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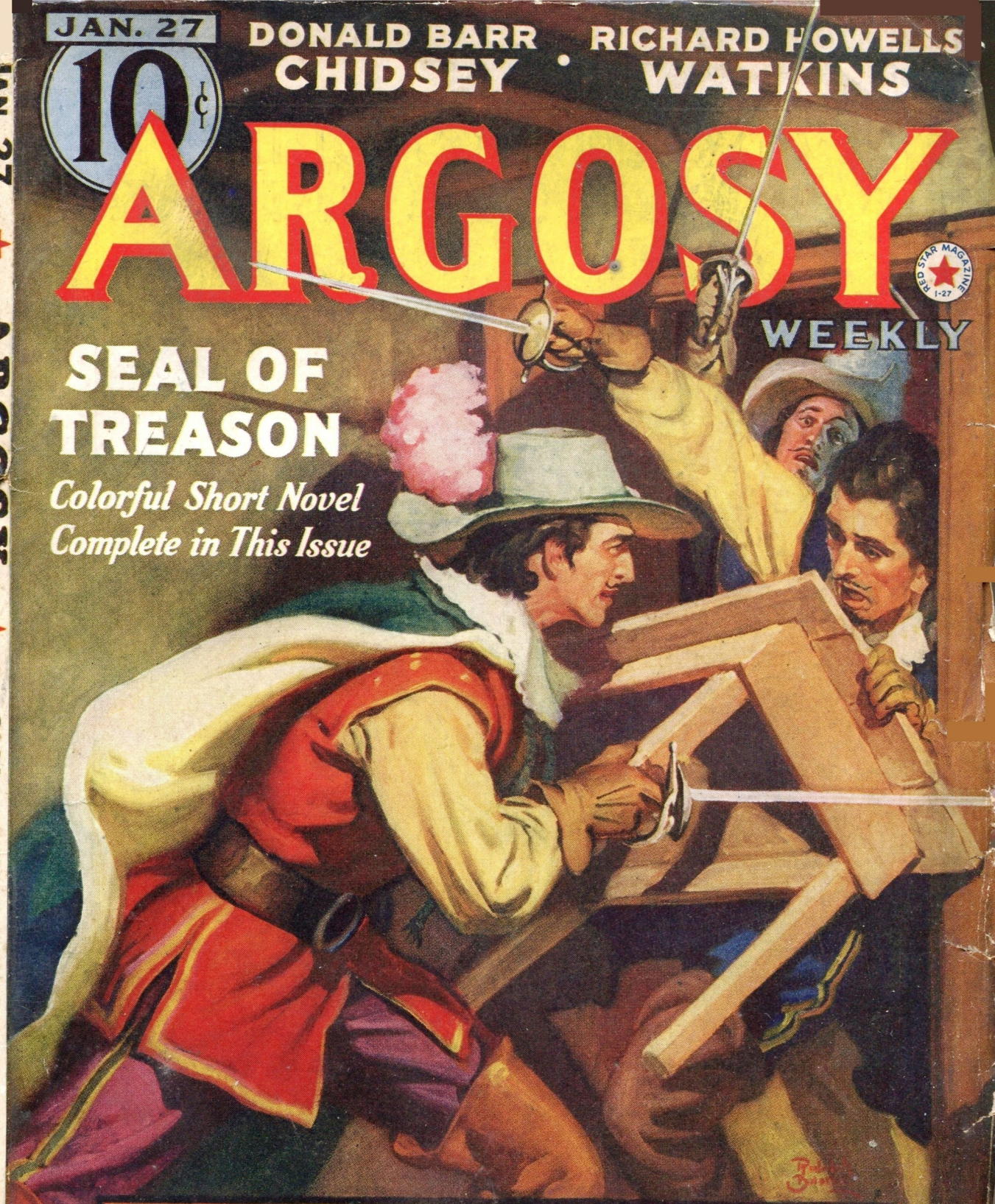

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Illustrating Seal of Treason

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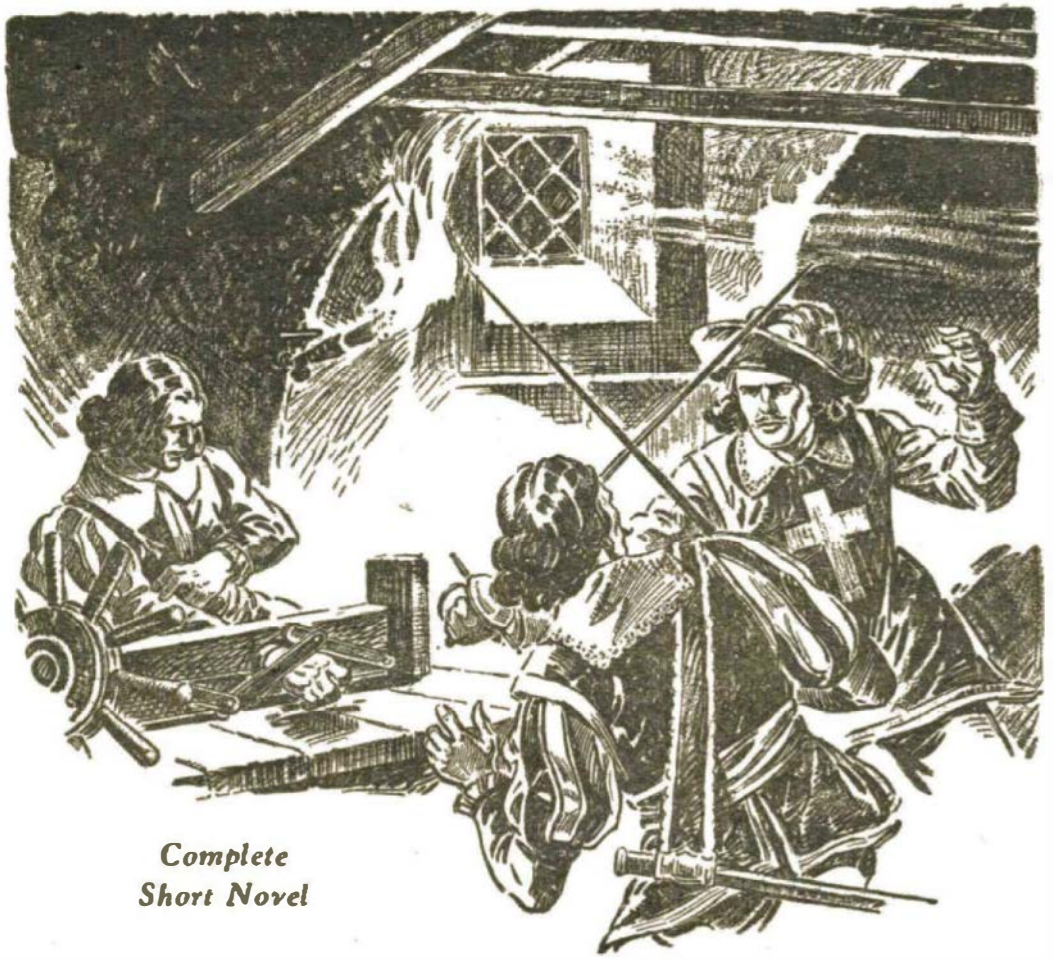


Complete Short Novel

Seal of Treason

By
MURRAY R. MONTGOMERY

Author of "Rakehelly Ride," "A Sword for the Cardinal," etc.

CHAPTER I

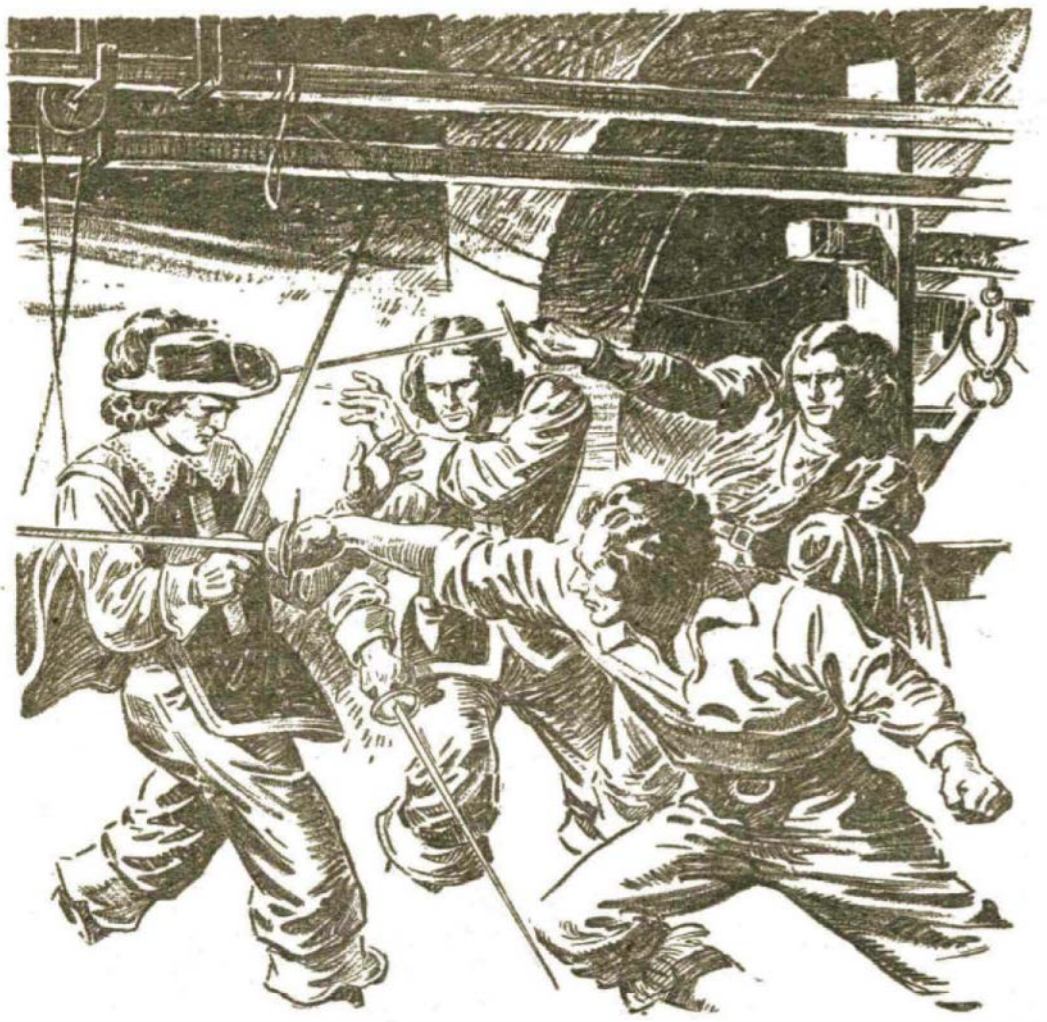
DOUBLE MURDER

THE large Venetian clock in the palace library was chiming seven as portly Capitaine Cordeau entered the high-ceilinged room, paced smartly over the thick rug and came to a halt in front of the Cardinal's desk.

He essayed a jerky bow which made the full white plume on his hat ripple gracefully, and smiled, the quick false smile of a politician.

"You sent for me, *Monseigneur?*"

Cardinal Richelieu thrust aside the litter of correspondence before him and fell wearily against the plush of his chair. It had been a busy day. An important day. But not without headaches—two headaches in particular.



They're loose again! Those two trouble-jabbing trouble shooters for Richelieu: Cleve, the Cardinal's Madman, who laughs with a hot steel-point at his eyeball; D'Entreville, the Cardinal's Kitten, who scratches deepest when men laugh at his purr. Where they ride, Hell whips loose from its moorings

"*Oui, Capitaine,*" he answered dryly, "I sent for you. It is my wish that you take a squad and search Paris for a pair of lawless scoundrels bearing the names Cleve and d'Entreville."

The smile on Cordeau's lips wavered. "Again, *Monseigneur?*"

The Cardinal inclined his head. "Again, *monsieur.*" He steepled his thin tapering fingers and stared at the tips absently, "And when you have found them, place them under arrest and throw them into the deepest dungeon. Understand?"

"Er—*oui, Monseigneur.*"

"*Bien.* That will be all."

Cordeau's muddy eyes had a glint of sarcasm in them. The Cardinal spoke as if the command were nothing. Belittled it with the careless expression: "That will be all!" *Corbac!* Richard Cleve and Guy d'Entreville were as amenable to arrest as wild-cats.

The *capitaine's* black spade-beard trembled and he no longer wore a smile, but he managed to keep his mouth shut. It wasn't prudent to say foolish things before Richelieu. With curses kicking rebelliously behind his lips, Cordeau bowed. He left the library with the stiff dignity of a man trudging to an unworthy fate.

Richelieu frowned across the table at Père Joseph. In the soft flickering light of the candles his fine pallor was delicately tinted with shadow, giving his sharply chiseled features a thoughtful, profound, and at the moment, stern appearance.

"Some day, Joseph," he observed, "Messieurs Cleve and d'Entreville shall learn that they cannot play their rogue-tricks in my guard!"

Father Joseph, the Cardinal's large, Socratic aide, allowed a look of resignation to flit across his unhandsome face. He sighed and laid aside the volume he had been scanning. The incorrigibility of the two in question was an old story.

FIRST, there was Count Guy d'Entreville: satirist, poet and swordsman. Guy had been a gnat in the great Cardinal's ear until forced, by Richelieu, into shifting his alliance.

Four months ago, d'Entreville's indiscreet fiancée had been made the innocent dupe of a treasonous plot. Guy had sworn himself to the Cardinal's service to save her from going to la Bastille.

And then there was Lord Richard Cleve. Cleve was an Englishman who had been exiled from his native land because of his fondness for speaking the truth at the wrong times. A matter of ten thousand pounds which was going into the Duke of Buckingham's pockets instead of into the Royal Treasury.

He was an enigma. A man of contradictions. The brilliance of his mind was exceeded only by his penchant for getting into and then out of trouble. This trait, abetted by the hot-headedness of Guy d'Entreville, combined to make a devil's partnership indeed.

Père Joseph folded his large hands. "What have they done this time, Armand?" he asked.

"*Ma foi!* It would be easier to ask what they have left undone!" Richelieu selected a document from the pile in front of him and held it up to the light. "Their misdeeds for the day," he said ominously.

In the spacious corridor, outside, a squad of Guards swung by, the rhythm of their tread sounding in muffled cadence through the door. He waited until it had faded before reading the report aloud.

"'At noon,'" he read, "'on this the tenth day of October, 1630, officers Cleve and d'Entreville fell to bickering between themselves on the ramp of the Pont Neuf. Six of His Majesty's Musketeers attempted to quiet them, and were promptly hurled into the River Seine.'"

Père Joseph shrugged. The tale was typical. He had often wondered how Cleve and d'Entreville could argue so constantly and still remain fast friends. The incongruity of madmen, he decided.

Richelieu continued, and his voice shook with cold indignation. "That was the lesser of their offenses, Joseph." He bent nearer the candles. "'In the market-place near the Capitainerie of the Louvre, le Comte d'Entreville did wilfully and with malice aforethought hurl an egg into the face of the King's brother, heir apparent to the Throne, Monsieur le Duc d'Orleans.'"

This time, Père Joseph was honestly shocked. "*Mon dieu!*" he exclaimed. "What ever possesed d'Entreville to do that?"

Richelieu crumpled the report into a hard ball and hurled it to the floor. "Cleve did," he said icily and got to his feet. "D'Entreville aimed for him — and missed!"

"The King is offended?"

"Naturally. One does not splatter royalty with eggyolk. And he blames me! Cleve and d'Entreville are in my Guard and consequently, my responsibility."

Richelieu interlaced his fingers and paced angrily. He made a graceful, commanding figure in his trailing red robe, seeming taller because of his extreme slen-

derness. It was a source of constant wonder to his contemporaries that such a frail-looking man could control the destiny of France. Not even the King dared rule the powerful nobles as did Richelieu. And therein lay the drama of the times.

FRANCE, in the early Seventeenth Century, was still subject to the whims of her ruling princes. The nobility retained its feudal right to levy taxes, to raise personal armies, and to subsidize the Throne for its own ends.

To combat this, Richelieu was trying to evolve France into a strong nation, united under but one leader—the King. He had to strip power from the nobles to do this and they hated him for it. Their plots against him were myriad, but as yet unavailing.

"Naturally, those rakehellies *would* wait to perpetrate their impudences when I am too busy to deal with them personally," Richelieu said returning to the desk.

Père Joseph shifted uneasily. He feared an outburst of nerves. In these critical times Richelieu's temper was stretched to the snapping point and minor irritations, such as furnished by Cleve and d'Entreville, could easily serve as the necessary cutting-edge. He was relieved when a Guardsman entered the library.

"Your Eminence, le Duc de Montauban has just returned to the Palace. He wishes me to extend regret that he is indisposed and will be unable to bid you good evening personally."

The Duke of Montauban was Richelieu's house guest, representing one of the major moves in the Cardinal's plans to unite France. The Cardinal frowned.

"De Montauban is well, I trust," he said.

"*Oui, Monseigneur.* He has retired to his suite."

"Then why? It is too early to go abed as yet."

The Guardsman moistened his lips uncertainly. "Er—you'll pardon me, *Monseigneur,* but le Duc de Montauban is drunk."

Richelieu stared at the treaty he had been hoping to persuade de Montauban to sign. He sighed. "The irresponsible young fool. The progress of a nation awaits his name, but he prefers to amuse himself."

The Guardsman nodded uneasily and left. Richelieu poured himself a tumbler of water and sipped it slowly. His dark eyes were pools of thought. De Montauban had been a guest in his Palace for a week, and still the reason for his visit lay unsigned. Something always came up. Fate? The Cardinal was beginning to wonder.

Prior to a month ago de Montauban had hated him with the fire and unreason of a very young and very reactionary noble. Now he was accepting his sworn enemy's hospitality with the promise of signing a pledge that would bind him by honor to the Cardinal's theory of government. Why? Richelieu set aside the tumbler of water and stared at Joseph.

"YOUNG de Montauban troubles me, Joseph," he confessed. "I have never fully believed his sudden reversal of opinion. Yet my agents have learned nothing to prove otherwise. *Ma foi!* It is an uncertain business. Intuition warns me of a trap, but reason and my desire for peace urge credulity."

"I have a profound respect for your intuition, Armand," Père Joseph said. "However, I think that the young duke is too shallow to formulate a clever plot."

"My opinion also, Joseph. And still, that vague suspicion has been gnawing steadily at the back of my brain and tonight it is stronger than usual."

The speaker rose to his feet and once more started pacing. Père Joseph frowned. It wasn't like the cold-minded Cardinal to act in this manner. The monk stood up.

"If it will relieve your mind, *Monseigneur,* I shall look in on *le duc* as I go to my room."

Richelieu's fingers played absently with the heavy pendant on his chest. He nodded. "Do that, Joseph," he said.

The elaborate suite given to le Duc de Montauban was on the second story. Père Joseph strode easily along the wide corridor leading to it; and then a sudden questioning expression began to cloud his features. Usually there was a guard posted before the ducal door. Tonight the space was deserted; the guard missing.

Quickening his step, Père Joseph reached the door and knocked tentatively. There was no answer. The frown on his forehead deepened. He paused, struggling to maintain an illusion that everything was all right; then entered the room.

The body of the guard was sprawled grotesquely in the middle of the foyer. Faint light from the adjoining room washed his dead staring face in ghastly yellow. His throat had been cut.

Père Joseph stood for one frozen moment experiencing the numb nausea of a man plummeting through a scaffold-trap. He carefully closed the door and stepped across the body.

"De Montauban!"

