

*Exciting Adventures*

# ARGOSY

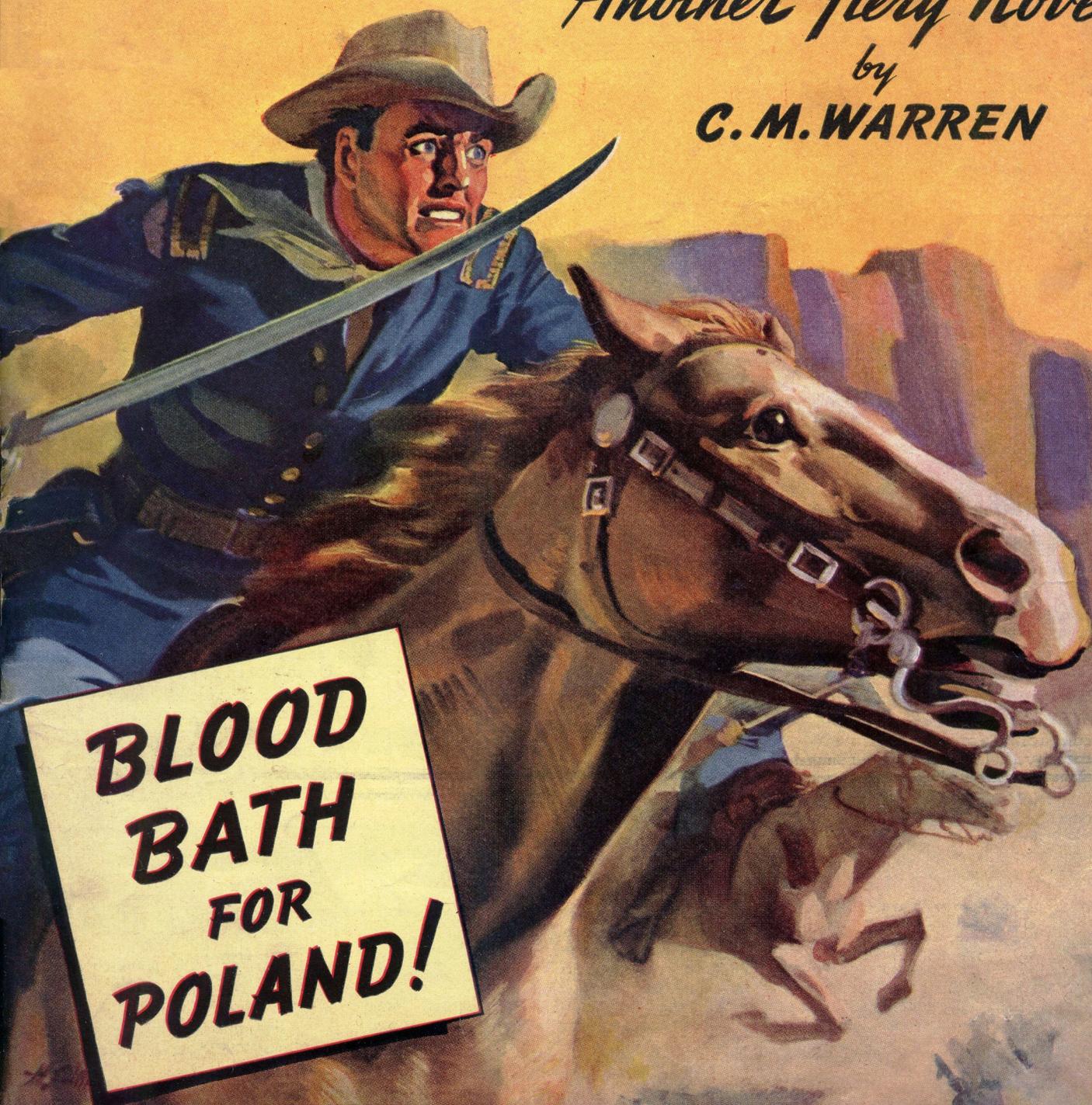


JAN. 24 *Every Other Wednesday* 10¢

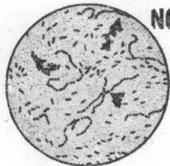
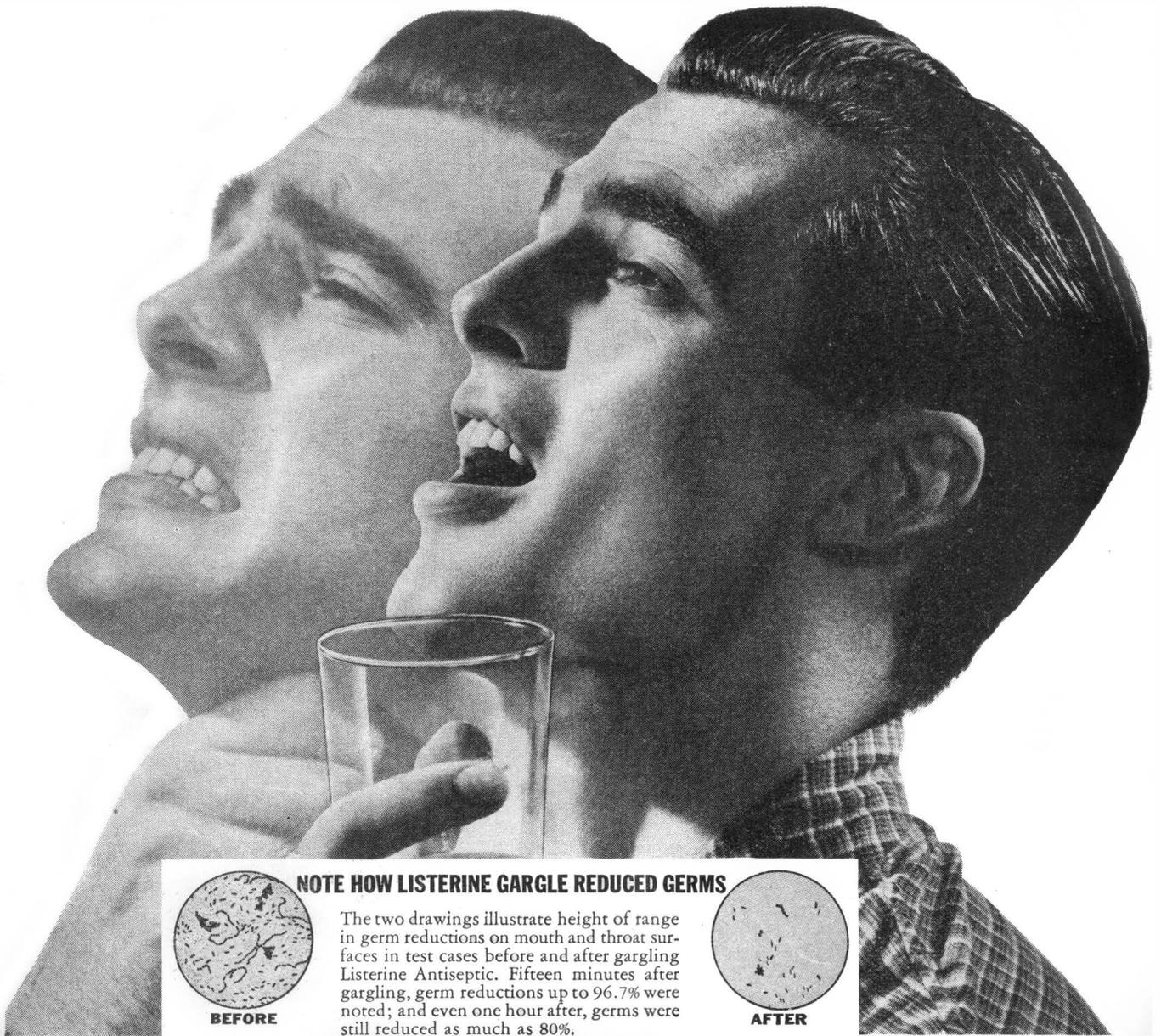
*Another Fiery Novel*

*by*

**C. M. WARREN**



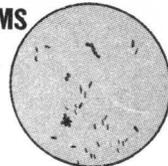
**BLOOD  
BATH  
FOR  
POLAND!**



**BEFORE**

**NOTE HOW LISTERINE GARGLE REDUCED GERMS**

The two drawings illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.



**AFTER**

AT THE FIRST SYMPTOM OF A  
**COLD OR SORE THROAT—Listerine, QUICK!**

Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on the throat surfaces to kill "secondary invaders" . . . the very types of germs that make a cold more troublesome.

This prompt and frequent use of full strength Listerine Antiseptic may keep a cold from getting serious, or head it off entirely . . . at the same time relieving throat irritation when due to a cold.

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Actual tests conducted on employees in several industrial plants during a ten year period of research revealed this astonishing truth: That those who gargled Listerine Antiseptic twice daily had fewer colds and milder colds than non-users, and fewer sore throats.

This impressive record is explained, we believe, by Listerine Antiseptic's germ-killing action . . . its ability to kill threatening "secondary invaders"—the very types of germs that live in the mouth and throat and are largely responsible, many authorities say, for the bothersome aspects of a cold.

*Tests Showed Outstanding Germ Reductions on Tissue Surfaces*

When you gargle with Listerine Antiseptic, that cool amber liquid reaches way back on throat surfaces and kills millions of the "secondary invaders" on those areas—not all of them, mind you, but so many that any major invasion of the delicate membrane may be halted and infection thereby checked.

Even 15 minutes after Listerine gargle, tests have shown bacterial reductions on mouth and throat surfaces ranging to 96.7%. Up to 80% an hour afterward.

In view of this evidence, don't you think it's a sensible precaution against colds to gargle with Listerine systematically twice a day and oftener when you feel a cold getting started?

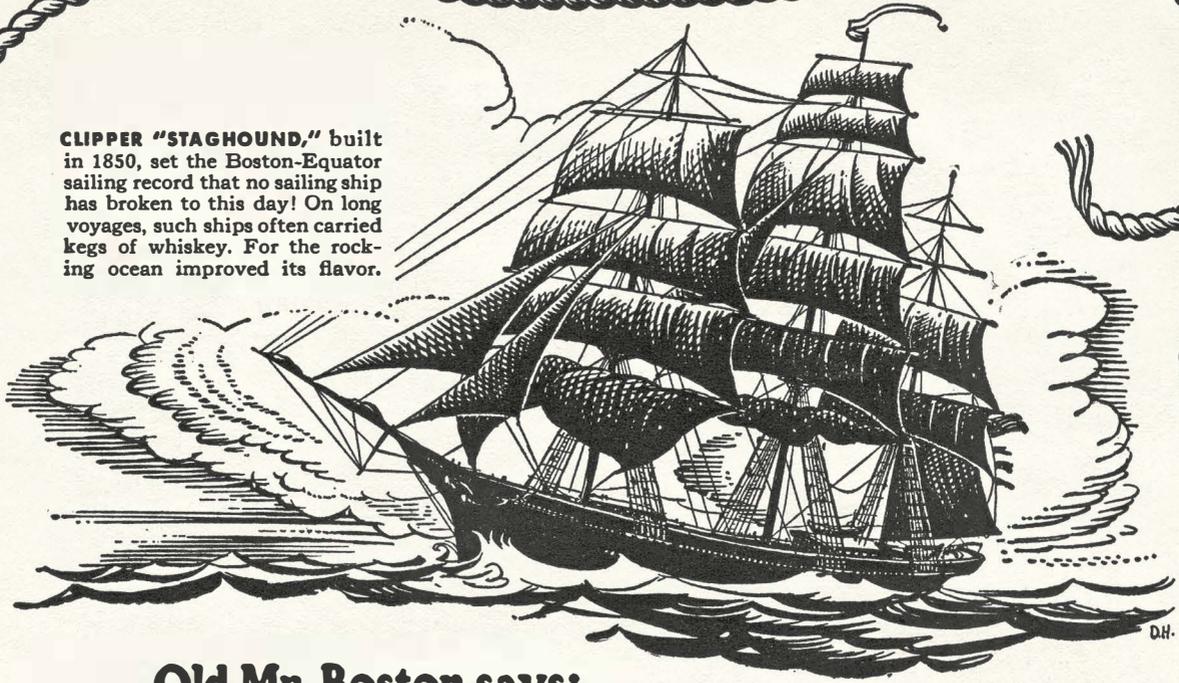
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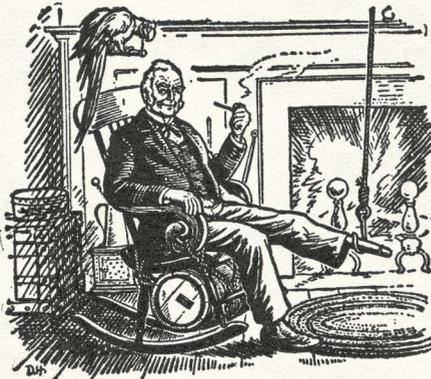
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# ARGOSY



America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 312

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Number 3

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*This magazine is on sale every other Wednesday*

#### A RED STAR Magazine

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# Blood

Even in conquest, the grim hordes of the swastika call no halt to slaughter. Instead, with savage and stony efficiency, they carry out Hitler's terrible plan for the extermination of whole populations, by starvation, exile, and mass execution. Here, for the first time, is revealed the whole bitter truth as seen through the eyes of men who beheld it



**J**OSEF FORMAN was one of the men who helped Masaryk build the first Czech Republic. He served during the present war at both the Czech Legation in Paris and the Czech consulate at Marseilles. He is now in this country as a member of the Czechoslovak Foreign Mission.

In his first article, Mr. Forman related the story of Zahor Topol who saw with horror the Nazi conquest of Czechoslovakia. A professor at the University of Prague, Topol was arrested by the Nazis, then released through the payment of a large bribe which his wife was warned would buy him only brief freedom.

He joined the underground movement and with Walter Behrlich, a young Sudeten German who had renounced the Nazi cause, was instrumental in the destruction of a huge munitions plant at Polichka. Then Zahor, his wife, and Behrlich fled for the frontier, hotly pursued by Nazi patrols. . . .

**F**OR THEM, Zahor and Hannah Topol and Walter Behrlich, it was unbelievable that they had escaped. Behind them was a trip of several hundred kilometers across the back roads and muddy, unmarked country lanes of Czechoslovakia.

The Gestapo had overtaken them at the ancient bridge across the Bečva at Prešov. A bullet caught a rear tire and slowed Hannah's driving. Zahor flung a hand grenade into the path of the leading Gestapo car. Then he and Walter leapt out, shot the Gestapo men in the second machine, as it skidded sidewise to a stop on the snow-covered bridge.

Walter was wounded through the shoulder, but he said it was worth it when Hannah backed the Nazi car off the bridge and they started their great, zigzag course for Poland. "The Gestapo command has got our course for Hungary spotted," Zahor said. "We'll have to take our chances in Poland, even though it too is occupied by the Nazis."

This village of Jablonkov was as far as they could go by

# *Bath for Poland*

*Hitler Murders Nations: II*

*As told by Josef Forman to Robert Carse*



**Herded into the grave that they had been forced to dig, wired together like cattle, the prisoners watched the arching grenade that would blow them to bits**



Photographs by special arrangement

car. The Polish frontier was a few kilometers beyond. They had used the dead Gestapo men's papers and fuel cards to get here, but they were being traced, they knew, and soon the local garrison would be turned out to search for them. Zahor Topol stared nervously down the gray-shadowed street. Jenck, the little leader of the revolutionary *Odboj* group at Polichka, had told him that at dawn a man from the Polish underground appeared here to help any Czechs in flight. It was that knowledge which made him hope they would be able to cross somehow into Poland. But in ten minutes there would be full daylight.

**T**HE MAN who came walking down the street had the quick, silent stride of a mountaineer. His face was oak-hard and brown, and under his sheepskin jacket bulked the stock of a Mauser pistol. The man was a *Góral*, from the high Tatra mountains, Zahor realized.

"*Prosze pana!*" he said in Polish.

The mountaineer turned a bit sidewise, so he could freely use the Mauser. "*Grom,*" he said.

That was one of the passwords of the *Wolnosc*, the Polish underground. Zahor Topol remembered the answering word that Jenck had told them. "*Piorun,*" he said.

"Come over behind the house," the mountaineer said. He studied their faces, listened to Zahor's story. "All right. I'll take you across into the mountains. Maybe you can get out into Roumania."

They crossed the border through a fir copse. "The patrol has passed," the mountaineer explained. "We've got half an hour before they find our tracks." He outfitted them with skis and ski-poles at a hut in the forest beyond, led them down a long slope. "Fast," he warned. "They've discovered our tracks."

**Hundreds of weeping girls like these line the ruined streets of Polish towns**

The Nazi patrol had automatic rifles. With them, they slung a curtain of fire across the slope. spurts of snow leaped up as the bullets came closer. Zahor tried to protect Hannah with his body, but she was struck high, through the shoulders and head. "Hannah, my darling!" he said.

"*Psiakref cholera,*" the mountaineer said. "If you stop, you'll get the same thing."

Zahor Topol heard him through his grief. He burned to turn and fight the Nazis. But this wasn't the place. . . . He took a final glance at Hannah, inert in the blood-darkened snow, and then he followed the mountaineer and Behrlich, who wept aloud with the pain of his wound and grief over Hannah's death. "I'm going to stay here," he told the two older men when they came to a rocky height at the end of a gorge. "I'm too tired to go any further, and I won't let you carry me."

Zahor Topol gazed into his eyes. "You're sure?" "Absolutely."

They shook hands quickly. There was no time for anything more.

In the next valley, Zahor and the mountaineer heard the Nazis using hand grenades to kill Walter Behrlich, but not until he had fired several deadly clips from his pistol.

"He gave us our headstart," the mountaineer said. "We're all right now."

"Where are we heading?"

"To a hunting lodge that's the *Wolnosc* headquarters."

Be careful that you say nothing that I don't tell you. It's not easy to get in."

They were challenged time and again during the rest of the daylight hours. Most of the men who challenged them Zahor never saw. They were hidden in the undergrowth, or high in tall trees, on crags behind boulders. His sorrow began to lighten. Here was really skilled organization, a force that stood armed and ready to fight back. . . .

They came out at last into an opening where against the greenish black of spruces a log cabin loomed low above the ground. Guards walked with them carrying rifles; another challenge was given from the cabin doorway.

"A Czech," the mountain man answered. "One of the *Odboj*. It's Svem who brings him."

"Come in," the straight-bodied man in the doorway said. He was the commander, Vladek Maszyn. He was surprisingly young, Zahor saw, but his face was somber, his eyes steadfast and searching. "Sit down, Topol," he said in good Czech, "and tell us the news."

"My wife," Zahor said dully, "and a good friend have just been killed by the Nazis. But that's not the kind of news you want. You want to know that four days ago the Semtin Works at Polichka were blown up, and eighty Nazis destroyed."

"That's right," Vladek Maszyn said. He rose and brought a bottle of brandy to where Zahor sat. "Have a drink. People like us haven't time to think too much of our dead."

Zahor looked around. In one corner was a powerful, compact wireless set. Nearer was an old flat-bottomed press that clanked and thrashed as it operated.

"For the two thousand underground groups being organized all over Poland," Vladek Maszyn said. "We both send and receive from here. We've been set up since the last week in November. Copies of the paper are taken down from the mountain to the other secret presses and reprinted for further distribution. But tell me of yourself and of your country."

Zahor told him. When he was done, he put his hands out before him in a yearning gesture. "You can get me Nazis to kill?"

Vladek Maszyn shook his head. He kept his voice quiet. "I can get you out into Roumania and away from Nazism, where you belong."

"No good," Zahor said. "I must kill the N. . ." Then exhaustion, the brandy and the heat of the fire overwhelmed him and he leaned back heavily in the chair.

Vladek Maszyn signed to one of the men. "Wrap him up in blankets and put him in the truck going to Lwow. Tell the driver that this man should be passed on by our groups to Roumania. He should be outside, working for us there. Understood?"

"Understood, commander."

VLADEK MASZYN sat very still after the Czech was gone. The rage that swept through him was cold and bitter. He was twenty-one, a peasant's son, and he hadn't worn boots until he joined the army.

Vladek Maszyn saw his country as though it were a vast, animated map spread before him. He was with his regiment of lancers again, and they charged at the full gallop, trumpets sounding, fanions fluttering, straight at the sixty-ton Nazi tanks.



Photographs by special arrangement

Scenes like this are a trademark of the aftermath of Nazi conquest

That had been at the border, near Grudziadz. Then those of them who were left were back on the Vistula, and the horses were gone and they fought with machine-guns and rifles. Then they were in Warsaw. The city was a roaring fury of flame; the Royal Palace was gone, most of the churches, the hospitals, and all the water supply. But they still fought.

They were Poles. They loved their city. Smigly-Rydz, Josef Beck and the others had fled days before, leaving the fighting for the people. The Nazis bombed every farm, every crossroad—bombed the women, the children and the old men in the fields.

It was more than war that the Nazis sought. Vladek Maszyn had known then; it was complete destruction. The Polish people held what the Nazis called their "vital space." To get it meant the ruthless, systematic annihilation of the entire nation.

His home was Krolewska Huta. He started for it the night Warsaw fell. Behind him in the Western suburbs some of the workers' battalions still held out, singing hoarse-voiced their national anthem:

*While we are fighting, while we are bleeding,  
We raise our voices to thee, O, Lord. . . .*

Somebody in the room whistled the tune, and he was suddenly aware that the press had stopped. He got from the chair and stamped his booted feet. "This edition goes into Cracow, Vladek?" one of the group asked him.

"Cracow and Lublin."

"Lublin is hard to reach," the same man said. "The Nazis have made all that region around the city a concentration area for the Jews."

"I've got orders to go there and organize the Jews into *Wolnosc* groups," Vladek said. "Our leaders consider that very important."

The man started to speak again, and then stopped himself. He remembered what he had heard about Vladek's family. Vladek's father and mother had been machine-gunned to death by a Stuka pilot as they tried to lead their only cow into the woods. His two younger sisters had been taken off with a hundred girls from the neighborhood and town to serve in military brothels in German-held towns.

"I'll be back in three weeks," Vladimir said, "or I won't be back at all. Then of course you'll have to vote for a new commander."

**VLADEK MASZYN** was glad to be again in Cracow. It was an old and a beautiful city, the former coronation town of Polish kings, and Copernicus had studied here. He stood now just inside St. Florian's Gate watching the crowd move through the great square. His people, the local members of the *Wolnosc*, had come out into the square and waited at irregular intervals around the King Ladislas statue. They were all girls and young women, but they were very calm.

Their motions were so fast as they slid the folded single sheet of newsprint to the passersby that Vladek could hardly see them. Then one changed her method. She seemed to have trouble with her shoe, and bent over, and the school children passing on their bikes all but ran into her. She straightened and pulled at them. Each child had a paper as he went on, slid it rolled inside the handlebars of his bike.

Then Vladek noticed the man who came from the other

side of the square. He was an ordinary-looking man in the cheap gray double-breasted suit and drab Homburg hat of the Nazi secret police. He talked to the school children on their bikes, and he held out papers from his pocket to them. "No," a couple of the youngest said, "we've already got ours."

The Gestapo man smiled. "Where?" he said. "Where did you get yours?"

"From that girl."

Vladek Maszyn walked fast. He got between the Gestapo man and the girl who still bent as though her shoe bothered her. He took the Gestapo man by the arm. "Excuse me," he said. Then with all his weight and all his force he hit the Gestapo man on the chin.

Squads of uniformed Nazi soldiers patrolled the square, their rifles at the shoulder. They turned, seeing the Gestapo man go down, and some of them began to shoot.

Vladek waited long enough to kick the Gestapo man twice in the face. He ran crouched behind the old Barbican Tower, then into alleys and along sewers, and through tenement houses until he came outside the city as the sky turned blue in dusk. He looked back at St. Bronislaw's Hill and the Kościusko Mound. It would be a long time, he knew, before he saw them again. That Gestapo man would remember him. . . .

A slow-stepping procession of women held the road outside the city. They were war-widows on their grieving way to the shrine of the Black Madonna. He walked beside them for several kilometers, his hand upon his pistol. But no cars followed from the spired and steepled city. He finally told himself that he was safe, and that his task now was ahead, at Lublin.

**T**HE MEMBERS of the *Wolnosc* who had helped him from Cracow had warned about the terror he would see in the Lublin region. Even then, Vladek Maszyn was all but overcome. Here, before his eyes, a people were being daily, hourly destroyed.

It was easy for him to enter the place and find them. The Nazis guarded it only with fixed posts, for plague ran through the population within the barbed wire.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews were there. Nobody seemed to know the exact number. They had been brought in trains and trucks and foot from all parts of Poland. Then they had been turned out into the open, freezing fields.

There was no food, no shelter. This soil had once been used for sugar beets and corn. The people got down on their knees and dug. They moved across the barren ground—dozens, scores, hundreds seeking roots, anything to keep them from famine.

First the old people, then the young died. Others went mad. They rushed at the Nazi barracks at meal time, and they were held back by the bayonet.

Vladek Maszyn walked through a region that stunk of death and was death. Staggering, gasping people clutched at him with muddy fingers. They begged for food, and some of the demented, thinking he lied, tore his clothing.

The young Jews whom he organized into units of the *Wolnosc* did their best to protect him, but they too were weak from starvation. Here and now, he told himself, he a Pole and a Catholic recognized the vast, unchangeable fact that there was only one God.

Both Christian and Jew shared that God. There was also for both of them the same anti-Christ, and that was

Nazism. Until it had been driven from the world, all men would suffer.

Then, although the young Jews stood around him and protected him, he was caught. The Nazi sentries, watching at first in amusement as his clothes were ripped from him, soon saw that he was too healthy and well-fleshed for a Jew. A sergeant-major brought a squad out and with gun butts knocked aside the starving people.

Vladek was sick with nausea and horror, but he stood steady. He didn't attempt to fight or run when the sergeant-major took him prisoner. "I think," the sergeant-major said, "that you're the lad from the *Wolnosc* that's wanted by the Gestapo in Cracow."

Vladek said nothing, and the sergeant-major raked him across the mouth with the foresight of his Mauser.

**T**HE GESTAPO MAN he had struck and other agents of the Cracow command tortured him for days. They rolled him back and forth over sharp stones, kicking his naked body. They used a pump and a hose and other instruments of torture.

He didn't talk. He had gone out of his head the first day when the pain had become really intense. But somewhere in the rear of his brain there was a small space that kept clear from the pounding darkness of the pain. There, he knew he was still Vladek Maszyn and a man who loved liberty. Men who loved liberty belonged to an organization whose name he had forgotten. But he was a member, and he was loyal. . . .

They let him go after about ten days of it. He was so crippled he could hardly walk, and for a time he wasn't fully sane. He walked along the winter road until he was met by peasant members of the *Wolnosc* who could hide him.

They clothed him and took him into the forest at Bialowieza, the greatest forest in Central Europe. The snow was deep. Wolves skulked among the trees. He gazed at them from the sleigh, studying them, remembering them. They brought the rest of his sanity back, and after a few days he began to talk with the peasant family that sheltered him in the little village.

There was a Nazi garrison in the village, of course. For a village of four thousand, it was a big one. An *Oberleutnant* and sixty men occupied the best houses.

"That's to guard the forest," he was told. "Our enemies need the timber. In the spring, they'll put us to work cutting it for them and hauling it out to Germany."

The man of the house was a wood-cutter. He went and got his double-bitted axe from the pegs on the wall. "I'll slice through the *Oberleutnant* with this if they do," he said.

"No, you wouldn't," Vladek Maszyn said. "You wouldn't have a chance. But listen to me."

He talked a long time to the wood-cutter and then, one by one, to the other men in the village. His idea was simple. Knowing the forest, they could all understand it.

He chose a night of northwest gale to put it into operation. Working with one other man, he cut the telephone wire out of the village and smashed the carburetors of the Nazi cars in the sheds. He and six others, all carrying big Polish axes, crept up on the sentries in the village square. They killed them, and then went on with the men whose duties were to fire the Nazi-occupied houses.

The gale caught the flames that they had started with kerosene-sopped rags stuck into window frames and doors.



Photographs by special arrangement

**Killed in battle? No . . . this is a martyr to the Nazi occupation**

Some of the Nazis were trapped and burned to death. The *Oberleutnant* and about twenty more escaped.

But, axes in hand, the peasants followed them through the forest. The Nazis were unwilling to show a light, and they kept close together once they were away from the carmine blaze of the village. The wolves attacked them in almost continual lunges.

The Nazis drove off the wolves with automatic rifle bursts. They laughed, cursing, as they killed the wolves. But more of the beasts were attracted, tore at their own dead and then at the Nazis. By dawn, the men were only firing when absolutely necessary.

The villagers wanted to attack, but Vladek Maszyn held them back. "Wait," he said. "Let's collect a few more wolf pelts, and a few more people."

Word had spread. Peasants were coming with axes, flails and pitchforks. A gray haired priest whose chapel had been burned over his head the month before arrived with a rabbi in a tattered *kajtan* and the former forest guardian who carried an old muzzle-loader from Napoleon's time.

Vladek Maszyn got worried about the cut telephone wire and the possibility of motorized Nazi reinforcements. Then he collected a crew of wood-cutters and they pitched hundred-foot trees back and forth in vast repeated tangles across the single road in from the main highway.

That night the Nazis attempted to get away one by one. The peasants captured them, beat them to death with flails. Wolves barked and whined in the further darkness, and Vladek Maszyn's breath came harsh in his throat as he gave the order to attack.

The Nazis had four or five rounds left for each man. They used them; then, huddling together, they asked for mercy. "Go ahead," Vladek Maszyn said. "Be quick. If we don't kill them, the wolves will."

Heavy tanks broke through the road barriers after dawn, but the people were all gone by then, off through the forest and to the West.

Vladek Maszyn said goodbye to the people at the edge

of the forest, started alone for the *Wolnosc* headquarters in the cabin at the frontier.

**H**E NEVER got near there. A Nazi patrol informed by the Gestapo arrested him as he rode hunched in the rear of a cart near Olkusz, north of Cracow. He thought for a time they were going to take him to the torture chambers of the Gestapo back in the city. But he was flung into a truck with other prisoners and shipped to the dreadful prison camp at Oświęcim.

The Gestapo tribunal didn't waste any time. His identity established, he was condemned to instant death. The camp guards led him out across the muddy wastes inside the barbed wire.

An average of six thousand people a month were executed here. Two styles of execution were employed. In the first, the members of the execution squad came up close behind the bound prisoners, shot them at the base of the skull with pistols. But Nazi brutality and fear of shortage of ammunition had given birth to the second type of mass murder. The prisoners were forced to dig their own graves. Then in groups of sixteen they were lashed together with wire and shoved down into the grave. After they had been brought to stand in a circular formation, a hand grenade was dropped from above into the center of the group.

A cheap and efficient execution.

Vladek Maszyn looked around him as he strode forward between the guards in silence. He studied the terrain and the copses of trees beyond the barbed wire barrier. It was beginning to rain and the light was poor. A man who ran fast, he thought, might get through that wire once he was free and had a few yards lead. But all of that depended on what happened here.

The rest of the condemned were waiting, men and women, young and old, country and city people. Their gazes came quietly to meet his. He was so proud of them and their calmness that he wanted to speak, but he checked himself.

Picks and shovels were issued to them by the Nazi guards. They were commanded to dig, head-deep. They dug slowly in the frozen, clayey soil while the Nazi kicked and struck at them. Beyond in the camp Vladek Maszyn could see hundreds of people who wandered, stupid from suffering and starvation. In back of the further huts there was the crack of pistol fire, a scream, a laugh and a shout of German profanity. Poland betrayed, he thought, Poland a prostrate victim. Then he straightened and dropped his shovel.

The Nazis were beginning to lash the wrists of the prisoners with strong steel wire. It was looped around each wrist in turn, tightened with a big pair of pliers a young Nazi soldier carried. He gave a little added pressure as he tightened the loops around Maszyn's wrists, but Maszyn had already flexed and swelled his wrist muscles to the utmost. That was the only way he could get free, he figured. He must be able to slip his hands out from the loops.

They were being shunted into the head-high grave. All he could see looking up were the muddy boots of the four Nazis. One had a light Spandau gun, the two others shoulder-slung carbines, and the corporal in command carried a Luger pistol in addition to his supply of hand grenades.

The corporal bent over the edge of the grave with a grenade in his hand. "Don't grunt too loud," he said. Then he pulled the cord at the bottom of the stick grenade and jumped back several paces to where the other Nazis stood.

Vladek Maszyn strained yanking, and his right wrist came free from the looped wire. He set himself, and stretched out from among the huddled and tensed people.

The grenade dropped slowly, end over end down toward them. Its flight was right into the middle of the group. He caught it by the short wooden handle. Quick, he told himself, sweat running his chin. You've got a second or less to throw it back. But the handle was slippery. He almost dropped the grenade.

The third article in this vivid and arresting series will appear in the next issue of ARGOSY.



# Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

## This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up

nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

# LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : By W.A. WINDAS



## • FIRST "NATION IN ARMS" •

The Spartans of ancient Greece were the first real "citizen soldiers." They ceased military training for only one thing, actual war... and in consequence, ruled other states for years.

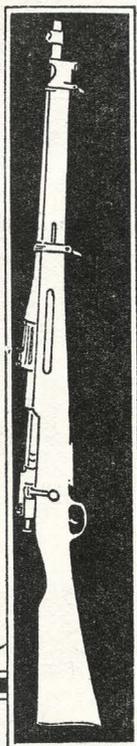
## • CIVIL WAR CONSCRIPTION •



After Congress had passed the draft law in 1863, New York longshoremen were selected. At that time they were on strike and Negro strikebreakers were working. Resentment rose to such a pitch that rioting went on for three days causing over \$1,500,000 worth of damage. More than 1000 men were killed.

## • U.S. RIFLE CALIBER •

Popular fancy has it that the U.S. military rifle is of .30-30 caliber. But the truth is the American army does not, never has, and probably never will use the .30-30 cartridge. The army uses the .30 Springfield (variously known as the .30-06, the .30 Government, or the .30 Mark I) which is very definitely not interchangeable with the old .30-30 Winchester.



## • DUELS in DENMARK •

The gentle art of friendly mayhem (which has survived the ages in Denmark) struck a snag when Germany put the "peaceful custody" plan into effect and banned all firearms. The Danes neatly evaded the law, however, by substituting bows and arrows for guns.

# Only the

In the gray-washed dawn the little patrol would ride out to almost certain death

By Charles  
Marquis  
Warren

Author of "Bugles Are for Soldiers",  
"Give Me Ten Men", etc.

## CHAPTER I

### ONE SHOT AT SUNSET

RETREAT had gone. The flat report of the swivel gun, discharged during the interval between colors and retreat, had roared for a second, seeming to split the air above Fort Winston, and then abruptly subsided. But the bugle notes lingered in the dusty heat above the desert.

Trumpeter Saxton removed his bugle from his lips and explored the roof of his mouth with his tongue, hoping to moisten and dislodge the dust which had caked there during the day.

Anger and disgust mingled on his face as he watched the color-sergeant fastening the halyard to the staff, and the corporal bending over and detaching the lanyard from the swivel's hook.

It was a fine moment for them, he thought, and spat drily, feeling the bitterness stir within him.

The entire post was permeated with quietude. Soldiers who had been solidified at attention while the flag was lowered, resumed their random activities. He heard a faint good-natured swearing emanating from the stables; a trill of feminine laughter sifted from one of the 'dobe's along Officer's Walk where an officer's wife entertained at tea; an enlisted man's voice was lifted in a tuneless song as he accompanied the creaking mule-drawn water cart across the baked parade. Trumpeter Saxton listened to these sounds with anger beating inside him, knowing himself to be outside the serenity of their realm.

Across the parade he saw Captain Lance leave the quartermaster's building and walk with lithely erect stride



toward his quarters on Officer's Walk. Saxton's thin face tightened, looked older than his twenty-two years.

A long breath escaped him. Captain Lance, he saw, had paused beneath the 'dobe's *ramada* and was watching him.

LOOKING across the parade, Captain Richard Lance saw Trumpeter Saxton's stare and something moved sharply inside his chest. He switched his gaze from the solitary figure, although it was unnecessary; the trumpeter would be unable to discern the sympathy in his eyes at that distance in this light; and anyway Saxton would misinterpret it for something cold and detestable.

