7	9.65 3.95
28x5.50-19	2.75 1.15	40x8	11.60 4.15
30x5.50-17	2.85 1.15		
30x5.50-18	2.85 1.15		
31x5.00-19	2.85 1.15		
32x5.00-20	2.95 1.25		
32x5.00-21	2.95 1.25		
32x5.00-22	2.95 1.25		
30x5.50-17	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-18	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-19	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-20	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-21	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-22	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-23	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-24	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-25	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-26	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-27	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-28	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-29	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-30	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-31	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-32	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-33	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-34	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-35	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-36	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-37	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-38	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-39	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-40	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-41	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-42	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-43	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-44	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-45	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-46	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-47	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-48	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-49	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-50	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-51	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-52	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-53	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-54	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-55	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-56	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-57	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-58	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-59	2.55 1.25		
30x5.50-60	2.55 1.25		

ALL OTHER SIZES DEALERS WANTED

FREE! With Every 2 Tires ordered RAY-O-VAC LANTERN

Complete with batteries and newest type reflector bulb. Ready for instant use. Strong, steady beam. Order now.

SEND ONLY \$1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. (\$2.00 on each Truck Tire.) Pay balance C. O. D. Deduct \$4 if cash is sent in full with order. We may substitute brands if necessary, to ship promptly. ALL TUBES NEW—GUARANTEED. We agree to replace at half price any tire failing to give 9 months' service.

GLOBE TIRE & RUBBER CO. Dept. 2601-A
6325 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

In answering any advertisement on this page do not mention that you mention this magazine.

HAVE A NEW SKIN!



Read this Free Offer IN 3 DAYS

—and learn that what was considered impossible before—the removal of pimples, blackheads, freckles, tan, oily skin, large pores, wrinkles and other defects in the outer skin—can now be done harmlessly and economically at home in three days' time, as stated by legends of men and women, young and old.

It is all explained in a new free treatise called "BEAUTIFUL NEW SKIN IN 3 DAYS" which is being mailed absolutely free to readers of this paper. No worry no more over your humiliating skin and complexion or signs of aging if your outer skin looks soiled and worn. Simply send your name and address to **M&B'S BEAUTY LABORATORIES**, Dept. E-163, No. 1700 Broadway, New York, N. Y., and you will receive this new treatise by return mail in plain wrapper, postpaid and absolutely free. If pleased, tell friends.



Latest Popular Lady's Baguette Wrist Watch, Beautifully engraved and chased. Chromium finished link bracelet to match. Tested and regulated movement. Guaranteed accurate time keeping and satisfactory service. Free material for two years. Earningly designed Lady's solitaire Ring, Beautifully fashioned. Set with a facet simulated diamond of dazzling radiance and blinding fire. Our simulated diamonds are pure white, 24 facet, glitter with sparkling brilliancy and shining fire. You will be amazed with its similarity to a perfect cut, flawless, genuine diamond costing hundreds of dollars.

To advertise our Simulated Diamond Rings, we include the above described Baguette Wrist Watch on each ring purchased from us and paid on our most liberal easy weekly payment plan.

SEND NO MONEY NOW! Just send name and address. No papers to sign, no reference necessary. On arrival pay postman \$2.00 down. After that you send us 50c a week, full price only \$9.95. The watch will not cost you anything extra on this offer. **Rush order!**

FASHION JEWELRY CO., 154 NASSAU ST., Dept. 188, NEW YORK

FACTORY TO YOU

LATEST MODEL REMINGTON TYPEWRITERS

10-Day Free Trial Offer



10c A DAY

BRAND NEW, latest model Remington Portable for only 10¢ a day! Amazingly low price direct from the factory. Every essential feature of large office typewriters—standard 4-row keyboard, standard width carriage, margin release, back space, automatic ribbon reverse. Act now. Remington Rand, Inc., Dept. 145-11, 815 Fourth Ave., New York, N. Y.

Prostate Sufferers



An enlarged, inflamed or faulty Prostate is very often caused by Lumbago, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Pelvic Pains, Lost Vigor, Incontinence, etc. Many physicians endorse massage as a safe effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Sciences, Vol. VII, 3rd edition.) Use "PROSAGEE," a new invention which enables any man to massage his Prostate gland in the privacy of his home. It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

FREE BOOKLET

DR. W. D. SMITH INVENTOR
 EXPLAINS TRIAL OFFER. ADDRESS
MIDWEST PRODUCTS CO., 8-1411, KALAMAZOO, MICH.