The young duke was in bed. He lay smiling, his long hair a dark froth on the pillow, his eyes closed as if in sleep. The jeweled haft of a needle-like stiletto protruded stiffly from his chest. Père Joseph moved closer and stopped. Le Duc de Montauban was quite dead.

The monk bit his lip and retired, locking the door after him. Disaster had struck. A murder that threatened to wreck France with the revolt of her nobility. A murder that threatened Richelieu's very existence. Père Joseph broke into a horrified, anxious, dog-trot.

CHAPTER II

SCRATCHER AND CUTTER

IN THE meantime, Capitaine Cordeau was rapidly losing his patience. For almost an hour he had led a stumbling squad of Guardsmen through the pitchy dark of Paris streets, without a sign of his quarry.

From tavern to tavern, house to house; scuffing his new boots on the rough cobbles; staining the fine lace of his collar with sweat, and always listening to the same story:

"No, *monsieur*, I have not seen them." . . . "No, *mon Capitaine*, they have not been here and they owe me ten livres." . . . "No, Cordeau, not tonight." And to make matters worse, the Guards were growing restive and he was running out of possibilities.

"We have visited le Coq Rouge, l'Oiseau Bleu and le Palais d'Or," Sergeant Burdet complained. "*Ventre saint gris, Capitaine*, Cleve and d'Entreville have left the city!"

"Orders to bring them in," Cordeau snapped. "So I bring them in, if we walk to Bordeaux!"

Burdet shrugged and fell silent. In the face of the *capitaine's* martinet attitude, there wasn't anything else to do. One does not argue with a duty-mad slave driver.

"Close up, men," he snarled. "*Corbac!* We are not out for an evening's stroll. Close up, curse you!"

They threaded their way past le Quai de l'Ecle, across the Pont Neuf and into the velvet dark of the market-place on the other side.

Two thick torches, carried in the van, thrust aside the night in flickering orange candescence, highlighting the stubborn flush on Cordeau's cheek. Boots cracked hard on the rough cobblestones; rapiers tinkled rhythmically against buckles; a pair of narrow-eyed footpads stared fearfully at them from a darkened alley and melted discreetly into the murk.

And then, rounding the corner which led to the Henri IV Tavern, they were greeted by the sight of a small crowd. A curious, apprehensive crowd, outlined sharply in the torch-lit courtyard, staring in fascination at the trim little inn. A battle was progressing inside.

Cordeau gripped his rapier and ordered the squad forward on the double.

The miniature war seemed to be located on the second floor; for as he approached, a window shattered open and a disheveled individual leaped from it feet first. He

landed in a heap; got up and kept running. Arms akimbo, and with feet astraddle in the center of the court, the captain eyed the broken window.

"Cleve! D'Entreville!" he roared.

"Present!"

A clean-shaven face with keen brown eyes and a lean jaw line appeared through the ragged aperture. *"Hola,* Cordeau," it greeted cheerfully.

The captain raised himself to his full rotund dignity. "M'Lord," he shouted. "In the name of his Eminence the Cardinal, I command you to come down!"

Richard Cleve looked back over his shoulder. The light from inside marked the deep bronze of his skin and the slight impudent tilt of his rather small nose. It shot glints of copper through the deep chestnut of his hair.

As he turned, he ducked. A gurgling bottle somersaulted past his ear and exploded against the side of the watering-trough below. He raked a few strands of hair from his eyes and shook his head.

"Can't make it, *Capitaine.* We're entertaining."

He waved cheerfully and disappeared before Cordeau had time to erupt suitably.

THE room was small, cramped. It had no furniture outside of a saggy cot and a large walnut table against the far wall. In the corner a tall, rangy young man, encased in maroon with a dancing red plume in his broad-brimmed hat, was holding a doorless portal against three gentlemen.

The three were backed up by a dozen more, all shouting and brandishing swords. Cleve went over and lounged against the table and surveyed the scene with the critical eye of a connoisseur.

"All because you decided to read poetry," he snorted. "Faith, Guy, this is one brawl that I didn't commence."

Guy d'Entreville caught a vicious thrust on the length of his blade and nipped its author in the shoulder. *"Pecaire!* Fine time for recriminations! Lend your blade to this, you English lout!"

He ducked a particularly high slash at his head and needled an exposed thigh. "No man can call my verse putrid. Especially these swine." He sent his sword into a flashing series of ripostes that caused the door-jammed trio to curse and retreat.

"Temper, Kitten," Cleve observed.

D'Entreville half rose from his couch. He was a full two inches taller than his companion. There was a glint of anger in his dark eyes. His hair, like rippled pitch, clustered in dark contrast against the white lace of his collar. The nose above his clipped mustache was high-bridged and aristocratic. It lent a slight hawkishness to his features which was abetted by high cheekbones and thin though even lips.

"Sapristi, Cleve! Don't call me Kitten!"

Cleve grinned. The name Cardinal's Kitten had been pinned on d'Entreville several months before by Prince Conde who considered Guy extremely young for his ability to claw adversaries first with his poetry and then with his sword. Guy had never taken to the title. To him it sounded faintly derisive.

"Some day Cleve, you'll call me Kitten once too—"

Cleve stiffened. "Watch out, you fool!" There was a bottle on the table beside him. He scooped it up; hurled it past d'Entreville's shoulder and scored. A man staggered back holding a badly mashed nose. The sword he had been about to stick in d'Entreville's back clattered to the floor.

"Pay attention to business!"

D'Entreville nodded. "But damned to you, Cleve. *À moi.* I'm not cut to play Horatius forever!"

Cleve put on his hat carefully, sheathed his blade, and picked up the table. In contrast to his friend he was unusually slight, but the ease with which he handled the heavy piece evidenced amazing strength.

"Step aside, Kitten. We've lingered too long. Cordeau is without and he has his army with him plus a jailer's expression in his eyes."

"Sangodemi! Why didn't you say so?"

THE speaker knitted his adversaries into a short retreat and then did a neat pirouette. Cleve came up behind with the table held shield-like in front of him.

The besieging horde surged into the room. They clogged loosely in the doorway as the table crashed into them. It was like a huge bowling ball striking half-set pins.

D'Entreville leaped a sprawling figure and came in behind Cleve. Opposition melted before their combined weight. The two cavaliers chased the others down the hallway as far as the stairs and hurled the table after them. Three of Cordeau's squad were caught in the deluge of falling bodies.

"Now to leave this hole," d'Entreville panted, snapping his rapier into its sheath. "The front seems best in the confusion. Keep the brim of your hat well over your face."

Cleve shook his head. "The rear. Cordeau has three men at the foot of the stairs already. Damned if I'll again return to the Palace under guard like a felon. We skip through the back, *mon ami.*"

D'Entreville's jaw snapped shut at a stubborn angle. "I still say the front. Last time, Cordeau was waiting at the back."

Cleve sighed. He planted the sole of his thigh-high cordovan boot on the chest of an ambitious climber and sent him crashing back to join his milling comrades at the foot of the stairs. He looked at d'Entreville and frowned. Argument, spirited verbal recrimination, seemed to be the tie that bound their deep friendship.

"The last time," he said patiently, "*you* suggested the back. Not I. We were caught."

D'Entreville glared at his companion with disgust, and said:

"We wouldn't have been, if you hadn't tripped over your own clumsy feet. Besides, you started the brawl in the first place."

"Me?" Cleve looked hurt. "Why, all I did was laugh a small bit when the duchess commenced to sing."

"The woman was not a duchess. She was the mistress of le Duc de Vas."

The climber had returned with a companion. Cleve kicked them both down the stairs again. Their return restarted the turmoil of arms and legs which had been slowly reorganizing. "The woman looked like a duchess," he said. "She was fat and she sang off-key."

From the door of the grog room Sergeant Burdet appeared and caught them thus arguing. He emitted a hoarse bellow: *Messieurs.* Stand! You are under arrest."

Both men stared down at him; and d'Entreville gripped Cleve's elbow. "You're right," he said. "The rear is the best wager."

They fled back through the L-shaped hall. It was a long narrow corridor, dingy with warped doors lining either side. The very gloom of it seemed to deaden the noise from below. Behind them Burdet was yelling curses and fighting his way up the clogged staircase.

"Damme! There's no rear entrance!" Cleve exclaimed as they pounded around the corner up against a dead end. Then he snapped his fingers and smiled. "But there's a window."

The window overlooked an extremely narrow alleyway, and stared directly across into the dark square of another. D'Entreville put his boot through the pane.

"No time for niceties," he explained, kicking aside the jagged remains. "I'll repay the innkeeper tomorrow."

"If you are able to," Cleve said, and stared at the neighboring window. He shifted to the depth of the alleyway and shrugged. "About five feet across," he decided. "Come, *mon ami.*"

They vaulted over the black chasm between buildings and stood, concealed by shadow, on the sill of the window. Burdet and three Cardinalists clattered down the hall they had just quitted. Cleve held his breath. The men finally withdrew without glancing across the alley.

"All right," he muttered, releasing his grip on a weather-warped eve. "In we go, and pray that the room is unoccupied."

IT WAS. The room appeared to be a small alcove. A thick drape blocked the single egress but allowed the light from the adjacent room to seep around its edges. Voices came in muffled accents through the folds.

Cleve hitched his rapier closer to his waist and glided across the rug on the balls of his feet. D'Entreville was close behind, breathing in softly, quickly. He had his sword drawn. He touched Cleve's shoulder and pointed to the curtain.

"*Pecaire.* Is that the only way out?"

Cleve nodded. He realized that they couldn't stay holed in the little room too long. The moment Cordeau discovered that they had eluded his men, nothing but a complete search of the neighboring buildings would satisfy him.

"We'll have to put a bold face on it," the Englishman said with a shrug. "Damme, I hope that our friends in there are amenable."

A whining voice from the other side was saying: "But I left my dagger there . . . I deserve the price of it."

With a sweep, Cleve armed aside the curtain and stepped into the room. It presented a tableau.

Three men were seated at a table around a black wine bottle. One was dark, swarthy, with a black mustache and goatee, glittering grey eyes and a rich costume studded with seed pearls.

Beside him, a veritable paunch of a man sat, blubber-lips agape and eyes pooling terror.

The third of the trio was a hard-faced individual, whom Cleve and d'Entreville had never seen, although he wore the white crossed surcoat of the Cardinal's Guard.

An imposter! Cleve's fingers felt the cool hilt of his blade.

"I trust you will pardon us, *messieurs,*" he said smilingly. "We have lost our way, and must pass through to find it."

The swarthy fellow with the pearl-studded doublet cursed, but the man in the Cardinalist uniform acted. With a yell he drew a knife from his belt and leaped. Cleve didn't have time to draw and d'Entreville's blade was tangled with the curtain.

"Spies!" the knife-man howled.

Cleve's left hand darted out and gripped the fellow's dagger arm. His right grasped his heavy sword-hilt from behind; raised it, and bashed it cruelly into the imposter's writhing lips. The basket hilt of the rapier was heavy. The man crumpled.

"Anyone else?" d'Entreville snapped, letting the light of the candles shimmer on his bared blade.

The swarthy man and his fat companion sat still. The knife-man, blood dripping from his lacerated lips, sat in the corner and cursed monotonously. Cleve kicked his knife into a pile of debris on the opposite wall and stepped to the door.

"Good evening, *messieurs,*" he said. "Come on, Guy."

The two cavaliers closed the door firmly behind them and groped hurriedly down the house's paint-blistered stairs.

"*Corbac!* It's dark. A wonder they wouldn't have a lamp."

Cleve laughed. "Apparently our friends upstairs desire privacy. Incidentally, wasn't that swarthy fellow Vendome, the King's illegitimate brother?"

D'Entreville stumbled; caught himself and cursed. "Yes," he replied after a moment. "I'm rather curious. What in the name of Heaven has he to do with Sarasanac? I wasn't even aware that they knew one another."

"Which one was he?"

"The fat sluggard. Owns le Theatre de Paris and claims to be a dramatist. *Corbac!* He doesn't know good verse from bad."

"Meaning," Cleve interposed, "that he doesn't like yours."

THEY reached the first landing and stepped stealthily into the street. Behind, the noise from L' Henri IV had quieted. Moonlight silvered the cobbles, lending a false serenity to the night. Somewhere in the distance a clock tolled.

But instead of striding boldly away, Cleve came to a dead halt.

"What's the matter?"

Cleve said: "I don't know." Then he snapped his fingers. "Faith, now I do. Observe the street, Kitten."

"What about it? 'Tis deserted. Quiet. Excellent for our purpose."

Cleve chuckled. "And that is the point, m'lad. It is too deserted and too quiet to be natural. With the battle fresh over at the tavern the crowd should be coming home now."

"Sangodemi! Don't be stupid. We're free and out of it."

"And about to step into it again. I think we had better retreat"

D'Entreville snorted. "I'm not doubling back into Cordeau's waiting arms and neither are you," he said.

"But it's wise. I'm warning you, Kitten . . ."

A thin edge came into the French cavalier's voice. *"Sapristi!* Don't call me Kitten!" He gripped Cleve's arm. "Come on!"

They marched quickly along the house-front, rounded the corner, and struck full into a large, heavy body that cursed. It was Cordeau.

He smiled triumphantly. "Good evening, gentlemen," he said. "I've been expecting you."

His voice suddenly rasped harshly. "And now, fall in. You are both under arrest, and after I report to *Monseigneur le Cardinal* about tonight's business you'll be fortunate to escape the block."

And as the prisoners marched away surrounded by their guards, one said to the other: "So, we are free and out of it, eh? Nice work, Kitten."

And the other replied fiercely: "Quiet!"

CHAPTER III

WHO'S DEAD NOW?

RICHELIEU spoke in an iced tone and the soft composure of it terrified. *"Messieurs,* you have outraged me, my regiment, and your King. There remains but one course."

Cleve eyed d'Entreville obliquely. The two were standing alone before the Cardinal's library desk where Cordeau had escorted them after a short stay in the dungeon. D'Entreville's face was tense.

Cleve sighed. D'Entreville was allowing the curse of his vivid imagination to run away with him again.

"You mean La Bastille, of course," he said easily.

Richelieu nodded. He folded his hands and eyed them enigmatically. "Have you anything to say in your defense, *messieurs?"*

Guy d'Entreville gulped audibly. He preferred death to imprisonment, and yet he could only stand there, hot and flushed, gripped in the wild rush various of mental protests, all of which contrived to choke him speechless.

The Venetian clock ticked a minute into the silence. Cleve found himself staring at the ornate candelabrum on the table. He looked past it at the white mask of Richelieu's face; into the man's dark eyes.

The Cardinal's gaze wavered for an instant, and in the wavering revealed an emotion that Cleve had never expected to see. Haunting, apprehensive with worry! Something had cracked the chill self-assurance of the great man.

The Englishman shrugged. "You did not call us here to ask us that, *Monsiegneur,"* he said. "Damme, if you had decided that the Bastille should be our lot—we would now be making friends with the jailer."

It was a bold speech. The Cardinal demanded complete deference from the officers of his Guard. But Cleve was filled with the recklessness of the foredoomed plus his natural lack of tact.

Surprisingly, Richelieu did not erupt. Instead, a look of relief seemed to flicker through his eyes. He mastered it quickly.

"You are impertinent, m'Lord," he said. "But the astuteness of your remarks pleases me." He arose, paced slowly to the window and turned. "You are quite right. I have a reason. A gamble, if you care to call it that."

"Yes?"

Richelieu frowned. "*Messieurs,*" he said, "you are scoundrels. Your roistering escapades have caused many to wonder whether the firmness of my hand has slipped. Mark you, gentlemen, it hasn't.

"It is only because I realize that two resourceful rogues are sometimes worth a regiment of ordinary men, that I suffer your repeated impertinences. And you have proved the truth of my theory in two noteworthy actions that have saved my life.

"Candidly, it is your rare ability to discover trouble that has caused me to bring you here."

The two rakehellies exchanged glances. The Cardinal was building up to something, and from past experience they knew it was something dangerous. Of the two, d'Entreville was the less apprehensive. He felt that at least they were still outside of the Bastille.

Cléve waited.

THE Cardinal seemed to be weighing his next words carefully. He returned to his desk and sat down. The waxen mask which Cleve had first noticed returned to his thin features, and the earlier tension again clogged the atmosphere.

When Richelieu finally spoke, his voice was free of its icy smoothness. It rang in harsh accents upon their startled ears.

"Upstairs, *messieurs,*" he said, "behind the locked door of his room, lies le Duc de Montauban with a knife in his heart—murdered."

"Murdered?"

The Cardinal smiled grimly. "I see you understand the disastrous implications of the affair." He fell back against his chair and fingered the pendant-ribbon at his throat. It was a habit he had acquired while in deep thought.

"A peer of the realm has been slain, *messieurs,* beneath my roof, and that is all my court enemies need to discredit my position. Naturally, they shall fail, but it may cause a civil war."

He eyed the two gravely. "With Spain and Austria land-hungry and thirsting to pounce upon France's border provinces, it will not do to have the nation weakened internally."

Cleve wasn't interested in politics. "About de Montauban, *Monseigneur,*" he said. "Who murdered him?"

The Cardinal's lips thinned harshly. "That, my dear Cleve, is the gamble I offer you. Find the duke's assassin within the week and we shall forget La Bastille.

"I shall paint the problem more graphically. Père Joseph discovered the body two hours ago. The Guardsman at de Montauban's door had been silenced, then dragged out of sight into the ducal chamber. De Montauban was slain in his sleep. No one was seen. Nothing was heard."

He paused. "Well, *messieurs?*" Then, with a chuckle:

"Oh, I had almost forgotten. If you accept this challenge and win, you have your liberty and a princely bounty. If you accept and fail, your original term of imprisonment doubles. It is a gamble, gentlemen, fit only for lawless rakehellies such as yourselves."

Cleve shook his head. If the assassin was clever enough to outwit Richelieu, then he was clever enough to escape discovery. The Cardinal was the originator of intrigue. Besides, Cleve had heard that the Bastille was not so bad. Good food, cards, pleasant companions. The odds were too high.

"Faith, if it is all the same to you, *Monseigneur,*" he grinned, "I prefer to idle my days in the—"

"But d'Entreville interrupted. "We accept," he said crisply. "After all, *Monseigneur,* what have we to lose?"

"Twice as much," Cleve muttered dryly.

LATER, in the corridor outside the library, he regarded his tall comrade sarcastically. "A month was the original length of our sentence," he snapped. "Damme, now it's two. Admirable, Kitten. In fact, brilliant!"

D'Entreville was defiant. "Anything is better than rotting in La Bastille. *Corbac!* Besides, we may win."

Cleve looked at the ceiling and sighed regretfully. "He believes we may win," he told no one in particular.

Then he smiled. "Faith, Kitten, your poetic fancy has led you to some wild impulses, but this beats all. Solving an escape from the Bastille will be child's play compared to His Eminence's little task."

"Mark me, Cleve, when I begin an adventure, something always happens!"

"True, m'lad. Quite true. Only it always happens to *me!*" The Englishman chuckled and set his hat aslant over one eye.

"But lackaday, fellow. Once bitten twice warned. 'Tis your show, so I'll bid you *au revoir*. Drop in now and again, and let me know how you progress. I'll be at the Blue Boar Tavern improving this last week of freedom with a keg or so of ale."

D'Entreville swore fervently. He hadn't considered the possibility of this exigency. It was against his principles to admit it, but the irrepressible Cleve was almost as necessary to him as his right arm.

"Ah, now listen, Richard . . ."

But Cleve was twenty feet away and whistling cheerily. D'Entreville shook his head, reached down and picked up the edge of the long roller-rug. He jerked it once—powerfully. Cleve's feet flew one way and his hat another. He landed with a soul-jarring bump.