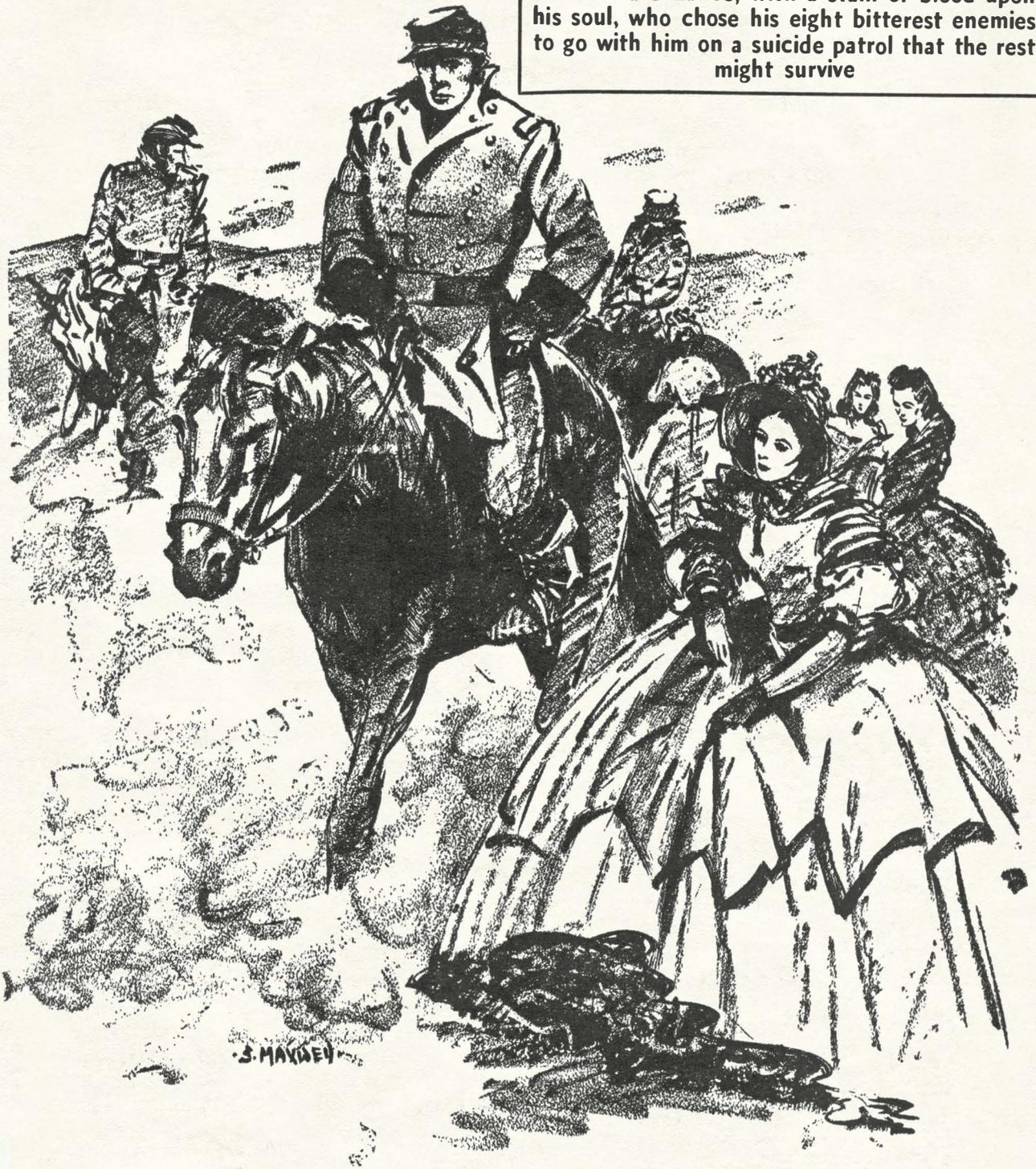
He found his eyes resting upon Jerry Winters' quarters and from this too he hastily averted his glance, because Cathy Winters would be inside and it did not befit an officer to look even upon a woman's abode if the woman were not free to be looked upon.

The lighted windows of the barracks drew his attention until he remembered that within were men who would find that attention abhorrent. He let his eyes become sightless, seeing nothing but himself.

He could see a tall, strong man whose good looks lay

# Valiant

This is the fiery and epic tale of a handful of men fighting for their lives at a far-flung outpost of the Southwest Territory in '67, and of Captain Richard Lance, with a stain of blood upon his soul, who chose his eight bitterest enemies to go with him on a suicide patrol that the rest might survive



mainly in his unintentional aloofness; a man whom the garrison knew afflicted with a sense of duty and honor as others are afflicted with a disease.

It was unfortunate that the most miserable period of the day for him should inevitably come when the calmness of sundown soothed all others. It was not pleasant to be allowed time to dwell on the extent to which you were hated. But then he had never, since he could remember, found being Richard Lance a pleasant experience.

With a conscious effort he pushed back his shoulders and entered his quarters.

Trumpeter Saxton waited until Captain Lance went inside. Trumpet under his arms, he had taken three steps toward barracks when he heard a rifle crack. It came from outside the post, close. Almost instantly, from the same direction, a voice lifted and slid to an inhuman whoop.

Trumpeter Saxton's jaw dropped and he said, "My God, what's that?" before he realized that there was no one near to hear him.

FOR A GOOD while Lieutenant Winters had sat at the table beside the window. There were other things for

him to do: inspections; checking troop reports in the orderly room; receiving and registering complaints and reports from his non-commissioned officers. It exasperated him to know that he should not be sitting here.

He poured himself another whisky and mixed this with water. Drinking half the cupful in one swallow he blinked, his eyes already watery and narrow from two other drinks, and looked up at his wife.

"You think he's handsome, don't you?" he said, his voice querulous and thick.

Cathy made no answer. She had her back to him, lighting a short thick government-issue candle.

"Don't you, Cathy?"

The candle flared, bringing his face into relief. His skin was puffy under his eyes and its deep burn of sun gave a false impression of health and hardihood. Back East, with Headquarters Company in Washington, his pallor and underweight had caused his transfer to duty here in the Southwest Territory. And the staff medical-officer had tactfully suggested that he take along a wife who could look after him during the first two or three months. He had married Cathy two days before the journey to Winston. And now he felt he knew no more of her than on the wedding day.

The daughter of a retired infantry major, she had known no other life than the military swirl of the Capital. She had been flattered and breathless at the unexpected opportunity presented to her. She knew Jerry as a palely handsome young officer, who had escorted her to balls and functions but who until now had made no further approach. His offer to share his new life and the rapid advancement which the Southwest Territory provided, had captivated her. If she had not yet fallen in love with him, if so far the excitement and promotion had failed to materialize, it was her duty to accept her lot without rebellion.

Which she could have done, had it not been for the officer who had handed her down from the stage upon their arrival at the post. Rarely did you cursorily meet someone whose eyes and smile lingered in your mind long after the moment had passed. Countless times she had talked with him, danced with him, watched him. Amid the post's pathetic attempts at social intercourse it was impossible to avoid daily contact.

But there existed in all those meetings a pronounced borderline: Cathy Winters was the wife of Jerry Winters. And so now as always she held in her mind that first sight of him, before he knew that she belonged to Jerry Winters.

"You are thinking of him," Jerry persisted. "Blow out that light. But don't turn around." She blew out the candle and remained rigid, her back to him.

He didn't want her to turn around. At a time like this the beauty of her face could shock him, could incite an unmanageable wildness in his chest. She said quietly, "I didn't want to light the lamp, Jerry. There's very little oil. No one knows exactly when the next wagon train is due."

He took a stiff swallow of his drink. "The wagon train will come with the exchange troops from Fort Grant."

"But no one knows when that will be."

"Washington knows. You'd like to be in Washington, wouldn't you?"

"No."

He laughed. "That's right. You wouldn't want to be in Washington as long as he's here."

She did not answer. He finished his drink, pressed his

hands to his eyes, as though to steady the tumult that welled up in him.

"YOU'RE thinking of him now, aren't you? You're thinking that I married you too soon; before you had a chance to distinguish between emotion and love; before I brought you out here and let you see what it was really like and what I was really like. And before you met him."

Very slowly she turned around. "Jerry, please."

He dropped his eyes.

She said levelly, as though they had been talking of it all along, "Have you heard when the exchange troops will arrive? The men left for Grant this morning before reveille. Will it take the exchange troops four days to return? Has Colonel Drumm mentioned it? Mrs. Drumm is vague. I don't believe she concerns herself with anything but her Wednesday and Sunday teas. Perhaps because she's lived out here so long, at one post or another."

"You don't want to live out here that long, do you? Are you afraid you'll come to be like Mrs. Drumm?"

"The fact that we're left at skeleton strength while the troops are transferred doesn't interest her. Have you received any word?"

"You're trying to soothe me, aren't you?"

"I'm asking a question, Jerry."

"Jerry'. You've never said darling. Don't you know how to say darling?"

She said without hesitation, "Yes, darling."

Against his will he allowed the barbed throb in his chest to tear more deeply. "You wouldn't have any difficulty calling him darling."

"Jerry, that's unfair."

"Is it because he's in line for a promotion and is due for a transfer back East, Cathy? Is it because it's cozy and safe and interesting in Washington? Or is it simply because he's exceptionally virile looking—totally different from me? Don't you know he's hated by more men in this post than any officer who was ever stationed—"

She took a step forward and brushed his forehead with her hand. The burn of his skin against her fingers brought a quick pity to her. It stirred something within her breast, always, making it possible to live with him.

He looked at his glass. "There's something wrong with an officer enlisted men hate," he said. "An officer can hate an officer. That's different. When enlisted men hate an officer—"

"What is it, Jerry?" she asked softly. "What's going on inside you? It's not that you're simply jealous. You hate him. Sometimes I think your hatred is what keeps you going. And it has nothing to do with me. I've never given you cause to be jealous! I never will. You're not afraid of him. That's not your secret. You're not afraid of anything."

For the first time he looked up at her, directly, his eyes alive. His voice lost its slur. "Not of anything that breathes," he said.

"Then what is it?"

He didn't answer. He stared out the window, watching Captain Lancé pass along Officer's Row. He felt his throat tighten, the saliva turn sour in his mouth.

"Why do you hate him?" Her voice was soft with urgency. "Let me help you, Jerry. Why do you allow the sight of him to do this to you?"

He stood up slowly, as though the feeling inside his

chest were hoisting him to his feet. Captain Lance, he saw, was standing beneath his 'dobe's *ramada* and was looking this way.

"What's he watching my quarters for? Does he expect you to come to the window and wave to him? Is that how you signal you'll meet him?"

"That's ridiculous. I've never met him."

"You've never met him alone—deliberately?"

"You know better than that."

"Answer me!"

The solitary shot and the wild discordant whoop caught his ears and for a moment he remained rigid. From beyond the south stockade came the sound of horses hoofs drumming on baked sandy earth.

Then he sprang across the room to where his tunic hung from a peg in the wall. His fingers, along with his brain, suddenly came alive and he had no difficulty buckling on his saber and revolver belt. Cathy handed him his broad-brimmed campaign hat as he went out the door.

She said nothing. She stood very still. Then she went to the window. With the room dark she could see the dim parade without being seen.

"Halt, sergeant and patrol. Corporal of the guard, post number three!"

Lance heard Murdock's impatient snarl. "Listen, you bat-headed, flea-brained—"

And a soft, drawling voice: "Corp'r'l, this ain't the exact time to stand on ceremony. Open that gate."

That would be Joe Harmony. The civilian scout had a way of purring his words when he was angry or when his nose had rooted out a danger scent.

Lance drew open the gate himself. In the near-dark he could make out the mounts and riders of one of the three partols he had been sending out constantly since the troops had left for Fort Grant.



A dead Indian was slung across the saddleless pony that Joe Harmony led

## CHAPTER II

### GIFT FROM A REDSKIN

CAPTAIN LANCE passed Trumpeter Saxton on the run. "Blow assembly, Johnny." He kept on towards the south gate. The beat of hoofs had stopped. He heard the ringing challenge of the sentry outside the gate.

"Halt—who goes there?"

"Sergeant Murdock and patrol."

Joe Harmony leaned forward in the saddle. "Dick?"  
"Yes. What happened? What's that on that horse?"

Lance was glad that he couldn't clearly see Harmony's nut-brown face. It would be ugly with a grimness that had become both familiar and abhorrent to Apaches and Comanches who made up the greater part of the Territory's population.

"It's Bill Holloway, Dick. He's come home at last . . . what's left of him."

Lance said nothing. He found he was unable to swallow. He stared dazedly at the shadowy blanket-wrapped lump lying rigidly across the saddle of the pony behind Harmony's mount.

"This here's the gent who brung Bill in," Joe Harmony said softly. His hand jerked to a pony which his own big mare had concealed. Across its saddleless back a figure lay, arms and legs dangling. Except for clout and moccasins the figure was naked. It was an Indian.

"He sneaked Bill through our patrol," Harmony was

saying, "an' give a whoop and spanked Bill's horse toward the post. After I spoke to him with my friend." The scout touched his long rifle.

Lance said, "I see." But he didn't. He couldn't see anything but Lieutenant William Holloway, tough and lean and perpetually grinning. Bill Holloway, Class of '62.

"Take the detail inside, Sergeant," he said. "Tell Corporal Gilchrist to take over. I want a relief patrol out in your section in three minutes."

Sergeant Murdock knew Captain Lance couldn't see clearly in the dim light and didn't even try to conceal his grin of pleasurable contempt. He knew what this meant to Captain Lance. It would not only postpone his transfer to Washington; it would probably wreck his chances for promotion. And for Sergeant Murdock that was great satisfaction.

The sergeant knew the blinding disappointment from a promotion that never materialized. And Captain Lance had taught it to him. Murdock knew his failure to make the upward jump from the non-commissioned ranks had been because of Captain Lance, who had resolutely stood Colonel Drumm down on the subject of Senior-sergeant Murdock's promotion.

So it was with a sense of gratification that Sergeant Murdock rode through the gate at the head of his patrol. It was a fine thing that Tucsos had chosen this particular time to send Bill Holloway home. A damned fine thing.

**DICK LANCE** watched the patrol disappear around the far side of the breaking pen on its way to the stable.

He nodded after it, saying quite softly, "Hi, Bill; it's time you came home," and turned and looked once into the black distances receding southwestward to the Flint-heads. Somewhere out there was Tucsos. Tucsos, who had reached out from the darkness and the years to touch Dick Lance. That touch was lofty and vicious and deadly—but it could not contaminate; it could only thwart and crush and, finally, kill.

The corporal of the guard said, "I'm sorry about Mr. Holloway, sir." His voice was quiet with a measured respect. "There wasn't a finer officer. We know what he was to you, sir."

"Thank you, Corporal." He walked through the gate, the corporal following. "Close it for the night. The other patrols will use the west gate."

"Yes, sir."

Lance walked slowly across the parade, and instinctively his eyes turned toward Winters' quarters. There was no light showing. But he thought he saw a small daub of white at the window. That would be her dress; she had been wearing white today.

The two troops of his skeleton cavalry unit were drawn up in troops-front, facing the two infantry platoons which were the maximum complement Captain Eversham would have until the exchange.

He took his place in the center, conscious of the eyes of every man in the formation.

Captain Eversham came over, his rotund figure looking crowded in its too-tight uniform, his pleasantly pink face appearing crimson in the glow from lanterns and flares.

"What's it to be, Dick?" he said cheerfully.

For a moment Lance said nothing. He saw the relief patrol, with Corporal Gilchrist at its head, canter in double file toward the west gate and disappear.

A man couldn't ask for a better soldier than Corporal Gilchrist, barring his excessive proclivity for draw poker and American rye whiskey. He was as ferocious as a puma when the liquor was alive in him. Lance had always nursed a secret wish to have Gilchrist along on a brush with Apaches when the fire was flaming inside him. But Gilchrist managed to confine his drinking to off-duty periods and did not buck regulations, though it was said that since Lance had curtailed the post store's liquor rations, the magnitude of Gilchrist's rages was the equivalent of his drunken sprees.

With an effort Lance drew himself out of his thoughts. Captain Eversham and the platoons and troops of infantry and cavalry were waiting on his words.

He said quietly, "Nothing's to be done immediately." He told Eversham about Holloway.

Captain Eversham looked down and scuffed the soil of the parade with his boot. "Was he . . . Did they treat him badly?"

"I don't know. And I'm not going to look. . . . You might strengthen the guard tonight. I haven't talked with Harmony yet. But I don't think they're close. Harmony would have said something. Might as well dismiss."

"I'm sorry about Bill, Dick."

"Hell, Bill doesn't want our sympathy."

Eversham went back to his position in front of his platoons. Lance hadn't meant to hurt Eversham. It was only that everybody felt so damned sorry for Bill, and Bill was lying there in that blanket. . . .

He heard the infantry sergeant's harsh, "Companee-ee . . . *dismiss!*"

**HE RAISED** his eyes and encountered the glance of Lieutenant Jerry Winters, who was confronting him, his face masked in the shadow and light, his lips grinning a little without seeming to grin.

"What is it, Jerry?"

"You know what it is."

"No."

"It's about Bill. Bill Holloway."

"He's back. That's all."

"No, it isn't all. And that's what I mean."

Lance drew in his breath, feeling it expand the muscles of his chest. He met Winters' mocking gaze levelly. It was dangerous in an isolated post such as Winston to put a curb on informality; yet it was more dangerous to let it become rampant. He knew he should immediately clamp down on Jerry Winters, but the lieutenant would construe hidden motives concerning Cathy if he did.

He said, "What are you trying to say, Jerry?"

"I'm not *trying* to say anything. I'm saying it. I know what Bill Holloway's return means as well as you do. That transfer to Washington hasn't looked so bright since Bill's come back, has it? And that promotion looks a little unreachable now, doesn't it?"

"That's enough, Jerry."

The grin left Winters' lips. His eyes became abnormally bright. "I just want you to know that I know how it is. If you call me out to go with you tomorrow—if you're going—you'll know there's no wool over my eyes."

"That's all, Lieutenant." His voice had a ring in it that brought Winters' hand snapping to salute.

"Very good, sir." There was an automatic respect in his own tone. He wheeled and strode toward the stables, his horse following with a leisurely dignity.

LANCE WATCHED him until he had left the cone of lantern light, then turned and headed for Colonel Drumm's quarters. He had forgotten about Joe Harmony. The scout's soft voice halted him.

"What I got to say won't take a spell, Dick."

Lance felt the cool reserve of the words and something in him winced. He and Joe Harmony and Bill Holloway had once been thicker than catclaw. Joe Harmony and Bill Holloway were still close friends; it didn't matter where Bill was.

He made his voice equable. "Then what is it, Joe?"

"I thought you'd want to know the how of it Bill was brung in."

"Yes."

"The fella was an Apache. Ogapaph clan, I'd say, from his markings."

"Tucsos' tribe."

"One of his tribes. He's maybe gathered a flock of 'em this time."

"Yes."

"He'd been drinking *tiswin*. There was quite a load of it on his breath before he stopped breathing. His chest and face was painted fresh. His hair was fresh greased. But Tucsos ain't close. He won't be coming in tonight, nor maybe even tomorrow."

This surprised Lance and he asked before he had thought, "How do you know?" For a moment he had forgotten that it was a mistake to ask Joe Harmony how he knew things; the fact that he vouchsafed information was your guarantee. When he didn't know, he didn't speak.

Joe Harmony said tonelessly, "The condition of Bill's and the fella's horses. All the dirt on their hoofs wasn't dirt you'd find near here. The fella'd been sent here from a ways off to bring Bill in." Harmony nodded and said, "You got a spell to make up your mind what you want to do; but not long. Not as long as until the exchange troops get here." He took a long step away.

"Joe," Lance called. "One more thing. It doesn't sound like Tucsos to warn us by returning Bill. Why did he?"

Joe Harmony took his long step back. "When these fellas go to war there's a kind of spiritual preparation. While their medicine men get their thought conditions in line the warriors live pure lives. No women. No drink—unless they got a mission that's pretty much suicide—like that fella out there. It takes a couple of days to get impurities completely out of their bodies. They cut down on their food and water each day till they're living on thoughts and the rhythm of their drums. Till they're ready.

"All this time their medicine men've been sending us their thoughts. Maybe most of us don't ever know we're hearing their thoughts. Some of us do. They've conditioned us. Without knowing it, we're ready for them in the way they want us to be ready. The fellas know that nothing we do is going to shuffle up what they're bent on doing.

"That's how it is now. Sending Bill back ain't providing us with a warning. It'll maybe add a mite of fear to our thoughts, which is fine for what he's got in mind. But we can't escape. He knew that before he sent Bill. He knew the exchange troops won't get here till they get here. And he's got till then to make up his mind when he comes in."

Harmony took out a plug of tobacco and worried a corner from it. A long time ago, he would have offered it to Lance. Now he did not.

He said in a voice that held no undertone, "And there's

the fact that Tucsos said he'd send Bill back one day—ahead of himself. You hadn't forgotten that?"

Lance winced, but could detect no intentional rebuke in the scout's tone. "Nothing personal meant," Harmony said. He appeared anxious to get away.

Lance held him a moment longer. "How does Tucsos know when the exchange troops are due—or even when they left?"

The lift of Joe's shoulders was barely perceptible. "How does a white man know how an Apache knows anything?"

Lance waited an intentional moment. Then he said quietly, "Thanks, Joe. It's been a long time since you've explained about the fellas to me."

The scout regarded him evenly. When he spoke his voice was gruff. "It's been a long time since you ast me, Dick."

### CHAPTER III

#### SOLDIERS ALL

LANCE PAUSED thoughtfully before Colonel Drumm's quarters, then he rapped on the door. It was opened by the diminutive, fat-laden, youngish Mrs. Drumm.

"Oh, it's you, Captain." She smiled up at him. She liked Lance for his looks, for the breadth and width of him, for the remote, unselfconscious manner in which he carried his virility. And she liked him, perversely, because so many others in the post hated him. "Come in, Richard," she invited.

For a moment he stood there. He couldn't get the thought out of his head that he was doing a deliberately ridiculous thing in seeing Colonel Drumm. He didn't have to bait the ugly head of the long-dormant fear that raised inside him. But he stepped inside the 'dobe and came to attention before Colonel Drumm on the cot before him.

... Trooper Tillman Rutledge preferred eating in the barracks. The large solitary oil lamp suspended from the roof supplied sufficient light for him to consult, as he ate, any of the three books comprising his depleted library.

These books he placed systematically in a semi-circle about him, opened at random so that his eyes might at leisure confer with the Messrs. Plato, Spinoza and Voltaire.

He recalled what had happened to his original library of twenty-odd volumes when he'd been in the habit of carrying his favorites in his saddle-bag. Up near Amarillo a marauding band of Comanches had rushed out of the night into the circle of the campfire, and the command was fortunate to withdraw with the loss of seven men and Rutledge's volumes of Milton and Scott. Another time the works of Schopenhauer had been left in the saddlebags of his horse, and dropped as a barricade to fire over, during a retreat from Sioux near White Sands. He had sustained other losses in other scrimmages until he had come to regard his last three books with tender and zealous affection.

Trooper Rutledge wore his learning as he wore his uniform, neatly, without ostentation. His age was indeterminate. His dark brown mustache lay over his upper lip like a half-moon; his eyes—like his smooth, burned skin—were tan and bright and timeless; his voice never lost its quiet, almost gentle restraint.

Of one thing only were the men in his troop certain: He had been dismissed dishonorably from West Point. That and the fact that Captain Richard Lance, his class-

mate, had been responsible for his dismissal, were the sole pegs life on which his fellow troopers could hang their curiosity.

He looked up as Sergeant Murdock swung down the aisle between the bunks. The sergeant's heavy-jawed face was lax from fatigue. He sank to the edge of his bunk, grunting with the effort of pulling off his boots. Swearing, he looked across the aisle. "Give me a hand, will you?"

Rutledge smiled and got up. "You look fagged, Ben."

He straddled the sergeant's right leg, the heel of the boot in his palms. "Did you get a look at Lieutenant Holloway?" The boot came off.

"No. Joe Harmony wrapped him in his blanket quick-like. I didn't have no hankering, except to make sure it was the lieutenant."

They repeated the process with the left boot. Rutledge went back to his bunk, closed his books, put them under his pillow. Murdock took off his blouse, and lay back on his bunk, breathing heavily through his nose.

"What you got to be tired about? None of you lousy bone-brained Rebs is any use on a patrol in this country . . . and nobody squawks their miseries louder."

Onstot's legs swung over the edge of his bunk and his raw big-boned hands gripped the edge. His face became darkly crimson. "You . . . you . . ."

"Well?" Sergeant Murdock sat up. The muscles of his naked chest and arms began to flex in little anticipatory spasms.



"There's something wrong with an officer that the men all hate!" Winters cried. Cathy didn't answer

**O**THER MEN trooped in. They sprawled on their bunks, smoking, talking, or lying still, nursing the fatigue in their bodies. Some of them sat down to poker.

Trooper Onstot picked his lanky awkward way down the aisle, his surly face set and hard under its coating of alkali. Unceremoniously he placed a dirty boot on the edge of Rutledge's bunk and swung himself up to his own.

"I didn't mean fer to muss your bed none. I reckon I'm pooped enough not to have thought." His Alabamian drawl softened the effect created by his harsh eyes.

Rutledge smiled. He brushed the powdery dirt from his bunk. "It couldn't be dirtied more than it is."

Sergeant Murdock, with whose patrol Onstot had ridden, propped himself on both elbows and looked up at the Alabamian, contemptuously.

Onstot's voice said softly, "You damn' Yankee. . . ." as though he had discovered the vilest name he could call the sergeant.

Murdock stood up quietly. His exhaustion fell from him as if it had been a coat he had shed. "Come on down, Reb."

A voice in the second aisle sang out in disgust, "Where's that filthy Arab? Look at his bunk."

Trooper Onstot held himself in check. Sergeant Murdock's aptitude as a Reb-baiter was known in every post in the Territory. The men of the late Confederate Army, who now found themselves in the United States Army of the Frontier, had learned that Sergeant Murdock's pleasure fed solely upon bringing Johnny-rebs forcibly to

heel. It seemed to satisfy some inner turmoil within him possibly caused by the fact that his war activities for the Union had been confined to fighting savages on the Frontier.

An answering voice drifted patiently from the second aisle. "Nobody knows where that Arab is when he's off duty. Unless he's in the stables."

"I said come down, Reb," Murdock said pleasantly.

It would get Onstot nothing to allow himself to be baited by the sergeant. He had no reason to come to blows with anyone but Indians—and maybe Captain Lance, if Providence ever granted him the chance. "I got no call to fight you."

"You got a call to keep a civil tongue in your head, Reb."

"You hadn't ought to take on at being called a Yankee. I thought you was proud of it."

"You coming down, Reb? I got to drag you down?"

"You got to act sensible. I didn't start this."

"Down you come, Reb."

Murdock took one step across the aisle and laid his hand on Onstot's ankle.

"Leave go that laig, Sergeant." The Alabamian's tone was so gentle as to be barely audible.

Murdock's muscles leaped into rigidity and Trooper Onstot was yanked from the upper bunk. He landed on left shoulder and buttock with Sergeant Murdock retaining his grip on his left ankle. This the sergeant shook as a man shakes water from a stick.

Trooper Rutledge watched them. "What's it to be, Ben?" he asked softly.

Onstot's face was as white as the dust that covered it. The light in his eyes had paled icily. "Let me on my feet, Sergeant."

The sergeant's grin remained fixed. "Get up, Reb."

**H**E RELEASED Onstot's ankle in a sharp, tossing gesture. He wiped his palm as though to clean it. He was thoroughly enjoying himself.

The Alabamian got up and started toward Murdock but Trooper Rutledge stepped between them, the edges of his teeth showing under his mustache in an imperturbable smile. He turned his face to Murdock, resting his brown fist on the sergeant's naked chest.

"Ben, you didn't answer my question."

Both men faced each other over his shoulder. No color had returned to Onstot's cheeks; the pale flame in his eyes had not brightened. Now the sergeant's lips lost their grin as he fastened his eyes on Rutledge.

"Don't stand there, Rutledge."

"You haven't answered my question."

"What question?"

"I asked you what's it to be, Sergeant? Now that Lieutenant Holloway has been sent in. Normally that would mean a retaliation detail. But with the post at skeleton strength could we spare a detail? The lieutenant's return might even signalize Tucos' intention to come in. At our strength have we a chance of defending the post?"

Onstot had climbed up to his bunk and lay on his back, his hands behind his head, his eyes open. His chest rose and fell unevenly.

Murdock watched him.

"We'll maybe send out a reconnoitering patrol, I guess." His words were a series of growls. "Only no yellow-livered

Rebel's to be included in it, I'm hoping." His grin had returned but he did not remove his eyes from the still figure of the Alabamian. Murdock sat on the edge of his bunk and grinned up at the tips of Onstot's boots. "Why don't you look in your books for the answer?"

**J**UNIOR-SERGEANT Tomkins' voice bawled from the doorway. "Fifteen minutes before tattoo I'm going to inspect leather in the stables. You heard the captain's orders. I got four hours' latrine-digging for each mule's son whose leather and carbine ain't in order."

Somebody said, "Trumpeter, ain't you glad you don't have to pester with a carbine?"

Sergeant Tomkins took several steps down the first aisle.

"You, Baker. Onstot. Rutledge. Get out there and give a hand to the burial squad. Get your legs moving." He moved around to the head of the second aisle. "Where's that Arab?"

"I reckon in the stable, Sarge. With the rest of the animules."

The sergeant turned and went out.

Trooper Baker paused in front of Trumpeter Saxton.

"Johnny, why don't you ask Captain Lance personally for a carbine? You could maybe get somebody to vouch that you've growed up. . . ." He was grinning.

Trumpeter Saxton stood up. His voice seemed congested but the words came out quite audibly. "To hell with Captain Lance."

For ten seconds there was absolute quiet. Onstot, sliding down from his bunk, turned and looked down the aisle. As though he himself were oblivious of the motion, his head began nodding in agreement.

Sergeant Murdock remained motionless, the words beating in his head as he assimilated them and approved.

Trooper Rutledge, putting on his boots, looked up, his face assuming the inscrutable mask he reserved for use at the mention of Captain Lance's name.

Trumpeter Saxton remained rigid, staring in front of him, as though the words he had uttered were suspended in the air before him and he could see them.

## CHAPTER IV

### WAYS OF THE ARAB

**I**N TROOP A'S stable a lantern hung from a peg in the 'dobe wall, its beams pushing against the darkness. Trooper Haik Kebussyan moved among the stalls on silent feet, inspecting each animal as he had done a hundred times before. While his hands explored the shoulders, withers, loins and hind quarters of a horse, he conversed in Armenian, now complimenting one beast on the meatiness of his shoulders, now reproving another for a scant loin.

Trooper Kebussyan had no neck. His head twitched unnaturally on the great hump of his shoulders. A fierce blue-black beard forced its way up his face almost to the sockets of his eyes, which were enormous brown Armenian eyes with a strange jagged streak of yellow splitting their centers. His uniform and boots, inevitably filthy ten minutes after inspection, had the look of being too small for his powerful body.

The men of his troop erroneously referred to him as the "Arab" because they had difficulty pronouncing his name;

and because they didn't exactly know where Armenia was. And finally because he was fanatically brave; filthy to the point of lousiness; and absolutely nazy.

The men's opinions did not disturb Haik Kebussyan. When they howled their derision for his ceaseless surveillance of Captain Lance, he made no attempt to defend himself. For he was positive none of them was aware of Captain Lance's real identity; and therefore in attending the captain secretly he was rendering them protection.

When they derided his habit of appraising the troops' horses, he accepted their rebuke because he alone knew that soon they would be forced to eat those horses. One horse or mule—only one—would have made all the difference in that trek through Syria along the Euphrates when Sultan Abdul Hamid, the Damned, had had his *Saptiehs* massacre the Antakiya Armenians and evacuate the survivors to Deir ez-Zor.

He could still see that hellish convoy of exiles, dying because they could not digest grass and bits of paper, though it had been years since he had managed to escape to Alexandretta and conceal himself in the hold of a ship which had carried him to New Orleans.

And now God had chosen him as His especial instrument for the salvation of these others. For had not He disclosed to Kebussyan alone the fact that Captain Lance—beardless and taller and lighter of skin, but indisputably recognizable—was Abdul Hamid, come across the seas to perpetrate his atrocities upon this race as he had upon the Armenians?

"Carefully, my red beauty," Kebussyan said in his own language to the great bay mare before him. "It's not my intention to harm. We do not harm the things we need. Ever so carefully, my great red one."

**B**UT THE HORSE stamped its powerful legs and the sensitive neck arched, the head tossing. Kebussyan was aware that Koko permitted no one but her owner, Joe Harmony, to handle her, so he grinned and stepped backward. But the heaving flanks of the horse lurched against his chest, pinning him to the side of the stall. The horse lurched again and the pressure would have crushed the chest of a man less powerful than the Armenian.

He managed to draw a breath and whisper, "Not so . . . roughly . . . my beauty . . ." and worked his hands up until he could place their palms against the mare's hip and ribs. He did not hear the scuffling of Joe Harmony's moccasins as the scout moved along the planked walk behind the horses.

At the end stall Harmony stopped. He leaned on his long rifle and watched Koko's third lurch force Kebussyan's chest nearly through the side of the stall. Presently he pursed the left corner of his lips and spat obliquely.

"I allowed one time you'd get to annoying Koko."

Kebussyan's enormous eyes rolled to meet the impassive glance of the scout. There was no plea in them.

Koko's ears quivered at the sound of Harmony's voice. She let her barrel bang against the Armenian as though she were falling sideways. The last of Kebussyan's breath tore from his mouth and the face above the beard whitened.

Then he had his elbows planted against the stall so that he obtained a leverage, and his hands strained against the heaving flank; blood flooded into his face and the veins of his forehead stood out like humped ridges.

Gradually the mare's big body appeared to edge away. Joe Harmony straightened, peering incredulously.

The mare galvanized her muscles for another lurch. Instantly Kebussyan threw his shoulder against her loin and Koko, unbalanced, gave way, her hind legs sidestepping to the opposite wall of the stall where immediately she let fly with a vicious kick.

But Kebussyan leapt clear and stood beside Joe Harmony, his chest heaving as he drew air into his lungs, a faint smile on his bearded face. He said at last:

"Yours is a stout horse, Effendi. It is good you tend the mare well, though I would see more fat upon her and less lean."

He waited respectfully for some answer and when he saw the noncommittal expression of the scout he nodded politely and started toward the door.

With a lazy turn of his body Joe Harmony took one step and stood in front of him. "They tell me you done a lot of skulkin' around the horses. Well, I ain't a power on buttin' in on other people's business. But when you mess with the bay mare you're callin' me out. I reckon you're not leaving the stable till I'm satisfied what you got in mind. Or maybe you'd rather sit a spell in the guard-house."

Kebussyan took a sudden backward step. His enormous eyes seemed to widen out of all proportion. The patches of exposed skin above his beard on either cheek had paled to the color of mottled liver. He put his hands before him, as if to shove away something sickening and unclean.

"You have not the authority to commit me to the guard-house."

"Try stretchin' my temper, Arab."

**K**EBUSSYAN felt the breath bursting in his chest. Bars or filth of any sort, when thought of together, meant for him the horrors of the prison at Deir ez-Zor, and were enough to turn the crackling in his head into a rending tear that deafened him.

Out of the roaring behind his eyes he looked at the man who stood before him and saw not a gangling leather-faced desert beast, but Talaat Pasha, who was the right arm of the Sultan and whose hatred of Armenians had committed so many of Kebussyan's race to death and himself to prison.

A queer look of cunning came into his eyes. He drew down his shoulders and bent his knees. Then he released the springs of his body as though a keg of powder had been set off beneath him and shot across the three feet of intervening space between them, his head catching the other in the pit of the stomach, his huge hands lifting to encircle his leathery throat.

Joe Harmony went over backward, his head catching the planked floor hard. He squirmed and brought his knees into play as violently as he could, but long before the pounding of blood in his throat and head began to cut off consciousness, he was aware that his resistance was no more effective than that of a child in the clutch of some blood-maddened jaguar.

The din in his head grew and he wondered if his eyes and tongue had already popped from sockets and mouth, it was that hard to see and breathe.