You'll still be shivering when Eustace L. Adams comes back with his new four-part serial

The Man with the Painted Smile— A swift story of shipwreck seas and strange adventure. A hard-hitting hero and a villain you will love to hate.

And these do not even approach the end of what we have in store. There will be a four-part feature by George Bruce, a story of the prize-ring, of fighting hearts and red leather.

Wench Caravan, by Johnston McCulley, a tale of old California—of a great ranchero who needed brides for his brave vaqueros and set out on a woman round-up. It's Johnston McCulley at his best.

And two six-part novels that deserve special mention:

Theodore Roscoe has already won his spurs as one of the finest young story-tellers in America. **Z Is for Zombie**, his new novel, will add to his brilliant reputation. And Edgar Rice Burroughs has hit a new high in fantasy with **Seven Worlds to Conquer**.

It's no wonder the Editor is pleased with himself!

for MORE PAY learn From An ENGINEER

DRAFTING

GET READY FOR PROSPERITY. Be ready for BIG PAY. I will train you at your home by mail on Practical Drafting until IN POSITION, or prepare you for BETTER PAY on the Job you have. All tools and drawing table sent at once if you enroll now. **WRITE FOR FREE BOOK.**

ENGINEER DOBE, Div. 2838, Libertyville, Ill.

No JOKE TO BE DEAF

Every deaf person knows that Mr. Way made himself hear his watch tick after being deaf for twenty-five years, with his Artificial Ear Drums. He wore them day and night. They stopped his head noises. They are invisible and comfortable, no wires or batteries. Write for TRUE STORY. Also booklet on Deafness.

Artificial Ear Drum THE WAY COMPANY
 728 E. Adams Bldg. Detroit, Michigan

MOLES and WARTS

removed from face and body, safely, quickly, at home. No pain or blemish. No acid. **FREE** information. Write, **NEFF LABORATORIES, Sta. E. 107, Toledo, Ohio.**

The Money Making Marvel of the Age!

PORTRAIT RING SELLS TO EVERYONE!

NEW! NOVEL! SENSATIONAL!
Pays a Golden Harvest of BIG CASH PROFITS To Men and Women!

It's here! The hottest, most sensational, most gripping selling idea of the age! **THE PORTRAIT RING**—the ring men and women everywhere, rich and poor, young and old want to wear and keep their whole lives long. Why? Because on this beautiful ring is permanently reproduced any photograph, snap-shot or picture of some loved one. Yes—reproduced clearly and sharply and made part of the ring itself so it can't rub off, come off or fade off. This sensational new idea is making an unbelievable hit. Men and women—even those without an hour's selling experience are taking dozens of orders a day and making dollars of profit by the handful. And now, in your territory, YOU can cash in big every day with this exciting sure-fire profit maker and earn money so easily it will seem more like play than work.



BEAUTIFUL! PERMANENT!

Portrait Ring Made from any Photo or Picture

For only \$2.00 retail—look what you offer! A made-to-measure onyx-like ring adorned with the most precious setting in the world—a reproduction of the picture of a loved one. The ring itself can't tarnish. It will wear forever with ordinary care. The picture of the loved one is clearly, sharply reproduced with surprising faithfulness and becomes an inseparable part of the ring. It can't wear off, rub off, or fade off.

Make Pockets Full of Dollars Just Wearing Ring!

Can you imagine a more novel, more unusual gift than the Portrait Ring? How can any man or woman find a more beautiful way to express loving sentiment than giving a wife, a child, a parent, a friend, a sweetheart a Portrait Ring with the donor's picture expertly reproduced! What a surprise! 10 orders a day is an easy goal—20 orders a day are not too much to expect. Only 10 orders a day pay you \$60.00 a week clear profit!

SELLS TO EVERYONE!
A Treasured Remembrance Its Value Beyond Price

\$1

Once women carried pictures of their loved one in lockets; and men carried them in watch cases. Those days are gone, but the desire to carry the portrait of a loved one is as strong as ever. Not until the amazing secret process for transferring pictures to rings was discovered, was it possible to revive this grand old custom and to satisfy the hunger of every human being to express again this grandest of all sentiments. How mothers and fathers will welcome this opportunity to wear a ring with the most precious setting of all—a picture of their beloved child. How happy every man and woman will be to keep alive the memory of the departed one by carrying with them always, night and day, this beautiful Portrait Ring!