"Well, *Monsieur le Comte?*"

Richelieu was standing in the door of the library and his eyes were chill. D'Entreville flushed furiously and fought to bring his stomach up from his boots. He still held on to one part of the rug.

"Er—*Monseigneur,*" he stammered. "I —that is. We were on our way to—I mean, Cleve was . . ."

"I know precisely what you mean," interposed the Cardinal. "I suggest that you cease your playing and commence the business at hand." His dark eyes shifted suddenly to the other. "I can see nothing to grin about, m'Lord."

Cleve nodded. He felt as if a mule had sneaked up behind him. "I agree, *Monseigneur,*" he said arising and massaging the spot solicitously.

"I understand you were planning to visit de Montauban's suite, *monsieur.*"

Cleve sighed, picked up his hat and nodded. "Yes, Your Eminence," he said.

PÈRE JOSEPH was in the Duke's room when they knocked. He had been collecting the dead man's personal effects. Frowning, he left the task to unbolt the door cautiously.

"There is little to see, *messieurs,*" he said after d'Entreville had explained their mission. "I have spoken to the captain of the Watch and no person, other than members of His Eminence's household, have been in the Palace tonight. Any person walking the halls alone would have been noticed and halted."

He ushered them into a large luxuriously furnished room, ceilinged in royal gold-trimmed blue and thick with carpets. The huge canopied bed had had the drapes drawn around it, but upon d'Entreville's suggestion they were opened to reveal the dark-haired corpse.

"I must caution you," Père Joseph said, "not to breathe a word of this misfortune. To the public the Cardinal will announce the sudden illness of the duke to allay suspicion until we have discovered the murderer."

"Or a reasonable scapegoat." Cleve nodded and collapsed into a pot-bellied chair. When Père Joseph had left, he stared at the ghastly vacancy of the room and said cheerfully: "Well, Kitten. Here is your problem. Solve it."

But, the mystery, on the face of it, seemed unsolvable. A *cul de sac.* D'Entreville found himself regretting his words to the Cardinal. He nosed uncertainly around the room, each step darkening his hopes until they were completely black.

Cleve had moved his chair to a neighboring table whereon sat an interesting-looking bottle and four silver goblets. Beside the liquor tray was Père Joseph's collection of de Montauban's personal articles. The Englishman sipped his drink and eyed the assortment of rings, pendants, brooches and medallions distastefully.

"Fop's baubles," he remarked. He picked up the largest.

Beside the bed, d'Entreville was staring unseeingly at the body. He started to turn away; then halted. With a muttered imprecation he pulled the stiletto from the duke's chest. The feel of the weapon seemed to jar his memory.

"Pecaire!"

"Speak up, Kitten."

D'Entreville looked annoyed. "Don't refer to me by that name." He held up the blood-clotted stiletto. "This has made me remember."

Cleve stood up, joggling the huge pendant ring idly in his hand. "Find the other half of that blade," he observed. "The human half, I mean. And you'll win out, m'lad."

"I am remembering," d'Entreville continued evenly, "about the visit we paid Vendome and that fat slug of a Sarasanac. There was a third man, an imposter wearing the surcoat of the Cardinal's Guard. He was complaining about losing his dagger when we burst in on them. Remember?"

Suddenly his eyes widened. *"Sacre Nom!* That's it. The imposter is the murderer." Then, he stared triumphantly at the Englishman.

"Don't look at me." Cleve shrugged. "I'm merely a spectator." He crossed to the bedside. He still had the large ring in his hand, but he slipped it over his little finger as he took the stiletto from the other's grip.

"But I believe you have stumbled upon half the truth, Kitten. A man garbed in the Cardinal's uniform would not, of a certainty, excite suspicion."

D'Entreville was vibrant. "But of course! Who would suspect a Cardinal's guard? He would pass unnoticed. That is the only way it could be done."

BUT Cleve wasn't listening. He had his eyes riveted upon the porcelain-white fingers of the corpse. They were large fingers. Blunt-ended and heavy.

And what was more—those fingers were singularly undecorated. The few times Cleve had seen de Montauban, he had noticed the near foppishness of the man.

He took the large pendant-ring from his finger and placed it on the dead man's—rather, he attempted to place it there. The ornament wouldn't fit.

"Strange," he muttered; and went back to the table for more rings. He attempted to jam them onto de Montauban's cold fingers and failed.

D'Entreville showered questions on him.

"Sacre nom du cochon, you English fool. What are you about, anyway?"

Cleve stepped back from the bed and shrugged. His eyes were thoughtful. "Something is amiss, my friend. He has not been dead long enough to bloat."

"What are you talking about?"

Cleve handed the speaker a fistful of precious rings. "Try to place them on his fingers," he challenged. "I'll wager ten livres to one that you fail."

D'Entreville snorted. "Taken," he said, and selected two diamonds. After struggling futilely he looked up, a scowl deepening his forehead. *"Sangodemi!* They are too small. I owe you a livre."

Cleve nodded. He stared at the mole marking the left cheek of the dead man. With a gesture, he reached out and dug his thumbnail beneath its edge. The mole tilted, came off, and rolled from the corpse's face onto the pillow.

"Just as I suspected." The English cavalier stared at d'Entreville's scowling face and grinned. "Sorry, Kitten. You have not solved the murder of le Duc de Montauban."

D'Entreville's chin assumed a belligerent attitude. "No?"

"No." Cleve shrugged. "That fellow abed is no more de Montauban than am I. He can't wear the duke's rings and he hasn't got the duke's mole."

AFTER some hesitation d'Entreville conceded the point. "But *sandiou,*" he exclaimed. "The resemblance is amazing." He peered thoughtfully into the impostor's dead face, and sighed.

"Amazing," he repeated and stepped away. "But I'm still positive that I am right about the way this fellow was murdered. Vendome's hired assassin undoubtedly made a mistake."

"I thought Vendome was a friend of de Montauban. They have been seen together often," Cleve observed.

D'Entreville pressed his fingers to his head. "You are right," he groaned. "Of course, Vendome hates Richelieu and perhaps that hatred exceeds his fondness for de Montauban. *Mon dieu!* The deeper we delve into this affair the more confused it becomes. Why should Vendome murder his friend? What was he doing with Sarasanac and that bogus Cardinalist? And where is le Duc de Montauban?"

"Sounds like the ingredients for a wonderful headache," Cleve chuckled. "However, it belongs to you, Kitten. Jerking the rug from beneath me does not force me into this problem. And, incidentally, that is one I owe you."

Suddenly, d'Entreville snapped his fingers. "*Corbac* Cleve. This business passes all understanding, particularly mine; but if de Montauban is not dead, I intend to find him. And, I think I know where to start. The house beside the Henri IV Tavern. Vendome and the others may still be there."

"Possibly." Cleve nodded, starting for the door. "But while you are finding out, I believe I shall keep my appointment with a keg at the Blue Boar. *Bonne chance, mon ami.*"

D'Entreville shrugged, scowled.

CHAPTER IV

TRAP FOR A MADMAN

CLOUDS were beginning to clog the moonlight as he rode alone up to the house beside the Henri IV. He tied his mount to a rusted hitching post and paused to inspect the place.

It stared back ominously. Silently. The tavern next door was closed, its pudgy proprietor deciding in favor of rest after a hectic evening.

With steel lending cool assurance beneath his touch, the French rakehelly tried the door. It swung back silently.

At the top of the staircase, a glimmer of light threaded along the base of the door. He paused tensely and listened. No voices rewarded the effort. Only a brooding, uncomfortable silence. It seemed to hang over his senses like a heavy cloak. Mentally, he cursed Richard Cleve for his desertion.

He put his hand on the door and kicked it open.

Charging into the room with blade aglitter, he was forced to a surprised, skidding halt. In the corner behind the table was Sarasanac. The fat dramatist was staring mildly at him, a seeming question in his eyes. He was alone. Only the black wine bottle and the flanking trio of glasses gave evidence that there had previously been guests.

"Ha! Sarasanac, you fat slug! Where is le Duc de Vendome? Where is that henchman of his? That hard-faced killer that masquerading bravo. Answer me, you paunchy pig, before I ram this blade down your gullet. Come on, curse you. Speak!"

But the fat dramatist said nothing. He merely stared in mild amazement. A chill lumped in d'Entreville's stomach. He lowered his rapier, stepped across, and shook the man. Sarasanac, still staring, wavered hesitantly, then slid off his chair to the floor. He was quite dead.

How long d'Entreville stood there staring at the body he never knew. All at once he stiffened. The stealthy creak of a floor-board outside the door announced a visitor.

Sword held ready, he flattened against the wall. The candle guttering on the table, wavered in weird shadows and flicked out. The ensuing darkness became crammed with tensity. D'Entreville licked his lips and waited.

Suddenly a raucous sneeze rent the silence to shreds, and a baritone voice near the door said: "Damn the dust!"

All of the breath went out of the Frenchman in a gasp. His sword-point

dropped and he stepped out into the room. "*Sangodemi!*" he erupted. "Cleve!"

The Englishman's voice cut through the black. "Eh? Oh, er, hello, Guy. Thought I'd drop in. Where the de'il is a light?"

D'Entreville jerked a tinder-box from his sash and lit a taper. He found a fresh candle and touched flame to it.

"Understood that you weren't interested in this affair, *mon ami*," he said.

The candle-light made the silver-facings on Cleve's black velvet doublet gleam in white contrast. It softened the hardness of his sword-hilt and threw shadows along one side of his face beneath its broad-brimmed plumed hat. The Englishman shrugged back the folds of his cape and smiled.

"I'm not," he replied.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Keeping you out of harm's way, Kitten—nothing more. You are such a rash fool. I feared that you might uncover some unsurmountable difficulty." He stepped across and stared at Sarasanac. "And I see that you have. . . . Dead?"

D'Entreville nodded. He sheathed his blade and bent over the body. "No wounds," he said. "Possibly his heart gave out. He was subject to attacks."

CLEVE jerked off a gauntlet and picked up a wine goblet. He sniffed the glass and replaced it. "Poisoned, Kitten. Gad, I'd know that odor anywhere. Friend of mine had a jealous wife and she used precisely the same stuff on him. Pleasant woman."

He picked up the bottle and inspected it thoughtfully.

D'Entreville, standing with arms akimbo in the center of the room, suddenly grew angry. The frustration that dogged every one of his conclusions was beginning to stick in his throat. He cursed.

"I'm getting a belly full of this," he growled. "*Corbac!* Vendome was here. Therefore, Vendome finished him. I'm wasting no more time. Come along, Cleve; we're going to see Vendome right now."

"That will be very interesting," observed the Englishman mildly. "Vendome apparently isn't to be visited. I have made inquiries and as far as I can ascertain he's—"

"For a person who is not interested in this affair," d'Entreville interrupted crisply, "you're wasting a cursed amount of time worrying about it."

Cleve tucked the bottle beneath his cloak. He eyed his companion brightly. "That I am Kitten," he said, chuckling. "That I am."

D'Entreville looked murderously in his direction and strode out of the room.

They returned to the Cardinal's Palace. The French rakehelly had smoldering impatience in his eyes as he threw his mount's reins to a waiting groom and stumped across the court. He knew much and could prove little and the sensation was annoying.

For example, he was pretty certain that de Montauban lived; that he was working in accord with the Duke of Vendome, and that their joint effort was to depose Richelieu.

"They'll have the Cardinal accused of de Montauban's death and force his execution," he told Cleve as they entered the grand foyer.

Cleve nodded. Basically, he believed in the theory, but there were several loose ends. He fingered the poison bottle beneath his cape and said: "A good opinion, Guy. Only what happens if it succeeds? If de Montauban is declared dead, then it will be dangerous for him to return to life. He would be prosecuted for treasonous subterfuge. He must live for the rest of his life incognito and surrender his wealthy estate to his heirs. Damme! Will he make such a sacrifice? Frankly, I doubt it."

D'Entreville pursed his lips tightly. "*Monsieur*," he said, "if you care to lend a hand in this affair, pray say so. Otherwise—" His voice broke sharply. "Cease blasting my theories!"

And with a swirl of his cape he marched away to report to Richelieu. Cleve remained behind, chuckling. After his friend had disappeared, the English cavalier fell

to inspecting the bottle he had carried from Sarasanac's room.

Cordeau came up.

"M'Lord," he snapped authoritatively, "it is against regulations for a Guardsman to drink in the corridors. And especially from the bottle."

"A good rule," Cleve conceded, and held the bottle higher in the light. "I say, *Capitaine,* you know your Paris. Where would you say I got this bottle?"

Cordeau looked flattered. Some of his stiffness departed. "Allow me, *monsieur,*" he said, taking the bottle. "I must see the seal. Of course," he cast a suspicious eye, "you took this from a reputable house?"

"Quite," Cleve nodded. He was thinking of Sarasanac's hovel.

Cordeau stared at the waxen seal on the neck. "Hotel Rambouillet," he adjudged. *"Pecaire,* I'd know that seal anywhere. An excellent vintage, too. '07."

"You are certain, *Capitaine?"*

"Positive. A moment and I shall sample it."

CLEVE struck like a snake. Fingers curling he ripped the bottle from Cordeau's startled lips. An angry flush crimsoned the captain's cheeks. He half-drew his blade.

"Put it back," Cleve snapped. "This bottle is crammed with poison!"

Cordeau's face grayed. "Poison?" he gasped.

"Exactly." Cleve thrust the bottle into his surprised hands. "Here. Take it and get rid of it. I'm off to discover whether Hotel Rambouillet makes a practice of fatal beverages."

Leaving Cordeau gaping, he went out to the stables and mounted a horse. When he rode up to the large hotel, fifteen minutes later, there was cold calculation in his eyes.

If he had guessed correctly, Vendome would be here and well protected. That meant caution. A hundred feet to one side of the main entrance he slid quietly from the saddle. Stealth would have to be the mode of his attack. In some tower a clock tolled a leisurely twelve.

Hotel Rambouillet was located on the border of a large public square, murky now in the uncertain silver of a cloud-ridden moon. At the main portal, two huge torches lighted the scene.

Keeping deep in the velvet shadows Cleve drew near. There was a huge lackey dozing beside an ornate palanquin at the foot of the stone steps. He was supposed to be guarding the vehicle. A seaman's cutlass was girded to his thick middle.

Cleve swung past the outer fringe of light and came up on the fellow from the shadows. He sent a swift challenging glance about to assure himself that no one was astir. Satisfied, he tapped the lackey on the shoulder with the point of his rapier. The man started; fumbled for his weapon.

"Forget it," Cleve warned him, and emphasized the command with a sword-prick. "I desire some information. On which floor is Vendome staying? You know, because you wear his livery."

The lackey shrugged and said nothing. He had a look of stubbornness on his lips. Cleve laid the point of his blade on the fellow's cheek just below the eye.

"A flick of my wrist and you lose half your vision, friend," he said softly. "Understand that I'm not in the mood to quibble."

The man took one look into the cavalier's eyes and commenced talking. "Monsieur le Duc has the garret suite," he said nervously. "He is not supposed to be in Paris."

Cleve lowered the point. "Thank you," he said, smiling. "The top floor, eh?"

"Oui, monsieur."

The Englishman ripped the curtains from inside the palanquin and quickly trussed the speaker. "You had best be right," he said grimly, lifting the fellow into the cab. "I'll be back."

"No need, *monsieur.* I speak the truth."

Cleve rammed an improvised gage into the lackey's mouth and slapped him cheerfully on the shoulder. "Good. Now don't go away, my friend."

IN THE rear of the building he noticed how a huge vine climbed, in leafy fastness, all the way to the roof. He nodded and smiled. Simple as a ship's rigging. He hitched his sword around so that it hung tail-like behind him, and commenced to climb.

It wasn't easy. He was perspiring freely by the time he reached the second floor. He hung against the thick leaves outside of a large window and peeped cautiously around its edge. There were two heavily armed guards inside, posted at the foot of a sweeping staircase. Vendome was well guarded, all right.

He started climbing again. He was spent but relieved as he finally reached the eaves. At one point, a branch had given suddenly, to let him dangle perilously for a startled moment by one hand. It had been bad; but now he hung by his fingers and sized up the situation.

Half a rod to his right a latticed window was open. Carefully he edged toward it, caught his toe on the sill, and eased himself inside. He was standing in a large room that was filled with the dull red glow of a dying fireplace.

"A fool and his luck . . ." he murmured, and drew his rapier.

On the opposite wall was a huge mahogany bed. In it, bed-cap and all, lay le Duc de Vendome, asleep and snoring gently. The creak of floor-boards outside the door warned Cleve that a guard stood there.

Cleve approached. He tapped Vendome gently on the end of his large nose with his blade. The duke opened his eyes and then his mouth. Cleve laid his sword-point in it before the tongue could get to work.

"Softly, *monsieur,* you may desire to use your voice in the future."

Vendome held his mouth rigid. His dark eyes promised that he'd be silent and Cleve removed the steel, but not its threat. He sat down on the foot of the bed and laid the blade carelessly on Vendome's stomach.

"This is merely a social call, Vendome," he said smoothly. "We are going to converse about our mutual friend, de Montauban."

The Duke of Vendome's eyes glittered. He didn't speak for a long moment; then he said: "You're Cleve, the Cardinal's Madman. I've heard of you."

"Interesting but inconsequential," Cleve said. "Where is de Montauban?"

Vendome's dark features frowned. In the red glowing murk there was a Satanic cast to them. "De Montauban is a guest at le Cardinal's Palace," he said.

"You're a liar!"

Vendome started forward. Cleve forced him back against the pillows with the point of his rapier. Vendome saw the cold devil in his eyes and subsided.

"You shall rue this night, Cleve," he said softly. "I'm a dangerous person to cross."

"So am I, Vendome. Who was the man you had murdered at Richelieu's Palace? He wasn't de Montauban."

Vendome's eyes widened, and then narrowed. "I don't know what you are talking about, *monsieur.*" And beneath the coverlet his hand was inching toward the knife on the table beside the bed.

"You poisoned Sarasanac to keep him from talking," Cleve said. "What were you afraid of, Vendome?"

"I do believe," Vendome replied, "that you know too much." With a sweep of his arm he swung Cleve's blade aside while his hand streaked toward the knife.

THE Englishman didn't attempt to use the sword. He used the hilt. As Vendome's fingers curled about the dagger, Cleve struck him savagely. Once. The swarthy duke collapsed.

Cleve pulled him back on the pillow and looked quickly about for a stimulant. He didn't dare leave the bed. There was a lamp on the table so he removed the wick-holder and dashed the oil into the other's face. There was a full half a pint of it.

"Messy, but effective," he muttered as Vendome moaned softly. He lit a candle and waited. Finally the duke opened his

eyes and there was black hatred crammed into them.

"You struck me," he muttered. "No man has done that and lived."

"I'm weary of this fol-de-rol," Cleve snapped. "Look, Vendome, you are drenched with oil. Lamp oil. It is very inflammable and I have a lighted candle." His eyes hardened. "Now we are going to talk."

Horror slid into the duke's eyes as he understood the significance. "All right," he said. "I'll talk. They said that you were a madman."

"I am, right now," Cleve assured him grimly. "First, we begin with the dead man in de Montauban's room at the Palace. Who is he?"

"An actor."

"Ah. Now I understand Sarasanac's connection with this. You murdered Sarasanac to prevent any possibility of his talking about the actor, didn't you? The actor was one of Sarasanac's, wasn't he?"

"Yes. Curse you."

"So far so good," Cleve said.