Junior-sergeant Tomkins entered the stable in search of Trooper Kebussyan and after a moment's disbelieving stare, ran forward, unholstering his service revolver and crouching over the Armenian, whose grip on Harmony's

throat he could not break until he had smashed at the base of his skull three times with the revolver barrel.

Then Kebussyan allowed himself to be dragged from the prostrate scout. He stood rocking, fingering the back of his neck, his eyes filmed with passion and shock.

When Harmony climbed slowly to his feet, his face red as much from humiliation as from strangulation, Kebussyan turned and started for the door. Tomkins' brittle bark and the sweep of his revolver to Kebussyan's back brought him to a halt.

"What's it all about? Who started it?" Tomkins addressed the two men but his eyes concentrated on Kebussyan. The Armenian shrugged and let his long lids droop while he watched the revolver aimed at his belly.

Harmony made several efforts to speak and discovered that no words would come through the dry thick pain in his throat. Tomkins said, "Speak up, you Arab."

"There is nothing to say."

"I've heard complaints about your messing with the

horses. There ain't any regulation barring a cavalryman from entering the stables. But it's different with you. They say you got an appetite for horsemeat. Is that true?"

Kebussyan's lids opened. "Only upon occasion, Effendi."

"Sir, you mule's son."

"Sir."

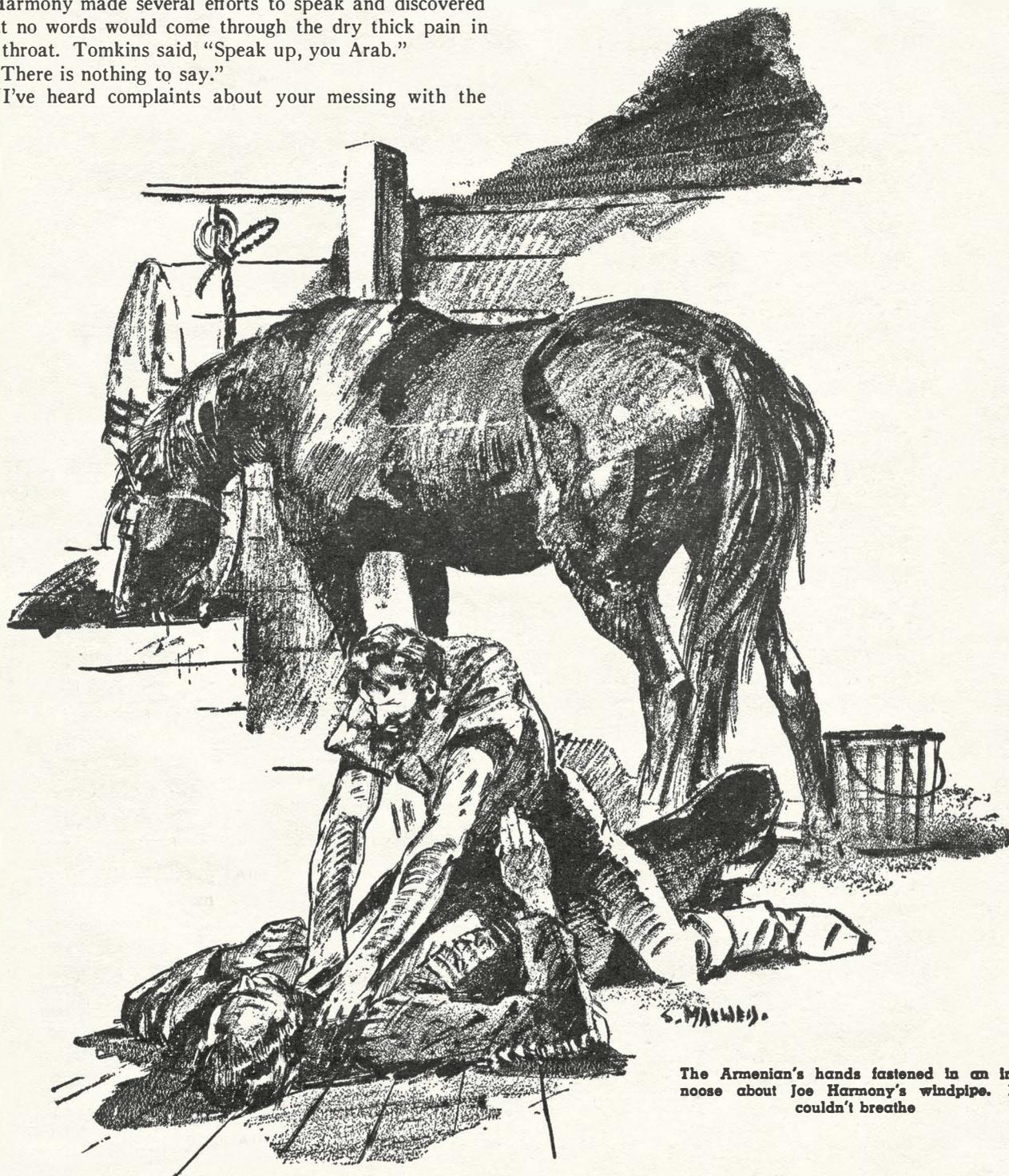
"Were you fixing to harm any of these animals?"

"No, Effendi . . . sir."

"Then what were you doing?"

"Inspecting them."

"We got a farrier sergeant for that." Kebussyan made no reply. "I'll see to it that A Troop ain't annoyed having a damned foreigner skulking around its animals. I was



The Armenian's hands fastened in an iron noose about Joe Harmony's windpipe. He couldn't breathe

going to leave you off light for having a disorderly bunk—”

“I have not touched my bunk since leaving it this morning, Effendi.”

“—I was going to leave you off with digging on the burial squad for Lieutenant Holloway’s grave. But that’s a job calls for a cavalryman and I wouldn’t embarrass the lieutenant by detailing you to dig for him. We’ll take you to Captain Lance, my skulking Arabian nizey, and see for how long you’ll bunk in the guardhouse.”

**T**HE PERCEPTIBLE anguish that came into the Armenian’s eyes furnished Tomkins with a measure of satisfaction. The stripes on his sleeve were comparatively recent and it was hard to tell how men who were his former equals would react to his new authority.

Kebussyan’s breathing had become harshly quick. “I will not be committed to the guardhouse for no reason, Effendi, sir.”

“You’ll do what I order you, and that’s go up before Captain Lance. The captain’ll know how to deal with you. He’s stuck you in the guardhouse before.”

“Yes, he has.” Kebussyan’s head canted slightly as he hunched his shoulders.

Joe Harmony said, “Wait a spell.” The fingermarks on his throat were white blotches against the maroon of his face. “I figger it ain’t rightly the Arab’s whole fault. I was scappin’ too.”

Kebussyan stared at him, his eyes growing round.

Tomkins said, “You defending him, Joe?”

“I’m tellin’ you how it was. If I hadn’t been in the stable there wouldn’t’ve been no fight.”

Tomkins frowned. “But he was here when you come. And that’s what I’m bringing him up for.”

“There ain’t no law against a dog-soldier entering a stable.”

“You keep out of this, Joe.”

“I only aimed at acquainting you how it was.”

“I’ll tend to the discipline; you’re hired to scout. You ought to be right pleased I’m collaring a rogue male like this here, after the way he done you.” Tomkins’ significant glance held on the white blotches at Harmony’s throat.

Kebussyan still watched the gangling man. There was gratitude in his eyes and his voice was soft. “Thank you, Effendi, regardless.”

Harmony shrugged. “It was my aim to keep you out of the hoosegow so’s I could get a crack at you fair,” he said.

Tomkins, said to Kebussyan, “Get going,” and as they walked down the parade, Kebussyan found himself thinking with surprise that Talaat Pasha, whom they unknowingly called Joe Harmony, had acted with a kindly sense of honor you would not expect to find in the Right Arm of the Sultan. There was every reason to think, he reflected, that if he had misjudged Talaat Pasha, perhaps he had been wrong about Abdul Hamid, whose ‘dobe quarters he and Tomkins were now approaching.

When Hector, the captain’s striker, answered Tomkins’s knock and informed him the captain was not available, and the junior sergeant said, “We’ll wait. Captain Lance won’t want to miss a chance to rid A Troop of the Arab for a spell,” Kebussyan merely smiled in his huge beard and said, “Yes, Effendi, sir.”

For by this time he was convinced that Abdul Hamid no longer wished to commit him to the guardhouse of Deir-ez-Zor. . . .

## CHAPTER V

### VOLUNTEER TO SUICIDE

**O**N HIS big bed Colonel Drumm elevated his thin shoulders by propping his left elbow. Lance sat beside the table, eager and yet uncomfortable, and wishing he could be out of this and away from the challenge in Celia Drumm’s eyes.

“Fort Invincible,” the colonel mused. “The Army surveyors were equipped with more imagination than logic.”

“Except for the water situation, the locale of the fort is excellent, sir, and quite logical,” Lance said.

“Except,” the colonel said. “That’s a big word, Richard, and there should be no toleration of it in the Army. Erecting a fort on the crest of a peak before the solitary pass in an impenetrable mountain range was sound Army sense; but overlooking the vital fact that the entire water supply could be cut off by a besieging force was deplorable.”

“There’s the cistern, sir.”

The colonel made a soundless laugh. “Yes, the cistern. Buried in the compound and depending on rain for its supply. I wonder if it’s still useful.”

“I should think so, sir. Indians seldom destroy things they have to work to get at.”

“I haven’t been out to Invincible for quite a spell. The details report its condition from time to time. They say there’s not much left. The barracks no longer stand, of course.”

“They were burned, sir.”

“And the stockade.”

“Also burned, sir.”

“The ramparts remain.”

“Intact, sir. Stone and baked clay. Wouldn’t burn.”

“Not much protection without the stockade.”

“The wall is four feet high, sir, with stone and clay redouts at each corner.”

“Wish I might take a look at it before answering you, Richard. These spells make a confounded invalid of the hardiest man.” The colonel smiled contemptuously at the illness which had bound him close to his quarters for the best part of a year.

As he weighed Lance’s request, tiny bubbles of sweat formed on his forehead and upper lip and he closed his eyes and his breath whistled through his nose ceased for a long moment, and resumed laboriously. He opened his eyes, and continued his line of thought in the manner of a man who is wearily used to the interruption of pain.

Lance gazed steadfastly at the colonel. “I hope you can see it my way, sir.”

He thought the other was purposely ignoring the urgency of his tone. A sick man could be stubborn in the face of all reason. *When you were well*, he thought, *you’d have snapped up my offer before I had a chance to rescind it and back down; and you would have known how much I want to back down.*

Lance waited. Gradually a feeling of mingled relief and disappointment possessed him as he sensed a refusal in the colonel’s slowly shaking head.

But the colonel was saying, “I’m a damned fool, Richard. A senseless invalid. But I say go ahead and heaven help you.”

Lance felt a contraction in his stomach, as though its walls had caved in.

"You're either a very brave man, Richard, or a complete fool and unfit to be an officer."

Celia Drumm said sharply to her husband, "You're much too ill to make a decision such as this, Harkness."

"Please, my dear. You were allowed to remain in the room on the condition you would be quiet. You are an excellent wife; you'd make a poor soldier. Captain Lance has requested permission to conduct an operation on his own initiative. Under normal circumstances I would not consider it; as it is, the situation calls for abnormal measures—"

"But Tucsos will have a thousand—"

"That's all, my dear." The colonel's voice contained a weary finality.

Celia Drumm stood up, the color mounting in her cheeks as she looked at Lance. "You wish to make this mad gesture?"

Lance felt his own color mounting. "It is not a gesture, Mrs. Drumm."

"It is. It's foolish heroics. What chance would you have? What added chance would you be providing us here at the fort?"

"A risk we must both take, Mrs. Drumm." The vain-glory of his words embarrassed and annoyed him.

"The captain's right," Colonel Drumm said. "The risk is inconsequential. He has one slight chance of delaying Tucsos' movements and until the exchange troops arrive a delay is all we can hope for. Therefore the risk is imperative."

Celia Drumm's bold eyes searched Lance.

"But a detail composed only of. . . ." Her teeth pressed her underlip. "Are you quite insane, Richard? Is that why the men detest you?"

"NEVER MIND that, Celia," her husband spoke sharply. He had drawn up his knees and his forehead was sweating. "Call Waters for me, Richard."

The orderly came from the kitchen and the colonel said, "Tell the lieutenant-adjutant I want him. I'll have him prepare and post your orders, Richard. Then it'll be in order."

"Lieutenant Cogswell is in the hospital, sir."

"Captain Eversham's officer-of-the-day, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have Captain Eversham report to me at once, Waters." Waters saluted and opened the door.

"Waters," the Colonel said.

"Yes, sir."

"Also tell Dr. Jennings to report to me immediately."

Waters again saluted and went out. Colonel Drumm extended his hand and the effort set his breath to whistling. Lance took it quickly. There was very little pressure in it.

"Good luck, Richard. Could say more. All that's necessary. Know how I feel about it."

"Yes, sir. Goodnight, sir." He straightened. He took a breath and hoped his next words sounded sincerely grateful. "Thank you for this opportunity, sir."

Because of his pain Colonel Drumm's grim was grotesque. He winked. "Not sure I'm doing right. Weren't for my damned head I'd know what was going on in yours. You'll do your best, feel certain. Where's that scoundrel Jennings?"

"I'll hurry him, sir. Goodnight, Mrs. Drumm."

He was surprised to see she had put on her cloak.

"I'll walk out with you, Richard. It's stuffy in here."

Lance held the door for her. "It's a pleasure, ma'am." He had the uncivil wish that she could exchange the thoughts in her head for the pain in her husband's.

They stood in the darkness under the *ramada*. "Don't go," she said. "It's foolish to go."

"It isn't foolish." He was annoyed that he had adopted her whisper. He heard a rustle of movement and sensed her closeness. Something soft touched his cheek and he did not move, knowing it to be her fingers. "I'll go to your quarters with you," she whispered. "I want to talk you out of this ridiculous notion."

"My quarters are bachelor, Mrs. Drumm." He heard how smug his words sounded and was furious.

"You did not have your supper. I will fix you something in your kitchen."

She leaned closer and he could smell her perfume.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Drumm. I'll be busy with preparations. But I appreciate your offer. I'm not hungry. My striker will fix something later. Thanks again, ma'am."

He sensed the stiffening of her body.

"You're a fool," she said. "You deserve what happens to you. You deserve the men's hatred. Don't think that I'm not aware that this idiotic detail is being made to prove something to yourself. I know what goes on inside you. Dr. Jennings couldn't cure you but he could tell you your disease. I know he could because I had it too. And he told me. He told me it was incurable!"

HE COULD feel the beat of her anger, and then two figures were blacker shadows against the dark and boots stamped on the single wooden step.

An irascible voice said, "Who's that?"

Lance recognized Jennings. He stepped back, opening the door so that light revealed Captain Eversham beside him.

"What are you doing out here, Celia?" Jennings demanded. "You should be in with the colonel. His spasms aren't any fun."

"For him or for me," Celia Drumm said.

"Good evening, Mrs. Drumm." Eversham smiled. He looked at Lance, his smile fading. "They've got Bill's grave nearly dug, Dick. You going to turn out A Troop?"

Lance waited before answering.

"Answer him, answer him," growled Jennings. "You going to or not?" He leaned into the cone of light and peered at Lance's face. "It won't do you any good personally, young man."

Eversham's face reddened with sympathy. "You could have him buried at reveille tomorrow when the entire command turns out and I could take over—"

"Damnation!" Jennings snorted. "It's got to be done tonight, not tomorrow. This climate isn't conducive to leaving corpses lying around any longer than necessary."

"There's no need for you to—"

"I know. I know. I'm not being brutal or insensitive for my own pleasure and I thought as much of Bill as anybody around here with the possible exception of yourself, Lance. If I'm impatient it's because I'm practical about that sort of thing. Leave him around here. Then you tend to any epidemic that breaks out, will you?"

The doctor looked at Lance curiously. "You don't need to look at him."

Lance's eyes caught Celia Drumm's and they seemed to

mock him. *Dr. Jennings could name your disease and tell you it's incurable*, her eyes said.

Lance said, "I'll turn out A and C Troops and I'll attend to my own volleys." He felt better when he had said it. He looked steadily at Jennings. "And I know what Bill looks like. What he looked like. There's no need to change my impression."

## CHAPTER VI

### MARCHING ORDERS

**B**EHIND the desk in his quarters he listened to the charge against Trooper Kebussyan as presented by Junior-sergeant Tomkins.

He was vaguely surprised to note a look of near friendliness in the Armenian's enormous eyes. He supposed the Armenian to be touched, whether dangerously he could not be certain. And as four years of war had drastically reduced the ranks of Army prospects you couldn't be severe with such recruits. Headquarters' answer to a charge of insanity would inevitably be, "If his arms and legs conform to regulation, he may rely upon the mentality of his officer."

Aloud, he said, "The guardhouse, Sergeant. Until further orders."

He saw the satisfaction which came on Tomkins' face as the junior-sergeant marched Kebussyan away. But he had seen something else which startled him. You rarely witnessed eyes which became afire with murderous insanity and lived to tell about it if the eyes directed that look at you. He wondered how long it would be before the Armenian attempted to kill him. . . .

A and C Troops stood in double rank about the solitary fresh grave. The words on the page before Lance seemed blurred and damp and his voice was so quiet and steady that even the seasoned campaigners thinned their lips, blinked and frowned fiercely at the cap visors of the troopers opposite.

"'As for man, man that is born of woman, his days are as grass: as a flower in the field, so he flourisheth.'"

He did not hear his own words. He was aware of the refilled oblong before him as though he could see it through the pages of the book. Bill was down there and the patting of the earth on him had been gentle but Bill had probably felt it and welcomed its concealing protection. *You feel all right, Bill? You comfortable?*

"'The wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.'"

*But we'll know you, Bill; we'll remember. I hope you're resting easy, because you didn't look as if you were.*

He closed the book and listened impassively to the volley of carbines and the lost sound of taps.

Then he dismissed the formation and did not at once follow, not seeing Cathy waiting for him until Lieutenant Winters paused and waited for her in turn; not seeing Joe Harmony stand beside the mound and for once not spitting and for once not leaning on his rifle; not seeing Sergeant Murdock, and the men walking toward their barracks conversing quietly and turning now and again to glance at him.

His mind's eye was possessed entirely by Bill Holloway's face as he had seen it ten minutes ago. He had stood for a moment, looking, his pulse pounding in his throat from shock and revulsion and pity and an ineffable shame, and

his lips did not form the silent word goodbye, but only an audible, "*God in heaven.*"

**A**ND NOW he knew he would not again envision Bill Holloway without the distorted and sickening disfiguration which had been on him like some grotesque mask, and he remembered that Bill had him to thank for it and the post knew it and he himself knew it and Bill must know it.

The scratchy querulous voice of Dr. Jennings pierced his thoughts and he looked up. "You need a drink. Maybe that will help. If it doesn't, nothing will."

"There's nothing to help."

Jennings grunted. "Bill was with those redskins nearly two years. That's a long time. He had plenty of opportunity to make up his mind about you. He probably got to hating you. But you never felt it.

"You think you did. But you felt your own imagination. You felt the things you'd think if you had been in Bill's place. He was different from you. But he probably got around to hating your insides in two years."

"Jennings, do you think the things they did to him were painful out of all understanding?"

"Good God, yes."

"Do you think they were done all at once or over a course of time?"

"All at once. Some of the things he couldn't have stood up under and they knew it, so they saved them for all at once."

"Tucsos knows about that sort of thing."

"Tucsos knows about every sort of thing. He'd make a better soldier than you. Or a better president than Lincoln. Or a better doctor than me. Don't stand there. If you want to sleep tonight you'll take that drink. I've heard about the order the O.D. posted. It's crazy. You're crazy. The entire thing is basically wrong because it won't do Bill any good or us here any good or yourself any good."

**T**HE MEN about the bulletin board stared at the posted order as though the white paper were something that might come alive. No one had anything to say and the quick notes of tattoo from the parade swept into them clearly, as though Trumpeter Saxton were sounding the call a few feet outside the door.

Presently the press of men gave way, those whom the order did not concern returning to their bunks and leaving Sergeants Murdock and Tomkins and Troopers Rutledge and Onstot to share what emotions the order had created, for it dealt specifically with them and also with Lieutenant Winters, Corporal Gilchrist, Trooper Kebussyan, Trumpeter Saxton and the scout, Joe Harmony.

Rutledge was the first to speak. "It seems a little more than coincidental, doesn't it?"

Murdock's heavy-jawed face turned to thrust at Trooper Onstot. "What they got against me that I got to have a yella-streaked Johnny Reb taggin' my tail on scout patrol?"

Rutledge's quiet voice said, "Apparently this isn't to be your patrol exclusively, Ben. Note that the order includes Lieutenant Winters."

"Hell, it's still my detail."

"Careful, Ben," Tomkins said. "That's disrespectful talk."

Murdock looked at him. "Don't you get them new stripes soiled."

"No offense, Ben. Just that it don't do to talk against your superior officer in front of the bucks."

"Wait a minute." Rutledge's tone was clipped and unusually high. He peered closely at the even writing at the bottom of the page and read aloud in a slow, incredulous voice, "The men named above to form at 5:40 A.M. in the quadrangle fully equipped for a six days' patrol to be commanded by Captain Lance, First Officer, Troop A, 77th Squadron. . . ." Rutledge's voice trailed off.

Presently he repeated, "To be commanded by Captain Lance," as if to convince himself that he was reading correctly. His finger traced down the list of men who were to compose the detail. "Of all the men in Winston to go out under Captain Lance. . . ." He shook his head and regarded Murdock and Onstot strangely.

The Alabamian asked, "What do you know about it?"

The older man shrugged.

"Hell," Murdock growled. Fury had come into his dark squinty eyes. "Every one of us on that list—with the exception of Tomkins here—has got a reason to want to be in a Lance patrol that brushed with Apaches. Lots of things gets settled lots of ways when there's an Injun action. And this ain't right and it ain't natural. What's he thinking of, taking out a detail like this?"

He received no answer. Trumpeter Saxton came in and when they showed him his name on the list he said nothing, looking at them first in bewilderment and then in a swift anger that flowed in and out of his eyes to be replaced by an expression which none of them could define. He went quickly to his bunk, sitting there and staring at his trumpet in the way of a man who does not see what he is looking at.

Corporal Gilchrist, having completed his three-hour trick at patrol outside the fort, reacted to the news with

apparent unconcern. He laughed uproariously and pointed a finger at Junior-sergeant Tomkins.

"What's he taking you along for, to bear witness that we were all killed by 'Pache bullets?"

Tomkins looked offended. "That's a hell of a thing to say, Tim. You've been at the store since you come off patrol."

"Sure I been at the store. I'm drunk is what you mean. Sure I'm drunk."

He threw back his head and laughed. His enormous body shook. Then he ceased laughing and frowned as though the reason for his laughter had just occurred to him. "Maybe he's got it in mind to take me out there where it's drier'n the leather of my boots. Maybe he ain't content with fixin' it so's I have to buy up every mule's son's liquor-requisition slip at triple price to get myself a drink."

He strode off, not revealing the quantity of liquor in him by his walk, and presently they heard his laughter again, in rolling peals, suggesting some immense joke which only he was aware of.

Trumpeter Saxton took hold of himself and walked slowly down the aisle. In two minutes he would blow taps. He noticed how Rutledge, Murdock, Onstot, Gilchrist and Tomkins lay on their bunks, their faces upturned, their eyes opened, their thoughts concealed beneath the inscrutability of the enlisted man's expression. The attitudes of these men he noticed without taking particular cognizance of them; he was wondering if this were to be the last time he would blow the trumpet he carried under his right arm. . . .

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

## Men Who Make the Argosy

Meet the Author—Louis C. Goldsmith

IT'S always comforting to have a legend substantiated. You've probably heard the one about writers: that they are adventurous and untrammelled people who have lived dangerously and tried their hands at a dozen trades. Having heard that, you generally meet up with an author who has spent twenty of his thirty years in a library and never adventured further than Niagara Falls.

So it's a great satisfaction to introduce an author who has really been around. The man we present to you is Louis C. Goldsmith, whose stories have become an essential part of ARGOSY. Mr. Goldsmith has been a soldier, a flyer, a sailor, a farmer . . . but let him tell you about all that himself:

Looking back over a misspent life, it seems I must have been a busy lad. I was practically born and raised under canvas, my father being a construction contractor building railroad grades and irrigation canals. I left freshman high school to enlist for the Mexican trouble.

From then to World War I, duty sergeant First Gas and Flame regiment; wounded in action, discharged. Finished high school to get into Flying Cadets. Left Air Service thinking I could learn to write fiction in a college. Barnstormed, taught flying, flew forest patrol to pay way through college. Worked at surveying, farm-hand and sailor (very proud of an A. B. seaman discharge from the full-rigged sailing ship *Tusitala*).

Sold fiction in 1927 and '28; started regular airline flying '28; chief pilot and later general superintendent of an airline running down west coast of Mexico to San Salvador, C. A. Flew seven years for United Air Lines; total of 18 years flying, 8,000 air hours. 1937 went to

China to fly commercially and got caught in war over there. Returned and started whole-time writing.

As for writing: I'm not a great writer, said he, blushing modestly. I try to write of things with which I am thoroughly familiar and for that reason often bore my readers with too much technical background. Sorry. I try to write a yarn that, like a glass of cold beer, is good to relax over after a hard day's work. After all, that's the reason why most of us read.

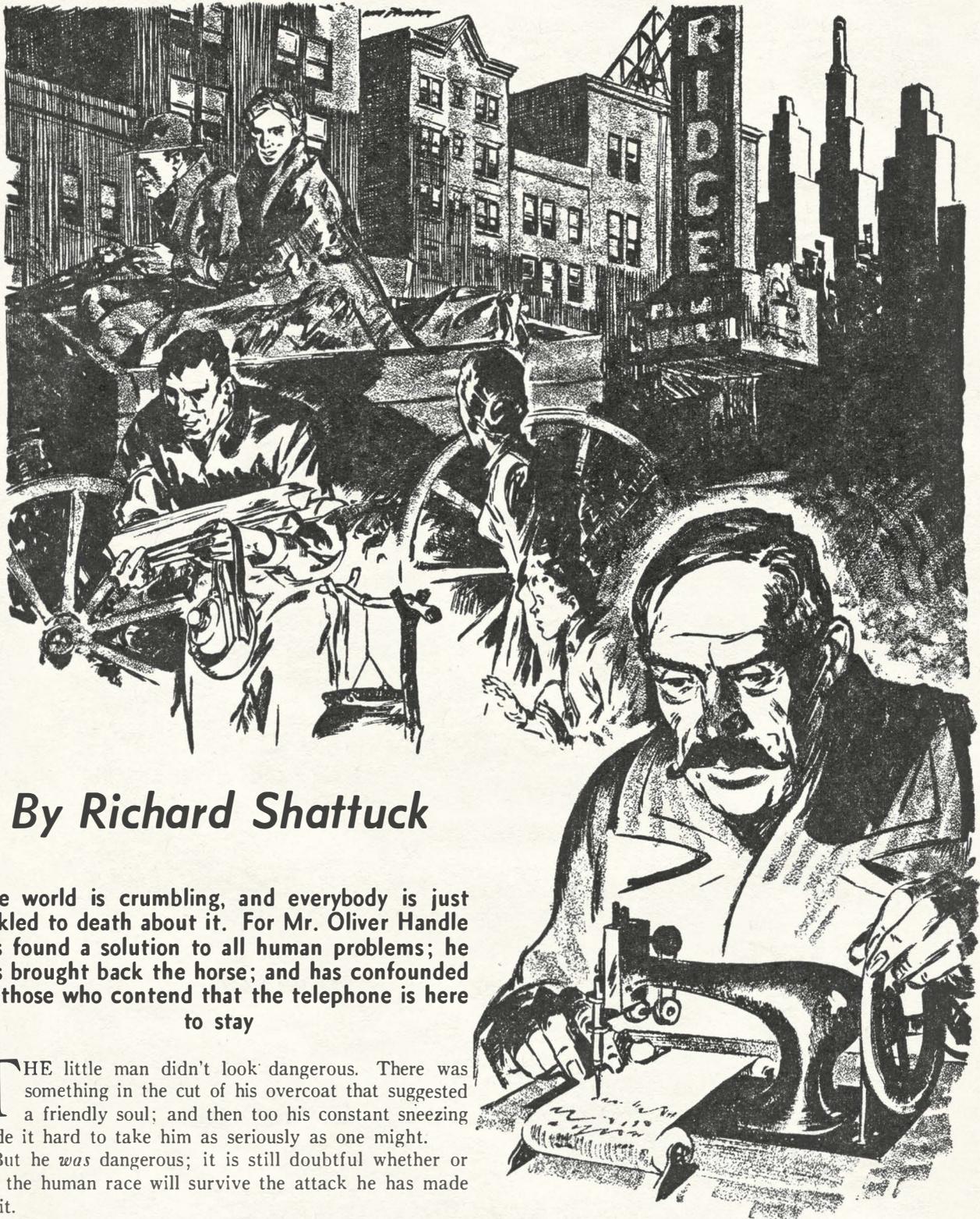
For the lighter side of life: I like to box; did some ring work in the Army and in college and still enjoy a little set-to with the gloves. Then there's skiing . . . remind me some time to show you the trophies I *haven't* won in that sport . . . and there's squash and swimming and gardening (things you can eat, not posies). I used to like to drink lots of whiskey and get into disgraceful free-for-alls, but seemed like everybody always felt kind of sad and reproachful afterward so I don't do that any more.

Would like to own a baby elephant and an Emperor penguin but the former might grow up to be too bulky around the house and the latter's a bit untidy in his habits. (But wouldn't it be grand to go out for a stroll with your own elephant and penguin for company?)

So, as a compromise, when I get the time and money I'm going to buy a darned good motorcycle and start out by making a trip through Lower California; south of the Border, y'know. Or maybe I'll be flying bombers within the next year, helping again to make the world safe for democrats. If ARGOSY keeps on buying my yarns you may hear about it.

Ed. note: We see no reason to stop.

# The Uninventor



By Richard Shattuck

The world is crumbling, and everybody is just tickled to death about it. For Mr. Oliver Handle has found a solution to all human problems; he has brought back the horse; and has confounded all those who contend that the telephone is here to stay

THE little man didn't look dangerous. There was something in the cut of his overcoat that suggested a friendly soul; and then too his constant sneezing made it hard to take him as seriously as one might.

But he *was* dangerous; it is still doubtful whether or not the human race will survive the attack he has made on it.

Small, slight, pale, his big old-fashioned mustache and deep booming voice were the only outward clues to his amazing vitality. The large white handkerchief he always held in his hand seemed to be waving a continual surrender to the world; his face, far from reflecting the morbidly brilliant thoughts within, looked merely cross and irritable.

That was the wicked, unbearable thing: The human race was delighted with each new step backward

He had the flat upstairs from mine; and when the landlady told me that he was an inventor, I was interested. I earned my living by writing weird tales and amazing stories, tales of the future with a pseudo-scientific background; and having just rewritten all of Jules Verne's stories for the fifth or sixth time, I was running out of inspiration.

It occurred to me one night that the little inventor, Oliver Handle, might have some idea knocking around in his head that would stir the springs of inspiration and give me an idea for my fiction of the future.

I was working then on a variation of the rocket-to-the-moon theme but it was bad; in my heart I knew it wasn't up to the high standard of my usual work. I rose and made my way upstairs, determined to call on my neighbor.

Now that I look back on it, it astonishes me that Oliver Handle permitted me to strike up an acquaintanceship with him. I suppose that perhaps he wanted a witness for the strange thing he was about to do: someone to tell his story when the time came. He cared nothing for fame, and yet . . . one part-time witness he allowed himself.

Not that I was admitted to his confidence entirely that first night. He let me in, reluctantly enough, to a bare little parlor; silently, he handed me the matches I had made a pretext of wanting to borrow, and stood looking at me sourly as if he wished me gone.

But I sensed a story—an amazing story—in the little man. Seating myself, I said easily, "I understand that you're an inventor, Mr. Handle."

His mustache bristled, his unexpectedly heavy voice boomed, "That's not true. I am if anything an uninventor."

"What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

HE RUMMAGED in the pocket of his overcoat (which he wore constantly indoors and out, and—as far as I know—to bed) for a cigarette. "I have just returned from Europe," he rumbled. "They have some wonderful inventions over there. I am going to uninvent some of them."

"You mean—"

"Oh, the airplane, for one; the submarine, bombs. Yes, and that's only part of it. I'm going to uninvent the damndest lot of things you ever heard of." He began to sneeze.

This, I thought, is better than I had hoped for. The little man is quite mad; what a mine of story-material he will be! As he continued to sneeze I said sympathetically, "Hay fever?"

He nodded morosely. "One of the worst cases in medical history."

"Do you know what causes it?"

"Yes. You do."

"I beg your pardon?"

He said, with a sort of quiet pride, "I'm allergic to human beings, among a great many other things."

That brought me to the edge of my chair with a gasp of astonishment. "You mean that human beings bring on your hay fever?"

"Yes. I thought at first it was just my wife but after I got rid of her I discovered that everyone affected me the same way. Poor woman."

I may say in passing that I never did find out what he meant exactly when he said he got rid of his wife. Unimposing as he was, there were some questions one did

not ask the little man. One somehow feared the answers.

I knew I ought to go, since I was making him so uncomfortable; he sneezed monotonously and his eyes had begun to run. Yet my curiosity was so aroused I simply could not leave.

"How do you propose to uninvent these things?" I asked.

"I've got a machine. Though damned if I know why I should save the human race from its folly. I hate humanity."

"And who could blame you?" I said with a laugh. "It makes you sneeze."

"It makes me weep tears of blood," was his somewhat melodramatic answer.

I decided I would find out more by humoring him a little. "I think you have a great idea there," I told him. "To uninvent the weapons of destruction would be a wonderful thing."

"I shall uninvent everything," was his disconcerting answer. "Everything."

IT WAS several weeks before I got a glimpse of his wonderful machine for uninventing machinery. By the time he finally unlocked the door to his laboratory for me and admitted me to this inner sanctum, my curiosity was screwed to the highest pitch. I knew he was talking nonsense, yet my imagination was so developed along certain lines that I was tempted to believe at the expense of my reason.

I must admit that my own stories and certain moving pictures I had seen had prepared me for a laboratory housing huge machines, futuristic tubes, glowing crucibles, dynamos, and a chained, hump-backed assistant.

Instead, Handle's laboratory was a messy, untidy room, with spare parts of machinery lying about; and his masterpiece, when he drew off a piece of canvas and showed it to me, looked more like a little old-fashioned sewing machine than anything I can think of.

Seeing the consternation on my face, he laughed uproariously. "Expected something fancy, didn't you? All inventions in their early stages are simple and crude, and anyway I've got hold of a brand new principle that makes a lot of complicated paraphernalia unnecessary. This runs by hand, as you see. I simply turn the handle, and this needle marks a graph of what I'm doing on this roll of paper, so."

"Why not run it by electricity?" I asked, my eyes busy trying to find something exotic in the workroom on which my imagination could feast.

"Because then I'd be out of luck when I uninvent electricity," was his astounding answer.

"Oh, come now, Oliver, that's going too far," I protested.

"You think tho?" he snarled. (I was having my usual effect on him, and hay fever made his speech thick) "I'm goink farther dan dat."

Ah, had I only taken the madman seriously, what disasters might not have been avoided! But fool that I was, I underestimated him; yet how could I be impressed by a fellow who sneezed so much? There was simply no precedent for it. True, Carlyle had dyspepsia and people took him seriously; but hay fever is a comical disease, as everyone knows.

"When do your experiments begin?" I asked, actually bored now his mystery was revealed, and wanting only to get away.

"They've already begun."

"And what are you uninventing?" I asked as he turned the crank.

"Doorbells."

I NEARLY laughed out loud. There was a modest beginning, if you like! "Why doorbells?" I asked idly. "Because they annoy me."

"And you're going to disintegrate them?"

"No, you fool." (I pretended not to notice when he called me such things, feeling sure he didn't really mean them. Besides, he pronounced it more like "foob," and you can't get angry when someone calls you a foob.) "I work directly on the source of the mischief: the human mind."

"Well, well," I said. "Direct on the human mind."