Order Your Sample Ring Now! You Don't Risk a Penny!

Never before has anything like this come your way. No competition from anyone—no looking for prospects (they are all around you)—no carrying a big stock or putting any money into goods. Simply showing your sample ring a few times a day, if you only start with your friends and neighbors, will be enough to give you an endless chain of orders. We cut away all red tape and are ready to send you a **SAMPLE RING**. The minute you take it out of its beautiful Gift Box you are ready to go after the orders. Rush the coupon below for **YOUR** sample ring **NOW!** That's all the outfit you need. It will do all your selling for you. And we make it easy for you to obtain this sample **ABSOLUTELY FREE OF A PENNY COST** under our liberal offer.

PROFIT FOR YOU ON EVERY RING!

Hundreds of customers write they wouldn't take a fortune for their rings if they couldn't get others. \$5.00 and even \$10.00 would be a small price for the **PORTRAIT RING**—but we have put a price of only \$2.00 on it! Think of it—and here's the most astounding news of all—of this \$2.00—**YOU COLLECT IN ADVANCE AND KEEP \$1.00 as your profit!** Don't wait. Rush the coupon at once for the sample ring on our **NO RISK** plan and see for yourself what a whirlwind money maker this is for you. **ACT RIGHT NOW!** We solicit foreign orders which should be accompanied by full remittance.



SEND YOUR RING SIZE NOW

PORTRAIT RING CO.
 Dept. P-57, 12th & Jackson St.
 Cincinnati, Ohio

RING SIZE

Enclosed is photo. Please rush my individually made Portrait Ring and starting equipment. Will pay postman \$1.00 plus few cents postage. It is understood that if I am not entirely satisfied I can return ring within 5 days and you will refund my money in full.
 () Send full details only.

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____

YOUR RING SIZE: Wrap strip of paper around **second** joint of finger, trim so ends meet. Measure strip down from top on this chart. Number at end is your size.

PORTRAIT RING CO.
 -DEPT. P-57- 12 TH. & JACKSON STREET CINCINNATI OHIO

Stop Your Money Worries!

Bills nagging, comforts vanishing, funds slipping, the fingers of want reaching out for what little is left—what a torture when jobs are hard to get and a family must be kept alive!

Would you change the picture? Then look at the cheering prospect opened up by my generous offer to help you set up a respectable and profitable business of your own—finance your prosperous growing business on my money—without you risking a penny of your money to start!

There's no catch in this. It's an honest offer, made by a responsible manufacturer whose Route Dealers made over one million dollars in profits last year.



I'll Give You This New Chance

I am a manufacturer, nationally known, with a million-dollar plant. I need more Dealers at once to work in their own home territories. I offer this liberal money-making chance to earnest men and women who will set up Routes in familiar neighborhoods. When you become a Dealer, you are like an Independent Merchant. Other Dealers now making up to \$60 and more in one week. You handle quality products in everyday use by all the family—a brand well-known the country over, but never sold in stores. You take orders at your convenience; light work; no experience necessary; no bulky equipment to carry; no store competition. *You begin earning at once—your first hour—no waiting, no delay!* Send for full details—ABSOLUTELY FREE.

What a delicious sense of security when you have your family provided for, money in hand and your future rosy. Not so much to ask, perhaps, but all too often denied.

It may seem "too good to be true" when I say my proposition has brought prosperity to many Dealers who work with me, but it is a fact. The chance I give those who cooperate and who pursue their opportunity faithfully, makes the way clear for *big cash returns for honest effort!*

You work for yourself. You have your own business, are your own boss, work as you like. Results are up to you.

It is into this prosperous family I invite the willing and ambitious. You, too, will have the most glorious opportunity of your life to make good. Find out more about my proposition. Lose no time. Mail the coupon right now—TODAY! All the facts are Free!

ALBERT MILLS, President
8749 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Rush Coupon—Send No Money

ALBERT MILLS, President
8749 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio

Without obligation to me, please send me FREE FACTS about money-making plan with which you help establish me in business for myself.

NAME

ADDRESS

(Print or Write Plainly)

Use a car like this

My free gift to Dealers as a bonus for making the grade! Given in addition to your weekly cash earnings. This brand new Ford Tudor Sedan will help you enjoy life—and your new business.