Suddenly he stiffened. The almost imperceptible sound of a move from behind warned him, but too late. He felt cold steel pressed against the back of his neck and a colder voice said: "Make a move, *monsieur,* and you'll fetch six inches of the knife I'm holding."

Triumph washed fear from Vendome's eyes. Cleve sat rigid, his rapier in one hand the lighted candle in the other. His mind was racing. Finally, he laughed. "Go ahead," he challenged. "Kill me and I'll drop the candle."

"*Dieu!*" groaned Vendome. "Be careful, Jacques. I'm besotted with lamp oil."

"So?" said the man behind Cleve. "Very clever." There was a quick gasp and a puff and before Cleve could prevent it, the candle wavered and flickered out. The Englishman stared numbly at the black wick. It was as if his life had gone with the flame.

"Very well." He shrugged. "I'm yours." He dropped the useless candle to the bed and waited.

CHAPTER V

KITTEN HAS TEETH

WITH the stiletto held firmly at the nape of his neck Cleve was forced to the far side of the room. His captor carefully deprived him of his rapier and told him to sit down. Vendome got out of bed, wiped himself free of the lamp oil and put on a blue nightrobe.

The English cavalier found his hands being bound behind him; and when the job was finished he saw his captor for the first time. Vendome had stirred up the fire.

The man was a vivid-looking person, tinseled in the height of foppishness with laces and satins of loud color. His face was sallow, scarred with arrogance, and his mouth was thin beneath a clipped blond mustache. He was of medium stature.

But it was his washed-out blue eyes that revealed the man. They were frosty eyes, glistening like ice, pitiless and hard. Cleve knew the fellow. He had seen him many times at the Court. Le Marquis Jacques de Brullier.

"You made one mistake, Cleve," de Brullier said. "You asked my lackey where *monsieur le duc* was staying, and then tied him up instead of killing him."

"I presume your method would have been murder," Cleve said dryly.

"Precisely."

"And then—"

The door burst open and the missing Duke of Montauban stepped across the threshold. He was only partially dressed. He had been preparing for bed. Behind him was the hard-faced knife-man whom Cleve had floored in Sarasanac's room.

De Montauban hesitated when he saw Cleve, a look of uncertainty clouding his handsome features, and scowled.

"What means this, Vendome?"

Staring, Cleve was shocked by the miraculous resemblance between the speaker and the corpse at the Palace. Vendome shrugged. He wore a nasty little smile on his lips.

"A visitor, Henri," he said with a nod

toward Cleve. "It appears that this hide-away is known."

De Montauban faced Cleve frowning more deeply. He was a tall man, well proportioned. "How did you find me?" he snapped. *"Corbac!* I covered my tracks when I left this noon."

Cleve shrugged. "But Vendome didn't, *monsieur*. I found the bottle and its telltale seal in Sarasanac's room, and—"

Vendome interrupted hurriedly. He stepped between Cleve and de Montauban. "No matter how he discovered us, Henri. The fact remains that he knows now where you are."

Cleve's eyes narrowed. That interruption had been a trifle too hurried. Vendome was trying to conceal something. Why? Sarasanac?"

De Montauban said: "And who is

"A flunky of mine," Vendome said quickly. "A dead fool. No need to worry about him any more. But *sangodemi!* We must get you away from here, Henri. If Richelieu finds you—"

De Montauban nodded quickly.

"You are right. 'Tis best that I leave Paris immediately."

Cleve had a shrewd expression on his face. He suddenly concluded that it was time to attempt upsetting Vendome's little scheme, what ever it was. "If you want to know about Sarasanac and Vendome's connec—"

"Quiet, fool!" De Brullier's jeweled fist chopped cruelly into Cleve's lips. He pricked the captive just below the ear with the stiletto.

UNFORTUNATELY, de Montauban had not heard. Cleve subsided. Nevertheless, he had discovered what he'd wanted to know. De Brullier was in accord with Vendome, and de Montauban was ignorant of Sarasanac and of his dead double. He wondered exactly what sort of a game Vendome was playing.

"De Brullier's château is three leagues from Paris," Vendome was saying. " 'Tis the best place to hide, Henri."

De Montauban nodded. "Very well." He started toward the door; then, hesitated as if recalling something.

"Incidentally, Vendome," he said, "tomorrow is the right time to face Richelieu with my disappearance. Do not make a flat accusation at first. Allow suspicion to grow. When the King becomes curious, accuse the Cardinal of my murder, or kidnaping. That ought to make the nobles rise and demand his death."

Vendome nodded. There was a peculiar little smirk in his eyes. "Richelieu's execution shall take place three weeks from tonight, Henri; that I promise. The nobles will be outraged if the King allows Richelieu to go free."

"I have planned it that way," De Montauban nodded. "And mark this: after Richelieu's execution, wait a week before you discover me chained in the dungeon of his château near Nantes." He laughed. "You'll probably get a reward for rescuing me."

"Undoubtedly. You have planned this well, Henri. But for the present, take de Brullier and ten of my guards and ride to his château. I'll pay a secret visit to you tomorrow night."

De Montauban stared at Cleve. "Now you know my plans," he said. "But worry not, *monsieur*. We don't want your blood; only your silence. You simply remain our prisoner until the coup is over. No harm shall come to you."

"I wish I were as sure of that, *monsieur,*" Cleve said.

After de Montauban and de Brullier had gone, he stared into the dark Satanic face of Vendome, and shrugged. "Will you murder me here, or some place else?" he asked.

Vendome smiled, walked to a decanter of wine, and poured himself a drink. The knife-man, who had entered behind de Montauban, cursed fluidly. His lips were still lacerated.

"Sacre nom," he exclaimed. "I'm willing to make it now. I haven't forgotten our last meeting, you lousy pig."

Vendome laughed. "Tut tut, Murat. Put away your blade. I have a few questions

to ask this fool before I have you take care of him."

Cleve forced his lips into a grim smile. "What's your game, Vendome? De Montauban doesn't know about Sarasanac. He doesn't know about his dead double."

Vendome nodded. "True," he said, and sipped his wine thoughtfully. "You have remarkable perceptive powers, Cleve. Too bad you weren't perceptive enough to avoid me. I have not forgotten the blow you struck me, nor—" he inclined his head toward his hard-faced henchman—"has Murat."

CLEVE shrugged. He had to keep talking to force nerve back into his heart. It was hard just to sit there knowing that each moment might be his last. "Put your cards down, *monsieur,*" he said. "What have you to lose?"

Vendome laughed. "You are ever right, fool," he said, and commenced changing his clothes. "I have nothing to lose. In this whole affair I have nothing to lose. It is de Montauban's plan, but I am improving on it."

The flint-eyed Murat ran fingers over his bruised lips and drew his blade. "Allow me to finish him, *monsieur le duc.*"

"Silence!" The swarthy duke shrugged into his doublet and picked up his boots. "It was de Montauban's thought to disappear while under Richelieu's roof. It is mine to make him disappear for good."

"Then why go to the bother of having this Murat pig murder the double?" Cleve asked. "Frankly, it seems to be complicating the issue unnecessarily."

"It does," Vendome admitted. He was almost dressed. "But not when you consider that killing de Montauban at the Palace would be a needless waste of money.

"You see, *monsieur,* my worthy friend de Brullier is le Duc de Montauban's half-brother. Unfortunately, this relationship is not enough for de Brullier to inherit the fabulous de Montauban estates should the duke die. There are a full brother and a sister to be considered.

"Consequently, de Brullier and I have decided to mix profit with—er—treason, as you would call it."

He smiled cruelly. "De Montauban does not suspect it, but even now he is en route to his death. Of course, de Brullier will see that he signs over his estate before anything happens."

And there it was. The whole black tapestry. Never in his life had Cleve heard of a more filthy plot. There was a snake-like, unwholesome, quality to both its author and his compatriot, de Brullier.

"Well"—he sighed—"betraying a betrayal is just about your style, Vendome. I can't say that I'm surprised. Already you have killed Sarasanac and that poor fool of an actor."

"A master stroke of luck the day I noted that actor's resemblance to de Montauban." Vendome chuckled. "In death, he will be mistaken for the real duke, and Richelieu will lose his head as neatly as a wine bottle. *Sangodemi, monsieur.* I do believe I am an exceptional fellow indeed. The manner in which I cover my tracks is perfect. Sarasanac will never tell anyone that he sold me the actor."

Suddenly he frowned. "Incidentally, Cleve, how did you know that the actor was not de Montauban?"

"Simple. His rings wouldn't fit. He wore a false mole."

"Sangodemi! If you have wrecked my plans—"

Vendome checked himself. "What of it? So Richelieu claims that the actor is not de Montauban! Will anyone believe him? No. Not after he is unable to produce the true duke. You see, *monsieur.* I am very clever."

"And very sickening," the English rakehelly snapped. "Reptilian!"

Murat drove his fist into the captive's mouth. Cleve licked blood from his lips and laughed. "Brave man, Murat. Kill a sleeping man; strike a bound prisoner. Damme, what courage!"

Murat's thin lips writhed blasphemy. The hilt of his blade described a vicious arc. A searing pain ripped through Cleve's head; then he drifted into oblivion.

WHEN he recovered, Murat was sitting opposite him. The killer's stony features were expressionless but his eyes schemed horror. The light from the fireplace coated the side of his face in orange. He was alone.

Cleve's head had a dull throbbing ache in it; a trickle of blood had streamed over his cheek from temple to jaw. Before only his hands had been bound; now he was lashed securely to the chair. He must have remained insensible for nearly ten minutes. Vendome was gone.

"Awake, eh?" Murat said dully. "Good. Thought I might have killed you."

"Vendome?" Cleve murmured.

"Gone to safer lodgings." Murat licked his lips and smiled coldly. "He left you for me. Understand?"

"I understand," Cleve nodded. "What are you going to do?"

"Pay you back for what you did to me," Murat said. His voice had a peculiar flat quality that was chilling. There was no emotion in it. No humanity. "I wonder how loud you're going to squeal before I finish you." He raised his sword and laid its length across the fire.

"Damme," Cleve shrugged. "You'll ruin your sword."

"I can get another," said Murat. "You're a pretty cool customer. Perchance this'll warm you up."

He dropped the red hot blade carelessly on Cleve's thigh. His flinty eyes stared into Englishman's as the cloth burned away and the steel sizzled into bare flesh. Cleve forced himself to smile although the sweat was breaking out across his forehead.

He said: "Your courage grows amazing, Murat."

Fury came into Murat's eyes.

"Shut your mouth!"

The killer poked the rapier back into the coals. "We'll try your left eye next," he said.

Cleve thought: So this is it. Faith, what a rotten way to die. . . . His torturer raised the glowing sword-tip and his stomach lumped in protest. He wondered whether he'd scream.

Murat wore a thin smile on his lips. "Don't care for it, eh?" he asked.

He came forward slowly, still smiling, his eyes on Cleve's face.

Suddenly the door burst open. The killer whirled in surprise. He had been expecting no one.

There, striding into the room with steel leveled, was d'Entreville. His dark eves sparked anger as he comprehended the scene: the bound Englishman, the burnt thigh, the glowing sword.

Cleve fought hard to keep the glorious relief out of his voice. "Welcome to the party, Kitten," he greeted.

D'Entreville didn't answer. His eyes were riveted on Murat's pasty face. He kicked the door closed with the heel of his foot, and started to walk across the room.

He walked on the balls of his feet, catlike, poised and ready. The glittering blade in his hand flicked, side to side, in short limbering gestures. Murat retreated. D'Entreville followed.

It was the killer who started it. He reached behind him on the table, picked up a bottle and hurled it. D'Entreville combined a leap with a ducking motion as the bottle arced over his shoulder. He sent his blade flashing for Murat's throat.

The killer parried and sidled out of the corner. D'Entreville followed, peppering his opponent with short vicious lunges and cuts.

Murat fought back with the fury of awful fear. D'Entreville gave before the attack. Suddenly he seemed to trip over a fallen chair. He went to one knee, and Cleve grinned. The Englishman knew what was coming. He had seen d'Entreville use that Italian trick before.

Murat, delirious with triumph, charged in recklessly. It was a mistake. D'Entreville's point ripped upward, beneath Murat's guard. He caught the killer just below the heart and his blade came throught the back.

"And that, *mon ami*," he said, deftly extracting the steel as Murat crumpled, "is that!"

FROM his chair Cleve chuckled. He forgot the searing pain of the burn on his thigh and the dull throbbing in his head. "Faith, Kitten," he said. "A putrid exhibition if ever I saw one. It took you almost two minutes."

"I presume," d'Entreville retorted, "that you could have done better."

"By my faith! Of course!"

The Frenchman cleaned his blade on Murat's cape and smiled. "Then why didn't you?" he inquired easily.

Cleve grinned sheepishly. He shrugged, burst into a whole-hearted laugh. "Well, Guy, you have me there. How did you locate this place, anyway?"

D'Entreville bent down and began to sever the ropes. "Cordeau," he said briefly. "*Parbleu*, why didn't you bring my attention to the seal on the bottle?"

Cleve arose, massaging his wrists. "I wasn't certain about it, Kitten. And damme, I'm not fond of being laughed at when wrong. Apparently you had no trouble in reaching this suite."

"None. I saw the light and came up. The halls were deserted."

"Hmmm. That means that Vendome has flown with everyone."

"Then you found him?"

"How do you suppose I got tied up in that chair? Of course I found him. And I found de Montauban, too."

D'Entreville's hand gripped the speaker. "You saw de Montauban?"

"Yes." Cleve put on his hat and picked up his sword. "Kitten," he said, "this affair is truly amazing. If we are going to pull it out of the fire, then we're going to have to ride hell-for-leather to the château owned by de Brullier. Do you know where it is?"

"*Oui*. But I don't understand!"

"You don't have to," Cleve said, starting for the door. "Come along, Kitten."

D'Entreville looked as if he had just discovered half a worm in an apple he'd been eating. "Kitten!" he snorted. "*Corbac et sangodemi!* I should have let that fellow finish you."

CHAPTER VI

SWORDS FOR SEVEN

THE road was a ribbon of moonlight as they pounded out of Paris. It stretched in silver ripples over the deep purple countryside, plunging through copses of wood, around farmlands, over gentle hills.

They rode close together as Cleve explained the situation above the beat of hoofs. As they topped the crest of a hill overlooking de Brullier's castle, d'Entreville reined up.

"*Pecaire!*" he exclaimed. "If what you have told me is true, we should have brought a troop."

"And waste precious time, eh?" Cleve asked. "Faith, Kitten, even now they may be killing de Montauban. It would have taken an hour to rout a company out of bed, saddle horses, and give orders. This is the only way. Besides, a troop thundering through the night would have raised the alarm."

D'Entreville cuffed back his wide hat. "I still think a troop would be the best solution, *Corbac!* Who ever heard of two men storming a castle?"

Cleve chuckled. "The idea exactly, my friend. No one! The lookout sees but two horsemen, and he is not suspicious. A whole troop and they lift the draw-bridge."

D'Entreville sighed. "Pity me, 'tis an awful fate to be saddled with a madman." And then he smiled and extended a gloved hand. "But I'm a trifle mad myself. Lead on, Richard."

They thundered down the hill. Ahead, Château de Brullier sat on the outskirts of a seven-house hamlet, looking like a battle-scarred Amazon grown old. Moonlight gleamed against the slate of her towertops; and running limply into the stagnation of her medieval moat was a trickling country stream.

The château was not large in comparison with many others, but her history was just as vivid. Here, the English Black Prince had made a headquarters. The Tenth Louis had been a constant visitor

and the rebellious Duke of Burgundy had used it as a seat of war during the siege of Paris.

The gray stones were but an empty chalice now. None of the de Brulliers had bothered to keep it in repair. The castle looked decrepit and ominous. In the ghostly light of the moon death seemed to lurk in the very shadow of her mossy walls. She was a fit place for intrigue.

Riding through the hamlet, d'Entreville noticed suddenly that the draw-bridge was up. The castle seemed barred as if fearing invasion. He cursed and arrested his steed.

"Well, Cleve," he snapped, "admitting that you know all the answers, perhaps you'll tell me how we're going to get inside that stone heap?"

The Englishman cursed. "They've pulled the draw-bridge, haven't they. Well, I might have foreseen this. Naturally, de Brullier would guard against interruption."

"That doesn't answer my question," d'Entreville pointed out quietly.

Cleve bit his lip. He was still trying to find the answer when the door of a nearby house opened and a bent figure in a battered black hat stepped into the street bearing a basket. The figure saw the two horsemen and stopped.

"Eh? *Messieurs?* From the château, eh?"

"No curse it—" D'Entreville started in to say.

Cleve kicked him. "Yes, father, we're from *monsieur le marquis,*" he said in a loud voice.

"*Bien, monsieur.* It will save me the trip." The old villager waddled over to Cleve's stirrup. He handed up the basket.

"Here is the food that *monsieur le marquis* ordered. I was just on my way. Tell him that old Jean is sorry, *monsieur,* but on such short notice he could not be quicker. Not surprised though that he's out of food. Never visits the *château* any more. Well, *bon nuit, messieurs.*"

"Good evening, father." Cleve nodded, and broke into a chuckle after the elder had disappeared. He held the basket high. "Our key, Kitten," he said.

THEY tied their horses in a copse of wood several yards from the moat. D'Entreville ripped the plume from his hat.

"The things I do for France," he said, eyeing it regretfully. "This cost me two hard-earned livres."

"What's the thought?" asked Cleve.

D'Entreville snorted. "*Corbac,* I'm no fool, Cleve. I know what you plan, and I've decided that I'm the best wager to put it through. Your French has too much the English accent to pass safely as old Jean from the village."

"All right," Cleve nodded. "But, I'm going with you. I can be old Jean's son. You just do the talking."

"You'll have to carry something."

"I'll carry my hat—basket-like. In the moonlight they won't know the difference. Keep your sword under cover."

D'Entreville nodded. He slouched his hat awkwardly around his head, bent down and picked up the basket. His shuffling walk gave the impression of senility.

"I hope you're correct when you say that there are only ten men there," he muttered over his shoulder.

"So am I," Cleve chuckled.

When they were on the lip of the moat across from the draw-bridge, a lamp suddenly winked from atop the portcullis, and a harsh voice rang through the gloom.

"Who goes?"

"The food, *monsieur,*" d'Entreville replied in a thin treble. "It's I, old Jean from the village. Lower the gate."

"Nice act, grandpaw," muttered Cleve.

"Close your fool mouth," the Frenchman snapped back softly.

"Against orders of *le marquis* to lower the draw," the guard on the wall said.

"Cautious rascals, aren't they," Cleve murmured. "Ask them, what you are to do with the basket. Damme, it can't fly over the wall."

A rope heaved from the top of the gate was the answer to that question. "Tie the rope to your basket," was the command.

"Why the dirty—" D'Entreville lost his temper. He stopped being old Jean from

the village. He grabbed the rope with both hands and started to pull. The guard on the other end let go a startled yell; a guard beside him caught him as he started down over the edge.

The business became a tug of war. Silent, angry and determined—except for Cleve. The situation struck his sense of humor and he could hardly help d'Entreville for laughter.

"Pull, you idiot, pull," the French rakehelly exploded as his heels began furrowing toward the water. "The cursed swine are trying to drown me in the moat."

AND then, when Cleve lent his weight to the end of the rope, the episode ceased as suddenly as it had started. One of the men atop the wall took out his sword and severed connections. The first inkling the two cavaliers had of this strategy was when they went sprawling to the ground meshed in hemp. The wall guards hooted.

"Let that be a lesson to you country wags," they called. "We know how to handle your tricks."

Cleve wiped dust from his eyes and said: "Faith, they think we were playing."