"It's happened before," he told me, with a look that silenced my inner laughter. "Just consider the stained-glass windows of the Middle Ages: there was a technique developed, and the formula lost forever. The glass-blowers of old Venice—who has the tricks of their trade now? I propose to make men forget their tricks, artificially."

Shortly after this, I went downstairs to my own apartment. Absently I punched my own doorbell, and do you know, curiously enough it didn't work.

"I must fix it in the morning," I told myself as I went to bed. I thought little of the occurrence at the time; the doorbell was frequently out of order.

Next morning I tinkered with it without results. I am not a mechanically-minded man, so finally I asked the landlady to have it fixed. An electrician was sent for, but he too failed to discover the source of the trouble; the doorbell just wouldn't, didn't, work.

Finally the landlady reported to me, rather triumphantly, that none of the doorbells in the building were working; she seemed to think that that made everything all right. That's one of the most irritating traits of the human race: the belief that a trouble shared is a trouble lost, that if everyone has the same misery all's well. I spoke to her rather sternly, but that too was without results.

But how shall I describe the dreamy air that overlay our efforts with the doorbells, that made no one really care whether they were fixed or not? During moments of insight I realized what was happening; at others, I shared the common indifference as to whether doorbells ever worked again or not.

Can you believe it? I began even to dislike doorbells, noticing for the first time that they looked like hideous mechanical breasts. Even if mine had been working I would not have used it.

You remember the old-fashioned doorbell, surely? We considered it a great convenience in its day. But not long after Mr. Handle began his operations a rash of articles broke out in the press, in magazines, in pamphlets. They had a common theme: the doorbell must go. It lacerated the nerves of the public, the public discovered (a professor attributed 8.93% of all nervous disorders to it); it took the busy housewife from her work to listen to the prattle of salesmen, and waked the baby. The doorbell went; hand-knockers reappeared.

Mr. Handle's ray, you understand, didn't put the doorbells out of order; they simply, naturally went out of order and people failed to repair them, or—quite without reason—stopped using them. As he had threatened, he attacked the will-to-use-doorbells; the rest followed.

NEAR the end of this period I saw the little man. He was bending over his machine, studying the graph with a triumphant air, between sneezes. When he saw me, he looked up, pointing to the graph with a smile. "This records the resistance to my ray," he said. "You notice that the needle is drawing a straight line now? Doorbell-resistance has disappeared. I begin on radio next."

I clutched the edge of his laboratory table, my senses reeling. "But—the radio?" I stammered.

He nodded. "Listen."

From above us came the sounds of a frenzied orchestra, which broke off to let a five-minute commercial announcement come down to us, hard and clear. "She has the damned thing on constantly, from seven in the morning until eleven at night," Mr. Handle snarled. "You don't think I should put up with that, do you?"

"But see here, we can't live without the radio," I said, breaking out into a cold sweat. "Please, please Mr. Handle, stop and think what you're doing."

"I have think," he replied, and the subject was closed, firmly. "Incidentally, the hammering of your typewriter annoys me nearly as much. But little by little; I can't do everything in one day."

I slunk back to my room; next day I bought a noiseless typewriter, praying that he would forget his awful implied threat. (In vain, might I add; before the month was out the typewriter, new and beautiful, sat unused on my desk. I was writing my stories by hand; editors had decided that typewritten work was hard to read and were accepting only handwritten manuscripts.)

IT MAY be charged that I failed to warn the world of what was happening. I tried to speak; but after mentioning to several people that a neighbor of mine had uninvented the doorbell, and noticing their reaction, I sank into the an uneasy silence. I am not the stuff from which martyrs are made, so I let the doorbell go.

When I dropped a hint that I thought the radio was doomed, I was laughed at. Yet scarcely two weeks later the radio had gone silent; dials were turned no more. No one remembered my prophecy, no one wanted to know where the danger lay nor how to cope with it.

Everyone was in fact delighted with the new loss. The radio, they said, had been driving them crazy for a long time; it produced a cheap, shallow form of entertainment that wasn't worth listening to. It made dictators possible, giving politicians an audience of vast dimensions; it penetrated the home, destroying reflection and conversation, smothering thought in a blanket of stupid talk and music.

It—but why go on? Blind to everything but its own unutterable folly, the human race put aside its greatest achievement with a shrug, and sat listening to the silence, completely enchanted. It was a sight to make the gods weep.

And motion pictures. Motion pictures! Soon the reels lay molding in their cans, emitting a faint sad odor of banana oil and decay.

And did the public leap to the defense of its idols, its heroes sublime? It did not. Moving pictures, people said, had run their course, had begun to bore the public insufferably. Censorship had put out whatever vitality the medium had ever had, the sound-track was more than human ears could bear, the pictures were infantile, puerile. . . .

Tears come to my eyes as I recall the flood of printed and spoken words on which the motion picture was washed into oblivion. I was the only mourner at the passing of this great art form.

The pen falters in my fingers as I think of the passing of the automobile: miles of cars abandoned in their tracks, in traffic tie-ups, on the roads back to town, as people got out and left them, with dreamy smiles, continuing their way on foot. It was fun, they said, to walk. Where have we been going so fast, all these years? They asked themselves.

Cars smell bad, people said. Too many of us are killed in traffic accidents. The Automobile Must Go!

It went, it went; but what a ghastly thing it was to see, in New York City, people camping overnight in the downtown streets, on their way to visit friends on the other side of town; grilling chops over little charcoal fires, laughing and talking, having a good time. . . .

**T**HAT was the wicked, the unbearable thing. Every step the human race took backwards delighted it; people were happy in their madness. They were like children let out of school, finding (or so they believed) new values in life, calling their blindness fresh insight.

The day newspapers ceased to appear I actually saw men playing patty cake in the streets, howling with delight; they had, they said, never liked the damned things anyway.

Among the many profound changes taking place in the world, few even noticed the disappearance of war instruments. Handle went whole hog here; he didn't stop at uninventing the bomber, the submarine, the heavy guns and tanks; he actually uninvented the bow and arrow, the sword and sling-shot, while he was about it.

To me it was a pitiful thing to see squads of German soldiers, smart in their uniforms, advance double-time toward the lines of English soldiers, and butt them in the stomachs with their heads. At this type of warfare the English had the advantage. Their heads were just as hard and their midribs harder, beer had incapacitated the Germans for taking it, and they went down like ninepins.

It was when magazines were no longer printed and I was forced to earn my living by weaving at a hand-loom all day that I decided to kill Oliver Handle. I should have done it long before, while there was still something left to save—before all machines were rusting away while people looked at them and laughed—but better late than never. At least I could revenge myself and the world on the monster who had ruined us.

It wouldn't be easy to kill him, either. He had uninvented almost all lethal weapons and I wasn't strong enough to strangle him with my bare hands. Far into the

night I lay awake, listening to the *clop-clop* of horses' hooves on the streets (horses were being bred again in large numbers) before I finally conceived the idea of poisoning him.

Poison was left and he should have some.

By saving money for months I bought a bottle of good Scotch whisky, brought across the sea in a sailing vessel. I didn't depend on one poison; no, I mingled cyanide with nicotine, strychnine with curare. No poison I could lay my hands on was omitted; yet so skillfully did I blend them with the whisky and spices into a hot toddy, that the concoction smelled delicious.

With shaking hands I carried the brew up to Handle for a nightcap; I stood by in silence while he drank it down, then hurried back downstairs. I didn't want to see him die, much as I hated him.

**I**MAGINE my horror and astonishment when next morning he came to me, alive and well, his face glowing with excitement. "I don't know what was in that nightcap you gave me last night," he said, "but it has cured my hay fever. How can I ever thank you?"

Dazedly I looked at him, while a faint hope lifted its head in my heart. "Then—then perhaps now you will stop persecuting the human race?" I asked wistfully. "Now we no longer give you hay fever, won't you destroy your machine and let us—"

"But don't you see, even yet, how I've benefited the human race?" he asked. "People are happier than they've ever been, aren't they?"

I saw the futility of arguing with the madman. "Why don't you come down tonight for a celebration of your recovery?" I suggested.

"I'll do it," he said heartily. "We'll burn my handkerchief, instead of the mortgage, in your fireplace." He waved the now-unnecessary handkerchief in triumph as he left.

All day I have spent writing this record; tonight the little man and I will drink together. If he survives the draught I am preparing (and I know I shall not) he will destroy this paper, I suppose. If he dies too, perhaps the human race will awake from its long madness as from a fitful dream, forgetting what it did in its delirium.

Perhaps doorbells will ring again, radios will play, bombs will fall; maybe all the happy life I remember and love will be resumed.

I shall not be here to enjoy it. But perhaps someone, coming onto this manuscript, will want to read a record of those strange, forgotten days that have been, and will remember me, if only for a moment, as the savior of poor, mad mankind. That will be reward enough; I die content.

# NO! NO!



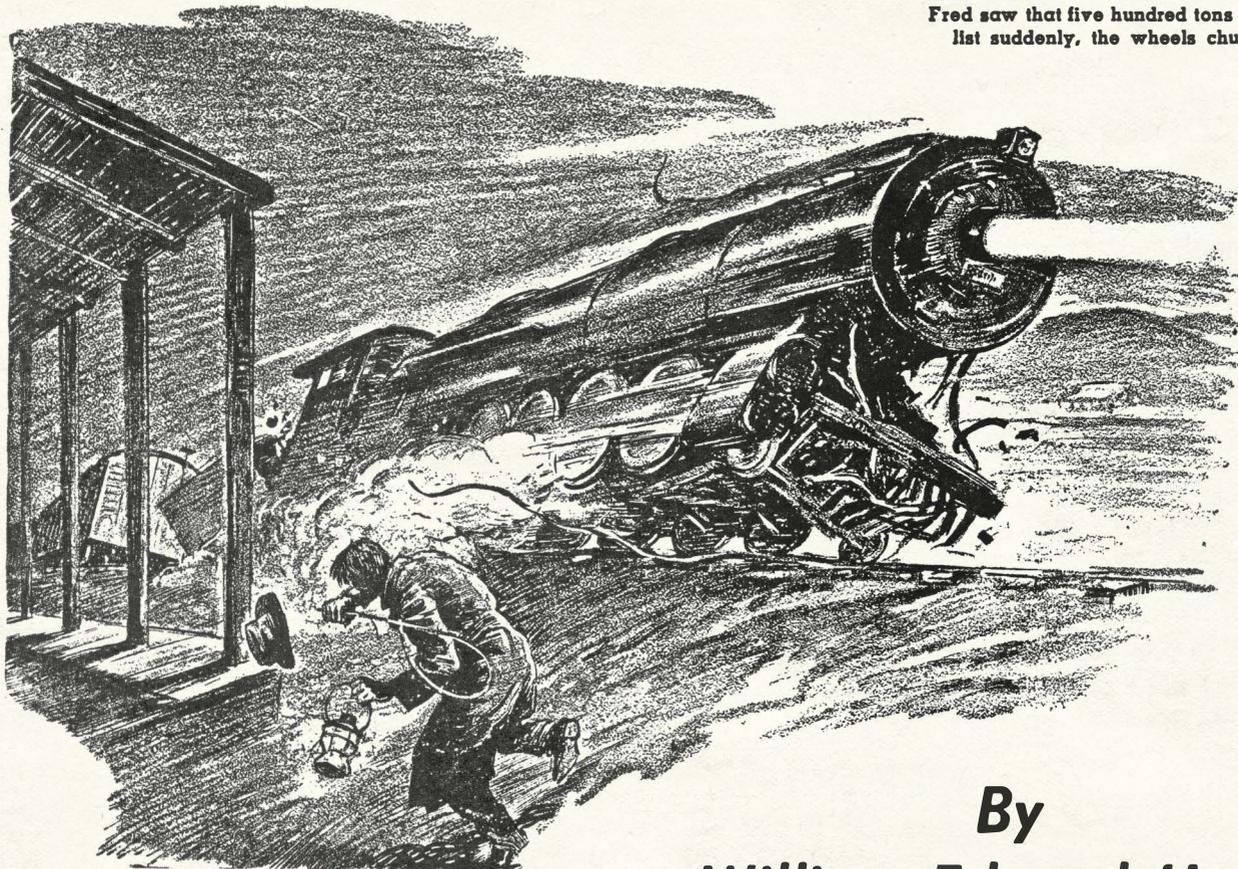
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Fred saw that five hundred tons of steel  
list suddenly, the wheels churning



By  
**William Edward Hayes**

*Author of "Glory Track," "Comet on Wheels," etc.*

# High Iron Rolling

The telegraph key clicks no warning; the special is running on schedule. Yet disaster rides the rails tonight, and Operator Fred Markey must learn to read a strange and sinister timetable—if he's to keep the steel road from flaming

## I

FRED MARKEY swallowed the jittery quiver in his skinny throat and bravely held his eyes to the searching gaze of the man in the black hat. Over by the row of levers along the east wall of the Cordville Junction office, Kimball, the traveling freight-agent, who hadn't bothered to introduce the man, tapped a toe nervously, his thin mouth grimly set.

The black-hatted man said, "You're sure you didn't stay in here out of the rain when 1st No. 31 rolled by."

Fred heard the fine drive of the cold rain against the windows in the bay where the telegraph table stood. He could hear, too, the whispered clicking of the instruments in the yellow funnel from the green-shaded drop light. He drew himself to his full lank six feet.

"I know my job," he retorted. "I stood on the platform and watched 1st No. 31 go by. I gave the caboose my lantern signal."

The man looked as if he didn't believe him, and Fred

wondered what had happened to that hotshot west that had crashed past Cordville more than an hour ago.

"No hot boxes? No smoke or smell?" the man asked sharply.

Fred wanted to ask what it was all about. He said, "He was okay by here."

The man asked for a telegraph blank, then wrote rapidly. Outside the junction office, No. 9, westward night passenger, waited in the rain, its conductor impatiently looking at his watch, then glancing toward the men inside the station.

The black-hatted man tore off the message blank, shoved it at Fred. "How long've you been on this railroad?" he asked.

"Three months," Fred answered, startled. He took the message.

"Rush this." He indicated the message, nodded to Kimball, the traveling freight-agent and went out.

Kimball, who was short and slim and quick, gave Fred a parting look and followed.

Immediately the passenger train fussed into its delayed start.

"Do I smell bad or something?" Fred asked the empty office and walked to the row of levers. He unlatched the one on the extreme right, nearest his table, and outside the semaphore above the lighted windows changed from green to red behind the train's disappearing lights.

"You'd think maybe I—" He quit talking to himself as his eyes focused on the message. He sat down and gulped, and his face lengthened. He felt jittery again. The telegram, in code, was addressed to George Gillick, the FBI chief at Central City, and was signed *Sherman*.

Fred laid the message under a tie spike while he reported the passenger train's arrival and departure to the dispatcher. The rain drove like fine sand against the panes. Why did the guy want to know how long Fred had worked here? What had happened to the first section of the hotshot? Everybody on the railroad knew it was worth a man's job to let anything happen to No. 31. It carried the kind of freight that moved on passenger time.

Fred plugged in the commercial telegraph company's wire and gripped the key to call Central City. His fingers stiffened a little and remained still while his practiced ear picked up the stiff-armed Morse of the old man at Salem, twenty-two miles west of him. Salem was reporting 1st No. 31's departure from that point.

"Set out four of his cars here," Salem rattled. "Middle of train. One journal badly burned. Don't understand why Cordville operator didn't see 'em and stop him."

Fred opened the dispatcher's line and his wrist humped with his machine-gun sending. "1st No. 31 didn't have any warm one passing here. Anybody who says he did's a liar."

The answer came promptly.

"A man can't churn up hot ones like that in twenty miles," the Salem operator retorted. "And since when'd 31 start carrying empty cars?"

"What you mean empty cars?" the dispatcher pounded furiously.

"These hot ones are empty," Salem replied. "Half the train, maybe more, was empties. Know empties when I see 'em."

"CD," the dispatcher gunned, addressing Cordville, "see if you can stay awake long enough to copy an order and hand it on to 2nd 31. Ought to be showing in a minute or two."

Fred didn't pump back what he wanted to say. He needed this job. Defense production had made it for him—had made a lot of new railroad jobs—and after those past few years when meals were far between . . . No, thanks, he didn't want any more of that.

So he sent the code message over the commercial wire while he waited for the dispatcher to bark the promised order on the chattering brass.

HE'D just finished this chore, and was spiking the message when he saw the outline of somebody at the ticket window, a man with hat pulled low and coat collar turned up. Fred saw the reflection in the black window pane in front of him. Then he heard the drumming of hard fingers on the ticket-window ledge.

Fred turned and the man said, "How's No. 6? And what time will it get me to Bannerman?"

"She's on time," Fred answered, "and you'll reach Bannerman at 3:31. Want a ticket?" The dispatcher's wire began calling him hurriedly.

"I got a ticket," the man answered. "You're sure she's on time?"

Fred didn't have time for a reply. The dispatcher began spitting code and Fred's fingers chased over the slick green of a tissue pad. The order for the second section of the hotshot freight told the freight that No. 6, night pas-

senger east, would run ten minutes late, which information would allow the rattler to get a little farther along the road.

Reaching up and taking two bamboo hoops from a hook above the table, Fred saw the reflection of the man at the ticket window again. He tore the tissues from the pad, folded two of them neatly, slid one into the wire clip on each hoop.

The hard fingers drummed on the window ledge, making an odd pattern of sound. Almost like the Morse letter H. It sounded as if the man was hitting with his little finger first, then following with the others in rapid order.

Something about the man hanging in the ticket window that way annoyed Fred.

"How long'll I have to wait at Bannerman for the Short Line connection east?" the drumming man asked.

"Less'n thirty minutes," Fred replied.

Far to the east a pale glow grew in the driving rain. Fred stretched his long legs. He pulled on his black rubber coat and his battered old hat. Then he went to the row of levers that controlled the signals and switches.

It was an old plant, non-interlocking, and thus required special attention and skill. With a modern plant it was impossible to do anything wrong. You couldn't clear your semaphore signal until everything else was in perfect order. With this antiquated layout you had to be more than careful. Fred checked on all levers, saw that the plant was lined up for the main track. Then he unlatched the right-hand lever and pumped it back and forth.

Outside, above the office, the signal board wagged up and down, the lenses in the quadrant changing from red to yellow to green and then back again. Presently the two short barks from the engine whistle told Fred that the engineer had seen the signal, knew that he was to scoop up an order, and would reduce speed accordingly. Fred set the signal to clear, took his hoops and lantern and went out.

Fred took his braced position beside the track at the platform's edge. His lantern was in the crook of his left elbow so that it lighted the hoop which he held by the handle above his head and out from him, so that the fireman's arm could stab through it.

He was standing there, ready, poised, watching the freight train's swaying approach, keeping his eyes out of the headlight. He was watching the gleam on the wet rails when suddenly his whole body went fault, and a squack that he meant to be a shout broke from his stiff lips.

Terror paralyzed his feet. And his stare was frozen hopelessly on the thing he'd just seen, the slight movement of the points that opened the branch-line switch from the main-line tracks.

His first reflex move was a swinging washout signal, a wild urgent swinging of his lantern in a signal to stop.

"Oh, my God—" he cried and knew there wasn't a chance.

The pinwheels of flame along the train in the wet dark told him that the engineer had slammed on his brakes in emergency, had big-holed her. But five hundred tons of charging steam and steel, with five thousand tons hurtling behind . . .

The engine swallowed track in her headlight's rush and then her wheels went into those half-separated switch points, locked in the hold of brake shoes, sliding like runners on ice.

The pilot climbed the steel and the drivers smashed ties and churned gravel. The cab and boiler listed over to the port side, before abruptly something happened under the engine frame.

Fred got his numb feet into frantic motion, leaped back and away, as the engine turned broadside to the main line and rolled over on her left side with her whistle screaming wide open. Steam and flame shot from her vitals, and over her scalding body the head cars piled up with an awesome rending of frame and timbers.

Dust and splinters and spewing oil filled the air, and Fred, with one arm raised to protect his head, staggered under the slap of a board across his back as he ran for his office. He thought of engineer, brakeman and fireman and knew that if they hadn't jumped they had no chance at all.

Dropping his lantern and gripping his key, Fred realized that all the muted whispering of those clicking instruments on his table had stilled. He straightened wide-eyed. Somewhere along the wreck a pole was down, and all these wires with it.

He turned to the row of levers and his alert eye saw the one that stood half open—the one to the branch-line switch. In that instant he remembered the man who'd stood in the ticket window. He leaped across to the waiting-room door and looked out. The waiting room was empty.

The engine whistle still screamed with a horrible insistency. Fred's body was sweat-drenched and his palms wet when, weak and trembling, he gripped the telephone receiver and asked the operator to get the dispatcher's office at Bannerman, and to get some doctors over from Salem.

From the wreck, as he buttoned his raincoat and started back to it, came the orange flare of a car on fire.

## II

THE sodden dawn was a chill, creeping gray that came up slowly. Fred Markey saw it with red-rimmed eyes, and the burns on his face and hands throbbed under their dressings. Sherman, the FBI man, looked up from scribbled notes. He sat at the agent's desk in the small office adjoining the telegraph room. Kimball, the traveling freight agent, who'd been with Sherman on No. 9 when word of the wreck at Cordville had reached him at Salem, rubbed his hands together as if they were cold.

There was a short sharp tap on the door and a man came in. He addressed Sherman, holding the door open and standing on it. "The head brakeman just died," he reported. "Didn't regain consciousness so we couldn't get any statement."

"Which means," Sherman said, "that we got no witnesses. Engineer and fireman scalded to death, the brakeman was our only chance."

The FBI man glanced quickly at Fred. "And maybe yours," he added.

Fred didn't get up. He wanted to but he couldn't. His knees were liquid under him. He said, "You've got to believe me, Mr. Sherman. I tell you—"

"Looks like part of this guy's story checks," the man in the door said, and nodded toward Fred. "I mean somebody did get the brakeman out of the burning wreckage. pulled him out in the clear, and the freight conductor and hind brakeman both say they didn't do it. They said

they found this man," again that indicative nod, "kneeling over the brakeman."

"Have they got the engineer and fireman out of it yet?" Sherman asked.

"The wrecking hook has to raise the engine a little more," was the reply. "It's pretty awful in there. The fire's all out, though. And the damage looks from here like it'll run into half a million counting the railroad's equipment."

The man left and the day telegrapher came in with three long messages. He handed these to Sherman, didn't look at Fred.

Sherman read the messages and Fred watched the swarthy, blocky face. It was expressionless. The dark eyes raised to him.

"You say you can't remember anything about the looks of this man that came to the ticket window," Sherman mumbled.

"I didn't pay any attention to him," Fred answered. "He just stood there and asked about No. 6. I might know his voice if I heard it."

"You don't know if he'd been out in the rain," Sherman said.

"How would I—"

"You say he wore a raincoat and had the collar turned up. You'd notice if there were spots on the coat unless it was black rubber."

"But the dispatcher was calling me for an order. And I had your telegram to send. I mean—"

"The fact of the matter is," the traveling freight-agent said, leaning forward now in his creaking chair, "that there wasn't anybody in that waiting room at all. Isn't that it, Markey?" His voice cut like a whip. His mouth was a line in his thin face.

"I'm telling you—"

Sherman's raised hand cut Fred off. He addressed Kimball. "This man's been in the employ of this road three months," Sherman said. He tapped the messages he'd gotten with the back of his hand. "He's got a sketchy background. Worked a dozen places in the last three years, but not more than a month at any one place. Personnel says they can't trace a couple of his moves."

The dark eyes switched to Fred contemplatively. "You're sure there was a man at the ticket window," Sherman said.

Fred's mouth was hot and dry. This was the hundredth time they'd come around to that. They were accusing him of—

"If you keep asking me till doomsday I'll keep telling you," Fred said. There was a defiant ring to his voice. "And as far as my record's concerned I'm not ashamed to say I've been a boomer. I haven't stayed long one place. These short stays you mention—I was hired for relief work. It wasn't my fault I had to move on. This job—well, this is one job I wanted to keep. I mean this junction—"

"We checked with No. 9's conductor," Sherman said. "He didn't see anybody answering the description you give get off here last night. No medium-height man with a raincoat. The day men say they haven't seen anybody like that around here. Yet you say the man had a ticket. He had to buy a ticket in order to have one. Yet no ticket has been sold from here to Bannerman."

"I don't know that he had a ticket," Fred answered wearily. This was another one that they'd put at him

over and over. "I said he told me he didn't want a ticket. He had one."

THE tap came at the door again; the same stranger appeared there. "The news hounds are here, chief," the man said. "Some photographers, too. They wanna take a shot of the fellow you got in here." That nod toward Fred.

"No pictures," Sherman said. "None of that wreck, either. Tell 'em I said so."

The man went out and Traveling Freight-agent Kimball spoke. "I suppose you'll deny you knew the kind of cargo No. 31 was carrying." He pointed a sharp finger.

"Sure I'll deny it," Fred retorted. He was getting fed up. They were trying to say that somehow he wrecked this train, had caused those three men on the head end to die. "You men came here last night and got off No. 9, and asked me some questions. I didn't know what you wanted. I didn't know that 1st No. 31 was mostly empty box cars. Not until I heard it on the telegraph wire. I didn't know anything about the second section excepting I had an order to hand on. I was standing out there in the rain with my orders on their hoops when I saw those switch points slide right under the pilot of the engine. He never had a chance to stop. Got his brake on them—" Fred shuddered.

The large rolling bulk of Division Superintendent Weston, pot-bellied and cinder-bitten, barged through the door. He was accompanied by a man Fred knew to be Joe Decker, a division bull. Decker looked self-conscious and ill at ease in the presence of the FBI man.

"Well?" Weston's voice rolled booming in the small room.

Traveling Freight-agent Kimball gestured with a well-manicured hand. "You don't have to look farther than that." His gesture was in Fred's direction. "Two hundred thousand dollars worth of important defense program materials hopelessly wrecked. Some of that stuff will require weeks to replace. That'll mean a lag on certain bomber production. That'll mean this railroad might not get the haul on some of this stuff that I sold the shippers on."

The FBI man sifted through his papers. The super cleared his thick throat and his massive jowls quivered. They all looked at Fred.

Fred came up from his hard chair.

Kimball said, "I can't figure how he did it. How anyone did it. We ran a dummy first section. Empties. If anything was to happen—" He shrugged.

Fred's heart beat faster. That was it then. Somehow the brass hats had expected something to happen to 1st 31 while the important stuff on 2nd 31 got through. The hot wheels. The hot journal boxes, the set-outs necessary at Salem. But still this awful wreck at the junction switch.

"Not only sabotage, but cold-blooded murder," Kimball was saying. His voice droned into Fred's harried brain. "Markey's story about a man in the waiting room. No proof. His story that he stood out with his orders waiting for the freight train. Three men on that head end died. No witnesses. Markey got burned trying to rescue the brakeman who was pinned under some burning wreckage. He's got burns on his hands and face to prove it. Maybe he chanced the burns just to make it look like—"

"Hold it," barked Superintendent Weston. He glow-

ered at Fred. His flabby jowls were purplish. "Go outside a minute, Markey."

Sherman, the FBI man, opened the door and motioned to his assistant in the telegraph room. Fred was allowed to pass.

A CROSS the telegraph office through the open door to the waiting room he saw the three forms under the sheeting, laid side by side on stretchers. Then he saw the day operator looking at him. The freight train's conductor turned and looked away. So did the brakeman. They both went out.

Fred's breath caught in his throat. Tears of rage suddenly blinded him. They all thought that he'd done this thing.

He gripped the edge of the ticket window and the hard bend of his fingers hurt. Behind him the restored wires brought in the ceaseless metallic mumble. Orders, messages, reports. The drizzle continued on the easterly wind and the smoke from the wrecker's engine lay close to the ground in a lazy drift.

All traffic had been at a standstill. Trains were being detoured over a competing line far to the south. The big hook swung and tore into the shambles and flung the broken timbers into the ditch to the accompanying rattle and clank of drums and dogs and chains, and the tattoo exhaust of steam.

The day operator sat at his table and stared at the rain. Fred leaned on the ticket-window ledge and watched the door into the agent's little office. Behind that door his division boss, and the freight man, and the FBI man . . .

The door swung abruptly inward and the smoky countenance of Superintendent Weston was dark above his thick, wide shoulders. He beckoned to Fred Markey.

Once again in the presence of his inquisitors, Fred felt that awful quiver where his stomach ought to be. They all looked at him stonily. Joe Decker, the company bull, moved around to the door on squeaky shoes. He left but the others stayed. East of the station Fred could hear the wrecker puffing. The smell of charred wood from the wreck had permeated the office. There was the wet musty smell of a waybill press.

Weston, the super, said, "You didn't get a good look at this man you say came to your ticket window?"

There it was again. Back and forth. Fred felt his nerves failing. His eyes were sultry as he met the super's gaze.

"I didn't pay any attention," Fred answered. "Like I said before, I had a message to send. The dispatcher was calling. I had an order to copy. The fella said he didn't want a ticket."

"You don't know the color of his hat or coat?"

"Look, Mr. Weston. There's one dim bulb in that waiting room. It was above and behind this man. I had one light in the telegraph office—over the telegraph table. When I turned around—well, it was like a silhouette, him standing there. Like an outline. He had a quiet voice. Nothing else—"

"His lack of description," Traveling Freight-agent Kimball said, "convinces me, Weston, that it's just a story. Something he made up to tell. Something—"

Sherman cleared his throat heavily. Superintendent Weston glared at Fred from soot-rimmed eyes.

"Okay, Markey," the super rumbled deep in his barrel



The gunman had Fred by the coat collar, punching him brutally with the gun

chest. "We're accepting that story for the time being. But you're out of service. Get it? You're relieved of duty, and you'll stay put here at Cordville until further notice. You'll be available when you're wanted by the FBI or anybody else."

"Please, Mr. Weston," Fred pleaded. "If you'll let me keep on working—"

"Go to your room and get your rest," Weston snapped. "That's all."

### III

**C**ORDVILLE wasn't much of a town. It was a mere dot on the railroad map with a scattering of houses, a few stores, an abandoned sawmill and an old freight warehouse west of the passenger station that had been boarded up ever since the closing of the milling business and the brick yards—the two industries that once had made the place thriving.

It was important as a train order office on this single track railroad. There was a long siding that would hold a couple of hundred cars, and of course there was the branch line over which a train ran in each direction once daily—a mixed job with a way car for package freight and a coach for passengers and crew.

By noon of the day following the wreck at the branch-line switch Cordville was alive with newspaper men and photographers, with insurance and federal investigators to say nothing of staff men from division headquarters of the railroad.

Fred Markey lived at Cordville's one boarding house. There was no hotel. And now that boarding house was

running over with people—strangers who went about their business without fuss, and who looked at Fred with queer questioning glances.

The reporters came and tried to interview Fred, but he avoided them. His landlady's husband was a big Mick who felt that somewhere Fred was getting a dirty deal, so the Mick, whose name was Pat Canady, and who had once bossed the local section crew, kept the reporters at a respectful distance.

Fred, following his inquisition at the station, slept restlessly until the middle of the afternoon. He came awake with a start and heard the long whistle of a locomotive. And all at once the events of the previous night crowded in upon him.

He lay still and heard the labored exhaust of the engine on the slight rise that led up to Cordville from the west. An eastward freight. Traffic must have been restored.

He got up and went to his window, and gazed across the brown bare backyards toward the main line. He saw the long brown line of cars creeping. The wet tops glistened like the wet roofs below him.

There was a light tap at his door and as he turned from the window it opened. Pat Canady's pale blue eyes were clouded with serious concern.

"I thought I heard yez movin'," the Irishman said. "An' I'm hopin' it's a little rested yez feel, Fred Markey. Agnes is brewin' a cup o' tea to warm yere heart, me lad, an' it's me that's got news fer ye."

"Good news?" Fred tried to smile but the burns still throbbled a little. His right cheek was patched and when he saw himself in his bureau mirror it was the first he

realized that his brows had been all singed off in that desperate effort he'd made to get the hotshot's brake-man from under blazing timbers.

"Well, not exactly good, it ain't, me lad," Pat answered. He sat heavily on Fred's bed. "Thim Micks on the track gang finally got the line so's traffic can move. Slow it is, but it's movin'. But it's about this stranger, Fred Markey. The wan ye said come into the ticket office. It's in all the papers that ye said it, me lad."

"They've tracked—"

"I wish it was such that I could tell ye," Pat broke in and shook his head. "But tis no such luck. I've just been after hearin' down the street that the federal men an' the state cops has combed the country an' it's not a trace of such a person. The state cops has asked everybody in Cordville about any suspicious strangers, but not a stranger's on record in the past several days."

"If they could find that man," Fred said, "then they'd find out who—"

"Tis right ye are, Fred," Pat said wearily. "The man must've got away in a car quick, an' yet this town ain't on any highway that would help him for speed. As ye yerself know it's muddy road from here to the main road, an' the state cops could find no tracks of a car outside of thim that brought in the doctors from Salem in the middle of the night."

"The earth didn't swallow him," Fred said doggedly. "And he didn't come to Cordville on No. 9, that west-bound passenger job. If I could only hear that voice again, Pat, I could nail him."

The landlady came with the tea tray and presently she and her husband left Fred with his thoughts.

**T**HEY were tumbling thoughts that tightened his stomach muscles and tensed his arms and legs. He gulped the hot drink on the tray but left the scrambled eggs and toast untouched. It was his breakfast, and not tea, but his Irish host had always insisted that tea was the name.

He kept trying to call up some definite picture of the man in the waiting room drumming on the ticket-window ledge. It struck him as odd that he had distinguished no features. Usually even in just a casual glance you could say whether a man's nose was long or short, or whether he had big ears—something definite, at least. No wonder the FBI men and Traveling Freight-agent Kimball and the super thought he was lying about the man having been there at all.

What had that code message the FBI man left with him contained? What inside dope did the FBI have on attempted sabotage to the road's most valuable freight that had prompted him to get off the westbound passenger at Cordville and make those terse inquiries about the passing of the first section?

Fred realized that he probably would never know the answer to those questions, and unless a miracle happened he might never know the answer to the strange riddle that now so completely involved him.

The thought of the three dead men under the twisted wood and steel sent cold chills through him. No doubt in his mind about that shadowy figure in the waiting room having slipped into the telegraph office to unlatch the switch lever. On an interlocking plant no one could have done this, but with that old—

Suddenly Fred sat straight up. He went to the window

and looked across toward the tracks again. The clouds were low, gray-black in the failing light of day.

Could it be possible? The thought that had come to him grew huge and bewildering in his mind. His fingers fumbled with his necktie. He got it in place and looped the knot and pulled it up into his clean collar.

The earth, he told himself, didn't swallow people up. If the state cops had found nothing in the way of marks left by a parked car near the scene—well, there must be something else then. The man with the turned-up collar must be right here in Cordville, must be in position to watch every move of the investigators, the officials and the state authorities.

His fingers fell away from his tie with a gesture of discouragement. What was he talking about? Suppose the man hadn't made his getaway immediately. Certainly he'd had plenty of time. And he could have had a car over on the highway, or near it, where he would have left no marks. It was eleven miles to the highway. So what? Couldn't a guy walk eleven miles without too much trouble?

Then, too, there was the railroad. A man could get away on the railroad and never leave a mark behind.

Fred watched darkness come. He sat in his deep chair at his side window and saw the dim figure who had taken up a position over there in the neighbor's arbor. A shadow on his tail.

His fingers made little convulsive movements. FBI Chief Sherman was taking no chances on Fred slipping away from him. A fierce anger mounted in Fred.

At eight o'clock he buttoned his black coat tight at his throat. He paused in the upper hall to hear the voices of his landlady and her husband coming up softly from the parlor below.

Pat Canady was saying, "I might slip up an' tell the lad that the bulls has all gone off about their business."

"Ye'll leave him alone, poor lamb," Agnes said stoutly. "Good riddance, say I, if it's gone they have, but I'm most glad for them reporters gettin' out of my sight. Nor I didn't like the looks of that Sherman, if ye ask me, Pat."

Fred paused, startled. Sherman gone off? To lay some sort of trap? A queer convulsive grip at his stomach wouldn't relax. He slipped noiselessly down the back stairs and presently stood in the black dripping night.

**T**HERE was no one on duty at the Cordville station between six and eleven P.M. The night trick began at eleven and ended at eight in the morning when the day man took over for a ten-hour stretch.

Fred felt in his pocket for his keys. Maybe if he could just sit there in the dark in that waiting room, and try to figure out just how the killer moved the night before . . .

It was a wild idea. The station would be watched. The FBI men certainly wouldn't leave it alone. And whoever was on guard there wouldn't welcome Suspect No. 1's presence.

Fred made his way through the alley. He took a dozen steps, then paused and listened, then took a dozen steps more. If these guys would only believe him, it would be easier. But they wouldn't.

The street light at the mouth of the alley threw a long shadow behind Fred Markey. He cut through a vacant lot to avoid the light. By taking this course he was sure

he had eluded anybody watching his house. He was close to the track. He could see the blinking light of the siding switches far down to his left.

He reached the main track east of the station and hugged the protecting boxcars in the storage spur. Above the dark office the green light of the semaphore glowed steadily through the mist. Even the short platform was dark.

Fred ducked out of the shadows to cross the short stretch of open space to the shelter of the station's overhanging eaves. He hadn't expected this total blackness. Not if Sherman had left a watchman. There was something deeply sinister about it, something ominous. He could smell the char of burned wreckage from the farther ditch where the wrecker had dumped it to consume in the dampness. There was the smell of fresh creosote on newly placed ties where the skidding engine had torn up the track.

There was the stillness of death over the scene of that crash. The stillness of death around that black station.

He would walk in, he told himself, whistling. He would tell the watchman anything. If it was a company bull, he would get along all right.

The sound that crooked his long fingers into claws, that stilled the breath in his throat, came from his own telegraph table, muted but clear.

It was the same rapid drumming sound that the shadowy figure at the ticket window had made with his fingers not ten minutes before three men rode to glory through an open switch. But this time it wasn't a drumming of fingers in an odd pattern of sound. It was the machine gun blur of the Morse letter H made in rapid succession as if the sender was either calling a station, or doodling with a key. The way a man might draw an H on paper over and over again while getting something straight in his mind.

Fred couldn't see into the room. He had come up behind so that any watchmen who might be lurking in there couldn't see his movements through the windows of the bay.

He listened as he moved cautiously along the back wall. And now he heard the drumming of the H suddenly cease and strange words follow that were evidently some sort of code. Disconnected words that meant nothing to him. But there were two things that did mean something. First, he knew every hand on the division the way he'd know the voice of a man he worked with. This was a strange hand. Second, there was a breathless urgency in the sending.

Those two things were enough to send a current of tension through Fred Markey.

He got into the waiting room from the back, still moving cautiously. If he could only get to that telegraph table in time he could use his jack box to trace the sending. What if there was somebody on guard—he would explain—

He acted on the hunch. He got out his keys, fumbled for a match to give him a light on the lock. He got the key in the lock and paused with no breath in his lungs.

Had that been some quick stealthy movement from inside?

Quickly he twisted the key, pushed the door inward, felt it hit something that seemed momentarily to resist. And then across the office he heard the hinges on the door to the agent's little room creak.

SOMETHING rolled away from the door as he gave it a mighty shove. He fumbled along the wall, reached the telegraph table, snapped on the light above it.

In quick strides he reached the agent's office, jerked the door wide, found it empty. The one window on the back wall beside the waybill press was open.

Fred stepped on the balls of his feet. A grimness set his mouth. He turned back to the telegraph room and to the telegraph table. Somebody had been in here seconds ago picking up code! Somebody who'd fled.

He gripped the key, flipped it open, drummed an H. If that H was a call letter, some sort of signal, there ought to be an answer.

There was. It came with that same old pattern. That same hard drumming. Fred jerked his hand away from the key as if an electric shock had been stabbed through it.

He turned to the jackbox on the wall. He took a plug and drove it into a hole with one quick jab. He grounded the wire west of him and still he heard the H.

To the east this killer . . .

The movement of the door from the waiting room drew his eye. It was only the wind. And then he saw the thing that had held the door momentarily, and had rolled in the dark under his forced shove.

The huddle of a man almost behind the door. A queerly sprawled figure with one hand projected and a ring on a finger picking up light from the drop bulb.

Fred Markey approached that body slowly and reluctantly, feeling the dryness of his throat. He saw the face and the hole in the head. He said, "Joe Decker," through his teeth. The company bull—lying there in his blood. Another murder. What fiendish thing was riding the high iron tonight?

Behind him on the table the queer code was running, with the same urgency. Fred moved now with desperation. Instantly he knew what it would mean if he should be caught here with this dead man. He knew that sooner or later his flight from his room would be discovered. There was little time to lose. That sending—one more detail to check.

He switched off the light and worked in the dark. He called the next station east of him on a local wire, took a chance that wherever this code sender was he wouldn't hear the local wire.

When the operator answered Fred asked him to ground the c-12 circuit on which the code was flowing—ground it to the west of him.

The code continued. Presently the operator came in and said, "Grounding west cuts him out from here. Anything else you want?"

"Thanx," Fred pounded. That was all he wanted to know. Somewhere east of the Cordville station, but west of Parkton, in that narrow distance of six miles, the killer was stationed.

Through the waiting room door he heard the distant voices. Without waiting further he slipped across the agent's room and out the window through which some other shadowy figure had just left.

#### IV

SIX miles of railroad was a lot to search for a tapped wire or two. But if fortune would only favor him . . . The main thing was to stay out of sight of whoever might

be walking into that dark telegraph office now. Poor Joe Decker. Fred's fingers were stiff again, and the hard bend of them hurt. He considered his own position. He was Suspect No. 1, and nobody would listen to his strange tale about code.

But somebody had been listening to code in that dark office, and had killed Joe Decker in order to listen. Why?

Somewhere in the raw night another No. 31 was running westward. On that train there would again be valuable freight—supply stuff for those bomber factories. There might be other trains. The killers might not strike again in the same way, might not strike at all. But someone was giving information from down the line, and someone else was receiving it in that Cordville station. Maybe it was the other way round. Fred wouldn't know that. But he knew it wasn't the work of just one man.

He hurried breathlessly eastward along the main track, passed the dark sawmill. Beyond this he paused and looked back.

"Could be," he told himself. "Yeah, could be."

There was a light in the station telegraph office now. He couldn't tell how many people might be milling around. If one of them could work a wire they could soon find out that Fred Markey had talked with the Parkton operator just five minutes ago.

He wondered if they'd get bloodhounds. The thought of one baying behind him chilled him. Then something else drove all thoughts of himself out of his mind.

There was a strange rolling sound and it was nearing. He could hear a clacking along with it. And he didn't need to be told what it was. He ridden those things many a time in going from one telegraph job to the other. It was called a speeder, and it ran on three wheels, and you pumped it the way you pumped a handcar.

Fred dropped flat on the side of the fill. The rolling wheels came rapidly closer. Then the speeder was passing him and a huddled figure was on it. It carried no lights. The figure was bent over the bars. There was an outline of movement. He could hear the panting breath of a man not used to such strain.

A G-man? Or the man who'd escaped from the office at Fred's entry?

Fred came up, crouched, and followed. He kept to the center of the ties where the gravel was comparatively even. He stumbled a lot. He couldn't hope to keep up with the thing, but eventually he might find where it stopped.

The green light of the east siding switch came nearer and nearer as he ran. He could still hear the soft roll of the wheels. Distant now. He saw the momentary blink between himself and the switchlight that told him quarry had passed that point. If he only had something he could ride.

It seemed an age before he too passed the switch. And then all at once he caught in breath and paused with his legs trembling and sweat running down his body.

**F**IFTY yards from where he stood was the old brick kiln on the right of the track, as he faced eastward. The grinding of wheels, closer now on the heavy air, told him that the ghost on the speeder had stopped and lifted the thing over onto the brick yard spur, and was now easing along on gritty rails that hadn't carried an engine or car for many long months. Rusty rails.

No need for hurry now. He gave attentive thought to

the figure on the speeder and decided that the man hadn't tarried at the station after his escape through the window. He might have paused long enough to see who lit the light above the telegraph table. What then? There seemed but one answer. This speeder must have been hidden in or behind the old saw mill. The man must have gone for it. It wasn't light; it would have to be carried or rolled from its hiding place and put on the track. Thus Fred could have passed the man without either of them knowing it. Fred decided that this was the right theory.

He remembered what had been said about the earth swallowing up the strange man he had tried to describe to the law. No wonder there hadn't been any tracks for the state cops to follow. Nothing on the roads to pick up. You just naturally didn't leave tell-tale tracks on a railroad—not not even when you rolled across rusty rails with one of these little speeders.

But who could the figure on the speeder have been? The man who'd been in the station on the previous night had been sending from down the line. The shadow in the station had been listening. How many might there be in this thing?

A surge of panic flooded him with momentary weakness. It was a long way back to the station, back to where he could get help. A good three miles. He couldn't turn back now. There might be a chance that, with only a couple of these guys, he could do something that'd hold 'em until he could get his fingers on their sending key. That was all he needed to do.

He kept low in the blackness and moved on. He passed the spur switch at the brick yard and went more cautiously. The poles were on the right-hand side between the main and the spur.

There was one way to find a tapped wire. He got down on his hands and knees and began to crawl. And he felt over gravel and cinders with the palms of his hands. It was slow work. It had to be slow. A slender strand could easily be missed.

He found it and bounced back from it. It lay loosely on the gravel. On his right loomed the deserted brick plant. He couldn't distinguish anything but the wall, a blacker density in the opaque night.

Three miles east of here, around the long bend, was Parkton, and east of Parkton was what everybody on the division simply called the Hill. It was a descending grade eastward which slowed westbound trains. It was long and winding, and Fred was glad that here ended his search.

He was still crawling, still following the tiny strand in the dark. Once he gripped it tightly with his thumb and index fingers to see whether he could detect any pulsing in it. Sometimes you could. He'd always heard that. But, no—it was just a piece of insulated copper wire.

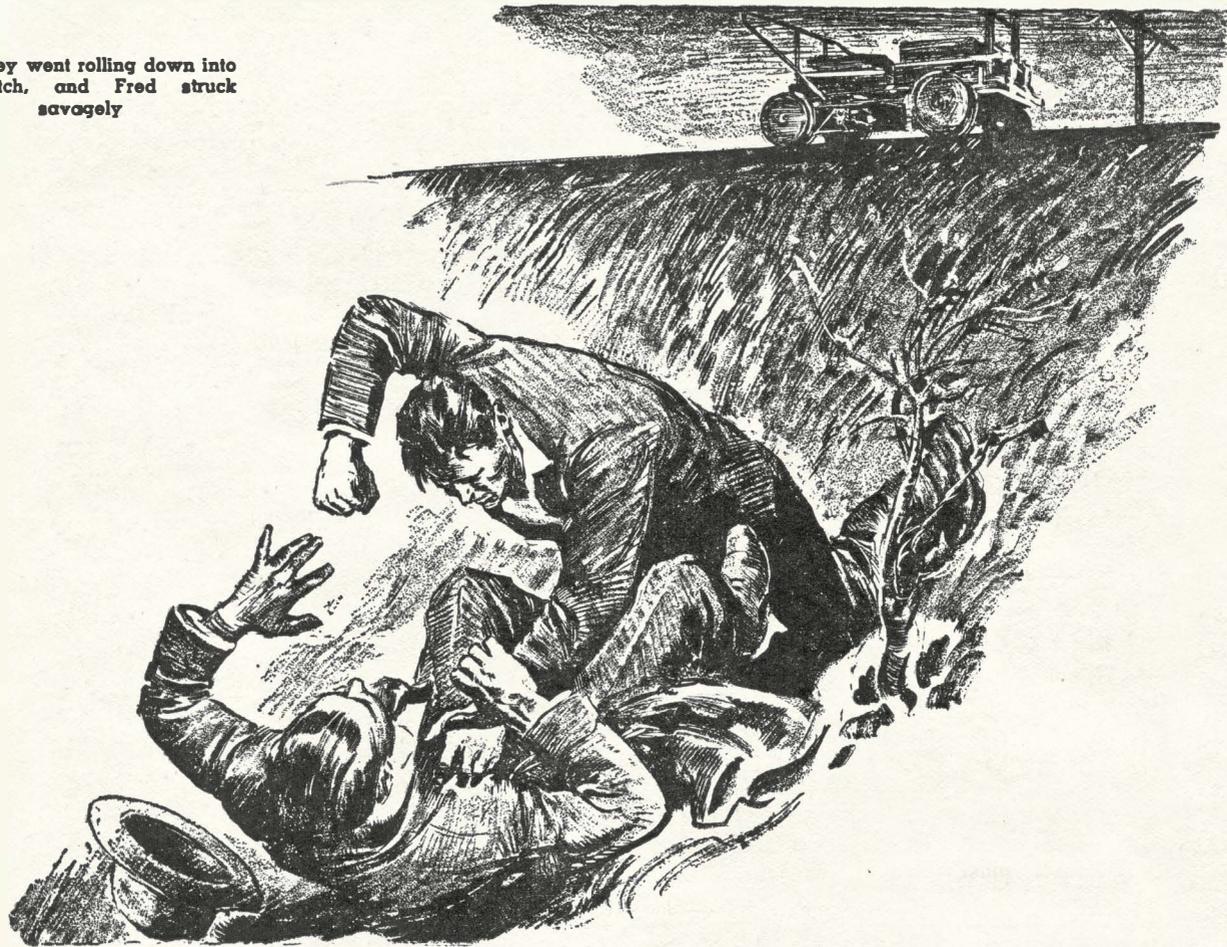
He followed it to where it went into the building, or rather beneath the old boarded-up office part of the plant. He flattened out and crawled under. And presently he stopped and let out breath slowly.

Someone was walking the floor above him. Someone was talking. The voice was a low blur. Maybe it was a soft voice. The man last night had had a soft voice when he'd come to the ticket window to ask about No. 6.

Then came a voice that wasn't soft. "What'n hell's eatin' yuh?"

"Look, chief," the voice said. "You yourself give us

Then they went rolling down into the ditch, and Fred struck savagely



the tip. Didn't yuh? Runnin' east as a extra, this freight train. Thirty-three box cars loaded with crated planes. Man, have we got 'em spotted. All your company bulls an' your FBI men'll be ridin' your No. 31 west, lookin' for more trouble there. An' here eastbound whata we got? Don't be a dope. What'll happen on the hill east of Parkton—well, there ain't a board in the world won't say it was an accident."

Fred was scarcely breathing. He was trying to hear the soft reply. There were two indistinguishable voices now. And the steady pacing on the floor had stopped.

The loud voice said, "Oh, mebbe there might be a brakeman killed, chief. But what the hell's a brakeman? That extra'll stop at Cordville to meet No. 9. Ain't we heard the order right here? Well, what more do yuh want?"

Fred tried to get the picture. An eastward extra loaded with boxed planes for Britain perhaps. For export. Everything on the railroad looking after westbound No. 31. This extra, without class or rights on the time card, high-tailing east. And on the hill at Parkton. . .

He shuddered. There were at least three men inside. How they got in there he would have to find out. He couldn't hear any telegraph. He couldn't see any light through the cracks. Perhaps a back door. He'd have to go very carefully.

He backed out from beneath the boarded-up office. He had no idea of the time. The best thing perhaps was to find their speeder and get back to Cordville as fast as he could go. Leave them in this building. Get help.

"Well, whata ya know?"

The light came first and voice next. The light from

the pencil torch was a sharp blade in Fred's eyes. The voice came from behind the light.

"So that's what pulled our little wire loose—you rollin' over it. Good work, chum."

FRED tried to say something, but the gun that came into view made him speechless. He'd never had a gun pointed at him in his life.

"Come on, playboy," the voice said.

This would make four men, then, Fred reasoned. He crawled out. The gun poked his ribs. "You don't need the cannon," Fred said because he had to say something.

"In my business, chum," the man said pleasantly, "sometimes you need a arsenal. Round back. Step quick an' keep your hands in sight."

There was a door round back and the gunman opened it. His pencil of light tunneled the gloom.

The gunman said, "Yoo-hoo, Speedy. We got company."

Ahead of Fred another door slid back on a rusty track. Yellow light was behind the figure who stood there. It was the man who'd stood at the ticket window.

"Who?" Speedy snapped, and he had a gun drawn. "Don't tell me—"

"Little sunshine," the gunman said. "The Cordville op."

There was a sudden blurred movement of footsteps behind the man in the door. A whispering, a scurrying.

Then the man in the door said, "And he's hot. State cops looking all over for him." The same soft voice that had asked about No. 6. "He caught my code somehow, Arnold. But how he traced us here—"

"He was playin' by himself under the buildin', Speedy," the jocund Arnold said. "Mebbe he heard somethin'."

"Come in, Op," the soft-voiced Speedy said politely. He stood aside. Fred entered the dust-smelling office.

"Mebbe he just fits in," a third voice said now, and Fred recognized the harsh voice he heard from his position beneath the floor. Then there was a fourth man. But where? He shot a glance around him quickly. He stood with these three. The fourth then—the one he'd followed out of Cordville. His mouth tightened and his eyes almost closed. The little telegraph sounder in the box that was a field set ticked away merrily.

"Okay, toots, whatta ya know?" It was the gunman. Arnold, who now grasped Fred's coat collar and shoved him back against the wall.

## V

FRED stood there and Arnold slapped him and punched him with the gun. Fred didn't know anything. He told them he didn't. They knew better.

Three of them against him. If he could get to that instrument. The fourth man in flight. Why? Because the fourth man must remain unseen. If Fred could only be certain. He had a hunch. This whole thing had come from somewhere inside. Otherwise the gang could not know train movements like this and train cargoes. But anybody who could read Morse, and knew anything about train movements certainly needed only to listen to a busy train wire.

If he could only get over there. Ten feet, that was all. Ten feet between him and the table on which that field set clicked faintly.

He could hear all the familiar orders, the reports, the bandied words between operators and dispatchers. The man called Speedy sat at the telegraph table. He had put away his gun. In the light of the candle he looked thin and stark. He had a long nose and the eyes of a killer. And now he drummed that odd sound of H with his fingers on the hard wood.

Arnold had a good-natured face. You'd take him for the guy that drove the ice wagon back in the old home town. He could be jolly. Only his mouth was too thin, and there was something deadly in his humor. The third man, with the harsh voice was small for the size of his voice and lightning quick in his movements. He still held his gun loosely in his lap. He perched on the edge of the table and swung a foot. They called him Lizard.

It was Lizard who's little eyes glittered at Fred and who said, "I got an idea, Speedy. You know what?"

Arnold smiled at that. Speedy looked up from the field set. "What?" he asked. He still drummed with his hard fingers.

"We could put this punk on the extra. They'd find his body in the mess. He's hot anyhow. He ain't doin' us any good hangin' around this way. We could tie him onto one of the cars, onto the brake staff between the cars. When the spill come—well, there'd be enough of him left for 'em to name him. They'd say he done it, an' couldn't get clear. They'd say something went wrong."

"You got lots wrong with you, too," Speedy said quietly. "No go. We got orders on this guy. We bump him, but not that way."

Speedy tensed suddenly over the field set and looked up. Lizard, sensing that the wire was saying something im-

portant, quit swinging his leg. "What's it rattlin'?" Lizard demanded.

Fred heard it and saw that something was going wrong.

"This isn't right," Speedy said.

"What ain't?" Arnold's steady gun wavered a little, but he didn't take his eyes off Fred.

"The dispatcher's changing the orders," Speedy announced. He bent lower over the set. "No. 9's late. The extra won't stop at Cordville. The dispatcher's giving the extra rights to keep going. Not so good."

"So what?" Lizard demanded. He wasn't watching Fred at all. Fred's mind was leaping. With two of 'em bent over the wire, if he could only jump the gun this third one held. Maybe he could get the candle out. Maybe. . .

"So we'll have to stop it," Speedy said quietly. "The train'll roll by Cordville wide open now in the next five minutes. Lizard, you take your little satchel, set your clock for thirteen minutes exactly as soon as you get No. 9 halted by a fusee. Get it?"

"I got it."

"You remember what car you set your satchel under?"

"Tenth behind the engine," Lizard said.

"You know where to set it?"

"What the hell you think I am?" Lizard demanded.

"Up in place along the center sill where it'll hook to the brake riggin'."

"Just wanted to make sure."

FRED swallowed. He got the picture now. Some sort of time fuse. Thirteen minutes. Just time enough to spot that extra on the downgrade at the Hill. Blasting loose the brakebeam. A dropped beam on a speeding train could mean a shambles even worse than what had happened at Cordville's junction switch.

Setting the thing for thirteen minutes meant that they would use a short fusee. One that would just stop the train with its red flare around the curve east of the yard here. The train would proceed as soon as the flare burned out. At Parkton it would get a green high light in the semaphore. It would get a highball from the operator. The engineer would mumble and wonder who'd flagged him down and conclude that it must've been a section foreman making a rail repair, or something like that. The hogger wouldn't stop at Parkton to find out. Not when he was in a hurry to get farther along for the west bound passenger train.

Fred watched Lizard get up from the table and go to a corner. He reached into what had once been a cabinet and brought out a black box. He handed it gingerly. He brought out a short red fusee. Decided to take more than one.

He came back to Speedy who glanced at his watch. Speedy said, "Get going."

Lizard's eyes drifted to Fred's wide frightened ones. "You oughta let Arnold bring the punk," Lizard said. "He ain't doin' us any good here."

There was a silence for a full minute following the Lizard's departure.

Then Speedy said briskly, "Okay, Arnold, take your friend down there. Wait." He went to the closet and came back with a short thin coil of stout rope. Arnold took the rope. Speedy continued, "Don't let Lizard see you do it. If he thinks I act on his ideas I'll have him on my neck forever."

"It ain't bad," Arnold said.

Speedy bent back to the field set. Arnold hefted the rope with his left hand, held the gun with his right. The rope slipped a little and just for a split second Arnold's eyes followed it.

Fred's forward rush smothered the gun even as Arnold's eyes caught the movement. Fred's rush was with swinging fist and high drawn knee close in to the gunman's body.

The gun exploded. Arnold gave a wild curse; Speedy came up from the table and tugged at his shoulder holster. The candle behind him flickered. Fred got one heel out behind Arnold's heel and Arnold crashed onto the table as Speedy tried to get a shot around the body of his companion.

Fred ducked under Arnold's left hook and slapped at the candle. The room was suddenly black.

"Block the door!" Speedy yelled. "Get a match. A light. Anything." His voice was no longer soft and purring. It was to Fred a shining and a guiding light. He swept up the broken chair on which Speedy had been sitting, and swung down on where the voice had been.

The chair crashed on the table and the voice shouted again. This time Fred's aim in the dark was better. The rungs splintered on something and there was a grunt. A weight fell against his feet.

Arnold got a light and swept the room with it. It hadn't quite picked out Fred when he leaped for it. He caught onto Arnold's left arm. Arnold's gun blazed from his right hand, in close. It was as if somebody slapped Fred across the side of the ribs with a flat plank.

He thought of that eastbound extra bearing on Cordville with all those boxed fighter planes. Thirty-three carloads of them headed for port. Two minutes, three minutes, maybe. Not long. He had to get to that key. He realized he had hold of Arnold's gun wrist. Arnold had dropped the flashlight to the floor now and was attempting to twist free, gouging Fred's eyes with the stubby fingers of his right hand. He was bending Fred's body back.

He couldn't hold on! He thought he could hear the extra's distant whistle, blowing far the other side of Cordville. If he just could hold out—if he could hold on with one hand and get that key open with the other. Just a couple of code letters. He wouldn't need to send any more than that. Just to let the dispatcher—

He ground a heel into Arnold's instep. His breath was coming in great sobs. His whole body was drenched. His wet hands clung to the gun wrist, twisting.

The light beam was toward the closet in the corner. The door was opening. Then a voice said, "Okay, Arnold?"

And Fred saw who it was—that fourth man who, he thought, had disappeared.

"Blast this punk, chief—" Arnold panted.

Chief! The guy who had to stay out of sight.

**T**HE shadowy figure ducked into the gloom, hurried through the door. Arnold called something after him. Then Arnold relaxed and tried to come in with a blow. Fred, at the same time, took a long chance with the gun hand. He had it pointing down. He squeezed with both fists on the trigger finger that Arnold had hooked into the guard. A scream burst from Arnold's throat. The bullet shattered his kneecap and drove down through his leg.

He dropped the gun as he went down, flopping like a carp out of water. Then he got the gun again and let another one fly at Fred. Fred was over the telegraph instrument and not looking. The slug creased his thigh. He gripped the key and pounded.

"Hold that extra at Cordville." He was thinking of the figure that was getting away out there in the night. The one he didn't want to get away. "Send help—"

His fingers wouldn't work. The wire broke open. He tried to run for the door and found that his leg wobbled. He was sucking in breath in great gasps. But he got out into the night and the air braced him. He couldn't see but he could hear the figure tugging to get the speeder onto the tracks.

The man was crazy! In the face of the extra, if it didn't get stopped, this was suicide. Fred lunged toward the place where he heard the wheels grind on the rusty spur. His leg was going. So was he. But this—this had to be. He had to last. Only a couple of minutes.

He overtook the fleeing man at the spur switch where the speeder had to be lifted over the points onto the main. He knew he didn't have much stuff left, so he knew he had to make it quick.

He struck with his hard head. He drove it into the other man's thin screaming mouth. He clutched at the thin throat with both hands. Then he went down in the ditch with the figure beneath him. And somehow he had a sensation of not giving a damn about anything.

Thus in the ditch they found him and his captive, and in the brick yard they found the bleeding Arnold. With an engine creeping along and men combing the right of way with lights and torches, they got Fred awake long enough to tell them that there was one more down the line with something in a black satchel.

When they got Fred Markey awake again he was in the company hospital, and he wasn't feeling so awfully gay. But he liked the handshake the division boss gave him and after he got his tongue to working he asked about his prize find, the man who'd tried to stay out of sight so well.

"Funny thing is, Fred," Superintendent Weston answered, "them G-men kinda suspected this Traveling Freight-agent Kimball all along. But they couldn't get a thing on him. They suspected everybody high up in fact, even me, and mebbe you think they weren't lookin' into private lives. I'm tellin' you. But they got Kimball where he'll keep, and they got them gangsters—as pretty a sabotage setup the country's yet uncovered. And all because a tramp operator by the name of Markey did a damn' fine job singlehanded an' tracked down a phantom on a telegraph wire. How'd you get onto it in the first place, Fred?"

"Just like I left it open for the dispatcher to find where I was," Fred answered slowly. "I traced down the code the man was sending with that letter H as a signal. East of Cordville, West of Parkton. When I saw I couldn't last to tell the dispatcher everything, and at the same time round up that fourth guy, I—well I just left the train wire open, and I knew he'd try to trace where it was open."

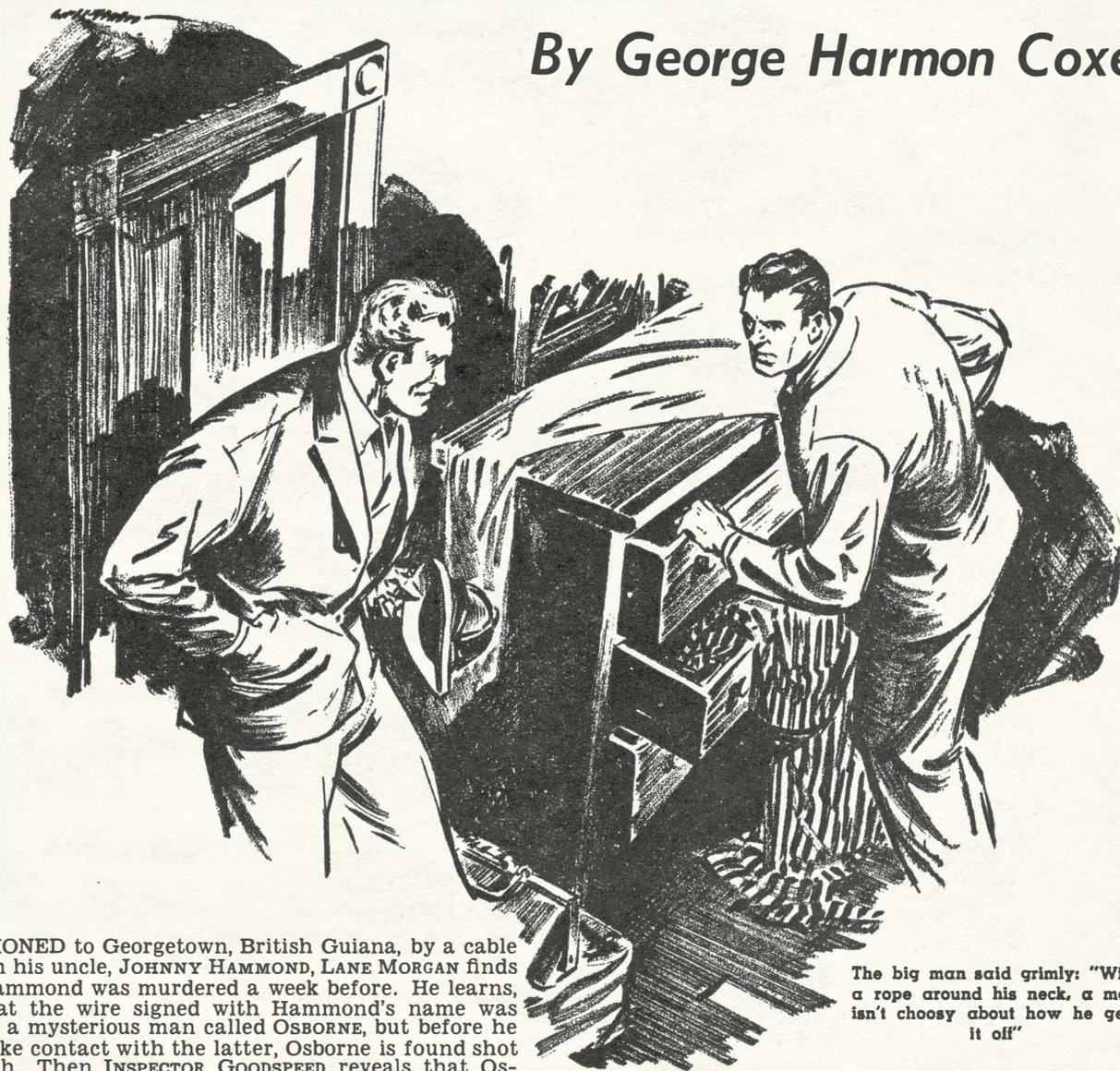
"A smart guy like you shouldn't be a boomer," said Weston. "So if you got any favors to ask—"

"I just want to go back to Cordville," Fred answered. "Nights. It's a good job, and there's a girl I met—"

"It's your job all the way," the super replied.

# Assignment in Guiana

By George Harmon Coxe



**S**UMMONED to Georgetown, British Guiana, by a cable from his uncle, JOHNNY HAMMOND, LANE MORGAN finds that Hammond was murdered a week before. He learns, too, that the wire signed with Hammond's name was sent by a mysterious man called OSBORNE, but before he can make contact with the latter, Osborne is found shot to death. Then INSPECTOR GOODSPEED reveals that Osborne was a private detective from New York, hired by Hammond for some unexplained reason.

Two people were very close to Johnny Hammond. One is big, handsome KERRY SNYDER, right-hand man in the management of the numerous Hammond interests, which include a gold mine in Guiana, rubber and tin concessions, and a fleet of freighters. The other person is lovely VALERY WARD, who was Hammond's secretary and protege. In spite of the fact that she is very cool toward Lane Morgan, he falls in love with her.

**T**HESE two must be considered suspects, since they saw Hammond a few moments before his death. He was also visited that day by his lawyer, sleek, pleasant HENRI GIROUARD, who owns an interest in the Hammond gold mine; but as far as the murder is concerned, Girouard has a time alibi. To Lane Morgan another possibility is C. C. CASWELL, a pompous, down-at-the-heels little man who was fired by Johnny Hammond. It is Caswell who retails to Morgan the gossip that Kerry Snyder was carrying on an affair with Henri Girouard's exotic French wife, TASHA.

Girouard explains to Morgan that Johnny Hammond was about to sell six of his freighters, and Morgan meets the prospective buyer, a Dutchman named VAN ORMAN. The ships will be used in anti-Nazi trading activities, Van Orman says, and he is anxious to get Morgan's re-

The big man said grimly: "With a rope around his neck, a man isn't choosy about how he gets it off"

lease so that the deal can go through at once. But Morgan asks for a brief delay, for an English buyer named LAUGHLIN is to arrive, and Morgan wants to meet him.

**B**Y THE will in Girouard's hands, Kerry Snyder stands to be the chief beneficiary of the Hammond estate. But now Valery Ward reveals to Lane Morgan that she possesses a second will, made at the last moment, which drastically reduces Snyder's inheritance, to the benefit of Morgan. A second copy of this will has already been stolen, she says; and so Lane Morgan asks her to keep the whole matter secret for the present, thinking that the murderer will show his hand.

He does: Valery Ward is attacked, chloroformed to unconsciousness, and the Hammond house is ransacked, obviously in a search for the will, which Morgan now possesses. That is quickly followed by something much more serious. One of the witnesses to the secret will was a CAPTAIN DOYLE, formerly master of a Hammond freighter; and he is found murdered.

Since Kerry Snyder recently visited Doyle and since Snyder stood to lose by the second will, Morgan believes him to be the person who is trying desperately to eliminate the will and the people who knew of its existence. But there is another possible reason for the Doyle

murder. He was hanging around the night Osborne was killed, and he may have been blackmailing the murderer.

Lane Morgan now proceeds to make a duplicate of the secret will and to trace Johnny Hammond's signature on it. He is busy at this when he is interrupted by a knock on his hotel-room door. He goes to it—and is amazed to see that his visitor is exotic Tasha Girouard. . . .

## CHAPTER XVI

### WOMAN IN FEAR

FOR a second or two Morgan could only stare at her, and before he could find something to say she spoke. "I know you are surprised. I—I was passing by and I thought—"

"Certainly," he said. "I'm glad you did. Won't you come in?"

"Well"—she hesitated and glanced up and down the hall—"for a minute then." She stepped quickly forward and something in her seemed to relax and she was more at ease. "It was only to ask you about dinner. Would you be free the day after tomorrow?"

Morgan said he thought he would, caught by something in her manner he did not understand. She went on, saying that there would be nothing elaborate, just a few people he might like to meet, and he smiled and made some answer, admiring again the perfection of her full-blown figure, the thick-cream texture of her skin.

"What's the rest of it?" he said.

Color crept up the column of her throat and then she smiled. "I am not a very good actress, am I?" She took the cigarette he offered and sat down. "There is something."

He perched on the edge of the table, gradually becoming aware of the scent she had brought with her into the room, a faintly sweet yet spicy odor that seemed oddly familiar and stirred some forgotten memory within him. A half minute dragged by and then she looked up.

"It's about my father," she said. "He's in France. A professor. We are from Alsace and for many years now he has been strongly anti-Nazi. He knew what he was doing, I suppose, but he believed in everything he taught or wrote and—he also believed like so many others before the invasion, that the French army and the Maginot line could never be beaten."

Her gaze went past him to fasten on something beyond.

"I have not seen him in four years, although until France fell, I had heard from him regularly. I'd gone to Columbia, you see. My fiancée was there and—" She broke off, as though realizing she was digressing. "Naturally my father was well up on the lists of the Gestapo. He fled, finally, and somehow managed to reach the South of France and unoccupied territory."

"He's not safe there?"

"He's not safe anywhere on the continent. And he's not well, he's not strong. You know Mr. Snyder? He has friends—connections, and it is through him that father is able to get in touch with me now and then. But even Ker—Mr. Snyder cannot help him very much."

Her glance came back to him. "And so I thought—" She checked herself again and her eyes clouded, as if she had read the answer in his own. "But you can't, can you?" she said quietly.

Morgan didn't think he could, but he hadn't the heart to say so. "Isn't Snyder an American citizen?"

"Yes. But he has not been home for years. I thought you might have friends—someone in the State Department—"

The appeal in her eyes stirred him strangely. He did not have much hope, but he told her he would try.

"You will be careful," she said, rising. "One word to the wrong people would cost him his life. That's why I've been so helpless, hardly daring to speak about him. I've been afraid for so long—"

She caught her lip and stopped, and as she went to the door he realized the change that had taken place in her since she entered. The woman who turned to thank him and apologize for coming wore the mantle of quiet meekness he had noticed that afternoon when he had taken tea with her and her husband. Her physical beauty remained, but the compelling force of her personality was submerged by a surface manner that was quiet and colorless.