"I'd like to play," d'Entreville snorted. "Play a tattoo on their skulls with a cane." He stood up and threw the rope from him as if it were a snake.

"No," Cleve said, picking it up again. "I think we had better keep this. I have a plan." He eyed old Jean's basket of food. "And we'd better keep that, too. I feel that we need—er—food for thought."

They retreated to the copse of wood where their horses were tethered. Cleve squatted on his heels and explained his idea. They waited half an hour and then took off their doublets, capes, and hats. The night was chill. It bit through the light linen of their shirts and raised gooseflesh on their bodies.

"*Corbac,*" d'Entreville chattered, "let's be on our way before I freeze to death."

"You'll be warm enough in a few minutes," Cleve said with a smile. He found a stout sapling and hacked it free with the edge of his blade. He trimmed it down to a section about four feet long by an inch and three quarters wide. He knotted the rope firmly about its center and nodded to his companion.

"Ready, Guy. Let's go."

They passed stealthily around to the rear of the castle. The moon was beginning to wane. Frogs croaked in the moat; fell silent as they approached. The castle wall rose like an ominous wave over them. It stood about twenty feet high.

"I can swim if need be," Cleve whispered. "I'll go first. Follow close behind."

He stepped silently down into the water. It was painfully cold. His teeth began to chatter but he kept on. He moved forward slowly with the water rising gradually to his thighs, his waist, and finally his throat.

He kept the rope and its length of sapling firmly in his grasp. The water rose no higher and a feeling of gratitude swept through him. D'Entreville couldn't swim.

There was a mossy shelf of land at the base of the wall. The two cavaliers reached it and stood shivering as the frogs, once again secure, recommenced their music.

"Faith, this isn't going to be the easiest thing in the world," Cleve muttered, staring up at the black heights. "But we'll try. Keep the rope coiled loosely while I heave this bar of wood. And for the love of peace, catch it before it splashes into the moat, should my cast fail."

"That's about all we need," d'Entreville grunted. "A splash in the moat and half the walls guards on our necks. Proceed, *mon ami.* Let fly."

It was tedious business. Cleve cast the stick five times before it finally lodged between the stone teeth of the ancient battlements. He tested it once and relaxed panting.

"All right, Kitten," he finally said. "You're the better monkey. You go first."

"Very uncomical," the Frenchman snorted.

He slung his sword belt around and grasped the rope. By bracing his boots against the rough stone he was able to

walk swiftly and silently up the side of the grim wall. His whispered: "All's well," floated down through the night. Cleve followed quickly.

THEY stood together on the wall-walk. Cleve pulled up the rope and coiled it loosely in a dark corner. D'Entreville drew his blade.

"I wonder how many are on the wall?" he queried.

Cleve shrugged. They were at the northern corner of the wall and a huge battle turret at their backs concealed the rest of the castle. "I shall find out for you, Kitten," he said. In a raucous voice he yelled: "Heyo, to the north tower every one on the wall. *A moi.* In a hurry. The north—"

Corbac! What the devil are you trying to do?" exploded d'Entreville. *"Mon dieu,* of all the sop-brained dolts you are the--"

Cleve said: "Not now, Kitten. Save the complments 'til later. Take the corner over there and kick the first guard that blunders around it into the moat."

Footsteps pounded on the stone of the wall-walk. Cleve received the first visitor. Before the fellow had opportunity to yell out, he was grasped firmly by the seat of the breeches and the nape of the neck, and tossed bawling terror over the side.

Cleve grinned. D'Entreville had his hands full. Two men swept past before he had a chance to set himself. They went immediately to the parapet and stared down at their comrade howling curses in the water below. The French rakehelly threw a flying block into them and they disappeared.

"Three." Cleve laughed.

Suddenly he frowned. A man's head appeared cautiously around the corner on his side and started to draw back.

"Oh, no you don't!"

The Englishman's fingers snagged the fellow's hair. He led the captive howling to the brink and booted him over.

"Four," he shrugged. "Faith, he almost got away."

The quartet below threshed indignantly in the muddy water, bawling out curses and threats in the night. The two rakehellies paid not the slightest heed, but waited. A few moments passed before they welcomed their fifth and final customer.

Cleve held a sword to his throat. "Where is de Brullier?" he snapped.

The guard squirmed under d'Entreville's grasp. "In the dungeon." he said. *"Sandiou!* What is the meaning of—"

"How many are with him?"

"Five, and le Duc de Montauban."

"Let him go, Kitten," said Cleve.

"Merci, monsieur," the captive began to say.

"Don't mention it," d'Entreville replied and swung him lightly over the parapet. "Good evening!"

The man's curses suddenly died in a fountain of spray. Cleve eyed his companion. "Damme, Kitten. I'll wager it is the first bath they've had in weeks."

"The dungeon," d'Entreville mumbled. *"Parbleu,* Cleve, that means that they've got de Montauban under torture already. Come on, we must hurry."

FINDING the torture chamber in a medieval château is comparatively easy. It is usually beneath the keep, or owner's residence, at the strongest section of the wall.

Fortunately, the depth of the place had prevented de Brullier and his men from hearing the ruckus on the wall. Cleve and d'Entreville were able to proceed without molestation. With swords shining in the light of the scattered torches, they stalked cautiously across the inner bailey, past the dozen horses in the stable, and into the main building.

"That door." Cleve pointed as they stood in the center of a ill-kept foyer. "I think that's the staircase down to the dungeon."

"You're right."

The door opened upon a length of stairs leading down into the bowels of the château. At the bottom a glow of light was shining dully.

Softly the two cavaliers started down. D'Entreville went first, his long blade held

loosely in his grasp. At the bottom was a low-ceilinged corridor, plugged at one end by a thick, iron-studded door. They approached it softly and stood listening.

A murmur of voices seeped through the wood; then a sharp though muffled cry of pain. And a brittle mocking laugh.

Cleve looked at d'Entreville. "Well, Kitten. This is the end of the trail." He tested the door lightly and it gave an inch beneath his hand. "We can get in. What are your plans?"

"There are five," Guy said, grimly stepping back. "Let's burst in and kick hades out of them."

The Englishman nodded, placed his shoulder to the door and crashed it open. Strong light bathed them from the chamber.

Strapped to a chair in the center with his fingers in a hell machine known as the screw, was le Duc de Montauban. His face was gray, and on the table before him were a pen and a roll of manuscript paper. The surrounding figures froze in staring astonishment.

"Cleve and the Kitten!" de Brullier suddenly yelled.

His cold features contorted and he ripped his jeweled sword from its sheath. Behind Cleve, d'Entreville cursed.

"Kitten!" he muttered. "He can't call me that and live."

"He won't," Cleve promised softly. "He's mine. Take care of the rest."

"Four to one," growled d'Entreville. "What do you think I am? Split them between us and maybe we'll be lucky."

"I warn you not to pass that door," de Brullier snarled:

Cleve took a cautious step forward. The slithering sound of blades being drawn rewarded the move. The room was tight with tension. The four men with de Brullier had heard of Cleve and the Kitten and they hadn't in the least liked what they heard.

The two rakehellies carried shining steel death in their hands. Cleve took another step. His blade was slanted carelessly across his boots, but that meant nothing. It could flash into action in a split second.

"No further!" de Brullier said harshly. His cold eyes were glittering with a mixture of fear and hatred. By rights, Cleve should be dead. "We outnumber you two to one."

Cleve cocked an eyebrow. "Really!" He took another step.

D'Entreville was close behind him, crouched a little and alert.

"All right, men. Take them!" the marquis yelled.

THE tension snapped as cut by shears. A burly individual hurtled wildly at the Englishman. Cleve sidestepped neatly and pinked him on the arm.

D'Entreville came up from behind. An ambitious opponent tried to circle. The Frenchman lunged accurately and the fellow tried to scream through a punctured throat. It wasn't a pretty sound.

Something licked burningly into Cleve's left shoulder. He stared through the flashing sheen into de Brullier's eager eyes. He feinted at a cautious heckler and swept toward the marquis. A man got in his path and he ran him through the stomach. The odds were more even, now. Three to two.

A chair flew out of nowhere and caught d'Entreville across the chest. He fell dizzily. The man whom he had been engaging laughed and lunged viciously.

The Frenchman rolled quickly but not quickly enough. The burning pain of a leg-wound told him that.

He struggled gamely to one knee. His enemy rushed him. D'Entreville parried weakly, but sufficiently. He was still on one knee and groggy.

Suddenly his free hand found a heavy iron mallet on the floor. As his enemy attacked again, he threw it into the man's face and broke his jaw.

De Brullier was a swordsman. Cleve kept trying to engage him, but the man was a dancing wraith, and his accomplice kept interfering. It was a stalemate until d'Entreville appeared on the scene. He drew aside the Englishman's heckler and left the marquis alone.

Cleve smiled grimly. His shoulder was throbbing dully now, and its fire seemed to give fury to his attack. For the first time, real fear glimmered in de Brullier's eyes.

"You're finished, de Brullier. Done!" Cleve said.

"Not yet!"

The marquis had been backed almost against the glowing hearth where torture instruments were heated. His free hand swept behind and came into contact with the handle of a small coal shovel. It was heaped with red, glowing ashes. He laughed and threw the flaming embers. Cleve shied away. De Brullier charged in furiously.

He was shouting:

"Now you're finished, Cleve. Finished. Finished!"

He emphasized each cry with a murderous lunge. The Englishman retreated. His shoulders and fore-arms were pitted with searing agony where the coals had struck. One of de Brullier's thrusts nipped a cut in his temple.

Suddenly, a red fury wrapped his brain in flame. He stopped moving away. With a curse, he swept aside de Brullier's blade. His blade cut hungrily into the marquis' neck; flashed away as the man started to crumple and pierced his heart before he hit the floor.

"Mon dieu!" d'Entreville exclaimed. "A slash and a thrust, almost simultaneously. How did you do it, Cleve?"

THE Englishman looked up. He was tired suddenly. He wanted to sit down. The torture chamber was strewn with bodies. He smiled wearily. "Damme, Kitten," he said. "I don't know. I'm just good, that's—"

D'Entreville caught him as he suddenly buckled. "You've lost too much blood," he said. *"Sangodemi,* look at your shirt."

He helped, half-carried, the Englishman to a nearby bench and sat him down. From the center of the room, de Montouban stared and sighed. He had remained unscathed through the battle.

"Mordi, messieurs," he said. "I do not mind waiting, but the pain of this cursed screw on my hands is almost unbearable. Won't one of you please take it off?"

"I'm all right, Kitten," Cleve nodded, ripped his shirt off at the shoulder and stared down at the wound. It had stopped bleeding.

D'Entreville walked over and released de Montauban's fingers from the torture machine. They were ugly-looking, badly mashed and broken. The French rakehelly gave the man a look of grudging admiration. De Montauban had kept his nerve when de Brullier was applying the screw.

"I've been a fool," de Montauban said as the ropes fell from him, "a hot-headed, blind fool. It never occurred to me that Vendome would betray me. Nor had I suspicions of my half-brother de Brullier."

His handsome young face was drawn with pain and exhaustion.

"Why not?" d'Entreville snapped. "When you dabble in treachery you're bound to get a little on yourself."

De Montauban scowled. He held his mangled hand and said: "I don't consider that I was dabbling in treachery. What I planned was for France . . . But you, being a Cardinalist, would not understand that."

"Mark this," d'Entreville retorted. "I hold no brief for Richelieu, although I have sworn to serve him. My distaste for you springs from the fact that you threatened France with the horror of a great civil war.

"Not only that; your methods of deposing the Cardinal were despicable. You appeared to be friendly; then attempted to knife him in the back. Fine means for a supposed honorable man! Besides, if you think that Cleve and I have enjoyed romping all over the country to save your hide, then—"

From the bench Cleve laughed. "Have pity on him, Kitten. Forget it. I've found a bottle. It has been kept down here to revive the victims, but from the label it should be excellent."

And it was.

CHAPTER VII

THE KITTEN PURRS

THE next morning, the luxurious coach of le Duc de Vendome swung up before the gates of Le Palais de Richelieu. Resplendent in a costume of royal blue, its swarthy owner stepped out and eyed his surroundings pleasantly.

An overdose of self-esteem was causing his manner to be a trifle more overbearing than usual and his eyes to glitter excitedly. Today was the beginning of the end—for Richelieu. And, he, Vendome, had brought it all about where countless others had failed. Richelieu was through! Finished!

He chuckled inwardly and addressed the *capitaine* of the Guard.

"Tell your master that le Duc de Vendome has come from the King with an important message for Monsieur le Duc de Montauban!"

Of course it was a lie. But it would guarantee an audience with the Cardinal, and after that it didn't matter. De Montauban wasn't alive to receive any sort of message, real or fancied.

He wondered vaguely how de Brullier had disposed of the body. Weighted and thrown into the moat, undoubtedly. That had been the original plan. Mentally he rubbed his hands together. In three weeks he would be the most famous man in France, besides having half of the wealthy de Montauban estates to boot.

The *capitaine* of the Guard ushered him into the grand foyer. Vendome chuckled. "Make haste, fellow!"

The *capitaine* of the Guard scowled. *"Oui, monsieur,"* he said, and disappeared into the library.

Vendome broke into a soft whistle and began pacing leisurely about the room. He was in excellent spirits. He wondered what sort of subterfuge Richelieu would attempt in order to keep him from seeing the dead duke. But no matter, he would grow insistent.

"Waiting for somebody, Vendome?"

The voice came from the other side of the foyer. It had an unpleasantly familiar ring to it. Vendome whirled, and a gasp choked his speech. Finally he was able to exclaim: *"Parbleu!* Lord Cleve!"

Cleve nodded. He wore his left arm in a sling. His lips were smiling carelessly. "That's right," he said. "Good morning, *monsieur.* I trust you slept well."

Vendome had a sickishness in the pit of his stomach. Murat had failed. Then what could it mean? How much damage had this cursed Englishman done? He summoned all the poise at his command and shrugged. "I slept well, *monsieur.* And you?"

"Well, *monsieur.*" Cleve nodded. "Incidentally, *monsieur le Cardinal* is waiting."

VENDOME glanced over his shoulder. The door to the library was open with the *capitaine* of the Guard waiting expectantly to one side.

Vendome's mind was a whirl of conjecture. He didn't know what Cleve's appearance indicated; but wishful thinking caught him in its grasp and he smiled.

So Cleve had escaped death. What of it? De Montauban was dead, and the body of his double still remained upstairs. Behind the thick walls of his castle, surely de Brullier could not have failed. Richelieu was still in the trap.

"Yes," Vendome bowed. "I must not keep His Eminence waiting."

"It *would* be bad form," Cleve agreed.

Vendome strode briskly into the library. The Cardinal regarded him enigmatically.

"You claim to have a message from the King for de Montauban?" he asked.

Vendome smirked. "Precisely, Your Eminence. It is personal, and I have been commanded to deliver it to the duke only."

"Er—do you insist upon it, *monsieur?*"

Ah. That showed how the land lay. Vendome felt the triumph swelling again inside of him. Richelieu could not produce de Montauban. Everything was all right.

"Mais oui, Monseigneur!"

The Cardinal allowed a ghost of a smile to twist his lips and tapped lightly upon

a small silver bell. The doors on the far side of the room slid back. The young Duc de Montauban strode quietly into the room. One hand was bandaged, and in the other he carried a large square of manuscript.

He glanced at Vendome, but his face remained composed, and his voice was casual when he said:

"Ah. Good morning, Vendome." Then his eyes shifted to Richelieu. "I have just signed your treaty, *Monsiegneur*. Here it is."

He placed the manuscript on the desk. Richelieu picked it up, scanned it, and smiled. Slowly, he was consolidating the Kingdom. Then he looked at Vendome.

"You have a message for le Duc de Montauban, *monsieur?*"

Vendome felt something shrivel up inside him. He opened his mouth but no words came forth. He stared at de Montauban as if seeing a ghost.

"*Monsieur le Duc* seems to have lost his tongue," de Montauban observed.

His manner was still pleasant, but his eyes were hard.

Richelieu smiled. There was no humor in it. "And his message," he added softly. "Well, *monsieur?*"

Vendome had but one idea—to get away from the library as soon as possible. His dream castles were crashing almost audibly about his ears. A great terror was icing through his veins.

"Er—I must have misplaced it," he muttered. "Excuse me, *Monseigneur*. I feel ill . . ."

"Bad health," Richelieu nodded. "I know the cause of it, Vendome. I would suggest a visit to another country. Say Spain or Italy . . ." His eyes glinted suggestively. "For your health, of course."

"Yes, er, yes." Vendome nodded and bolted.

In the corridor he met Guy d'Entreville. The young Frenchman looked solicitous. "You look ill, *monsieur,*" he said. Then he extracted a fold of white paper from his sash and placed it in Vendome's numb fingers.

"Whenever you feel the cause of your present malady sneaking up again, *monsieur,* I suggest that you read the enclosed. Good morning, *monsieur.*"

He stood watching Vendome's hurried and stumbling progress down the hall; and on d'Entreville's face there was a look of deep satisfaction. He only wished that he could see Vendome read that message.

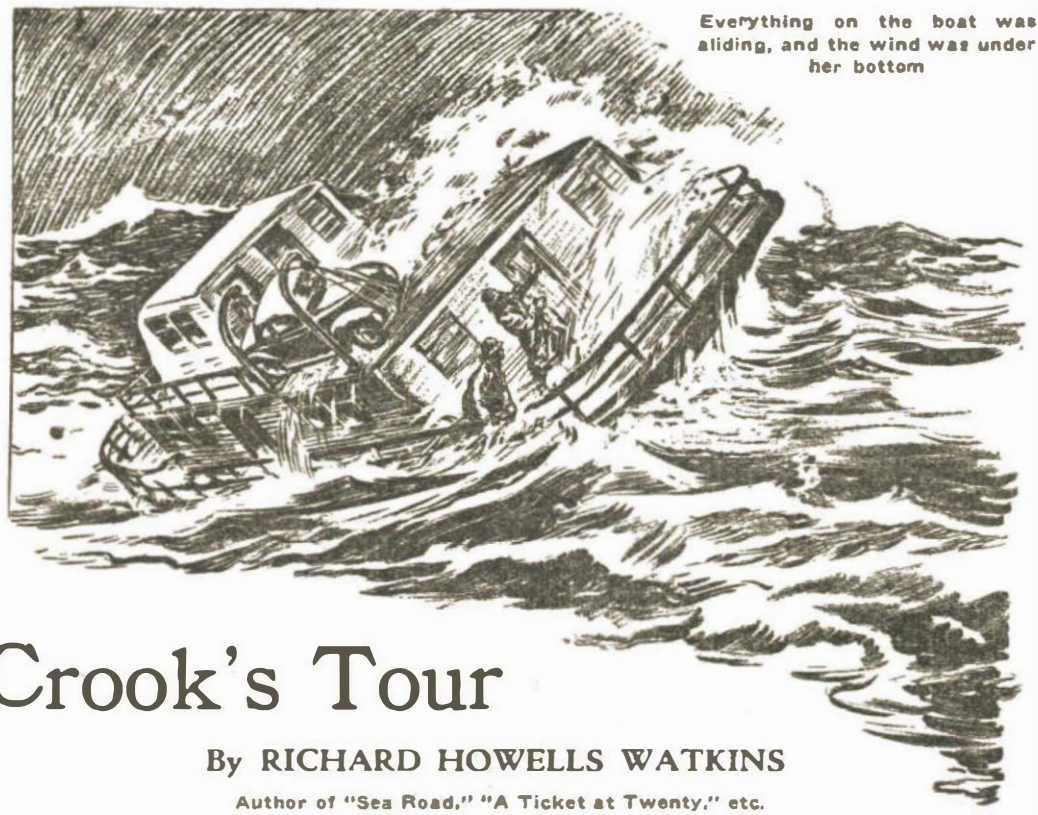
And, safe in the rocking confines of his coach, Vendome stared at the piece of paper he had been given, and wondered. Finally, he ripped it open. It read:

His mind was full of crafty thoughts,
Of villainy and treason-plots.
And all he did succeed in brewing
Was Richelieu's gain, and his undoing.
Next time he plots, perhaps he'll know,
'Tis best to choose a smaller foe.