HE WATCHED her as far as the stairs. He closed the door and went over to the dresser, the spell of her dark beauty on him as he thought over what she had said. Her sincerity impressed him and yet, somehow, he felt that there should be more to the story than he had heard. Why had she felt it necessary to have such privacy? Or was there some other reason for seeing him at this time?

He saw her cigarette butt in the ashtray as these things went through his mind. He picked it up, inspecting the red-stained end. He looked away, still holding the butt, sniffing the scent that lingered in the room. Was this the same odor that had spiced the air of Snyder's living room the night before? Was the rouge the same as that which he had seen on the other cigarette?

He tossed the butt away and shook off further speculation, deciding it was unimportant. He took pencils and eraser from his pocket and locked the door, then he got out the will and set to work finishing the final signature on the copy.

Satisfied at last, he put the real will in the hotel envelope and the forgery in the one he had taken from Hammond's desk. He went downstairs, telling the desk clerk that if anyone inquired for him he would be back in a half hour; then he walked the two blocks to the library, finding C. C. Caswell sitting behind a semi-circular desk in the act of stamping some books for a dusky-skinned young woman.

The little man's face lit up at once as he saw Morgan, and he summoned a colored youth to take his place at the desk. Caswell came over to Morgan, taking him by the arm and leading him to one corner of the room.

"Well," he said, "nice of you to stop in."

"As a matter of fact," Morgan said, "I came to ask a favor."

"Consider it granted."

Morgan produced the envelope with the original will. "I have some papers in here that I wouldn't want to lose," he said. "Nothing of value to anyone but me, but it would be awkward replacing them."

"You'd like me to take care of it for you? Certainly." Caswell reached for the envelope. "I can lock it up here."

"I'd rather you took it home with you."

"Whatever you say."

"I may need it at any time. That's why I don't take it to the bank. It would be safe enough there but if I should want it at night—"

"Exactly."

His explanation sounded slightly lame even to Morgan, but Caswell did not seem to notice and, actually, it was the truth. He had thought it over in his room. He had no idea what might happen. If nothing did he would turn over the will to Girouard in the morning. Meanwhile he wanted that envelope to be accessible and reasonably safe.

It would be a simple matter for a gunman to enter the hotel lobby in the middle of the night and force the lone clerk to open the safe. There was no real safety there, and realizing this he saw, therefore, that this was the logical place for the duplicate will.

Suppose someone did break into the safe, or force the clerk to open it? There might, conceivably, be circumstances in which he, himself, could be forced to surrender that will. If this did happen it would be exactly the break he wanted. Crazy, perhaps, but the only way he could think of that would assure Valery Ward's safety. Should it become known that he had a will, or that it was in the safe, then the girl would be left alone since it could be assumed that she no longer had possession of it.

He did not trust Snyder; he was not sure he trusted Van Orman—or even Henri Girouard, this in spite of the fact that his uncle had trusted him to the extent of naming him executor of the new will as well as the former one. There was, however, one person who might help clarify his suspicions—Laughlin, the man Johnny Hammond had cabled, the one who represented the British purchasing mission in search of ships. . . .

"It will be perfectly safe with me," Caswell was saying. "Whenever you want it—"

"Fine," Morgan said and put a hand on the thin shoulder. "I appreciate it a lot."

## CHAPTER XVII

### TWO MEN WITH MILLIONS

AS SOON as Lane Morgan got back to the hotel he asked the desk clerk if a Mr. Laughlin was staying there.

"Yes, he is," the clerk said.

"Do you know if he's in?"

"I believe so, sir." The clerk glanced at the rack behind him. "Room two, on the third floor."

Morgan thanked him and went to the telephone alcove. He called the Tower hotel, asked for Mr. Van Orman and presently the heavy blunt voice answered.

"Something has come up about the Hammond Line ships, that you should know about, Mr. Van Orman. "I can't tell you over the phone—"

"Is Mr. Girouard with you?"

"Mr. Girouard doesn't know anything about it. Neither does Mr. Snyder. And it's important that nothing be said to them until you've seen me. Will you come?"

"All right, but—"

"I'll be in Mr. Laughlin's room."

This time Van Orman's voice hit back at him. "Who?"

"Mr. Laughlin, the English buyer," Morgan said, hearing something that sounded like a drawn-out, "Oh," as he hung up.

Room two was almost at the head of the stairs on the third floor. Morgan had to wait a minute after he knocked and then the door opened and a pair of narrowed greenish eyes gave him an inspection that seemed not only to size him up but to measure every detail of his face as well.

"Yes?" a flat voice said.

"I'm Lane Morgan," Morgan said. "Johnny Hammond's nephew."

Nothing changed in the man's bony face and his. "Yes," was identical with the other.

"You're Mr. Laughlin, aren't you?"

"I am."

Morgan found himself resenting the man's stare. "You came down here to buy some ships, didn't you?"

Laughlin opened the door wider and stepped out of the way. "Come in," he said. "How did you know I was here?"

"Van Orman told me. Yesterday in Girouard's office."

Laughlin seemed to relax. "I have to be careful," he said. "I talked with Girouard this morning. He said he would know by tonight whether you—"

He broke off and cocked his head speculating. "Have you anything to show you *are* Lane Morgan?"

Morgan produced his wallet. Laughlin inspected the cards and papers offered, and Morgan inspected him, finding the man to be about his own size, with a lean hard-bitten look about him.

"I've phoned Van Orman," he said. "He's on his way over here now." He hesitated, seeing something flicker in Laughlin's eyes. "Then we'll decide who gets the ships. Maybe you'd like to look at this."

He took out the forged will and passed it over.

THE REACTION came almost at once. Laughlin's brows came up. He looked at Morgan, seemed about to speak, then read on. When he had finished he looked up again, eyes wider now and clouded by a look of puzzlement. He handed over the will and stood up.

"I didn't know about that," he said slowly.

"Neither does anyone else."

"Makes a difference, doesn't it? Maybe we'd better wait for Van Orman. . . . He doesn't know about this? Well, you can do all your explaining at once then."

"That's what I had in mind," Morgan said. "But while we're waiting—if you don't mind giving me a chance to satisfy myself that you have the authority to buy those ships—"

"Certainly." Laughlin went to the closet. He took out a somewhat battered suitcase well plastered with stickers, opened it, produced a folder.

First he handed Morgan a cablegram which read, *Ships now for sale. Utmost secrecy essential. Advise—Hammond.* Morgan glanced at the date—the 19th—and at the Washington address.

Laughlin handed him a carbon copy of another cable. This one said, *Still interested. Should arrive twenty-third.* This acknowledgment was signed *Laughlin*, and the date, Morgan realized, was the one on which he had arrived. He mentioned this.

"I was a day late," Laughlin said. "Held up at the last minute and didn't get in until yesterday." And then he was handing over two or three letters addressed to J. H. Laughlin, in care of the British Embassy in Washington.

Morgan felt relieved. He was confident now that in Laughlin he had one who could be depended upon. Not that he suspected Van Orman in any way; he didn't; it was simply that he had reached the point where he could take no chances. So far he had taken Girouard's word as to Van Orman's mission. Now, if anything was out of line, Laughlin would know.

Conrad Van Orman must have hurried because he was breathing hard when he came in and his ruddy face was moist. He snatched off his pith-helmet, his thick-lensed glasses exaggerating his blue-eyed stare as it caught Morgan and jerked over to Laughlin.

"Well, Mr. Morgan," he said bluntly. "Hello there, Mr. Laughlin. Glad to see you. Mr. Laughlin's been through here before," he said to Morgan. "Some months ago. He stopped at Puerto Loya on the same trip." He put his helmet aside and took out a handkerchief. "Now," he said, as he began to mop his bald spot, "why am I here?"

Morgan gave him the will. "You'll know more about it after you read this."

Van Orman scowled at the envelope, glanced suspiciously at Morgan and opened it.

"What?" he said as he started to read. "What's this?" He flipped quickly to the second page and his scowl put funny humps and wrinkles in his face. "I don't understand," he said. "Does Mr. Snyder know about this? Why, according to this he has nothing to say about the sale of those ships. And Girouard—"

"Neither of them know—yet," Morgan said.

"Van Orman dropped heavily on the bed. "This is most unusual. I don't know what to say."

Laughlin lit a cigarette and blew out the match. "Yes, Mr. Morgan. Just what *are* your plans?"

"Mr. Hammond had the papers all made out," Van Orman said.

"And I'm going to do just what he would have done," Morgan replied. "That's why we're here. You want to buy ships and I'm ready to sell. You've made an offer and I'd like to hear what Mr. Laughlin has to say."

"I don't follow you at all," Laughlin said. "I called on Girouard this morning and made him an offer. He was to let me know after he'd heard from Mr. Snyder—and you."

"But since Mr. Snyder has nothing more to do with the ships, you'll have to deal with me," Morgan said.

"Then why not go to Girouard—the three of us?" Van Orman asked.

THEY had him there, and Morgan knew it. He could not give them any reasonable answer. He couldn't say: Look, my uncle was murdered and I'm trying to find out if there is any tieup between his death and these ships. He couldn't say: I want to give the killer a chance to show his hand and for all I know it could be Girouard.

"That's a question I can't answer," he said. "You want to buy ships. I'll make up my mind right here which of you is to get them. You must respect my confidence until tomorrow; then we will go to Girouard and close the deal."

"This is highly irregular," Van Orman said, "highly irregular. But, damn it, I want those ships! I don't care how we do it. What do you say, Laughlin?"

Laughlin sat down. He regarded the tip of his cigarette, put it in his mouth. He reached for the folder he had taken from his suitcase.

"When I was here before," he began after he had studied some papers inside, "I made Hammond an offer of fifty dollars a ton for those freighters." He glanced at another slip. "Thirteen thousand, six hundred tons in all—\$680,000. We're prepared to raise that figure slightly. The price I'm authorized to give is fifty-five dollars a ton, Mr. Morgan. \$748,000."

"I'm afraid that isn't quite enough," Morgan said. "Mr. Van Orman's made a better offer. You know what he wants them for?"

Laughlin smiled thinly. "It's our business to know all about Mr. Van Orman and his company."

"Oh," Morgan said, the statement taking him by surprise. "Then—that's your final bid?"

"We need the ships," Laughlin said. "Under some circumstances we might be prepared to outbid Mr. Van Orman no matter what he offered. Rather than have them fall into the hands of the enemy, for example. But in this case Van Orman's use of this tonnage will help us indirectly and it will cost us nothing. I will still have \$748,000 to put into other ships." He put his folder aside. "So I'm afraid you'll not get us to bid the price up for you this time."

Morgan colored, aware now that his scheme had sounded as if he had no interest but the highest price. Before he could think of a reply, Laughlin continued.

"However, this is only my personal opinion. If I may, I would like to get a confirmation from Washington. You say you'll not be ready to put through the sale before tomorrow. I can get a cable off this afternoon. I should have a reply by ten in the morning."

"That's all right then," Van Orman said, mopping his brow. "I'm satisfied to leave it that way."

Morgan folded the will and put it in his pocket. Somehow he had not expected the discussion to end so simply.

But there was nothing he could find fault with; if Laughlin was satisfied, so was he.

LATER, when he had deposited the envelope and forged will in the hotel safe he realized that his plan seemed sillier than ever. In the beginning he had gone along on the hope that Van Orman might not be all he seemed, that if he showed the will, and Van Orman had some connection with the man who wanted that will, then Van Orman might see that word of it got to the proper man.

Even so there was still a chance. Van Orman's story had been substantiated by good authority, but this did not preclude the possibility that there was someone else involved besides himself. So long as word of the will got abroad, there was a chance the killer would make his move. . . .

Morgan drove to Girouard's office, catching the lawyer just as he was leaving.

Now, as Girouard led him in and seated him, he felt again the absurdity of his plan. Why, after all, should there be any illegitimate connection between Girouard and Van Orman? Stubbornness alone made him pursue a brief questioning.

The lawyer talked first of the murder of Captain Doyle. He, too, had been summoned from bed to answer Inspector Goodspeed's questions the night before, and as he exchanged information with Morgan his voice was troubled.

"I don't understand these murders. What's behind them? Both Osborne and Doyle had business with Hammond. So did I, and you, and Snyder and others. Will it be one of us next? I don't like it. I don't like it at all. The man must be mad."

"The police—" Morgan began.

"Are frantic, believe me. But I don't suppose you came here to talk about that. Make up your mind about the will yet?"

"I'm not going to contest it."

"I think you're doing the wise thing. I'll have a paper for you to sign in the morning and then I can go ahead with the sale of the Hammond Line."

"Did the Englishman show up?"

"Laughlin? Yes. This morning."

"How was his offer?"

"Not good enough, I'm afraid. Not by seventy odd thousand. But Laughlin asked me to give him until tomorrow noon to put in another bid. Under the circumstances I had to do so."

"Snyder is agreeable?"

"Oh, yes."

Morgan nodded. "And how soon will he get the money?"

"Right away. Van Orman has a certified check. As executor and with full authority to act before probate, I can turn it over to Snyder as soon as I am satisfied everything is in order."

"I see."

Morgan rose, impressed with the lawyer's ready corroboration and telling himself he was getting nowhere fast.

"And when do I get mine?"

The lawyer smiled. "Even before that if you like. From Hammond's half of our gold claim. Our agreement reads that one can buy out the other for a price estimated at eight times the last year's earnings."

Remembering now what Caswell had told him before, Morgan nodded. "The price you're paying will cover my bequest?"

"More than cover it. Twelve hundred a month times twelve times eight—easily. What I haven't got in cash I can get from the bank."

Morgan walked down the stairs with him.

"Tasha—Mrs. Girouard—spoke of getting in touch with you about dinner," the lawyer said. "Did she? Fine. . . Well, cheerio."

And with a smile on his darkly handsome face, he moved on down the street before Morgan thought about offering him a ride.

AT THE hotel, Morgan stopped at the foot of the stairs and went back to the telephone alcove, the desire to hear Valery Ward's voice too strong to resist.

Somehow he had to see her again. When the cruise ship had been in he'd overheard some of the passengers mention a place called Bel-Air. A night club of sorts, he guessed. Maybe they could dance.

"Is Miss Valery there?" he asked when Alice answered, and then disappointment crushed him for Alice answered, "No, sir."

"Do you expect her soon?"

"I don't rightly know, sir."

Dejectedly he went upstairs and undressed. He went down the hall to the bath and showered glumly, the unheated but warmish water stimulating him not at all, and set about his shaving. In all he was there perhaps fifteen

He saw Snyder swing but the fellow was off balance and Morgan beat him to the punch. The big man bounced against the wall and Morgan moved in, not reasoning or thinking until an elbow blocked his fist. His next punch missed. Before he could recover, Snyder's foot tramped on his slipped one, anchoring him.

He did not see the blow, but just a blur of motion that came from nowhere and exploded with a blinding flash before his eyes. He felt no pain or shock, and as that blinding light dissolved to blackness one last thought went with him: *That decoy of mine worked after all.*



Van Orman mopped his face and said: "This is highly irregular. But, damn it, I want those ships!"

minutes before he gathered up his things and shuffled back to his room.

He went in, depositing his things on the washstand. He had scarcely emptied his hands when, from the corner of his eyes, he saw the door start to close. He glanced up, startled, reaching for the door, and then, from behind it and closing it with one hand, stepped Kerry Snyder.

He was grinning. Morgan saw that first—the old insolence in his eyes; he saw also the hand in the pocket start to come out with some object that gleamed darkly. Then something snapped inside Morgan and he stepped up, not waiting to see if it was a gun, not waiting for anything, but swinging with both hands at that rugged chin.

Fury powered his blows. His right hit first, the shock of impact jarring clear to his shoulder. He saw the smile go. His left smashed solidly. The blond head snapped back and a fierce exultation gripped him.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### GO VISIT THE ENEMY

GRADUALLY the smothering blackness faded to gray and the roaring inside Lane Morgan's head moderated to a disagreeable hum. Without knowing he had opened his eyes, he found himself staring up at the mosquito bar and then things came back to him with a rush.

He sat up; too suddenly it seemed, for the giddiness attacked him and he had to close his eyes a moment until it stopped. Kerry Snyder was sitting in the chair by the window and when his image steadied and became clear, Morgan saw that he was grinning.

"How do you feel?"

Morgan got his feet on the floor and twitched his robe about his nakedness. There was throbbing in his head

and another in his jaw. He ran his fingers along it, finding only a slight swelling in spite of the aching tenderness. He saw then that Snyder was imitating his gesture, caressing a spot higher on his jaw in the same way and grinning.

"For your size you really hit," he said. "With a little better aim you might have put me away. How about it? Think a drink would help?"

Morgan just glared at him, his anger fed by the incredible coolness of the fellow. Except for the gun held loosely in one hand, Snyder could have been no more at home had he been invited here as an old friend. He went over and pressed the button by the door.

"And when we get the drink," he said casually, "it might be a good idea to have the boy bring up that envelope you've got in the safe." He came back and sat down. "It is in the safe, isn't it?"

"You go to hell," Morgan said, his normally even voice rough with anger.

"Lucky, finding you in the bath," Snyder said.

Morgan stood up, slipped off the robe and began to dress. "You searched the room last night."

"And didn't find anything. So I came back again, thinking maybe you didn't have it then."

"Didn't have what?"

"Johnny's will. The one that makes you top dog."

Morgan filed his anger away for future use. This, after all, was what he had wanted to happen. Not in just this way, perhaps, but his idea had been sound. Snyder was sure of a new will now. And the only way he could be sure that Morgan had it was through someone telling him, someone who was sure of his facts.

Van Orman! It had to be. And so there *was* some definite connection between the two. All right. Let him think he had everything his own way. Give him the will—the phony one—if necessary, and then when Snyder thought he was safe, go to town with the real will and the police.

The knock on the door checked his thoughts.

"You want to tell him to bring it now?" Snyder said softly.

"You're crazy," Morgan said.

Snyder opened the door and told the boy to bring two whiskies and soda. When he shut it his grin was sardonic.

"I'm in no particular hurry," he said, "but what's the point in stalling when—"

"You don't expect me to hand it over, do you? Why should I?"

"Because you haven't any choice. Oh"—he waved the gun carelessly—"you've a choice, but not much of one."

"Go on."

"Well, it's hand it over and keep your peace of mind, or don't and take the responsibility for what will happen to Valery Ward."

MORGAN stared at him. "That sounds like something out of a corny movie or a radio serial," he said. "I do what you say or the heroine pays with her life. Just like that, huh? That's very funny." His grin was tipped with scorn as he waited. Seconds went by. Snyder just watched him with a steady, emotionless stare. "Very funny," Morgan said. "You're in love with her. She's in love with you. Yet you sit there and try to—"

"No." Snyder shook his head. "I'm not in love with her and she's not in love with me."

Morgan held his breath. His heart turned over, thumping; then he could not quite believe this and sobered, hearing Snyder continue.

"You're a smart lad in lots of ways, Morgan, but you confuse things. I like Valery. We get along all right because we understand each other. Oh, I made a play for her, but she sees through me. No." He shook his head again. "She's all right, Val is, but—"

"You're crazy," Morgan said, still not quite believing. "You haven't got the guts to hurt her."

"Not personally perhaps. But things like this don't work out as you imagine. I shan't even see her. Ever, if you don't play ball."

Morgan looked at him, trying to find something in his face to justify his belief that the man was bluffing. But there was nothing there. His smile was fixed and mirthless, his blue eyes pitiless.

"Your premise was sound enough, I suppose," the big man said. "If I loved her it would be different. I can think of one woman I wouldn't hurt for ten million dollars, but there are a lot of girls in the world, Morgan."

He leaned back, continued patiently. "What you overlook are the essential values. You take that will to Girouard tomorrow and what happens to me? I get a half interest in a rubber estate. I've put a lot of work on it, but it will be another year or so before we're sure we've got the plant disease licked. If we have, that acreage will be worth big money in two or three more years. Now it might bring forty or fifty thousand, if we could find a buyer ready to gamble. So how do I come out on the will? Twenty thousand maybe—some day when we get a buyer." He glanced at the gun in his hand, pocketed it.

"Twenty thousand, maybe, and Valery and I are still friendly. As against that eight hundred thousand sure dollars in my pocket and possibly a pang of conscience once in a while if I should wonder what happened to her.

"I've kicked around a while and you haven't. I see things differently. I've never had a chance to get my hands on any real money, and I'll likely never have the chance again."

THE boy knocked. Snyder reached for a coin and opened the door. "I'll take the tray," he said, handing over the coin. "And listen. Mr. Morgan has an envelope in the safe downstairs. Bring it up, will you? And he'll sign for it."

He handed over a glass and Morgan took it. He went back and sat down.

"Cheerio," he said. "And when that boy comes back don't get the idea I'm going to put up with any argument. Sign and keep quiet or I'll walk out of here. Valery's already gone from the house. Start something and she'll never come back. And if you think I'm bluffing, if you think the police can ever connect me with her disappearance—"

He went on but Morgan did not know what he said. Valery was not at home when he had called. The maid did not know when she would return. Was that part of Snyder's plan? Was he bluffing? In any case Morgan could take no chance, now or ever, with Valery.

Even if he handed over this phony will, Snyder dared not free Valery until he had collected his money. To do so would mean that she could testify about the will. With Valery free he could not collect for months; therefore he must not have been lying. He must already be holding her somewhere.

Morgan jumped up, his mouth hard. "Listen, Snyder! If anything happens to that girl—"

"Here's the boy," Snyder said. "Take it easy. Why should anything happen to her if you give me what I want?"

He stopped at the door, threatened Morgan with a quick cold stare; then turned the knob and admitted the boy.

"Clerk says you're to sign, sir," the boy said. He gave Morgan the envelope and held out a slip of paper and a pencil. Morgan signed.

"Take the tray with you," Snyder said and then, when the door had closed, he held out his hand and said, "Thanks."

Morgan gave him the envelope, watching him open it and scan the two typewritten pages.

"That does it." Snyder's smile came. "You did the smart thing for once, Morgan, but I still can't figure why you've been so stupid up to now. I can't figure what I've done to deserve all this good luck. Why didn't you turn in that will when Valery gave it to you. She did give it to you, didn't she?"

Morgan glowered at him, saying nothing.

"I didn't even know there was a will until two days ago," Snyder said. "Just luck I ran across it. Then I knew there was a copy but I couldn't be sure where it was." He chuckled. "If you had turned it in I would have been sunk. I guess there's such a thing as being too smart, huh? And this time you played everything perfect—for me."

He went to the bureau, leaned against it, folding his arms. Morgan looked at him, seeing that insolent grin, the cocky assurance, and suddenly there came to him a surge of wild vindictiveness such as he had never felt in all his life. He wanted to leap at that smirking figure, to beat it down with his fists, smash the handsome face, get his fingers in that neck and choke the truth out of it. He'd find out where Valery was . . .

"Steady, Morgan!"

THE voice cut through his consciousness low and abrupt. Morgan caught himself. He did not know his face was white and stiff, that his lips were flat against his teeth and his eyes bright with the fury of his thoughts. All he knew was that the man had guessed his thoughts and had perhaps saved him from some attempt that could offer nothing but futility.

No! That was not the way. The thing to do was to pretend to accept defeat until he was rid of the man and then—He got no farther with his planning because Snyder spoke again.

"The rest of it should work out all right. There are just a few things I want to point out before we go."

"We go?"

"Yes, Snyder said easily. "I thought it might be a good idea if you checked out of here and spent the night at my place."

Morgan nodded and made his voice sarcastic. "That's very thoughtful of you. What's the rest of it? You've got the will."

"But not the money yet. It's like this." Snyder put his hands on the edge of the dresser. "You still have to sign some kind of paper saying you accept the conditions of the will—the one that names me. Girouard told me that much. Otherwise he wouldn't authorize the sale and that would tie me up. Now there's a ship in today, New York bound. The *Thailia*. She'll sail shortly after noon tomorrow and you'll be on it."

"Really?" Morgan said.

"You can phone from here when you check out and get space on her. You can get off at Trinidad and fly the rest of the way, or you can fly back here for all I care. You might as well pack now. Tell them at the desk you're leaving tomorrow and spending the last night with me." He gestured with one hand. "That's about all there is to it."

"Not quite all," Morgan said. "What about Valery?"

"She'll be all right, old boy. She'll be released when I've collected. I understand it won't be more than a couple of days."

"You say she'll be all right. How do I know that?"

"You'll have to take my word for it. Look. All I want is the money. When I get it I'm on my way. The money from Hammond's half of the gold claim will pay you off. The tin concession—well, that I'll have to forget. I'll have enough without it." He glanced at his wristwatch. "By

now Alice'll think Valery's gone visiting for a few days. She's done it before, she's got friends around the country. She'll be home twenty-four hours after I leave."

MORGAN stood up and tried to keep his voice level, to speak reasonably. "You think you've got a fool-proof plan but it is all based on one thing—that I'll do what you say. Suppose I don't get on that boat? Suppose I don't sign that release? What's to prevent me from going to the police?"

"Two or three things. They wouldn't believe you in the first place. You've got a story about a will but you can't prove it. You can't produce it and you haven't any witnesses—"

"Yeah," Morgan cut in. "Nice for you that Doyle isn't around, isn't it?"

"Very." Snyder returned Morgan's stare with steady eyes. "But let me get on. You can't make much of a story of a will and you won't do yourself any good with a story about my kidnaping Valery. Because in that, as in murder, you need what they call a *corpus delicti*, don't you, before you have a case?"

"They'd find her."

"No. On the map this place looks pretty small but it's got two hundred and fifty miles of coastline and extends back into the jungle nearly six hundred miles. A lot of territory, Morgan, and much of it is inaccessible. I know it pretty well and those helping me know it even better."

He moved to the door. His jaw was grimmer now and there were overtones of this same grimness in his voice.

"I'm getting a little annoyed with all this talk," he said. "I'll know if you try to cross me; I'll certainly know if you get in touch with the police, believe me. So make up your mind. You can tell your story if you like, but I'll tell you what will happen if you do."

"They'll question me, hold me, perhaps. But that's all. You can tie up the estate for a few months but that won't matter then because you'll never break the other will. I'll get it all in the end and there will never be a charge against me because there won't be Valery Ward to bear out your statements. I'll have to make sure of that for my own protection. Does that make sense?"

His thin smile came again. "I see it does. With a rope around his neck, a man isn't choosy about how he gets it off. I'm taking a chance, sure. For me the money justifies it. You can do as you please but if you think I'm bluffing you're more stupid than I thought. . . . Want to pack and come along with me now? A good idea, don't you think?"

Morgan stared at him. He had not really taken Snyder's invitation seriously when first given because in the back of his head there was the assumption, fostered by the movies and stories he had read as a boy, that somehow he would be held prisoner or at least find himself the victim of some degree of force. This was not at all the pattern he had expected and he said so.

"So you don't intend to stand guard over me from now until the boat leaves?"

"I had thought of it," the big man said. "But it's too risky. I couldn't expect to hold you a prisoner here, and I'd never try to take you out of here by force. I have a gun, of course, but I don't trust you much, Morgan. You've got plenty of courage when it comes down to it, and you're such a stubborn ass I wouldn't want to take the chance."

"No thanks. I'd rather have things more informal. I'd like the clerk to think we're good friends. I'd like to leave the same impression with my servants, in case they should ever be questioned. No, I'm not such a fool as to be melodramatic when it isn't necessary. If you insist on staying here, why I guess it'll have to be all right."



Morgan felt something snap inside him and then he was pounding that grinning, handsome face

Morgan went to the closet and took out his bag. He put it on the bed and began folding his suits, deliberately. His anger was gone now and his brain was calm and sharp and coldly calculating. He still had the original will. He could do nothing about it until he'd had a chance to think, to reason things out. Maybe there would be some way he could use it to trade with, to make a deal.

Meanwhile it might be the smart thing to play along with Snyder, to pretend to accept the inevitable. The fellow thought he had every contingency covered, so let him continue to think so and see what developed.

He went over to clear out his dresser drawers, forgetting Snyder's presence as a new thought warmed and comforted him. At least Valery wasn't in love with Snyder, and that in itself was more than he had hoped.

"All right," he said, and picked up his hat.

## CHAPTER XIX

### ALONE INTO PERIL

**M**ORGAN returned to the hotel for dinner that night, determined not to spend any more time in Snyder's house than was necessary. When he had finished he went to the telephone and called the Hammond bungalow.

"Has Miss Valery come back, Alice?" he asked.

"No, sir. Is this Mr. Morgan?"

He said it was, and did Alice know where Valery had gone?

"To the country, sir. To the Mitchells. She sent for her bag just after you called the first time."

Morgan thanked her and hung up. Well, there it was. Snyder hadn't lied about that. Somehow he had managed to get the girl away without suspicion on the part of the maid. It would not be difficult to find out who the Mitchells were and where they lived. He could also find out if Valery was there but—he already knew she wasn't,

didn't he? So what? Go to the police with his information?

He did not dare. There was no longer any doubt in his mind about Snyder. A complete extrovert, without imagination or fear, he was playing for the highest stakes and willing to use whatever methods were necessary for his success. No! The police were out.

He trudged downstairs to the bar, went to the corner table and ordered a brandy. He could think of lots of questions he had meant to ask Snyder now, even though he felt sure of the answers. Snyder must have sent the East Indian to his room that first morning.

Snyder had found the copy of the will and, not knowing where the original was, must have hoped that Valery Ward would keep silent about it, aware as he was of the girl's bitterness toward Morgan. It was Snyder, too, who had made the attempt on the night before, not with any desire to injure her but only to search her room for the will. He could not know that Morgan already had it.

There was more of these thoughts but always he came back to the same point of focus. The whole thing was his fault. If he had done the obvious thing—declared the will the minute it was given to him, this could not have happened. He'd told her he was going to quit but he hadn't. He had held on, waited, being stubborn. And she had taunted him and asked him to wait. Thinking of all this put a dull ache in his stomach.

He hit his fist hard against the table, not realizing it until he heard the glass jump and overturn. The noise helped steady him and he watched the brandy trickle toward the edge of the table.

Then, suddenly, his stare wavered and he sat up. Walter was there now with a bar rag and saying something that Morgan did not even hear. He wasn't aware that he had moved until he found himself on his feet.

He put down a coin and started for the stairs, the hinge of his jaw ridged and his eyes bright, seeing nothing in the room, seeing only the superstructure and stack of a rusty freighter tied up at the river jetty.

"Who," he asked the clerk at the desk, "has to do with clearing the ships that come in and out of Georgetown? The harbormaster? Some customs official—"

"Oh, yes, sir. A harbormaster."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Alexander, sir. . . . Yes, I think he has a phone."

Morgan found the name in the directory and asked for it.

"Captain Schwartz got his papers this afternoon," Alexander said when asked about the *Hammondson*.

"She's sailing in the morning."

"Early?"

"Somewhere between two and four if he expects to get the tide."

"In ballast?"

"For Puerto Loya."

C. C. CASWELL lived in a smallish bungalow surrounded by what looked in the darkness to be a miniature jungle of flowering shrubs. Their scent was sweet and strong as Morgan walked up the path, and light from the front windows left rectangles of yellow-tinted leaves and blossoms.

As he approached the steps someone stirred on the veranda and Caswell's voice challenged him. "Hello. Who is that? Oh, Mr. Morgan!" He came down the steps. "You've come for the envelope?"

"No," Morgan said. "What I want is a gun. Have you got one?"

Caswell seemed to stiffen in the darkness. "A pistol, you mean. Why, yes—"

"And a flashlight?"

"An electric torch? Yes."

Morgan paced back and forth, realized it and stopped, annoyed at his nervousness and impatience. He was standing deliberately still when Caswell came back and produced a small automatic and a flashlight.

"Loaded?" Morgan asked.

"Eight shots." Caswell hesitated, watching Morgan slip the gun in his side pocket. "Is it about—about those murders?"

"I hope so."

"Could I go with you?" Morgan looked at him.

"I think it's better if I go alone," Morgan said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd stand by, though. You have a phone? I may call you if you don't mind waiting up for a couple of hours."

Caswell said he would be waiting and Morgan thanked him and went back to the car. He did not have any trouble finding the right road and twenty minutes later his headlights picked up the scattering of thatched roofs that made up the native village on the Ward estate.

Although it was no more than ten o'clock, not a light showed anywhere in the village and as he drew opposite the huts he saw that every door and every window was shut tight to guard against the evil spirits of the night. When the dirt road loomed up before him he turned right on it and snapped off his lights.

Halfway there—he guessed the entire distance to be about a half mile—he stopped and got out. From the edge of the road he felt his way along the side. Waist-high grass grew here and he tested the ground, half expecting to find it marshy and thankful that it turned out to be reasonably firm. He got in the car and backed cautiously into the area he had tested, turning it around and leaving it just off the road.

Switching off the motor, he sat for a moment, thinking. Until now the hardest part of all was overcoming the temptation to go to the police. He could think of no better place to hide anyone than a ship bound for Puerto Loya; and not just any ship but one managed by the man who had the most at stake.

The officers would do Snyder's bidding. There would be a place to hide a person that even the crew might not know. Yet just because the *Hammondson* was sailing before dawn, was no proof that Valery Ward *was* aboard, and he dared not inform the police until he was sure. If he raised an alarm and Valery was *not* there . . .

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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# Dark Battle

By Louis C. Goldsmith

Author of "Give Them Wings," "Decide and Blast," etc.

The strange war-time story of an aristocrat who knew how to fly, but not how to fight with his fellows. And of a Green Grocer's Boy, who nearly robbed him of something dearer than life

on psychology . . . the affect of early impressions on a person's mind. Really astonishing."

Lord Roycroft pushed his glass of port aside with an impatient movement and stood up, his left thumb hooked through the shoulder strap of his Sam Browne belt. He was in the uniform of the Guards. It was traditional that the Roycrofts serve their King in the Guards and this year of 1915 was no exception.

"You're spoiling the child, Elsia," he said. "From all this bother and crying you'd think the green grocer's boy had struck him. We will forget the whole thing."

"Yes, dear," Lady Elsia agreed, her voice troubled.

Upstairs Terry Roycroft clutched a pillow in chubby hands, muttering against its tear-dampened linen. "I wish he'd killed me! I wish he'd killed me!"

\*

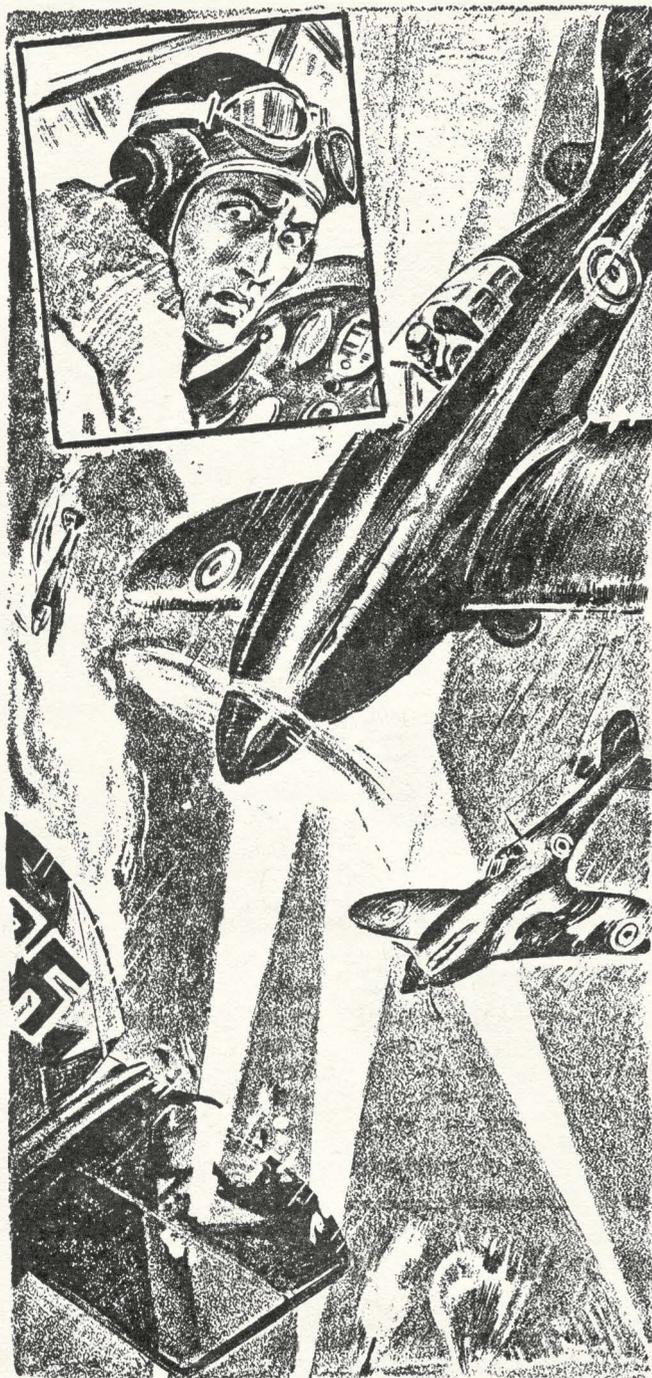
TERRY ROYCROFT, flying officer, jabbed his throttle, feeling a surge of power from the Rolls-Royce. He skirted widely around number four position in the formation, taking his assigned place on the left. Michelsen, commanding their squadron, glanced back over the left cowl of his 'pit. His voice was casual in the earphones: "Ready?"

Terry spoke in his sequence: "Ready, sir." The sound of his engine quieted a little as he slid the glass hatch cover above him. Gardner's formation was ahead of them, pointing at right angles down the field.

The air was nippy outside and there was a golden haze in it that was pure tonic to a man's soul. In other years, on such days, he and his father would be out for pheasants or perhaps have a shooting party up to their lodge in Scotland. But the Park was a hospital grounds now, Glendduyt having been turned over to the Red Cross to care for wounded of the Norwegians operations. And of all the places in the world his father had insisted on moving into London.

This flight today would be Terry's first scramble, if the Germans were up there. He was rather looking forward to it. Topping if he could shoot a Jerry down over the Channel. The old gentleman had been upset no end by him resigning from the Guards. Roycrofts had always served in the Guards.

Terry frowned, trying to push his mind away from that subject. He straightened the oxygen mouthpiece on his chest and let his eyes wander over the instrument panel. He felt driven by some inner compulsion, felt an urgent need of meeting the enemy and proving himself.



He was terrified: he was on the ME's tail, and in easy range

IT SEEMS incredible that a green grocer's boy could put to naught the careful breeding of centuries. Yet Terry Heathart Roycroft lay on the wide, four-poster bed upstairs and knew in his small boy's heart that something terrible had happened. And downstairs in the great banquet room of Glendduyt, Lord Roycroft and Lady Elsia dined alone and were disturbed without knowing exactly why.

"It's all nons'ense," the earl told his wife, impatient that his one-day leave should be spoiled by such a trivial thing. "The village boy didn't even strike him. Nurse Lucy saw Terry slip on the wet cobblestones and fall, just as she came from the green grocer's shop."

Lady Elsia's voice was severe. "Lucy shouldn't have taken him with her. Terry is so young, so sensitive. And just the other day I was reading one of these new books

Why didn't Gardner take off and give them the field?

Of course there was no disgrace in him resigning from the Guards. Quite the contrary since he left them for a more dangerous service. And he'd been hating the infantry work. That was before Dunkirk, when it looked as if they might trench in some place for the winter. Mud and all that sort of thing.

Grass flattened under the sustained blast from Gardner's aircrew. The five other planes in his flight charged down the field after him in takeoff. Terry worked nervously with his throttle and rudder to keep in position as Michelsen led out for their takeoff.

Terry hated these close formations and despite all their air tactics he had a secret conviction they could do just as well or better flying separated. But for that matter he had always hated anything, any sport, that involved teamwork or actual contact with others.

That was why he'd dodged rugby at school. It was why, later, he'd found polo intolerable though he had ridden horses all his life and could take a ditch or hedge with the best of them. In his first practice chukker one of the opposing team had ridden him off the ball. That finished polo for Terry.

Michelsen's voice came over the wireless: "Close up, Roycroft."

Terry opened his throttle with caution and moved the wingtip of his Spitfire in so that it closed the gap between the left wing and tail group of the plane ahead. He had that chest-heavy feeling of not quite being able to breathe. And yet they were still too low for the need of oxygen.

Roman Road made a white ribbon in the green carpet of fields below, angling off to the northeast. The Thames was widening to its mouth and he could see Foulness Island ahead.

**F**OR the last six months Terry had been wondering about himself. The Green Grocer's Boy had come back. It was the silliest kind of rot, because that was something that had happened to him when he was a mere child. He couldn't even remember the name of the Green Grocer's Boy.

Yet it was queer how those words remained with him. They were not a name so much as they were a foreboding of calamity ahead, a fear that he would be afraid.

It was why he'd resigned from the Guards. Fear of actual, bodily combat. He'd seen a bill poster near Covent Garden, the picture of a British Tommy with rifle held across his chest, facing a German. The rifle was gripped to deliver a "butts-strike" blow. It was a good drawing, one of the many recruiting posters. It conveyed a sense of vigorous action, of brutal, hand-to-hand combat.

Terry saw it and knew that he hadn't forgotten about the Green Grocer's Boy. He had cried out, involuntarily: "He'll fall! He'll fall!" The muscles of his own body had tensed against the inertia of his mind, striving to carry him away from the spot.

No one had heard that cry, or paid notice to it. Perhaps it was a reality only in his mind. Just as the Green Grocer's Boy. Just as the conviction he had that the British soldier would stumble and be at the mercy of his antagonist. Terry knew that the blow would never reach that leering German face. The Englishman would slip on wet cobblestones and fall.

The Channel coastline opened up before them and Gardner's formation turned southward toward their con-

voy, that looked like toy boats, stationary on a ruffled sheet of lead. They were still climbing to get above a layer of broken clouds. Those fat shapes of mist could serve as good ambush for the Germans.

Roycroft closed his teeth on the oxygen mouthpiece and took his first whiff from the canister. Engine sounds grew louder and everything seemed to sharpen into focus before his eyes.

**T**HEY were nearing the cloud layer. Terry dropped back a little in the formation. It was a strange thing that he didn't seem to be afraid of being shot down by a Messerschmitt, but was in deathly fear that he might touch some plane in their own formation.

The white vapor closed around him and he went onto instruments for a moment until they had climbed above. Gardner's formation had climbed through ahead of them. They appeared to be stationary against the pale indigo of sky, a perfect step V with one closure unit for rear guard.

Terry heard Michelsen's voice, brittle with command. "Second flight engage enemy bombers; first flight hold elevation to cover!"

The words startled Terry. He hadn't seen any bombers. Yet Gardner dropped his plane's nose and the others of his flight closed and followed in a steepening dive.

The enemy bombers had appeared, it seemed, from nowhere. They were Donier 17's, long, slender fuselages giving them the look of dragon flies. They were dropping altitude toward the convoy.

Michelsen's voice rasped again in the earphones: "Ware above you! ME's!"

The next instant the sky seemed filled with clipped-winged hornets. They'd been caught flat-footed with the Germans on their tails.

"Break formation!"

Terry felt a tremendous lift of spirits. He'd be fighting alone now and wouldn't need to be afraid of tangling in the formation. He canted his stick and jerked it back in a vertical, catching the nose up with top rudder. He saw Michelsen's Spitfire arch up for an Immelmann turn.

Then fear clutched at his throat. An ME was diving on him. It was so close that he could see the louver cuts in the engine cowling.

Years swept from his memory. He saw a grimy face coming toward him, scowling horribly; a chunky, muscular body with clenched fists swinging. It was the Green Grocer's Boy! There was the conviction that something terrible was going to happen and, as in a nightmare, he was powerless to avert it.

His hand had gone slack on the control stick. He was sideslipping out of the vertical turn. Clouds thrust their swirling white curtain between him and the Messerschmitts.

Instinctively he neutralized controls. The bank ball centered and he used rudder to bring the turn needle to vertical. For the moment he was safe. The German couldn't find him here, except by accident.

He put the plane into a twenty-degree turn. He would be safe as long as he stayed in the cloud. . . .

**T**HEY were grouped in Wing headquarters, making their customary after-flight reports to the intelligence officer. Michelsen's face had a stupid, stolid look as he summed up the calamity of that flight. Emotion didn't appear in his voice, except that he misplaced his H's:

"There was no good in 'oldin' formation, sir. They 'ad us dead to rights. Three of the boys shot down from my flight. One from Gardner's."

Terry Roycroft held himself stiffly, waiting for the other to make accusations. Nobody had spoken to him since that hellish ambush they'd been caught in over the Channel. It had been hours since that had happened. He was thinking words that had been repeated in his mind until they lost meaning: *I wish he'd killed me. I wish he'd killed me.*

Gardner made his report. One of the DO's shot down; credit to pilot officer Hart. Himself put a four-second burst into another. It was losing altitude at last sight. And then the retreat and one Spitfire downed.

His eyes moved about the circle of faces, showed only bewilderment at this thing that had happened to them. There was no change in his expression when he looked at Terry Roycroft.

Terry knew then. They had all been too busy with their own fighting to see what else had happened! Terry had to keep a tight grip of himself. He wanted to laugh. It was like being relieved from a death sentence. He fought the hysterical mirth that was in him, listening to the others report in turn.

None of them knew what he had done! None of them were aware that he'd stayed circling in that cloud until the fight was over. In their eyes he was still a man of courage equal to or better than theirs. A man to be treated with just a shade more respect than was accorded others. He was a Roycroft, the son of a belted earl, the descendant of proven warriors.

"I KNEW you'd be pleased, getting this assignment, Roycroft," Michelsen said. "Ordinarily a new man doesn't get a night scramble for several weeks."

The black 'raid curtains were pulled from the windows of the farmhouse that served as squadron headquarters. Red light of evening glinted on Michelsen's wide, homely face, showing it moist with the embarrassment of this meeting. He'd come very near to saying "m'lord."

The crooked smile on his heavy lips deprecated his own importance as squadron leader. "You've had your air tactics," he forced himself to continue, "so you know that in these night scrambles it's close and engage, instantly. No time for fawncy shootin', eh? And if they won't engage you drive 'em down into the ack-ack fire."

He misunderstood the constraint on Roycroft's face. "I'm only telling you this, Roycroft, because it's required of a squadron leader. Supposed to 'ave a friendly understanding; a little chat with a new man before 'e goes up for 'is first night scramble."

In his mind Terry was already up there, feeling his way through the darkness over London. *Close and engage.* The horrible reality of those words left no room in his mind for other thoughts. He was silent, fists clenched at his sides.

Michelsen's upturned face reddened slowly with his embarrassment. His hands with their stubby workman's fingers, with their close-clipped nails, smoothed the flight map before him; quick, jerky movements. He cleared his throat.

"Silly, what? I thought that scramble this morning might 'ave gotten your wind up a bit. I mean," he hastily added, "just a bit thick out there y'know, for a man's first scramble."

Terry had to wet his lips and swallow before trusting his voice. "Yes, sir."

Michelsen stood up, his short body, cheap ill-fitting officer's uniform contrasting with Roycroft's tailored perfection. "That is all," he said, his voice turned flat and colorless.

Terry saluted and about-faced. A few yards from the tent a Hurricane's engine barked to life. Further down the line a Spitfire joined its clamor—the periodic warmup. A Zwicky petrol lorry went charging down the field in its never-ending task of replenishing fuel tanks.

Young Roycroft moved with the precision, the erectness that he had inherited from generations of military forebears. Another Spitfire came to life, its three-bladed air-screw fading into a metallic disc of speed.

It was getting near dark now. If a man walked into that murderous circle of steel—if *he* should walk into it—they would never know about the Green Grocer's Boy. He shook his head, slowly, in despair. Such an easy escape wasn't open to those who bore the name of Roycroft.

THIN, inquisitive cones of light probed the dark mystery ahead. Terry hunched over the small wheel control stick of his Spitfire, conning the map of London that was etched in his memory.

The patterned burst of ack-ack fire was below him. It made a bright, traveling line of death that repeated itself, moving to the west edge of his fighter zone, stopping, returning, fencing the area that he should protect.

It was a tremendous, awe-inspiring sight below him. Tons of explosives were being thrown aloft; searchlights by the hundreds roved a sky that was laced by the thin, purplish streaks of tracers, yet there were places in that inferno where men in fighting planes held poised to strike the enemy.

A man's mind was staggered by the spectacle. It shrank from the significance of the whole, turning inwardly to avoid something beyond individual comprehension. Each man had his own task, his own problem in this man-made Hell.

The searchlights put glare into a man's eyes, expanding the pupils until nothing else could be seen. Terry strove to avoid them. He had passed that abrupt south loop in the Thames that air-marked the India docks. They had bombed that and missed. Or perhaps it was the Surrey docks they were after.

Just beyond his zone, in line with the Mall, a string of bomb bursts traveled westward toward Berkeley Square, toward the King's palace. Some of them blossomed like flowers; Molotov bread baskets, incendiary bombs.

A searchlight parted from the others, swung in a stealthy arc. Roycroft followed it with his eyes. The fear that was in him grew to a certainty. The beam stopped, an accusing finger pointing toward his fighter zone. If he failed to report in there immediately the blanketing anti-aircraft barrage over Wauxhall-Lambert sector must be thinned to do his work. All London was down there to witness that disgrace.

"Calling Blue section."

Terry raised his hand to firm the wireless phone against his left ear, to keep out the mighty grumble of his Rolls-Royce. Michelsen's voice repeated: "Calling Blue section."

Terry dropped his lips to the microphone disk. "Section Blue approaching assigned zone, sir."

He wondered that Michelsen didn't catch the thin note

of rising terror that was in his voice. He was over the black pit of his fighter zone. It was lined with the glare of ack-ack bursts, walled by the purple-red streaks of their tracers. There, after all these years, he would again meet the Green Grocer's Boy.

He'd go dotty, thinking things like that! He couldn't even remember the name of the Green Grocer's Boy. Perhaps that thing hadn't happened to him when he was a boy. He'd imagined it. The details of the encounter had faded to pure emotion—fear of what would happen if the Green Grocer's Boy struck him.

Terry exerted delicate finger pressure on the small wheel of the Spitfire and with his left hand slackened throttle to cruising. He spoke again into the microphone. "Blue section patrolling assigned zone."

He repeated the information and waited for acknowledgement from his squadron leader.

They had only eight planes left to the squadron, after that Channel fight. That was why he had been given a night scramble so soon. But this zone was a "cushy" spot. Often enough the anti-aircraft guns were considered sufficient to protect it, since there was nothing below of military value. His squadron leader had seemed to think that a Roycroft would be grousing for a livelier spot.

**M**ICHELSEN gave himself the Red zone, also flying it alone. That was characteristic of the man. Red zone was the narrowest they had, over Parliament and government buildings. There a man had to strike with the speed of a snake and turn or be caught in his own ack-ack barrage. There was more danger from that than from the Messerschmitts that convoyed the bombers. It was just so much the worse.

A low hum of traveler wave was in the earphones. Michelsen's voice acknowledged his report: "Okay, Roycroft. Over your zone. I just had a little brush with Jerry. You might take a look over my way. And lower yourself down, old boy. Much lower!"

Terry flat-turned a little to the north, then banked his fighter so that he could see the area below Michelsen. A German Heinkel was down almost to the roof-tops, lighted by the flames of its own burning.

*Your twenty-third victory, old chap.* That was what Terry Roycroft wanted to say into the microphone. That was what any of the other boys would have said. Michelsen had the right to expect it. The confirmation would be given him on his sworn statement, but it would have been so much finer to have one of his own men put it on the air for Wing operations to pick up.

The words of congratulation stuck in Terry's throat, held back by some instinct of decency. He didn't have the right to applaud a man like his squadron commander. He, a Roycroft, whose forebears had led the King's wars since the days of Richard, didn't have a right to cheer the gallantry of a commoner.

That was what Michelsen was. A "ranker," a tradesman's son. He'd worked himself up by pure merit from an aircraft apprentice to a flying officer. But despite his common birth, his tendency to relapse into cockney speech, there wasn't a man in their squadron who didn't respect Michelsen and take a sort of personal pride in the D.F.M. that he wore from the Dunkirk operations. In the old army an officer would have hesitated wearing a D.F.M., the medal awarded enlisted men.

Michelsen's voice came again through the earphones.

It was curt with impatience. "Drop off that altitude, Roycroft. Immediately! You're doing no good up there."

The words were a whip laced on raw flesh. Terry's left hand jerked the throttle. He eased rudder and stick into a spiral, trying to keep centered over his fighter zone. He wasn't afraid of being struck by anti-aircraft. He was praying for that deliverance. And if it struck him he wouldn't take to silk. He'd ride the broken plane down to oblivion.

But there was something else below him. Something that he could not face—the Green Grocer's Boy. That fear was stronger than all the will power in him. Teeth clenched on bleeding lips he jockeyed back on the stick, climbing steeply up from that menace.

A moment later the beam of a single light swung, held on him for an instant, then moved away.

The high-pitched "traveler" of Wing operations sang in his earphones: "Red section move east to intercept enemy. Abandon Red zone to AA."

Roycroft could have cried out with the shame that was in him. By tomorrow all the defense military of London would know his name and spit it out with the contempt that fighting men have for cowards.

**T**HE searchlights awoke to a flurry of movement. Scores of them swung through miles of space and centered in a gigantic cone. There were lean-shaped Heinkel bombers, above the roof-tops. Dozens of them, silhouetted in the glare.

Michelsen had crossed to the east side of Terry's zone. He saw the bombers and started a dive on them. He was shoving his Spitfire toward certain death. There wasn't an instant's hesitation in his choice.

Terry was above him, but not far. Yet between them slid the form of another plane, a clipped-wing Messerschmitt fighter. Its guns would chop Michelsen to fragments.

Thoughts whirled through Roycroft's brain. All else held in abeyance to the frantic speed of his mind. Everything seemed in slow motion, all but those thoughts that followed each other with blinding, dizzy speed.

He should be down there instead of Michelsen. Not just because this was his zone but because it would be the true pattern of things. He was looking down on the gallant ending of a courageous man. The whole thing was illuminated so brilliantly by the searchlights that he might be viewing it in a cinema. And looking at it he was seeing himself as he should be.

That was him down there and it was Michelsen up here. Michelsen, the man of squalid toil, looking down on the glorious death of a Roycroft. And envying that death yet knowing such things were not for him. That was the very essence of their creed, the blazonment of their coronet; *Death with Honour Is Sweet*.

That was what the Green Grocer's Boy had taken from him.

Without conscious thought he had shoved forward on the control stick, diving. He was on the ME's tail, and within easy range. His thumb hovered over the solenoid switch on his wheel. Pressure would start the eight Brownings jerking in the wings of his plane. It would start their steel-splintering salvo converging death on the enemy.

He *thought* he was within range. That was a hard thing to judge at night. Gun convergence was set at two hundred yards. Beyond that the bullet paths diverged. There was

loss of fire impact. There was the further danger of his missing completely.

That other plane would whirl on him. They would crash together in mid-air.

**I**T WAS the very thing he feared. He wanted death. But not in that way. The Green Grocer's Boy. That was it. He would turn and strike him and something would happen. Something far more terrible than death. He would fall; he would slip and fall and—

He jerked stick. His left leg straightened for pressure on the rudder pedal. The weight of centrifugal force rode his body. But he was escaping! He was escaping from that nameless something that he could not face.

In some fashion Michelsen must have become aware of the German plane behind him. He, too, had jerked his plane into an Immelmann.

Roycroft's body stiffened with horror. The fuselage of his plane was past vertical, the wings starting the cart-wheel flip out of a half-loop. And directly before him was another plane!

It must have been following him all this time, closing to effective range. And back of it came still another. He couldn't help striking the first. Their combined speed would bring him and the other together in a split second. At almost seven hundred miles an hour!

He had hoped to escape his destiny and had turned full into it.

That was his last coherent thought.

A monstrous hand closed over him, shaking him with ruthless savagery. The banked glare of searchlights entered his brain, whirling, drawing him to them. There was the thin, unearthly scream of hurtling steel. He fought against the giant's grip, cursing, laughing.

This was death. It was death and he was glad. He had never known the full ecstasy of such happiness. He had met the Green Grocer's Boy and death was the only penalty.

His body was free now of the crumpled plane. His hand groped for the rip-cord ring of his parachute. He wanted to live. This wasn't because he feared death. He exulted over a new freedom. He wasn't afraid of anything.

**T**HE surgeon compressed his lips to firmness over his decision. "Not for ten hours at least," he said. "He must have rest before we can operate. Is the needle ready, Miss Cowden?"

"Seems like he's burning up inside," the head nurse commented. "Please hurry it, Cowden."

The medical captain put his hand out to restrain the wounded man. "It's the shock," he said. "Bless me, I don't see how anything can stand it. Anything as delicate as the human brain. But he'll be all right."

"That's what I told the earl and Lady Roycroft," the head nurse agreed. "They wouldn't leave until they'd found out. And there's another man who's been awsking. . . ."

Young Roycroft broke into the slurred speech of delirium. His eyes were wide, seeing things beyond the ken of others. "I'm not afraid," he exulted. "I'm like Michelsen now. I'm not afraid of anything—the Green Grocer's Boy—not anything—not a-n-ything. . . ."

"Yes, yes, old fellow," Captain Prescott said soothingly. "The hypodermic, Miss Cowden!"

The head nurse exposed the wounded man's arm, swabbing it with alcohol. "He keeps repeating those same words," she commented. "Who do you suppose Michelsen is, Captain?"

Prescott frowned. "Somebody he admires greatly. Ah, that's better. Hold his arm, please."

He sheathed the slender needle in flesh, working the plunger. "Interne's duties," he complained. "Did you say there was a friend asking about Roycroft?"

"In the corridor, sir. He's been haunting the place since before dawn. In an officer's uniform," she added, with a doubt in her voice that brought a look from Prescott.

He understood that when the man accosted him. He was in officer's uniform, but. . . .

"Michelsen, sir. Flight officer in his lordship's squadron. He's—will he—"

Captain Prescott nodded briefly, studying this anxious, flustered man. He said:

"He'll live. Right leg badly crushed but we'll fix that."

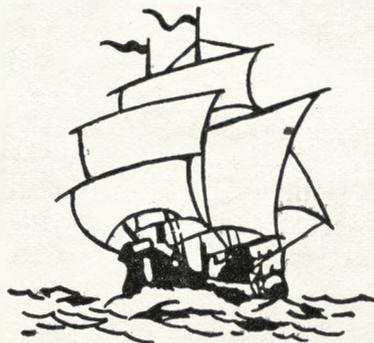
Michelsen's face was red and disagreeably moist with perspiration. He was trying to comprehend this miracle. " 'E'll live," he repeated. Pride mingled with the humbleness in his voice. " 'E did it for me, sir. Fair chopped that ME's tail hoff. And the one back of it couldn't stop in time. Three victories, sir, if you can believe that. The whole three o' those Germans tangled in one mess and blazin' like old sin."

"Yes. Yes, the raid wardens were full of it." There was something here that the captain couldn't understand. "You're an old friend of his?"

"Me! Aw, no sir. But I came from the same village—that is, Glennduyt 'ad its name from the earl's manor." Michelsen's laughter carried a braying note that rasped across the tired brain of the surgeon.

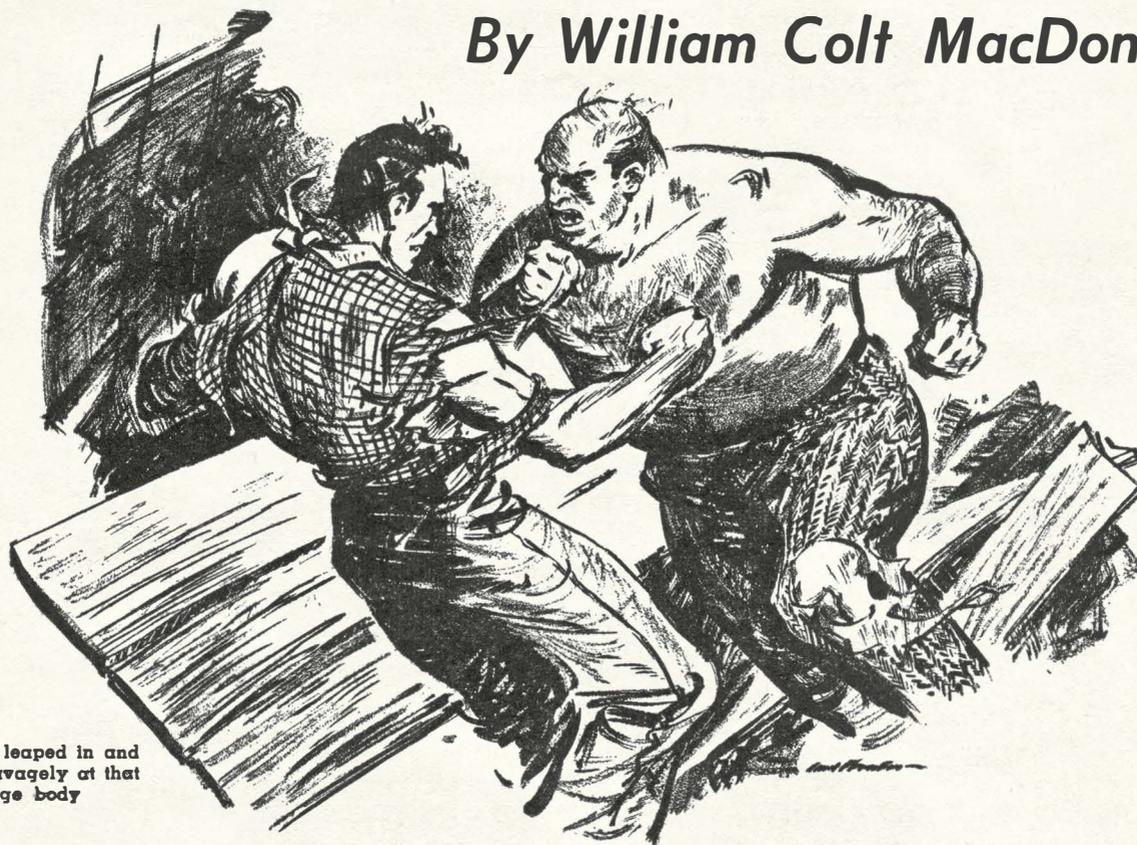
Prescott wanted to get away from this sweaty clodhopper who wore an officer's uniform of the Royal Air Force. But the other seemed to have a joke to tell, or a confession to make.

" 'Is lordship would never remember me, sir. The Glennduyt servants might, o' course. But not his lordship. My father kept the only green grocery shop in the village."



# Ramrod Ridge

By William Colt MacDonald



Nogales leaped in and struck savagely at that huge body

ALL the mystery and turmoil of Ramrod Ridge centers around young FRED VINCENT, whose father, ETHAN, owns a ranch in this desert country. Placed in charge of a gold-train, young Vincent was held up by bandits, from whom he managed to escape with the thirty thousand dollars in gold. After weeks of terrible suffering on the desert, Fred is eventually found and taken to his father's ranch. He regains his strength, but not his memory of that nightmare ordeal; he cannot remember what he has done with the gold.

NOGALES SCOTT and his partner CALIPER MAXWELL have placed themselves at the service of Ethan Vincent. Certainly Vincent needs their shrewd wits and swift gun-hands, for he has been waging a losing battle against the desperado ruler of Ramrod Ridge, a huge, clever, brutal man named SIMON CRAWFORD. Nogales partly checks Crawford's lawless activities by bringing to Ramrod Ridge a competent deputy sheriff, ROD PETERS; but Crawford is by no means finished yet.

HAVING learned from his henchman, DEACON TRUMBULL, that Nogales Scott is a wealthy man, Crawford works out a scheme to shoot Scott and forge his will. But he hasn't yet been able to obtain a sample of Scott's signature. Crawford is also determined to get his hands on that missing thirty thousand dollars in gold; and so he kidnaps Fred Vincent, with the intention of torturing Fred into revealing the hiding place of the treasure.

Nogales Scott is certain that Crawford has engineered the kidnaping. Backed by Caliper and another ally, a Mexican called STEVE, Nogales shoots it out with three of Crawford's hired gunmen, and then proceeds straight to the desperado's headquarters, a combination store and saloon in Ramrod Ridge. Nogales orders Crawford to give up Fred Vincent, or to shoot it out.

SIMON CRAWFORD refuses to talk or to be drawn into a gun duel. But he willingly agrees to a bare-fist battle to the finish with Scott. Everyone leaves the store but Crawford; Nogales is to enter alone when he is ready.

Deputy Rod Peters attempts to dissuade Nogales from meeting Crawford, saying that the huge man has killed more than once with his fists. But Nogales will not back down now; he signs a paper brought by Deacon Trumbull which releases Crawford of all responsibility in case of fatal injury. Then, resolutely but warily, Nogales strides into the building where Simon Crawford awaits him. . . .

## CHAPTER XXVI

HIS WEAPONS ARE HIS HANDS

FOR just a moment, when the door was closed behind him, Nogales stood peering into the big room, trying to accustom his eyes to the faint light, so dim after the sunglare of the street. And then it happened.

Like a bull charging, Simon Crawford bore in from Nogales' right, where he had been waiting just inside the doorway. Nogales felt himself caught up in the rush and carried off his feet, as Crawford's huge hands fastened on him.

The impetus of Crawford's speed and weight carried both men across the room. Then Crawford released his grip, and Nogales went hurtling against the long wooden bar. Glasses and bottles clashed together and toppled.

To save himself, Nogales caught at the edge of the bar, struggled upright. Then, seeing Crawford closing in again,

The first installment of this six-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for November 15

Nogales swung to one side, scrambled to the top of the bar and dropped to the floor beyond. At the same instant, Crawford drove against the long counter, with a splintering crash.

For a moment the two men stood glaring at each other, only the mahogany bar between them. Crawford was stripped to the waist and in his sock feet; his huge torso was ridged with muscle. His little pig's eyes glinted now, and he said harshly, "I'm going to kill you, Scott."

"Come ahead," Nogales told him. He was breathing heavily, stalling for time to recover from that first savage rush. His breath was returning now, but his body still ached from that impact against the bar.

Crawford cursed. Quick, light-footed steps carried him around the end of the bar. Nogales waited, tense, ready to move. Crawford started a quick rush. At the same instant, Nogales flung out his right arm to reach the back bar and swept a pyramided stack of glasses and several bottles to the floor in Crawford's path. Crawford tried to stop himself, but he was too late. One foot landed on a bottle; he slipped and lost his balance, going down with a crash. Glass crunched beneath the weight of his huge bulk.

Crawford rose swiftly, far more swiftly than Nogales had expected. Blood trickled from small cuts on his barrel-like torso, as he came charging after Nogales, growling his fury.

**N**OGALES retreated as Crawford closed in. They moved back to the center of the room, Nogales always giving way before the short, angry rushes with which Crawford tried to come within striking distance.

Suddenly Crawford swept up a chair, sent it flying at Nogales' legs. It caught Nogales at the knees, bowling him over, and he went sprawling on the floor. With a hoarse triumphant grunt, Crawford closed in, his powerful hands clutching at Nogales.

Nogales rolled out of harm's way; cat-like he came to his feet again. It was too late to retreat now. Instead, he stepped up close. His fists thudded three swift blows on Crawford's jaw. He heard Crawford's contemptuous laughter. He saw Crawford's huge fist coming, and he ducked in time to take the force of the blow on the side of his head.

For a brief instant everything went black. Nogales felt as if his head had been torn from his shoulders. Then his brain cleared as he found himself again on the floor. He was down with Crawford's hands pawing at his throat. There was a smell of dust and blood and sweat in his nostrils, as he squirmed from side to side, and those hoarse, animal-like growls were very close.

Frantically, Nogales' fingers searched for and found Crawford's eyes. He pressed his thumbs deep into the sockets. Crawford suddenly screamed with pain and threw himself back. An instant later they were both on their feet again, sparring for time, fighting to catch their wind.

Once more Nogales started his retreat, with Crawford coming closer and ever closer. Suddenly Nogales stepped in, threw two savage punches into Crawford's middle, felt his fists sink deep into fat and muscle, then jumped quickly back in time to escape the sledge-hammer blow that failed past his head.

Round and round the room they went, Nogales always retreating, until the time was right for a quick attack and a getaway. Time after time he pounded Crawford's middle, then leaped back from the killing ferocity of Crawford's fists. Sweat and blood was streaming from both men now.

Again Crawford started one of his rushes. Nogales feinted a retreat, then stood his ground, swinging his right fist to Crawford's jaw as the big man closed in. What

happened next was pretty much blurred in Nogales' mind. He felt his fist bounce from Crawford's jaw. An instant later something like the kick of a mule crashed against Nogales' left ribs.

All of the breath was forced from his body and he went hurtling beneath a table. Crawford came after him, growling. Desperately, Nogales threw himself to one side, at the same instant seizing and jerking the nearest leg of the table. The table toppled over, directly in Crawford's path. Crawford cursed as he crashed down.

Nogales was up and around the table before Crawford could rise. His fists swung viciously at the big man's face and head. Crawford's face was cut and bleeding now, but he flung out one great arm; his hand seized Nogales' right wrist. Nogales felt his arm bend back, felt the agony run through him. He gave way suddenly, and miraculously managed to slip out of Crawford's iron grip.

**N**OGALES' retreated to the center of the room, breathing heavily. After a moment, Crawford heaved up from the floor and started after him. Nogales backed away, unconscious of the yelling outside the store. Men's faces were pressed against the windows.

Crawford was gasping now, even more winded than Nogales. Crawford's left eye was closed; his face looked like a chunk of bruised beefsteak. But he was still dangerous.

A thought flashed through Nogales' mind: "*If I can only close the other eye. I've hit him with everything I had on the jaw and in the stomach. I can't hurt him there. But if I can close his other eye . . .*"

Nogales leaped quickly in and drove his fist into Crawford's right eye. Then, as Crawford swung, Nogales jumped out of harm's way. Again he backed away, again he darted suddenly in, and once more his fist punished that right eye.

That was the game: concentrate on Crawford's eyes. It was the beginning of the end for the huge man, though Nogales didn't dare let those powerful hands close on him again. He'd leap in, swing sharp, punishing blows to the eyes, then jump away. The right eye commenced to swell, then it too closed. Once, when Nogales' missed the eye, his fist struck Crawford's nose. He felt bone crack beneath his bruised knuckles.

By this time, Crawford's bellowing cries were filling the room. He was more than ever like some great wounded animal as he rushed blindly, madly about, banging into chairs and tables in the furious search for his opponent. His sweat-streaked body seemed to exude a strange animal stench. His face was a bloody smear, the features almost lost in the swollen puffy mass.

Again and again and again Nogales closed in, his fists striking savagely. Still Crawford refused to go down. His speed was gone now, but he kept coming after Nogales. He could no longer see, but he could hear Nogales moving.

Nogales spoke, his voice a hoarse croak: "You're licked, Crawford. Where's Fred Vincent?"

What the big man said, Nogales never knew. His voice was a meaningless bellow as he moved toward Nogales. Nogales waited, tense. His arm lifted. Then Crawford took him by surprise. Instead of striking out blindly, Crawford suddenly dived, hurling his weight at Nogales' legs. His arms wrapped around Nogales' body. The two went to the floor together.

**O**VER and over they rolled, scratching, clawing, each seeking a finishing hold. One moment Nogales would be on top; the next he'd be nearly smothered beneath Crawford's great bulk.

Crawford's arms were around Nogales' body now. Their hold tightened, like two constricting steel bands. Nogales

felt the breath leaving his body. His ribs must surely crack. He squirmed desperately around, locked his hands on Crawford's throat. He could feel his fingers sink in.

Now it was Crawford who was fighting to break loose, but Nogales hung on. That terrible vise that had enclosed his ribs was gone now, but Crawford was striking again, his fists thudding against Nogales' head and body.

Still Nogales kept his grip fastened in Crawford's throat. He didn't know how much longer he could withstand the fearful punishment from those flailing fists, but this was his last chance. His strength was slipping from him; darkness was creeping into his brain. And then, in the last moment before unconsciousness, he realized that Crawford's blows had begun to weaken. Even then it seemed an endless time before Crawford relaxed and lay still.

Nogales struggled to his knees. For the moment he couldn't rise higher. The room swirled, but at length he managed to get a grip on himself. His vision cleared. Crawford lay stretched out before him, gasping painfully for breath, the sounds echoing through the big room. All the fight was gone from him now.