Signed:

Guy d'Entreville (poet)

THE END



Everything on the boat was sliding, and the wind was under her bottom

Crook's Tour

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

Author of "Sea Road," "A Ticket at Twenty," etc.

Curiously disputed passage along the Jersey coast, in which it is demonstrated for once that too many crooks do not spoil the broth

NATHANIEL PIPER was even more worried than usual as he hurried up the steps into the pilot house of the steel-hulled houseboat *Pioneer*. Never before had he had anything to do with the criminal classes.

Two deep wrinkles in his forehead hooked up with a long, thin nose. From his nostrils, via a couple of ice-tong curves, the lines ran to the downturned corners of his prim mouth.

Young Rod Carr, yacht broker, was happily intent upon a chart of New York harbor and approaches. Rod had sold this peculiar craft to an elderly tycoon, exuberantly guaranteeing rapid delivery in Florida. The only trick was that his boss had made his job contingent on delivery.

"Mr. Carr," said Nathaniel Piper. "I believe that that seaman-engineer you engaged at the agency is a crook."

"What's he pinched?" Rod Carr asked. He cocked an ear to noises of metal upon metal down in the engine compartment. "Why is he still working when he can get away?"

He nodded toward the high East River pier to which they were moored.

Nathaniel Piper was annoyed at having his words taken beyond their literal meaning. That sort of thing was enough to bring on his nervous indigestion, the accursed ailment that was driving him from his air-conditioned city life at thirty-one.

"I did not say, Mr. Carr, that the seaman Potts had stolen anything. But potentially—"

"Sometimes I have doubts about myself, potentially," Rod Carr admitted calmly. "What d'you think Potts figures on pinching?"

"I said I thought he was a crook, not

necessarily a thief," Nathaniel Piper corrected. "He talks very strangely. And he has a sort of sinister conspiratorial manner. He— Believe it or not, he said I looked honest at a hundred yards. And then he warned me that I was overdoing it."

Rod Carr snorted, checked himself and snorted again. "A man who has been in a downtown commercial bank for ten years may perhaps get to look too blatantly honest," he consoled. "What else did Potts say, Nat?"

"This is more serious than you think, Mr. Carr," Nathaniel Piper protested. He accented the formal *mister* faintly. After all, he was a friend of Carr's boss. "Perhaps Potts is demented rather than crooked. He told me with a wink that he'd done insurance jobs before. And he said he'd never seen a boat that he'd more cheerfully sink than this one."

Rod Carr grinned. "I hope you told Potts that the *Pioneer* is intended for living on in sheltered waters rather than for making ocean passages," he said. "We must make a salesman as well as a sailor out of him. The boss wants us to sell some of this type while we're heading south and it'll take all hands to do it."

"You mean we shall keep him?"

Rod Carr cocked an ear to a sudden well-bred mechanical purr beneath him. "Keep him—a hand who can make a marine motor talk like that? Sure!"

"He practically intimated that you and I were crooks, too," Nathaniel Piper protested.

Rod laughed. "If he doesn't object to our morals why should we kick about his?"

THE hairy, leather-faced man from the ship chandlery arrived just then with some extra gear for the *Pioneer's* first seagoing venture. He stopped on the dock and his eyes bulged at her.

His gaze was centered upon the most unusual feature of the high-sided houseboat, a midget automobile resting casually between davits on the port side of the *Pioneer's* upper deck.

"Well, I'll be a—I'll be a dressmaker's moll!" he gasped. "What's that?"

"Practice!" Rod Carr softly urged Nathaniel Piper. "Go into your selling song."

Nathaniel Piper cleared his throat unhappily.

"The houseboat *Pioneer* is designed to be a movable home afloat anywhere on the great inland waterway running from New Jersey to Florida," he said. "It—"

The man on the pier guffawed again.

"Rotten!" cut in Rod Carr. "Put your soul into it. Don't get plaintive, Nat. We've got to sell houseboats like this, not apologize for 'em."

From the engine compartment Mike Potts' huge round-shouldered body emerged just then. He ruffed up at the sight of the derisive ship chandler's man. His thick arms bowed up belligerently.

"Keep them two watery oyster eyes off this craft, you loblolly swab, you!" Potts growled. "Pass down that stuff!"

"The proper spirit," approved Rod Carr.

Nathaniel Piped shuddered.

Though the man from shore displayed his teeth he handed down the supplies.

"This paid for, sir?" Mike Potts asked.

Rod Car nodded.

"An' what a waste o' money that is, sir," Potts commented morosely. "I could ha' paid off this rennink with the toe of my shoe. The motors are set to start."

The ship chandler's man jeered and departed in a hurry.

"Pipe down!" Rod Carr commanded his one-man crew. "This may be a houseboat but you're still a seaman. Get your motors turning and cast off."

"Motors turning an' cast off, sir," Mike Potts repeated. "Begging your pardon, sir, but who's mate of this craft? I had a second officer's ticket once. I mean I've mislaid my papers."

"You're second officer, Mr. Potts," Rod announced. "Mr. Piper, I'm making you acting mate."

Mike Potts concealed a grin with the back of his hand. "With him as mate, sir, you won't have no trouble explaining how

we lost her," he said, and then departed.

Nathaniel Piper clutched Rod's arm. "You see!" he exclaimed. "I tell you he thinks we're going to sink her for the insurance money."

Rod Carr's face was without a care. "Stand by to help Mr. Potts cast off, Mr. Piper," he commanded.

NATHANIEL PIPER worried. Carr had made him mate. What did a mate do? In the bank he had always carried his share of the load. He resented his incapacity in this world of outdoor action. He must learn. He studied Rod's casual manipulation of mysterious controls as they got under way.

Leaving a boiling wake, the *Pioneer* waddled down the East River under the thrust of her two heavy duty motors. She was a beamy craft, at best, and her high white house, gleaming chromium plate, and square windows robbed her of any pretention to sea-going style.

Her appeal was to be to land folks. Her afterdeck was unashamedly like a back porch though her lines were not Georgian, colonial nor any other recognized school of architecture. Truly she was a pioneer.

Nathaniel Piper had a fleeting thought, as he studied Rod Carr's expectant face at the wheelhouse window, that the Atlantic outside Sandy Hook might not be the best place in the world to learn the houseboat's merits.

It wasn't that young Mr. Carr betrayed any anxiety. But the tinge of red in his brown hair, the quirk of his lips and the animation in his eyes all made Mr. Piper wish his health hadn't sent him to sea.

Mr. Piper looked back with a sigh at the skyscrapers in which he had passed ten of his thirty-one years.

Mike Potts chose that moment to ascend to the upper deck, abaft the pilot house, with a five-gallon water jug on his shoulder. This he stowed carefully in the bottom of the tiny sailing dinghy that swung in davits opposite the midget car.

"There was a time off 'Bados, mister, when I'd ha' traded rye whiskey for water, pint, for pint," he muttered with a confidential wink.

"I tell you once for all that this houseboat is not going to be sunk," Nathaniel Piper said furiously.

"Sure it ain't," Mike Potts agreed with specious heartiness. "Why would we want to sink a classy villa like this thing? But it ain't our fault if she gets a leak in the cellar and we have to escape out the second-story windows. Only don't kid me; that's all I ask."

"What—" Mr. Piper gulped down his dislike of this leering ruffian. His voice became a whisper. "What makes you think there is any plan afoot to sink this boat for the insurance money?"

"Huh?" The question annoyed the formidable Mike Potts. "What makes you think a sailor like Carr would want to keep a thing like this afloat?" he retorted. "Why would he be taking her outside with a nor'easter makin' up? And why would he ha' signed on me?"

He looked at Nathaniel Piper again. "It's all right, Pipes, old socko," he said with grisly humor, and struck Piper violently on the back. "You don't have to go backing and filling with me. I can be trusted, I can. Look!"

He delved into a pocket and from an empty cigarette packet produced with reverent care a small clipping.

SEAMAN SOUGHT IN INSURANCE FRAUD
Material Witness Escapes D.A.'s Inquiry

"Material witness nothing," Potts proudly assured the horrified Piper. "I was in it up to the neck."

He squared his jaw. "All I want here is my slice in the divvy. I'll do my bit and I'll get my whack. I've done these jobs before and never been caught or drowned."

He nodded with grim significance. "Or done out o' my money."

Piper staggered into the pilot house. Already, although still in the lower Bay, the *Pioneer* had a restive gait, like a house in

a mild earthquake. She heaved uneasily.

"Believe me, sir," Piper appealed to Rod Carr. "That man is determined to sink her."

"He may not need to," Rod replied absently. "It's breezing up some even if the Weather Bureau did say light easterly winds."

Mr. Piper looked around. The sun had slid in behind some filmy gray clouds and, now that his attention was drawn to it, he perceived that it was beginning to drizzle in rather a chilly and windy fashion.

A city man, Mr. Piper had never made any concessions to weather except in the matter of clothes. But here were both the disreputable Mike Potts and the enigmatic Rod Carr talking about the weather as if if were more than a topic of conversation.

Uneasily Mr. Piper recalled improbable hurricanes he had seen in the movies and read of in newspapers. Storms.

Nathaniel Piper buttoned up his coat. He poured the tale of Potts' villainy into Carr's ears.

Rod Carr was unimpressed. "Never keep a customer waiting," he muttered absently. "It's only a run of twenty-three miles from the Hook to the shelter of Manasquan Inlet. This nor'easter looks as if it was making up slowly."

A COAST GUARD boat, as even Nathaniel Piper could tell by the lettering and numbers on her side, came out of the curve of Sandy Hook and circled about them. A uniformed man in the pilot house read the *Pioneer's* name off her broad stern and then the boat sheered off.

"That's so they'll know we really did put out to sea when we turn up missing," Rod Carr said cheerily. "But we'll fool 'em. This breeze will just speed us on our way. Twenty-three miles is nothing."

Even though the wind was almost behind the *Pioneer*, it became quite gusty out beyond Sandy Hook. Rod Carr headed the waddling houseboat down the Jersey coast at what appeared to Nathaniel Piper to be a long distance from the beach. He hoped that he wouldn't be seasick and determined to make an effort not to be. It was the scoundrel Potts who worried him more than the sea.

Little whitecaps went racing past the boat. Occasionally the *Pioneer,* mounted on the slope of a large wave, went rushing along at an undignified pace, until the sea at last escaped from under her.

Rod Carr's customary animation became somewhat more pronounced as he handled the wheel to keep the *Pioneer* headed right. The waves, Mr. Piper saw, had a tendency to turn her sideways as she slid off their crests, a tendency Rod Carr kept correcting swiftly with the wheel.

Mike Potts came up to the wheelhouse.

"Airin' up smartly, sir," he reported unnecessarily. "I wouldn't want to stick out my voice, sir, but if we got to get back to shore in that round-bottomed dinghy we better be pulling off the wreckin' party soon."

He jerked a hand briskly toward that strange sight, the miniature automobile on the davits.

"How about lettin' that car get away from us and stave in our side, sir?" he suggested briskly. "It's just a matter of lowering the car on one tackle. Then turn this house-on-a-hull into the trough, get her rolling and let the car knock a hole in her. It would be giving the underwriters something new for their money."

Rod Carr grinned at the sight of Nathaniel Piper's afflicted face. Then he shook his head.

"Ingenious, but it won't do, Mike," he said. "This ship has a steel hull. Would you mind telling me just what led you to suspect we had wrecking designs on the *Pioneer?*"

"Now, listen, sir!" Mike begged. "I know a good guy when I see one. You ain't trying to do me out of my fair share for dunking this funny thing. I know that. You're just kiddin' me along. Sure! But it's airing up plenty, sir."

"It is, and you'd better be standing by those motors," said Rod Carr crisply.

Mike Potts made his abbreviated salute. "Stand by the engines, sir," he said, ag-

grieved. "An' I'm sorry you don't think I can be trusted, sir. I can, sir—to help an' to collect mine for it, too."

He departed. Nathaniel Piper flung out his hands in an uninhibited gesture. "You see!" he said. "He's bent on sinking us. Why didn't you tell him once for all that we have no intention of wrecking her?"

"You've told him—and it didn't take," replied Rod Carr. He meditated, spoking the wheel, more serious than usual. "Get me my checkbook in that briefcase over there, will you?"

"Your checkbook?" Piper was mystified. But he obeyed.

"Take the wheel, Nat," Rod commanded. "Go on, take it! It won't bite you—much. You've driven a car."

PIPER took the wheel cautiously. Rod Carr kept a hand on it until the other had succeeded in getting the principle of the thing. He didn't find it too difficult, but the way the *Pioneer* occasionally lifted under him and ran skittishly ahead gave him well pronounced jitters.

Rod kept close to the wheel. He took his fountain pen and wrote a check. Then he found an envelope in his pocket and put the check in it, chuckling.

"We'll fix him," he said.

"I never thought I'd be willing to see a —a criminal bought off," said Nathaniel Piper with puritanic grief. "And I think you'll find he won't take a check."

Rod Carr chuckled again. "Go below and get him up here again," he commanded.

Down below, amid the hammering of the two motors, Nathaniel Piper located the seaman. Mike Potts was engaged in some sort of a tussle with a spare gas tank and he laid down his wrench with reluctance.

"I got another gag—old-fashioned but always good," he confided to Piper, and departed.

Nathaniel Piper did not follow him at once. He looked about, reacting distrustfully to all the noise, smell, hot metal and mysterious contrivances necessary to shove the *Pioneer* along.

Finally his gaze focused on the tank on which Potts had been working. He saw after a time that the seaman-engineer had disconnected a copper tubing from it. There was a slow drip of gasoline from near a spot where the tubing had been attached.

Piper bent and felt the bottom of the tank. His fingers touched a tap. It was loose; it turned easily. That accounted for the drip. Frowning, Mr. Piper wondered which way was on. He turned it.

Suddenly the tap dropped off and a quick stream of gasoline hit his fingers. The tap was swept away in the spurt of gasoline. Piper bent and groped with frantic fingers in the stinging, offensive gasoline, but the thing was gone.

He straightened up, jerked out his handkerchief and tried to plug the stream. But his handkerchief was pushed out at once. He tried again and stemmed the torrent. But it still dripped. He fled up to the wheelhouse.

"A gas tank's leaking!" he gasped. "Come quickly!"

Mike Potts didn't move. "Hear that?" he said to Rod Carr. "There's a hundred ways how gas could get loose in the bilge an' something set it to burning. Then we got to abandon on the jump. Who's going to think we'd pull a fake fire in a breeze like this?"

"Come on!" cried Piper.

"Sure, sure," Mike Potts said reassuringly.

"Wait!" commanded Rod Carr. He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and from the envelope a check. Piper saw that the ink looked fresh. "Here's the hitch, Mike," he said to the seaman. "The insurance company returned my check. They wouldn't accept the premium if I took this boat outside."

Mike Potts stared at the check. Slowly his iron jaw dropped. "Then—she ain't insured!" he said. "The dirty crooks!"

HE ROUNDED on Nathaniel Piper. "What's the idea of wasting all that gas, then?" he demanded sourly He ges-

tured toward the hurrying clouds. A horrible idea occurred to him. "It would be a swell break if we lost this high-sided cottage for nothing, wouldn't it?" he asked, outraged.

He hurtled down the steps to the engine-room.

"Why did you do that?" Piper demanded of Rod Carr, pointing to the check.

Carr let the wind blow it away. "If he discovers we're honest he won't trust us."

"I will make it my business to see that he is returned to justice," Piper said firmly.

He followed Potts below, to see him plunge competently into a sea of gas. Somehow Mike Potts cut off the flow. But over the floor plates the gasoline was lapping. The smell was very bad.

Mike slid around and got a bilge pump working. By that time the movement of the *Pioneer* had become a dizzying succession of slides, nose downward, followed by an instant of uncertainty and then an abrupt slowing down, bow pointed high.

Mike's face was savage. "More house than boat," he yelled in Piper's ear. "What are we going out here with no insurance?"

"Trying to reach Manasquan Inlet," retorted Piper in an unfriendly voice.

Mike Potts consigned that idea to the deep with a sweep of his arm.

"We couldn't risk getting near the Inlet with this howler pounding the beach." He shook his head. "We'd be two-three times as safe if we left her in that open boat, soon's a ship came near us."

"But it ain't my style to abandon anything that'll float with nobody paying the shot."

He pounded upstairs again to report to Rod Carr. Piper, following him, found the motion much worse in the high wheelhouse. The *Pioneer* was teetering skittishly on the crest of every comber, and Rod was using the engine controls as well as the wheel to keep her obediently on course.

Piper, watching the rising sea, understood what would happen if the boat should slide sideways.

"We've got to heave her to," Rod Carr decided. There was more zest in his tone than ever, as if danger made living more worth while to him than pleasant days. "I can't risk trying to head her around into this; we've got to ride it stern to the wind."

Mike Potts nodded somber agreement. He cast a withering glance aft at the *Pioneer's* unconventional hulk. "Call it hind side foremost," he said. "I won't be naming that thing a stern."

Carr and Potts went into a swift conference, too nautical for Nathaniel Piper to follow. Then, of a sudden, Rod Carr began throttling down both motors. He did it gingerly, while Mike Potts, at the wheel, fought the swooping seas to keep her stern to them.

Scant seconds later Rod shoved the motors into reverse as Mike Potts put the helm amidships. She was going slowly into it now, stern foremost.

Instantly the wind's many tones rose to shriller notes in the scant rigging and numerous corners and crevices of the *Pioneer's* superstructure. And the seas became rougher. They ran at her now, flung her up, doused her with spray and dropped her heart-sinkingly into the hollows.

SHE had lost the dizzying, dangerous scenic railway motion. But she was taking a beating instead. It didn't seem any improvement to Mr. Piper.

Both Rod Carr and Mike Potts were staring tautly aft. "Sort of tough on those nice big windows lookin' out on the back porch," Mike bellowed ironically.

Rod nodded. "We've got to brace 'em."

Mike Potts lashed the wheel. He lashed it tight.

Rod Carr motioned to Nathaniel Piper to put his hands on the two throttles. "You'll like this," he said, grinning. "Any time she seems to you not to be tailing into the wind, open her up a little. Better kick her with both motors. She has two propellers, one on each side of the rudder. Don't use one throttle unless she gets altogether away from you."

"An' don't let her get away from you," Mike Potts counseled grimly.

"What are—" Nathaniel began. But they were gone, together. He was the unhappy master of the ship.

He got only glimpses of what they were doing. They were busy with pieces of heavy canvas, heavy boards and hammers and nails. A distant but unmistakable sound of crashing glass after a big sea hit her stern visibly speeded their rapid work down on the after deck. They were finding that deck as hard to stand on as a limber springboard. But they got the windows boarded up and secured against the seas.

Suddenly both men came up onto the upper deck. Now they were working with ropes. It took them a long time. The *Pioneer* was jarring heavily.

To Mr. Piper's horror the other two began lowering the small boat, much bound with heavy lines about it and within it, over the side. They got it down to the water without smashing it but it filled at once. Their only means of escape!

Mike Potts paid out lines as the dinghy, sunken to the gunwales in the frothing water, drifted astern. There was a canvas bag fastened alongside the little boat, a bag that slowly oozed oil.

"What's all that for?" demanded Mr. Piper distrustfully.

"The boat will act as a sea anchor—we hope," shouted Rod Carr. "We drift tied to that boat so that it keeps our stern pointing into the wind. Oil's trickling out of that bag to smooth down the seas."

He cut the motors to idling speed. The *Pioneer's* stern no longer butted into wind and sea. Dragging on the sunken dinghy, the houseboat drifted slowly to leeward. The seas, tamed by the oil, hit less furiously. The wind smote the house with not quite so much wrath.

Mr. Piper breathed a sigh of relief. He started to sit down but Rod Carr stopped him. He pointed to the throttles.

"Stand by," he said. "That contrivance may break up or the lines chafe through. Keep your eyes on it. Get set to kick her astern if it carries away. If she turns sideways to this wind we're through. We'll be rolled over."

Mr. Piper nodded. "How far from land are we?" he asked with a glance at the distant shore. The question was involuntary; he regretted asking it.

"Only about a hundred and twenty feet," Rod Carr replied. But he was not looking to westward. He pointed downward—straight downward. "A hundred and twenty feet. Don't worry."

With a pleased smile he hurried away. Even more Piper regretted having asked that question.

THE afternoon drove on down the wind with the gray and hurrying clouds. Night loomed menacingly over Nathaniel Piper's head and still he stood by the throttles.

On the upper deck Rod Carr and Mike Potts toiled on a new labor, a thing made of canvas awnings on a wooden framework, something between a huge funnel and a box kite in appearance. A stronger sea anchor, he learned, a heavy cumbersome thing and a strange-looking one to save men's lives. Piper didn't see how they could get it overboard.

Night overwhelmed them. Still the wind shrilled and the sea roared. Piper stood by unending centuries at those throttle controls. Even danger became monotonous.

And then the wind changed direction. Nathaniel Piper was at first only dully aware of this phenomenon. The wind had been battering at the after side of the pilot house. Now it was thundering on the starboard windows. Queer, Piper thought drowsily. It really was almost tipping them over.

Piper jerked himself bolt upright. He was wide awake. The *Pioneer* had gone lunging skyward onto a crest. She reeled under the impact of a terrific gust. Everything clattered in the wheelhouse.

He pawed frantically at the controls. He realized what had happened. The wind hadn't shifted. She was broadside—broadside to this screeching thing.

Everything on the ship was sliding. Piper was sliding. He got both throttles open—wide open—but though the motors

sang a deep monotone, a background to all the higher sounds of fury, the houseboat still lay over. She was almost on her side.

Rod Carr came dropping into the wheelhouse from the high side. ". . . carried away. . . ." Piper caught. The dinghy was gone.

Rod lurched to the controls but still nothing happened. Against that wind she could not recover. The rush of water poured into Nathaniel Piper's ears as if he were already drowning.

A sea hit, and another. They were unsoftened now by oil; they hit that high white side hard, as if it were a ledge opposing them. It was all over, but Rod Carr still worked; he was trying now to get the lashing off the wheel.

OF A sudden the *Pioneer* shuddered. Something had jerked her. It jerked her again, rhythmic as the seas but by no means as hard hitting. She responded but little. She was still lying far over. But she did not plunge her broad side into the water. She stirred. It was barely perceptible. Again that tug. Something was trying to help her.

Nathaniel Piper realized that her stern was turning, slowly pointing more into the weather. She made a horrible corkscrew movement. Still almost down on her side, she was flung diagonally across a rushing greyback.

And then, down at the bottom of the sea, she felt another tug. Suddenly she lifted herself up a trifle off her side. She was heading almost into it. The pressure of the wind was now only slantingly on the starboard side. In the sheltered hollow of the sea it was not great. She rose higher; she came up. Her deck was level again.

Nathaniel Piper scrambled to his feet. Rod Carr had ceased to tear at the lashings of the wheel. He stood still, fingers on the closed throttles, head lifted.

Mike Potts suddenly appeared in the wheelhouse door. He was very slowly brushing the palms of his hands together in a dusting movement. With a great effort he spat contemptuously over his shoulder into the night. The shining sweat was standing out all over his drained face. His huge, round-shouldered body was sagging like a broken bridge.

"That second sea-anchor—you got it over?" Rod Carr got out in a awed, rusty voice. "You got that big thing over—alone? How—"

"Ar-r! I just chucked it over," growled Mike Potts. He made a movement, as one flipping away a match, with a weary arm, then staggered and fell. He stayed where he dropped.

Rod Carr laughed, with increasing relish. He laughed in the black, shrieking night with that confounded zest of his. But Piper was glad to hear him laugh.

"Sure!" Rod roared. "You just chucked it over. Why didn't I think of that when we were both tearing our insides out just to get it to the rail?"

Mike lifted his sagging shoulders belligerently.

"No insurance company is goin' to put over anything on me," he said. "We'll take this two-story hearse to port, get her insured an' sink her right. Huh?"

THE wind blew and blew. The sea fought the houseboat and the night hung over the battle. But still the *Pioneer* drifted to leeward of her sea anchor.

And at last the night paled. The wind backed to northwest and blew harder, but only for a little while. The gale backed on to westward, which made it a breeze off the shore. Then it had but a short sweep to raise the waves. The huge combers became a mere chop.

As the power left the seas the *Pioneer* at last abandoned her sea anchor. She got under way and thumped along under the push of her two motors.

When they reached the smooth water and pulled alongside a dock, well within soothing sight of the skyscrapers of Atlantic City, Nathaniel Piper's stomach of a sudden felt the lack of motion and he was very sick.

But soon he recovered. From now on the voyage was practically all inland waterway, mere ditch crawling. With the skyscrapers towering to restore his mind to city normality, Nathaniel Piper put the matter of Mike Potts up to Rod Carr.

"I know he saved our lives, Mr. Carr. But that has nothing to do with the point I wish to make." Nathaniel Piper's voice was strong with inflexible conviction. "This man Potts is a crook. He has no moral sense whatever."

"He's a man and a seaman," Rod Carr declared. "He's straight as—as a string. That clipping is three years old. He admitted that when he showed it to me. The D. A. doesn't want him now."

"Surely you cannot jeopardize our undertaking by being sentimental about a malefactor," Piper pressed. "He should be rewarded I admit. I suggest giving him fifty dollars. If you keep him with us he'll ruin—"

"Here's a sporting proposition," Rod broke in. "If I give him a chance to rob us and he doesn't, then he stays. Otherwise—" He slung out a hand.

"I will agree to that," Piper said slowly.

"Good!" Rod Carr went to the desk in the wheelhouse and wrote out a list of supplies. "Let me have fifty dollars, will you, Nat?"

Slowly Piper opened his wallet and took from it the largest bill he had, a fifty-dollar banknote, new, crisp, seductive.

"You'll admit that if he doesn't run away with this he has some moral sense," Rod Carr said, fingering the bill fondly.

Nathaniel Piper nodded. "You're throwing away the money," he declared.

Summoned from the engine room, Mike Potts stared at the bill with popping eyes. Then he leaped ashore with the list of supplies and the bill stuffed into his trousers pocket. He hurried away.

Rod Carr sighed. For the moment life had lost its zest. He kicked a cord fender violently and glowered at the tall hotels of Atlantic City. Then both men settled down to wait. Minutes dragged. Slowly Piper's air of moral rectitude became more pronounced. He had done his duty in ridding the *Pioneer* of this evildoer.

Of a sudden Rod Carr emitted a subdued whoop. His face glowed.

Mike Potts was coming down the dock His arms were full of packages and he was singing raucously. Rod's grin broadened to infinity; then he look a hole in Nathaniel Piper.

"Now has he got some moral sense?"

"Seemingly I have misjudged the man," replied Piper stiffly.

Mike Potts dropped aboard. He was beaming with satisfaction as he pressed a roll of bills on Rod Carr. He winked in comradely depravity at Piper.

"Here's the change," he said. "Boy! Are we three goin' to get rich! I hope you got the printing press along. The guy took that phony fifty just like it was good money."

Minions of Mars

With a roar, the sergeant lunged out with his sword. The move was ill advised

By WILLIAM GRAY BEYER

WHEN Mark Nevin, young American engineer, is given a dose of a newly discovered and terrifically powerful anaesthetic, it does more than cause him to sleep during his appendicitis operation. It sends him off into a six-thousand-year coma. He wakes in an elaborate mausoleum, thoughtfully provided by his repentant doctor, and discovers that the world, harrowed by continuous wars, has collapsed into a stage of semi-savagery.

The anaesthetic has imparted to his blood radioactive elements that have turned it a handsome shade of blue and, more practically, have rendered him immune to hunger, fatigue, and destruction of the tissues.

Still impressed with this highly satisfactory state of affairs, he bumps into one Omega, a thoroughly disrespectable and highly entertaining disembodied intelligence, migrant from the Moon, who is fascinated by humanity and determined to start a new human race, free from all savagery and greed.

MARK, he sees at once, is heaven-sent for the role of the Neo-Adam, and he chooses the girl Nona, with whom Mark obligingly falls in love, as his Eve. Returning from a combat with two malevolent monsters who threaten to wreck Omega's fine new world, Mark and Nona are separated when Mark carelessly gets in the way of a towering comber and is carried overboard.

Mark swims about vaguely and, because of his new blood-energy, quite tirelessly; he lands at Scarbor, inhabited by the tribe of Brish, which it appears, is continually threatened by two neighboring tribes, the Macs and the Mics. Mark, mentally translating, decides that the three tribes are the descendants of the British, Scotch, and Irish, in that order.

Mark falls in with a hot-blooded, red-headed rebel named Murf, who enlightens him as to the true state of affairs. Scarbor has a well-meaning duke, Jon, who is the merest figurehead. The country is really run by

This story began in the Argosy for January 13

greedy nobles, headed by Erlayok, an all-powerful and utterly unscrupulous despot.

Since the inhabitants of Scarbor are impressed by Mark's remarkable strength and unholy skill with weapons, Murf thinks it would be a fine idea if Mark were to head the revolutionary movement that is brewing. He neglects to mention, though, that Mark will have little to say once the rebellion goes over.

MEANWHILE Nona has sent Omega off in search of Mark. He finds him, but does not reveal himself, ruefully confident that Mark will get into more trouble. He reports back to Nona, but refuses to take her to Mark. Nona, being as modern as only an eightieth century maid can be, waits until Omega has gone and then commands her Norse-manned ship to sail for Scarbor.

Mark falls into Erlayok's hands and is saved from torture only by the intervention of Jon and Murf. Murf, naturally, hasn't been much woried about what happened to Mark; just afraid Mark would break and tell all he knows about the coming rebellion.

Erlayok's idea has been to force Mark to tell, not about the revolution, but about twentieth-century armaments which Mark remembers but could not duplicate if he wished to. Afraid to admit this to Jon, Erlayok invokes a technicality that will involve an obligatory sentence of drawing and quartering.

And somehow Jon feels drawn to Mark. He wants to save him if he can. So he changes the sentence. The harvest games are being held daily in the arena. Mark shall play in these. If he survives, he shall be free *If* . . .

CHAPTEk XI

OFF WITH HIS HEAD

MARK smiled his thanks. He knew that Jon, in his generosity and gratitude, was doing all he could. As for himself, he hadn't feared the sentence of drawing and quartering. He still had confidence in his ability to escape before the sentence could be carried out. And with the knowledge that somewhere Nona was probably mourning him, it was his full intention to do so at the earliest moment. The rebellion would be an accomplished fact in a very few days after he put his forces in motion, and then he would be free to return to her.

Erlayok motioned one of his men to unbind him. "Put him in one of the cells," he directed. "Under guard!"

"No," the duke interposed. "I shall see that he is adequately guarded. In a city prison."

For an instant it seemed that Erlayok would go completely berserk. His face twisted and his hands clenched and opened like the claws of some bird of prey. But abruptly he calmed and smiled, as if at some delightful secret. Mark, as he was led out of the chamber, wondered what charming thought was behind the smile.

At the palace gates the party remounted. One of Jon's soldiers gave his horse to Mark. Ordinarily a prisoner would have been forced to walk, but the Duke evidently didn't consider Mark a criminal.

Murf rode part way to the city prison, and then requested an opportunity to bid his friend goodbye, before going his way. The Duke, with a wry smile, ordered his men to draw away a short distance.

"You won't be in jail very long," Murf said, hurriedly. "I'll get our forces together as quickly as it can be done. We'll free you and begin the attack. Our men will fight all the better with the prospect of turning you loose to lead them."

"No," Mark said. "Wait a day or two. I'll break out of prison without any help. When we stage the attack it must be a complete surprise. And aimed only at the strategic points we have agreed upon. If our forces waste time storming a prison to free me, the nobles will have a chance to consolidate their available fighting men. The element of surprise may mean the difference between success and failure. Not to mention the difference in the number of men who must die."

Jon, aware that something other than an ordinary farewell was in progress, motioned his men to break up the conference.

"The horse is yours," he told Murf. "Don't use it for any dishonorable purpose."

The redhead grinned impishly and nodded his thanks. "I wish Your Highness, and Your Highness' family, a long life," he said, enigmatically. And with that he dug his heels into the horse's flanks and rode off, waving a hand.

"Quite decent of him," the Duke remarked, watching the disappearing figure.

THE party continued down the winding streets, the horses' well-shod hooves a-clatter on the cobbles. They proceeded at the leisurely pace necessary because of the ox-carts and pedestrians that thronged the streets.

Several times there was cheering and shouting as the horsemen were recognized. Mark, riding beside Jon, thought the tribute was intended for the Duke as he saw the admiring and worshipful looks cast in his direction. Jon, he believed, was regarded by the people as being a man of gentler stamp from the nobles who oppressed them. They knew of his futile efforts to help their conditions, and loved him for trying.

"They like you," Jon observed ruefully. "I wonder what they would do if they knew I was taking you to jail."

Mark was astonished. "The cheers were yours, not mine."

"Some of them, perhaps," the Duke admitted. "I have been cheered before, on the city streets. But never as much as today. So I'm not fooling myself." He smiled, almost wistfully. "I do envy you. I wish I— Never mind."

Mark insisted. "If any of these people are cheering me, they are doing it only because I once saved your life. And that, of course, is only a left-handed way of paying you tribute."

The Duke looked at Mark, his eyes twinkling. "I may be stupid but I am not entirely uninformed, my friend," he said.

Before Mark could puzzle out the meaning of this remark, the party arrived. Mark had been brought to the same jail from which he had so blithely escaped the night before. He hadn't known that this was the nearest public prison to the Earl's palace, and had assumed that he would be taken to some other place.

The massive door in the courtyard was wide open, and seated in the heat of the sun were the four guards, engaged in their eternal game of cards. They raised their heads as the Duke's party entered the yard and Mark instantly recognized one of them as the man who had summoned the soldiers. The man jumped to his feet, and after bowing formally to the Duke, blurted the story of the raid, pointing toward Mark as the guilty party.

But surprisingly, Jon was not perturbed at the news. He acted, in fact, as if the story were not news at all. He merely nodded and told the man, who, it appeared, was the sergeant of the guards, that Mark was already condemned to participate in the games. He added that the prisoner was not to be molested in any way, so that he would be in one piece to give the audience a good show.

The sergeant grinned. "How about food?" he asked. "The usual prison fare, or should I feed him well so he'll last longer in the arena?"

"Starve him," the Duke decided. "It'll make him all the more ferocious."

WITH another grin, the sergeant herded Mark through the door and into a cell. Mark went quietly, resolving to tear the cell door off its hinges as soon as the man shut the inner portal of the guardroom. He was disagreeably surprised when he saw the other three men carrying their table and benches down the corridor. These they placed directly opposite his cell. Sunlight, coming through the window he and Murf had once used as a means of escape, struck the table top and furnished light for the game.

"You're our only prisoner," chortled the sergeant, "and we can give you all our attention. So just make yourself comfortable and meditate on the habits of certain fowls that always come home to roost." The sergeant's enormous belly shook as he laughed in appreciation of his own joke. Then he sobered. "And if you think you can walk out of here by bending those bars, just try it! We'll slice your fingers off at the elbow!" He laughed again and placed his sword within easy reach of his hand.

Mark, inwardly indignant, grinned as if everything was to his liking. This required

quite a bit of thinking. He began to strip off the nightwatchman's rig he had been wearing since the night before, and carefully spread it on the dusty floor of the cell. Then he sat down on it and leaned his back against the wall.

One of the guards shivered beneath his warm leather jacket as he saw Mark's bare back touch the wall. The prisoner was now wearing nothing but a pair of sandals, recently acquired, and the skintight trunks he had worn when he emerged from the ocean. His belt contained no weapons.

Mark felt a certain satisfaction as he noted the wondering expressions on the faces of the guards as they began their game. He was playing a game too. A waiting game.

There was, after all, no reason why he should escape immediately. There were only four men outside, and if he waited long enough there would be only two. They would eventually break up their game and take turns at sleeping. And when the first two went they would leave two drowsy comrades behind.

And if Mark pretended to be asleep at that time, maybe they would doze off. In fact, it was almost certain that they would.

As he silently watched the flicking cards and listened to the sound of clinking coppers, Mark's thoughts dwelt on the enigma of Jon, Duke of Scarbor.

He knew that the Duke was a right-minded man, sincerely trying to see that justice was done, and earnest in his attempted reforms. He knew also that the Duke was wholeheartedly supporting his subjects' desire for lighter taxes and elevation from serfdom. He also was aware that the Duke was a noble of royal blood and therefore could be expected to take sides with the nobles to quell any possible rebellion.

Yet Jon had gone to great lengths to defy Erlayok and release Mark. And he had also befriended Murf, a known insurgent. Gratitude alone failed to completely explain such actions.

Mark recalled the cheers which the Duke had insisted were for him. And his own clumsy effort to twist their meaning. The Duke had said, "I am not entirely uninformed." And had smiled when he said it.

That seemed to indicate that Jon was aware that Mark was the leader of the rebels. And the fact that he had turned Murf loose, and had even made him a present of the horse, might indicate that the Duke was in favor of a rebellion.

The idea was plausible. Jon had been balked in his own efforts to better conditions among his people. Perhaps he considered a rebellion was worthwhile if the desired end was gained.

The Duke had certainly been a friend when he'd barged into that torture chamber. Those burns had hurt, even if they hadn't done any lasting damage. And he had further shown his friendship when he had ordered Mark's guard not to damage him. Yet he had also told them to starve him. But he had smiled then, too.

Mark wondered about that. It didn't seem possible that the Duke could know that he didn't require food. Even Murf wasn't sure about that. Several times in Murf's presence he had eaten a mouthful or two. Mark hadn't told of his unique properties because of the involved explanations it would require. And with the limited knowledge of the day, the phenomenon would probably fall in the category of black magic, anyway.

A diversion at the card table distracted him.

FOR the past few minutes he hadn't been watching the game very closely, though he did notice that the pile of copper coins at the sergeant's elbow was getting higher and higher. Suddenly the player opposite him sprang to his feet and threw his cards face up on the table. At the same instant the sergeant swept his hand back in a grab for his sword. But the other man was quicker. In a flash his sword was drawn and in action.

As the sergeant came erect with his own weapon swinging, he was probably very surprised to find that he had been decapitated.

At any rate, he took practically no interest in the proceedings from that point on. The head came to rest altogether too far away to concern itself with the welfare of the body, which slumped in utter dejection. His conqueror calmly cleaned his sword on the trousers of the vanquished.