Nogales bent over him. "Where's Fred Vincent, Crawford?"

"Don't . . . know—"

Again Nogales clamped his fingers on Crawford's throat. After a moment he released his grip. "Where's Fred Vincent?" he asked again, staring down at the red pulpy mass that was Crawford's face. "You're finished, Crawford—or do you want me to shut off your wind for good?"

"Don't . . . don't—" the words came painfully. "Vincent . . . in cave . . . Quithatz Canyon—"

"What cave? Where is it?"

But Crawford had lost consciousness. Nogales took a deep breath for added strength; he bent down and went through Crawford's pockets. He found the paper he had signed for the Deacon, tore it to bits, then rose and walked wearily toward the door.

As he staggered outside, he heard Rod Peters say, "My God!"

Nogales tried to grin. "I reckon I was struck by an express train." Then he fainted.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### PRISON CANYON

**T**WENTY minutes later he opened his eyes to find himself stretched on the cot in Rod Peter's office. He was dripping wet. Peters wasn't there. Nogales glanced around the room and painfully sat up.

A pail of water stood near and some court plaster. There were some patches of the plaster on various sections of Nogales' anatomy. Nogales swung his feet to the floor. Every bone and muscle in his body ached and for a moment his head swirled dizzily. Then it cleared.

The door of the office opened. Peters stepped inside. A look of relief passed over his face as he saw Nogales. "Cowboy!" he exclaimed, "you sure took a beating. You look like you'd been run through a threshing machine."

"Maybe that's what it was. I thought it was a cyclone. . . . How'd I get here?"

"I carried you here. You were just plumb exhausted. It must have been a fight—"

"It was a killing brawl," Nogales mumbled from between swollen lips. "I don't want any more of Crawford's game. My God, Rod! I hit him with everything I had and most of the time he just laughed. I reckon I'm lucky."

"I reckon you are," Peters nodded. "But it'll be some time before Crawford laughs again. He's a sight. I don't think he'll ever completely recover. He looks like you'd

pounded him with two-by-fours. His neck is all slashed and torn."

"I didn't use two-by-fours on his neck," Nogales said grimly. He looked at his bruised knuckles. His fingers ached and the nails were broken. Nogales sighed wearily, "Does Crawford admit he's licked?"

"Hell's-bells, cowboy! He can't admit anything. He's still unconscious, or partly so. The Deacon and Limpy Bristol are working over him, but they can't get anything out of him but a moan now and then, then he slips off again. There aren't any teeth left in the front of his mouth. His eyes are swollen shut. There's just a flat spot where his nose used to be. What did you do, go crazy?"

"I reckon." Nogales nodded. "He had me on the run most of the time. I guess I was getting pretty desperate." Glancing across the room, Nogales saw his shirt and gun-belt. He staggered up, swayed uncertainly a moment, then started to dress.

"What you intending?" Peters asked.

"I'm riding to Quithatz Canyon. Fred Vincent's being held there, in a cave some place."

"You're crazy. You better take it easy. I'll go."

Nogales shook his head, donned his sombrero and strapped on his gun. "You've got to stay here, Rod. It's your job. I'm all right now. I'll feel better after a ride into the canyon. I was just plumb tuckered for a few moments, but I'm all right now."

"But, Nogales—"

"Don't try to stop me, Rod. Just bring up my horse for me. Eventually, Crawford is going to tell the Deacon that he gave away Fred Vincent's whereabouts. Then they'll all be starting for the canyon to cut me off."

"It's up to you to stay here and see that nobody leaves town. That's a big job. That gang of Crawford's is likely to turn ugly with the Deacon to urge 'em on. You may have a job holding 'em down."

"I'll hold 'em down," Peters said. He crossed the room, picked up his double-barreled shotgun and started showing buckshot shells into the weapon. "With this and my sixshooter, I figure I can stand off quite a crowd."

"Maybe it won't be necessary. I figure they won't do anything until Crawford gets to speaking again. That's why I've got to hurry. Maybe I can find Fred before Crawford commences to give orders. If you'll get my horse, I'll be much obliged. If you see anything of Crawford's gang you can tell 'em I'm hurt bad, that I'm heading for the Rancho to see Doc Stebbings."

Peters nodded and stepped outside. Nogales sank down wearily on the cot again. Lord, how he ached! The creaking of saddle leather sounded outside the office. Nogales rose and staggered outside. Peters helped him up to the saddle. Conscious of the sullen eyes watching him from Crawford's porch, Nogales slumped down on the horse's neck.

"Good acting," Peters whispered. "They'll never guess you're heading any place but home. Good luck. Got any idea where to look?"

"Not the slightest. I'll follow one side going in, the other going out, if I don't find that cave right off. There should be something, some bit of sign to tip me off, though. I'll be seeing you, Rod."

Peters slapped the pony on the rump and it walked slowly down the street, with Nogales' sagging form slumped above the saddle horn. Once out of sight of the town, he straightened in his saddle and touched spurs to the pony.

**T**HE horse made good time into Quithatz Canyon, following the trail Steve had taken the previous day. As he rode, Nogales was alert for any sign that might lead him to a hidden cave, but he couldn't even see any fresh

hoofprints, other than those made by the horses he and his companions had ridden the day before.

The hot sun beat down into the canyon. Nogales' mouth was parched and dry; his head ached terrifically. His left ribs were so sore to the touch that it was agony to make the slightest movement.

"Feels like I've got some cracked ribs," Nogales muttered. "Lord, I wish I had a drink."

The horse hurried on. Before long they swung down around the big rock that marked the approach to Quithatz Falls. A few more yards and Nogales pulled his pony to a halt at the edge of the tumbling pool of water. Beyond, the falls cascaded straight in a wide white ribbon of lacy froth. The horse moved out into the pool and thrust his nose into the cooling depths.

Nogales relaxed in his saddle and looked around. "So far, no cave that I can see," he mused. "Going out, we'll follow the other side of the canyon, horse. Vincent's got to be in here some place. . . . That water taste good, pony? I'm going to have me a drink in a minute. I'd like to get in and wash all over! Well, why not?"

Guiding the pony across the pool to the opposite bank, he dismounted and stripped off his clothing. He had started back toward the water when he paused suddenly. "Reckon I'm not thinking clear," he muttered. "Vincent is held some place in this canyon. There's a guard over him, probably. I'd sure feel like a fool if that guard was to catch me out in that pool, mother naked, without a gun to defend myself."

He picked up his gun and placed it on the bank, close to the edge of the pool. Then he stepped into the water, which proved to be icy cold. Nogales shivered and moved on into deeper water, feeling his way carefully over the smoothly worn rocks on the bottom. He moved nearer the falls, thinking; "I'd sure like to stand right under those falls."

The water was up to his chest now and he stretched out, swimming with slow easy strokes. The chill of the mountain water sent the blood racing swiftly through his bruised body. The invigorating depths of the pool were like a caress to his scratched and cut flesh. He ducked his head beneath the surface and came up blowing and puffing in keen enjoyment. Then the thought struck him that he would be wise to go back and get his gun.

He swam a few strokes back to the bank, then stood up and commenced to wade the rest of the way. At his back, the roar of Quithatz Falls drowned out all other sounds. Suddenly he swore with pain and halted abruptly, having stubbed his toe on some hard, unresisting object. "That didn't feel like rock," he muttered. "I wonder . . ."

He dropped down, opening his eyes under water, then abruptly stood up. "Well, I'll be damned!" he half shouted.

Beneath the waters of the pool was what appeared to be a strongbox.

He stooped down again, while the icy waters swirled about his bare thighs. Managing to get one hand under the box, he gave a tentative lift. The box was plenty heavy. Five minutes later, his heart beating madly with excitement, he heaved the dripping strongbox out on the bank and stood over it, near the spot where he had left his six-shooter.

"If that isn't Fred Vincent's strongbox . . ." He bent over it.

Because of the roaring of Quithatz Falls he didn't hear the first shot as it whined past him, clipping leaves from the aspens on the bank of the pool. But when the second bullet struck a rock, throwing bits of granite in his face, Nogales dropped as suddenly as if he'd been hit, and lay still, face down, one bare foot still stretched out in the pool, the other leg drawn up beneath his body.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### DYING WORDS ARE TRUE

FOR five minutes Nogales lay without movement. His foot, extended in the pool, commenced to ache from the chill of the water, and that chill was soon running through his whole body. It was with difficulty that Nogales kept from violently shivering.

His fingers had clasped the butt of his six-shooter as he went down. He lay, now, watching the scene before him with his eyes almost closed. Nearby was the stretch of grassy bank; beyond it the sloping wall of the canyon, almost wholly concealed by heaped rocks and thick brush. Overhead the leafy branches of slim aspens cut off the direct sunlight, throwing a criss-crossed pattern of shadow across Nogales' naked body.

His eyes moved from side to side behind narrowed lids, alert for the first sign of movement from the man who had fired at him. There wasn't anything to be seen at first—just trees and rocks and brush, and at the rear the continual roaring splash of Quithatz Falls.

And then, fifty feet away, Nogales' caught a slight movement behind a tree trunk. The next instant the movement was gone. Five minutes more passed. Nogales waited. A man suddenly took form around a shoulder of rock. It was Swifty Catlett, six-shooter in hand, approaching cautiously the spot where Nogales was lying.

Catlett took two more careful steps, stopped again, his gaze intent on the sprawled form on the bank. Still Nogales held his fire. Catlett raised his gun to take careful aim.

Like a flash, Nogales rolled to one side and came to his feet, his right hand throwing a mushrooming cloud of smoke and fire. Stunned, Catlett held his fire an instant too long. When he did pull trigger the bullet flew wide, as the impact of Nogales' slug struck him.

Catlett half-dove, half-spun to the earth, braced himself on one hand and again raised his gun. Nogales thumbed a second swift shot. He saw Catlett's body jerk as the bullet plowed in; then Catlett sank to his face and lay quiet.

Nogales lowered his weapon and crossed the intervening space in quick stride. Stooping at Catlett's side, he turned the man on his back. Bloody foam was issuing from Catlett's pale lips. His eyes were already glazing. With an effort he met Nogales' searching glance.

"Where's Vincent, Catlett?" Nogales demanded.

The reply came low; Nogales could just catch the words. "Up in . . . cave . . . not fifty yards from here. . . . I reckon you're too fast for me, Scott. I'm a goner . . . ain't I?"

Catlett's eyes turned upward, looking at Nogales with wordless appeal. Blood flecked his mouth.

Nogales said, "You're a goner, Swifty. It had to be you or me."

"I . . . know, Scott. No . . . hard feelin's. I was just . . . on the wrong side . . ."

"Just where is this cave?" Nogales cut in.

"Look for . . . two rocks 'bout same size . . . with tall brush growing between them . . . up near canyon wall. Push through brush . . . find cave. . . . You want to know . . . anything else?"

"Thanks, no. But wait a minute. Crawford was awful anxious to get my signature. Why?"

A thin smile crossed the dying man's face. "Crawford and Deacon . . . planned to rub you out . . . then forge your signature to a will. . . . They planned to get . . . everything you own."

Nogales waited. A shudder ran through Catlett's frame; he drew a quick choking breath, and died.

NOGALES rose to his feet, made his way back to his clothing and quickly dressed. Reloading his gun, he started in search of the hidden cave, wondering if there were any more guards with Fred Vincent.

He had no trouble finding the twin rocks Catlett had mentioned. Moving cautiously near, he pushed through the brush and came out in a narrow cleared spot. Beyond in the canyon wall was a large opening, higher than a horse's head. Nogales waited, tense, listening for voices or movements; and for several moments he heard nothing. Then, quite suddenly a horse nickered from within the cave.

Nogales pressed on, gun in hand. Entering the cave, he saw first the rumpled blankets on which was the bound form of Fred Vincent. Beyond stood two horses, tethered to pegs driven into cracks in the cave wall. At one side were a stock of canned goods and a couple of saddles.

"Nogales!" Fred exclaimed, his voice lifting with amazement and relief.

"You all right, Fred?"

"Sure, I'm all right. Just get these ropes off me and—where's Swifty Catlett?"

Nogales said quietly, "I ran into Swifty down by the falls. He won't bother us any more."

He had his knife out by this time, sawing at the ropes that held Fred's wrists and ankles. After a moment Fred rose to his feet and stretched stiffly. "By gosh, I'm glad to see you. Is everybody all right? What happened since I was seized and brought here? Say! What's happened to your face? It looks like you'd been scrapping. What happened?"

"Whoa!" Nogales laughed. He gave brief details of the happenings during Fred's absence, then said, "You're sure you're all right? You're not hurt any?"

"Right as rain," Fred told him. "In fact, I think it did me good. No, Catlett didn't knock me around any. He treated me all right. Just questioned me a heap about that missing gold, but I couldn't remember a thing.

"You know, a couple of riders grabbed me when I was walking down in the fig orchard. They held me out in the desert, outside town, all night. This morning, early, Catlett brought me up here, tied in my saddle. After we got here, he tied me up and left me on these blankets, then lay down himself and took a snooze. I fell asleep myself. When I woke up, he was gone. I don't know how long he'd been gone. Next thing I knew, you came in."

"I don't guess he'd left you for very long. He must have come outside to look around and spotted me. I'd been taking a swim down near the falls." Nogales paused and looked narrowly at Vincent. "You're sure you're all right, Fred?"

"Positive." Fred looked curiously at Nogales. "If you ask me, I think the ride did me a lot of good. Why, what's on your mind?"

"Figure you can stand a shock?" Nogales asked. "No, wait—don't get me wrong. There's nothing happened to Polly or your dad. This is good news."

"Good news never shocks me." Fred laughed. He sobered suddenly and stared at Nogales. "Don't tell me you've located that missing gold?"

Nogales nodded. "I'm right sure of it. Anyway, I've found a strongbox that wa'n't packed with feathers. While I was in swimming I stubbed my toe—"

"Wait!" Fred exclaimed, holding up one hand. "It's coming back. Now I remember. Nogales! I can remember everything! You found that strongbox in the pool—"

"I'm telling you." Nogales grinned. "But do you recollect how it got there?"

Fred nodded emphatically, for the moment unable to find his voice. Then the words poured out in a sudden torrent. "It all comes back now. I'd herded that pack

mule, up here. The mule was wounded and dropped, not far from the pool.

"It was raining like the devil. We'd had a drought. There was scarcely any water in the pool. The falls were just a thin trickle, but I knew before long they'd be pouring over in the usual manner. I unleashed that box and tumbled it into the pool, knowing that the way the rain was coming down the falls would soon cover it up and we could get it later."

"You sure had the right hunch, Fred."

"I'll bet that box was completely submerged in a couple of hours. There was a regular cloudburst on. Once the box was taken care of, I had to think of myself. I was wounded and getting pretty weak. I knew those raiders would be coming into the canyon after me.

"I started to climb the cliff where the falls come down. I remember getting part way up, then my strength left and I fell back. After that I don't know what happened, except I woke up buried in a clump of brush. If anybody did look for me, they didn't look in the right place. But at that time I couldn't remember what had happened, who I was or where I was.

"There was a long time of wandering around, being afraid of everybody and everything. It's a wonder I even realized what my six-shooter was and hung on to it. . . . Say, did you make sure the gold was in the box?" His face was eager.

"Didn't have time for that," Nogales returned.

"Let's go see!"

VINCENT ran past Nogales and headed in the direction of the pool. Fast as Nogales followed, Vincent arrived there first. There was a broad grin on his face as he looked across the strongbox at Nogales. "This is it, all right. Nogales, how will I ever thank you?"

"Forget that part," Nogales said. "We've got to get inside this box. Now if you only had the key to this padlock—but you haven't. This box is sure water-soaked, but the staple seems to hold fast. I reckon I'll have to shoot off that lock."

"There should be six canvas sacks inside," Fred said excitedly, "each containing two hundred and fifty twenty-dollar gold pieces. Go ahead, shoot that lock!"

Nogales' gun roared. A moment later he threw back the cover of the box which was still partially filled with water. He reached in and swung out a hefty, water-soaked canvas sack and let it to the ground. Fred's fingers fumbled at the wet draw strings. Finally he had the sack open. Peering inside he gave a wild yell. "It's here! It's here!"

"Five more sacks like this in the box," Nogales counted.

Fred dropped weakly down on a rock, a silly grin on his face. Nogales sat beside him. They rolled and lighted cigarettes. Within a short time, Fred recovered his composure.

Nogales said, "I'll tell you what. No use totin' this strongbox back with us. We'll get one of those blankets from the cave, bundle up these sacks of gold and lash it on the back of Catlett's horse. You'd better take Catlett's gun too. Then you mount the other horse and head straight for the rancho, with the gold. I'll ride with you most of the way, but I want to get back to Ramrod Ridge as soon as possible. There's a settlement to make and I figure Rod Peters may need my help."

"How about me going with you?" Vincent asked.

Nogales shook his head. "It's your job to get that gold to the rancho. I'm just worrying whether you'll be up to it or not. All this excitement and—"

"Stop fretting about me." Fred grinned. "My mind's all right, if that's what you mean, and as for my body—well, if you hadn't already licked Crawford, I'd take him on myself. Finding this gold is just the tonic I needed."

Two hours later they had emerged from the canyon and were following the irrigation ditch that led to the rancho. By this time it was past noon and a strong desert wind had come up. Here, where they were riding, leading the horse packed with the blanketed gold, the wind wasn't so bad, but down on the desert flats Nogales could see that the atmosphere had turned hazy with flying dust and sand.

"Looks like a sand storm rising," Fred commented.

"Do they get 'em often in these parts?"

"They're not unusual this time of year."

They rode on, until Nogales sighted the roof of the ranch house. "I'll be leaving you here," he announced. "I want to get to Ramrod Ridge. You push on to the welcomin' arms of your folks and turn that gold over to your dad."

"It'll take a big load off of his mind," Vincent said. "Now he'll be able to pay you. I don't know what we'd have done without your help. Nogales."

Nogales flushed and reined his pony away as if he hadn't heard. "Keep going," he urged, through the sound of the rising wind. "I'll be seeing you before long."

He turned the pony toward Ramrod Ridge.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### TOWN OF FLAME

**B**Y NOW the wind was blowing harder than ever. It swooped down in great gusts, hurling biting particles of sand against horse and rider. Nogales' face soon was painfully raw.

He drew his bandanna up across his mouth and nose and bent his head against the fierce blasts. There seemed to be no definite direction from which the wind came. Now and then there'd be a lull and when the gusts resumed they seemed always to come from a different direction.

The air was so filled with dust and sand that by the time Nogales neared Ramrod Ridge the town was almost obscured from view. It was impossible to see the sky; the sun was a great brassy disc that glowed feebly through a hurtling sandy fog.

Suddenly the vague outlines of a building appeared before Nogales' vision and he realized he was entering the town. Other buildings loomed up as he progressed farther. A section of tin roof went bumping and clanging along the roadway; papers were swept wildly about in the rising gale.

As he drew near Rod Peters' office, a man loomed up through the sandy air. It was Limpy Bristol. Bristol peered through the swirling atmosphere, recognized Nogales and hurled a savage curse.

"What's bothering you?" Nogales yelled through the gale.

But Bristol didn't reply. Instead he took to his heels and headed in the direction of Crawford's store.

Nogales dismounted and led his pony into the open space between Peters' office and its neighboring building. Peters' horse was already there, sheltered to some extent from the stinging storm. Peters' door was closed. It required main force to open it against the strength of the wind. Nogales stepped inside and the door banged at his back. Here he stopped and took a deep breath.

**P**ETERS was seated at his table, smoking a pipe. He jumped to his feet as Nogales entered. "Did you find Vincent?"

Nogales nodded, adding, "And the gold."

"T'hell you say!"

"I'm not fooling." Nogales gave details.

"Gosh, that's good news. How do you feel now?"

"Mite stiff and achy, but not bad. Heard anything from Crawford?"

"I was over there about an hour ago. He's back on his feet again and nearly crazy with rage. One of his men had some fight experience, at some time or other, and knew how to treat black eyes. He took a razor and make cuts in the swollen flesh around Crawford's eyes. That let out the bad blood, or something. Anyway, Crawford can see again."

"Nothing much happened while I was away, then?"

Peters shook his head. "I guess they were all waiting for orders from Crawford, and, like I say, they just got him up on his feet. Cripes! There isn't much that could be done in this windstorm. Nice little breeze, ain't it?"

"I don't know as I ever seen worse."

"I'm damned if I know how you could see to find Vincent or the gold."

"It wasn't blowing up in the canyon—and a few miles back it isn't blowing nearly so hard as it is here. What did Limpy Bristol want?"

"When?" Peters asked.

"Just before I got here."

"He wasn't here."

"I saw him leaving, just as I rode up. Didn't you see him?"

"He wasn't in here," Peters repeated and frowned. "I wonder if he was spying on me."

"Why should he be?"

Peters said, "Crawford's able to give orders again. By this time they all know that Crawford gave away Vincent's whereabouts. Maybe they were ready to ride for the canyon—"

"They know I'm back now," Nogales cut in. "If they're looking for trouble they'll be heading here right soon, Rod. Maybe we'd better get ready."

"Wait," Peters said suddenly. "After your fight with Crawford those coyotes saw you head out of town. I gave it out that you were heading for the rancho to see Doc Stebbings. Now, Bristol will tell 'em you've returned. They'll never dream that you've been to the canyon and found Vincent."

Nogales nodded.

"I'll tell you what I bet they will do, though," Nogales said. "To prevent me from going to Quithatz for Vincent, I figure Crawford will send some men here to stop me—and stop you as well. Once you and I are out of the way, the gang can go to the canyon and overpower anybody else I may have told. Leastwise, I got a hunch that's the way Crawford's mind will work."

"I think you're right. Well, I've got enough on Crawford to act now. I reckon I'll just sashay over to his place and put him under arrest. We know he planned Vincent's kidnaping and that he plotted to kill you and forge your signature to a will. I'll also arrest Bristol and the Deacon as accessories—and anybody else that shows signs of backing up Crawford. Right now I'm deputizing you to help me make arrests. Ready to go?"

"Ready and waiting," Nogales said promptly.

"Come on!"

**P**ETERS turned the door knob, then threw his weight against the door to open it against the howling gale. Sand cut and tore at their faces as they stepped outside. The outlines of houses could be seen but dimly through the dusty fog. The sun was sending down only a pale light on the street.

"Phew! What a wind!" Peters shouted to make himself heard.

"Wait, Rod!" Nogales said suddenly. "There's a gang coming!"

The two men waited. Forms took shape and came

nearer, headed by Limpy Bristol and the Deacon. Behind them, Nogales could make out some twenty men at least. Some were armed with rifles. The Deacon was carrying a length of coiled rope.

Suddenly Bristol spotted Nogales. "There's Scott!" the man shouted. "C'mon, we'll string 'em up!" Yells arose from the followers.

Nogales said calmly, "We'd better get back to your office, Rod. We'll have to make a stand there. That gang's sure set to wipe us out and the fact that you're a law officer won't stop 'em!"

They turned and started back toward the building. One of the men behind Bristol jerked a rifle to his shoulder and fired. The report sounded flat and thin against the roar of the wind, but Peters saw the bullet kick up dust at his feet. Instantly his six-shooter was out, blazing.

A man went down. For a moment the mob halted. Then the Deacon yelled. "Don't stop, men! We've got to get 'em or they'll get us."

Limpy Bristol's forty-five roared. Nogales thumbed two quick shots. He saw Bristol spin half around and then drop. Now firing broke out with savage intensity. Bullets were flying all around Peters and Nogales, but the two men managed to get back to the deputy's office without being wounded. Jerking open the door, they leaped inside and quickly shot the bolt.

"We're in for it, Nogales," Peters said.

"I won't go out without taking a few of those scuts with me," Nogales said grimly.

A bullet shattered the window pane. More bullets thudded into the door. Peters and Nogales dropped to the floor and lay there until the early volleys had subsided. Then they both jumped for the window and threw shots at shadowy figures dashing past. But this time there were no answering reports.

The two waited, crouching close to the walls. Nogales said, "They've stopped shooting. I can't hear a sound."

"Couldn't hear much in this wind anyway," Peters growled. "Maybe they're trying to make us think they've left, so we'll come out."

"Maybe." Nogales nodded. "But I got a hunch they're up to some deviltry. I don't like it." He sniffed the air suddenly. "I smell smoke—"

"Look!" Peters pointed to the closed door that led to the room back of his office. Smoke was curling through the crack between the door and the jamb. "They've set the back of this building on fire. They're going to burn us out!"

**H**E OPENED the door and a gust of flame shot into the room. Quickly he shut the door again and turned, pale-faced, to face Nogales. "What are we going to do now?"

"Stay here and roast," Nogales replied, "or leave here and go down fighting."

They could hear the crackling of the flames in the back room now. The boards of the back wall grew hot to the touch. Peering cautiously through the broken window pane, Nogales reported, "I can't see anybody, but I know they're waiting— Cripes! The building across the street is afire! I reckon sparks from this made it catch."

"With this wind, we'll be lucky if the whole town don't catch."

The room was filled with smoke by this time. Both men were coughing. "I don't know how much longer I can stand this," Peters gasped.

A sudden orange light appeared in the room. Looking up, they saw that fire was burning through the ceiling. Embers drifted down on the men's clothing to be slapped out with their hands. Now they crowded near the window, trying to catch as much fresh air as possible.

"Look," Peters said, "I can see a whole row of buildings on fire! This blaze is spreading fast. How much longer we staying here?"

"Not much longer." Nogales tried to hold his voice steady. Sweat was streaming down his features now. "I'm hoping the smoke will get thick outside and we can make a dash for it."

"Smoke or no smoke, I've got to have air!"

"Right!" We'll get moving. Let's go through this door with our guns blazing. We'll get as many as we can—"

"I hear shooting!" Peters interrupted. "There's a lot of it." They listened, and heard through the mingled roar of wind and crackling flames the sharp reports of guns and the pounding of hoofs. Peters stole a glance around the edge of the window.

"Nogales!" he yelled, "there's a street fight going on. There's been so much noise we didn't get it."

"Street fight?" Nogales asked dumbly.

"Sheriff Burger is out there! He's got a crew of riders with him. Things have been happening while we hung back here, breathing smoke."

Throwing open the street door, the two leaped out. All one side of the street was ablaze, the shifting wind sending flame and sparks in all directions. The sun-warped wood in the buildings caught and burned fiercely.

The street was filled with horsemen, as Nogales and Peters stepped outside. Burger spotted them almost instantly. "Wondered where you were, Peters," his voice came bellowing above the sound of crackling timbers. "Hi-yuh, Scott! Glad to see you're alive."

The street was strewn with the bodies of dead men. Two horses were down. Farther along, three horsemen were herding a bunch of prisoners before them.

"Seen Crawford?" Nogales yelled.

Burger shook his head, and reined his horse to one side. "Somebody said he was still in his store. I'm not waiting to see. Let's get out of this town. The whole place is going in a few minutes. . . . Hey, Scott, where you going?"

**B**UT Nogales was out of earshot now, running swiftly in the direction of Crawford's store. The roof of the building was ablaze, but the rest of the structure was intact. Nogales leaped to the door. It was locked. Standing back, Nogales took a short run and again hurled his weight against it.

There came a sharp splintering sound as the door jerked and fell inward. As Nogales stumbled on through, he caught the picture in a brief glance. Waiting there in the middle of the room were the Deacon and Simon Crawford. The Deacon's long six-shooter was out. Crawford held a double-barreled shotgun in his hands.

Nogales drew his six-shooter and threw himself to the floor all in one swift movement. He heard the roar of the Deacon's six-gun, followed by the heavy *boom-boom* of Crawford's weapon, as a charge of buckshot thundered above him. Both men, having missed, were preparing to try again. Crawford was fumbling for fresh shells and the Deacon was raising his six-shooter, when Nogales fired twice swiftly.

He saw the Deacon's long form jerk, then fall sidewise, the six-shooter clattering from his hand. Crawford was still trying to shove fresh shells into the shotgun, when Nogales fired once more.

For an instant Crawford swayed unsteadily. Then his knees bent and he went to the floor like some huge stricken beast. He lay without movement.

Nogales scrambled up and darted outside, reloading as he ran. By this time not a building remained untouched by fire. The crackling of burning wood was deafening, the heat intense. Smoke billowed up to be swept away by the raging wind.

Sprinting as fast as he could, Nogales ran the flaming gauntlet of buildings. By the time he reached the end of town his clothing was burning in a dozen places, his eyebrows were singed.

Suddenly he heard Rod Peters' voice, "God! You did escape!"

And then, to Nogales' surprise, he saw the relieved faces of Caliper and Steve looking down on him from their saddles.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THESE ASHES BRING PEACE

"AND the more I thought of it," Burger's pompous voice went on, "the more it was borne in upon my conscience that I owed it to my constituents to look into affairs at Ramrod Ridge. My deputy, Rod Peters—and I think you'll all admit I certainly know how to pick good deputies—had kept me well informed how matters stood. With me to think is to act.

"I rounded up a bunch of fighting riders, deputized them and came here to put under arrest every man-jack of Simon Crawford's crooked outfit. The very thought of his nefarious practices has for a long time made my blood boil. I decided to put a stop to it, once and for all. We arrived at—ahem—a very propitious time, I believe. Wouldn't you say so, Mr. Scott?"

"No doubt of it," Nogales replied.

"And—er—and," Burger asked cautiously, "do you think the governor might be interested in this affair? That is to say, the small part I played—er—"

"I intend to write the governor tomorrow," Nogales said dryly, "for the sole purpose of telling him the way in which you fulfill the duties of your office."

They had all been seated on the ground, back from the heat of the fire, watching the town go up in flames. By now there was little left of Ramrod Ridge, save a smoldering heap of timbers. The wind was dying too.

If Nogales was surprised at seeing Steve and Caliper when he emerged from the flaming town, he was more surprised to be greeted by Polly, Fred and Ethan Vincent. Their presence was quickly explained by Ethan: "We could see smoke rising and flames from the gallery of the house. Polly got all upset about Rod and wondered if he was in danger—"

"Father!" Polly had protested, flushing.

"It's so," the elder Vincent said, his eyes twinkling, "though I wouldn't go so far as to say you were as bad as Caliper and Steve. We couldn't hold those two down, wounded as they were. Doc fixed 'em up and we all mounted and came down to see the doings. We were just in time to see Nogales come down that blazing street. I just hope Caliper and Steve won't get a set-back from their activity."

Doc Stebbings growled, "You couldn't kill those two. They're too tough."

"I sure wish I'd been in on the excitement, though," Caliper said wistfully.

"Ees so." Steve nodded. "Always, Nogales, he have all of the fun."

"You've all had a hand in the doings," Ethan said, "though Nogales gave me the biggest thrill by finding that gold."

"If you got a thrill, what do you think I got?" Fred laughed.

THE talk ran on. Back some distance from the group, Burger was instructing his riders regarding the prisoners who had been taken. The voices of Rod Peters and Polly dropped lower, and soon the two of them were absorbed in a private conversation of their own.

"Well," Nogales said finally, "Crawford and his gang are wiped out, as well as Ramrod Ridge."

Rod and Polly sat staring into one another's eyes in a way that was almost like hands groping out, one for the other, wanting to touch and to hold.

"Good riddance all around," Ethan said. "We'll have peace in this country now."

Rod Peters got back into the conversation. "Peace is fine, when you've got a job. But now I've got to get me another town, and I've got a hunch this county is filled with deputies, just waiting for offices."

Nogales glanced over one shoulder where Sheriff Burger was talking to his riders, and said, "Rod, I'll bet I can get you another office. One word about the governor watching out for your welfare and—"

Rod shook his head. "I don't want to get a job thataway."

"I've been thinking about your job too, Rod," Ethan Vincent put in. "Before long I'm going to start raising blooded stock to sell to cattlemen who want to improve the strain of their herds. And next winter I aim to put in some citrus trees. There'll be too much work for my foreman. How'd you like to handle the cattle end of the business for me?"

"Why," Peters said, "that's downright nice, but I don't know if I should take the job or not—" He broke off, his face crimsoning, his eyes searching Polly's face.

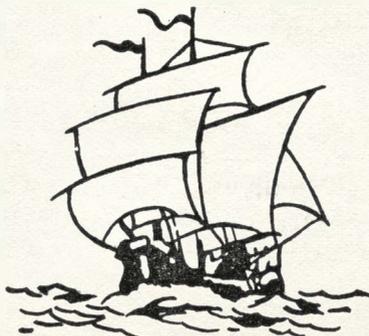
"Please take it, Rod," Polly said quickly. Rod looked at the girl steadily, seeking the answer to a certain question. Apparently he found the reply he sought, for he turned back and said, "I'll be glad to work with you, Ethan."

"Fine," the elder Vincent said heartily and patted Polly on one shoulder.

"Gosh," Caliper said, "everything is turning out right. First Rod gets burned out of his job, then he gets another—and plenty happiness besides, I'm betting. You know, I sort of miss the Deacon; he'd probably have something appropriate to say on such an occasion. Nogales, can't you think of anything?"

Nogales pondered a moment. Then, grinning: "Behold," he said, "how great a matter a little fire kindleth!"

THE END



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# Argonotes

HEMMED is as we are this week, we must do our breathing carefully and speak with reserve. We cannot engage in violent arguments, or even permit our correspondents to do so; and it's fortunate, therefore, that the first letter at hand maintains a level tone.

Among other things, he asks for more Merritt stories, as so many others have done. Well, the unfortunate truth is that Mr. Merritt is so busy a man these days that he can find no time for fiction. We wish we could do something about it, but we can't; we can only wait hopefully.

Now here is one man's opinion of ARGOSY as she sails today.

## CHARLES W. WOLFE

What I like about the present-day ARGOSY:

The fiction by Max Brand, Burroughs, Beyer, E. Hoffmann Price, and Richard Sale; the new cover illustrations, especially those by the master artist, Virgil Finlay; the Men of Daring feature by Stookie Allen; the every-other-Wednesday publication dates (some will call me traitor for that); the red band on the recent issues (put on 144 pages and the small size, and we would be almost back to the good old days).

What I don't like about the present-day ARGOSY:

The large size, the so-called true-story features of recent weeks about war threats to the U. S., the poor art work of Maxwell, some of the advertisements, the preponderance of Western stories, the shortage of good fantastics and mysteries.

Make ARGOSY all fiction once more, try out some new interior artists, but stay away from Hannes Bok, get more of Finlay, get more repeat characters such as Diker, Dr. Kildare, Tarzan, Smooth Kyle.

Why not return to ARGOSY some of those feature characters from some of Munsey's short-term publications like *Red Star Mystery* which featured Don Diavolo. Those would make great serial stories.

Run some good fantastics for those thousands of science-fiction fans who scan through ARGOSY each week to see if they are missing something. You know the really great classics of fantasy came from ARGOSY pages almost without exception. Today, the fans still watch ARGOSY for fear a new Merritt story might slip by them. Make that hope come true, can you? Las Vegas, New Mexico

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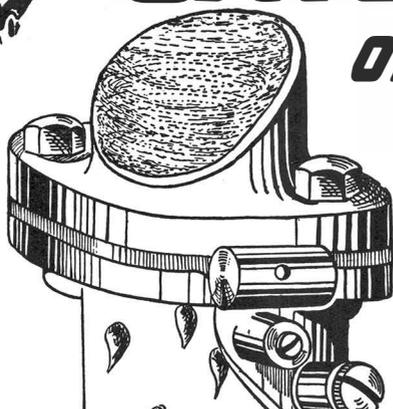
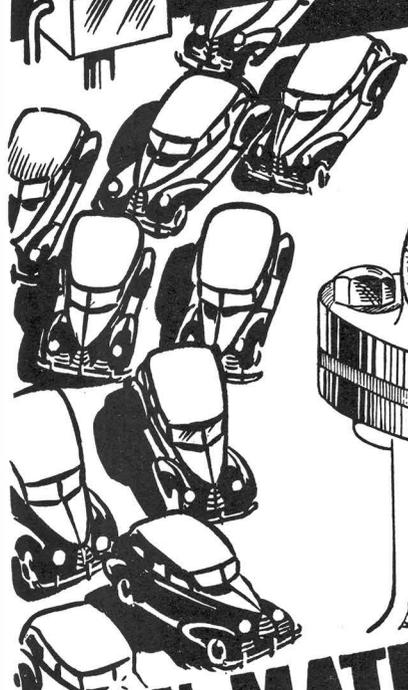
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