"Tsk, tsk," Mark commented as he noted the cards on the table. There were five of them face-up, and all five were aces. He didn't know the nature of the game they had been playing, but he had observed that there were four suits in the deck. The dealer—and the sergeant had dealt this hand—had made a serious mistake.

The two other players were still too stupefied to do more than stare at the victor. That gentleman reached over and appropriated about one-third of the sergeant's winnings.

"I did you men a favor," he said. "That crook would have had the rest of your money if I hadn't done what I did. Now you do me a favor. Give me a good start out of here before you report this. And when you do report it, make it self-defense. That's what it was, you know. He went for his slicer first. But I'm not taking any chances. I'm joining Erlayok's army right now. They can't touch me if I do that. Erlayok takes care of his men. Now give me about fifteen minutes. Okay?"

The two nodded dumbly and the man wheeled and left. As soon as the outer door slammed they made a concerted dive for the remainder of the coppers. Then they proceeded to go through the pockets of the deceased, picking him clean.

Mark eyed them closely, missing nothing. For a moment he toyed with the idea of trying to bend the bars of his cell door while they were occupied. He decided to wait, however, realizing that he wouldn't be able to bend them far enough to slip through before they would be upon him, slashing his fingers with their knives.

And a frustrated attempt to escape now, would render them all the more alert later.

After dividing the loot, the two guards went into a conference. Then one of them left to notify the authorities what had happened. The other tilted a bench against the wall and sat facing Mark's cell, his sword in his hand.

Mark stayed quiet, but his mind was busily trying to see a way to turn these unforeseen events to his advantage. He only had one guard to contend with, but that wasn't much help. The man was wide-awake and alert. Mark knew that the keen-edged sword could slice his hands beyond the ability of his blood to repair, in the minute or two that would be required to bend the bars.

CHAPTER XII

THE SPINELESS SWORD

IN A few minutes the opportunity was lost anyway. The guard returned and brought several other men with him. One of these was garbed in a uniform unfamiliar to Mark. He carried no sword, merely an ornamented dagger in a sheath. The uniform was otherwise gaudy and Mark decided he was someone in authority. This man looked carefully at the arrangement of furniture, the position of the corpse. He even smiled when he saw the five aces. Finally he bent over and went through the pockets of the corpse. Then he frowned.

"There is no money on the body," he said, heavily.

Both guards burst forth in voluble explanation. Nothing could be made of the garbled sounds until the official silenced one of them with a wave of his hand.

"He didn't have any money in the first place," the other said. "We won all he had last night, fair and square. Then we lent him enough to get in the game today. So all he had was on the table and that belonged to us because he won it by cheating."

The official stroked his chin and nodded his head. "I'm glad you explained that," he said. "Robbing the dead is a serious offense. However your statement of the true circumstances will be accepted when I write it out and present it to my superiors. My time is valuable, of course, so

I'll charge you each a fee of fifty coppers for writing it."

"But excellency!" one of the men exclaimed. "That is more than . . ."

The other one silenced him with a kick on the shins. With resignation they handed over the hundred coppers. The official smiled happily. He was faring better than as if he had robbed the corpse himself.

The transaction completed, his men went about removing the body. One of them tucked the head under his arm, facing to the rear as he went down the corridor. The two guards almost jumped out of their skins as the head leered at them before it disappeared through the door. Mark failed to see this little incongruity or he might have had some warning of what was to happen shortly.

As it was he had dismissed the matter of the slaughtered guard from his mind. If the two missing guards were replaced before the day was over, he was no better off than before. If they weren't, his position was improved to the extent that when the time came for one of the remaining two to sleep, he would be guarded by only one drowsy man.

For some reason Mark wasn't in any great hurry to escape. When he did break out, Murf would insist on making the first surprise moves in their planned rebellion immediately. True, Mark had agreed that now, in the disorganization of the holiday festivals, was the most propitious time to strike. And certainly the rebellious factions were now united as strongly as they ever would be.

But perversely, and in spite of the enthusiasm he had shown for the past weeks in his campaign, he was hesitant about putting forces in motion which would certainly result in great bloodshed.

HIS mind went back to the stories he had read of the French Revolution. Of the thousands of innocent heads that had been lopped off. He remembered hearing first-hand accounts of the Russian Revolution. Of the bestiality that resulted, and of the savage destruction of irreplaceable works of art. Neither of these rebellions had resulted in any immediate improvement in the living conditions of the common people.

They had merely swapped one set of ruthless leaders for another, just as bad.

Might not this rebellion he planned get out of his control and wind up the same way? The ever-present menace of the Mics and the Macs could furnish the means. There would be temporary disorganization in the armies of the Brish, and during that time the country might be invaded and hopelessly subjugated. He hated to take the responsibility of starting something which might end so disastrously.

And the rebellion might well be a failure. His men could never hope to defeat the armies of the various nobles. And if the surprise element of his attack should fail of its purpose, they would surely have to contend with those armed forces. They would be slaughtered without mercy.

Only by simultaneously defeating the garrisons of all the nobles could they hope to succeed. For this would automatically give them control of the armies. The palaces of the various earls contained the valuts which held the vast sums collected as taxes and land rentals. And from these vaults came the money to pay the salaries of the soldiers.

If the rebels took these strongholds, the allegiance of the armies was assured. But if they failed, those soldiers would hunt them down and kill them.

And even if they won and escaped attack from their hereditary enemies, would conditions be very greatly improved?

For the first time Mark began to have doubts even of this. The tremendous armies would still have to be maintained. Forces for control of civil affairs would still be necessary. Crime would still require curbing.

Of course, there would be a great improvement in criminal procedure. And the army would no longer be allowed to ride roughshod over the rights of the citizens. There would be fewer injustices and inhumanities committed.

But would these things be worth the bloodshed that was inevitable, or the disastrous possibilities which must be risked?

The rebels expected much good to result from their victory. They were going to be bitterly disappointed to learn that taxes would still remain at a high level, so high that they would still be required to work from dawn to dusk to pay them.

Erlayok had pointed out that the only economies which could be safely effected would be to remove the expense of supporting the ruling class in luxury. And that there would still have to be rulers to support. The amount which could be saved would be relatively small. And it wouldn't satisfy the rebels, he could foresee.

His attention returned to the guards. Those two, quite oblivious to the recent decapitation of the sergeant, were now hotly engaged in a two-handed game. The stacks of coppers were about evenly matched. Evidently neither was winning. They were seated at the ends of the table so that both could see the prisoner. Both, furthermore, were chewing cuds of tobacco, and using Mark's cell for a cuspidor. They seemed to take great pride in their ability to spit between the bars. Mark himself appeared to be out of range, but he didn't regard the sport with any great favor.

THE guard on the left pushed forth a coin and laid his cards face down. He was raising a bet. But he was too busy with his tobacco juice to call it. The other player matched his coin and raised again. The man on the left took another peek at his hand and decided to call. As he put one coin in the center of the table he raised his head and puckered his lips in the direction of Mark's cell. It looked to the prisoner as if a distance record were being contemplated and he prepared to pull his feet out of range.

Surprisingly, the ejected stream didn't so much as reach the door of the cell. Instead it curved in mid-air, as if driven back by a sudden gust of wind, and returned to splash full in the spitter's face. The other guard was convulsed with laughter and Mark mumbled: "Serves the blighter right."

The guard's laughter died suddenly and his face registered the unaccustomed impact of a thought. "Say—there—there wasn't any wind. How—"

The other one glared balefully at Mark, who smiled back sweetly. "*He* did it! He must have blew it back at me. I'll cut his heart out!"

Cursing handsomely, he reached for his sword. The other guard objected, warning him of the Duke's explicit order that the captive not be harmed.

"You better leave him alone. Don't know as I blame the poor guy anyhow. Jeepers, what lungs!"

The game went on.

But not for long, however. The corridor suddenly became the Cave of Winds. The cards developed a frisky will of their own. Apparently wafted by inexplicable gusts of wind, they would turn jauntily over and lie face up. They would drift off the table altogether and lodge in unprobable locations. Twice the man on the left carefully spat upon the floor, only to have sudden currents of air carry the brown spittle against his legs.

The guard on the right, whose cards behaved more capricously, got so nervous about it that he would snatch them up the instant they were dealt.

The game finally broke up when he managed to get hold of three kings and a pair of queens, only to have them snatched out of his hand by a gust of unusual violence and deposited, with the pictures uppermost, in the center of the table. He swore loudly and with emphasis, glaring toward Mark's cell.

Strangely, both guards blamed it all on Mark. There was no reason for doing so, for the gusts had come from all directions and they could see that Mark hadn't changed his position. Possibly it was the fact that the prisoner saw nothing unusual in the peculiar antics of the wind. Perhaps it was because he was either grinning or laughing at them all the time these things

were happening. But whatever the reason, they glared at Mark every time anything unusual occurred. And in a sense they were right. The peculiar happenings were directly due to his presence. Without him, nothing strange would have occurred.

THEY couldn't hear him chortling to himself: "Omega, you old reprobate. Give 'em the works—and then get me out of this cross-barred spitoon." They couldn't know about Mark's familiar spirit, whose unmistakable signature was scrawled all over the antics of the cards.

One of the guards grasped his sword and lunged menacingly at Mark's cell door. "Now cut it, you!" he roared. Then his face puckered plaintively, "Gorn, we ain't doing you any harm."

Mark grinned at him and said nothing. Suddenly the blade of the guard's sword began to flop back and forth like an eel trying to escape. From a rigid length of gleaming steel it became a writhing object with the consistency of wet spaghetti. In horror, the guard flung it to the floor. It landed, flopped a few times like a fish out of water, and then lay still.

This latest foible seemed to take some of the spirit out of the guards. When a man's weapons can no longer be relied upon, he loses some of his assurance.

The guards placed little reliance upon the bars of the prison to hold their man. They had already inspected the bent bars of a cell further down the corridor. Nor did they feel much confidence in their own ability to stop a man of such vigor. Their mastery of the situation depended wholly upon their ability to use their swords to attack Mark's hands if he tried to bend those bars.

"How did you do *that?*" said one of them querulously.

"A trade secret," Mark confided. "Didn't they tell you I was a master of Black Magic?"

"No," said one, awed.

"Well, I am," Mark declared flatly, ignoring the whisper: "Liar!" that drifted to his ears.

"Rats!" the other said. "There ain't no such thing!"

Mark smiled in a friendly manner. "Oh, but there is," he insisted. "Do you want me to prove it? Well then, spit. Anywhere at all. I leave the choice to you."

The guard paled, then rallied. "I *thought* you did that," he said. "But it's some kind of a trick. And you're not going to get out of that cell with any trick."

"Black Magic or trick, what's the difference?" Mark asked. "I'll walk out of this cell whenever I care to."

As he spoke, Mark waved a hand past his face to dislodge a fly which had decided to park on his nose. But the gesture seemed fraught with significance to the two guards. For at the same time they were astounded to see the door of the cell becoming a cherry-red color.

They stepped back, shaken, and so doing, one of them stumbled over a bench and landed in a heap. He didn't take his eyes off the door, however.

The bars lightened from red to a brilliant white, and to the accompaniment of angry crackling, melted and dripped in a pool on the stone floor.

Mark, at the back of the cell, felt the blast of heat that was released, and grinned. Omega was playing his favorite game. He loved to astonish ignorant humans with a display of his mastery of natural forces. The guards were properly impressed. They cowered against the far side of the corridor, evidently too scared to run from the heat which was singeing their hair.

"You see it would be simple for me to escape if I wanted," Mark said. "So you needn't keep such a close watch over me. Suppose you both run along now and continue your card game in your own quarters. I'm tired of looking at you. And I'm tired of having you spit in my cell."

The guard who doubted the existence of Black Magic suddenly experienced a return of his courage. "No," he shouted, brandishing his sword. But abruptly the weapon began to weave through the air like demented sea weed. The guard howled and

let it go. Whereupon the sword drifted feather-light to the floor.

"Short memory," Mark observed. "Now you two do as I say, before I get mad. Don't worry about me. I'll be here for quite a while. Shoo!"

Mark made a violent gesture with the last word, and the guards fell over each other in their flight. Once in the outer room they slammed the door to the cell block and shot the bolts. And with the sound, Omega materialized in the familiar form of the wrinkled old man.

CHAPTER XIII

UNCLE OMEGA

MARK said furiously: "It's about time you showed up. I've been having the darnedest time, and it's certainly no fault of yours I've come through so far in one piece. How's Nona?"

"She's okay," Omega assured him. "When I left her, the ship was within a hundred miles of Stadtland. She was madder'n a skinned wildcat because I wouldn't bring her here. And it's high time you learned to mind your manners, you young ingrate! How's your head?"

"All right," Mark said. "And I'm certainly relieved that for once you showed sense enough to keep Nona out of this. This is no place for a woman—even Nona. Gosh, now I miss that baggage. Nobody's really bawled me out in a month."

"Yeah," Omega agreed, eyeing Mark and rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "You do need taking down a peg. Too big for your boots."

Mark didn't like the look in Omega's momentarily borrowed sage's eyes. "Now, look here—" he began in alarm. The old man had gently vanished. "Come back here, you shyster. This is no time for—" His speech broke off in a short, indignant yelp as a large gray rat, appearing out of the wall, scampered uppleasantly across his face.

"Cut it out!" Mark roared and took a swipe at the skittering rodent. His knuckles banged first air, and then the wall. It was very painful. Mark cursed.

Mocking laughter echoed out of space.

Mark jeered: "Behave yourself. Orson Welles did that hollow mirth stuff a heck of a lot better, and anyhow—"

But Omega was having much too good a time to stop so soon. His next divertissement was to turn into several pairs of disconnected hands that floated menacingly about in front of Mark's face. In spite of himself, Mark shivered and then drew in a deep breath as the hands, like a flock of gulls suddenly assembled for concerted attack upon an unwary fish, dove for his naked and defenseless stomach.

"Quit it, you playboy idiot!" was all Mark had time for before the hands descended upon him, fingers curved and outspread, and began to tickle as hard and as fast as they could. It was an expert job and a skilled masseur could scarcely have been more personal. To Mark, it was sheer torture. He was helpless, doubled up, and screaming with agonized and involuntary laughter.

When the hands retreated, Mark collapsed, winded.

"Say uncle," a voice commanded.

"I'll be—darned—if I—will," Mark panted, thoroughly annoyed. "I'll—get you—for that."

"All right," said the voice. "Here you go. Oops-adaisy."

The hands swooped down, grasped Mark by his armpits and raised him swiftly to the ceiling.

"Put me down!" Mark demanded.

IN answer, the hands let him down with terrifying speed, arresting his plunge inches above the floor with a suddenness that did things to his stomach that hadn't been done to it since he had last ridden in an office-building elevator, eight thousand years ago. But the good old sensation was still there, and Mark howled in angry protest.

"Say uncle," the voice repeated.

Mark clamped his lips together; and the hands, this time in no mood for fooling, dragged him through the air in a series of

breathtaking loops and swirls that would have made a twentieth-century stunt pilot weak with admiration. It was remarkable what intricate maneuvers could be accomplished in such a limited space. And a man may be stubborn, but his sense of equilibrium, when properly outraged, will betray him at last.

"All right." Mark gasped weakly, wincing as the floor came up to bat him in the face for the twentieth time. "I surrender. And I love you very much, Uncle Omega—but for cat's sake, *put me down!*"

Mark came to a gentle rest on the floor, where he lay, eyes closed and gasping for breath, until his head and his eyes and the pit of his stomach began to function in something like unison again. He opened his eyes and was relieved to find Omega back in his old man's guise, sitting placidly in the corner.

Omega stirred. "That ought to teach you," he said smugly. "And now let's get down to brass tacks. What are you doing here? When I looked in on you the other day you were making speeches to a bunch of misguided insurgents."

"Why didn't you say hello?" Mark inquired.

"You were busy and I had to get back and tell Nona I'd found you. She was worried sick. I told her not to expect you for a while. I knew you'd want to finish this job even after you regained your memory. You've got a fine knack for sticking your nose into things which don't concern you at all."

Mark made a rude noise. "What do you mean, don't concern me? You fixed things so that this peculiar body-chemistry of mine is to be perpetuated. For which you have my gratitude, incidentally. A lifetime several thousands of years long would be monotonous without company of the right sort. But the very fact that you gave Nona my kind of a body-chemistry, makes me extremely interested in the sort of a world my future descendants will have. Therefore, I'm starting a campaign for betterment, right now."

"And how are you going about it?"

"I'm not so sure any more," Mark confessed, with unaccustomed hesitation.

"Then suppose you answer the question I asked," Omega suggested. "I could get the information direct from your mind, you know. Only I don't do that to people I like."

"You mean how I happen to be in prison?"

"Yeah. Were you jay-walking?"

"Something about as serious." Mark went on to explain his encounter with Erlayok.

"Nasty character," Omega said. "I looked him over several years ago. Unmitigated scoundrel—and a tyrant."

"A genius, though," said Mark.

Omega caused his seamed face to take on an expression of surprise. "Who said so?" he demanded. "Your own intelligence is better than his by a long shot. Even if you behave like a looney."

"How do you figure that out?" Mark inquired. "He was able to hypnotize me before I knew what was happening."

"Doesn't mean a thing."

"Why not?" asked Mark.

"LOOK at it this way," said Omega. "Back in your youth there was a powerful intellect known as Einstein. And as far as I know he had no hypnotic power at all. Whereas there were any number of mediocre intellects in the form of fakirs and magicians who had considerable talent in that field. Obviously then, hypnotic power has little bearing on the intelligence of the mind which uses it."

"Sounds reasonable," Mark conceded. "It never occurred to me that there wasn't a direct relationship between the two."

"There isn't," Omega said. "Hypnotic power is merely a special ability of certain brains. It bears about the same relationship to intelligence as other special abilities, such as adeptness with figures. If you'll remember, there were men in your time who could add long columns of numbers with lightning rapidity. What did they do for a living? Were they great statesmen, mathematicians or erudite scholars?"

Mark smiled as he recalled several such cases. "There was one who worked behind the counter of a grocery store," he remembered. "If you ask me it takes a high grade of intelligence to sell anything to a woman who doesn't know what she wants. That is, without going stark raving mad in the process. Were you ever in a grocery store, my old one?"

"Yeah. I was in a trolley car once, too," Omega confided. "That was a lot of fun. A woman, who for some reason was carting around about a hundred pounds of excess weight, was trying to find a nickel among a mass of gadgets jumbled inside her handbag. These jiggers, I understood, were mainly aids to beauty, and all had some specific purpose. Not being a human, I don't have a very well developed appreciation of human pulchritude, but in my opinion this particular lady was fooling herself.

"But as I started to say, there was a long line of people waiting to get on the trolley, while she fumbled. The motorman was looking at his watch and breaking out in a cold sweat. Several passengers were evidently late for work. She finally found the nickel, and was quite surprised to see it turn into a slimy worm in her hand. The conductor, who had meanwhile managed to become an overgrown rooster, pecked at it hungrily. The lady left the car with several blood-curdling screams, much to the surprise of the other passengers, who hadn't noticed anything unusual."

Mark listened patiently to the reminiscence, resigned to the fact that anybody as old as Omega certainly had a right to become garrulous about past adventures.

"About hypnotism," he said. "I'm afraid I got off the subject. Just what *is* hypnotism?"

"I think you did," Omega agreed. "Bad sign—indication of advancing age. Hypnosis may be said to be a condition in which the subject is in an exaggerated state of passive attention to some person or object. In that state he is very amenable to suggestion. He can be made to do all sorts of things. The hypnotist, also by suggestion, can make him imagine he is being subjected to any sort of environment. It might be a sultry July day, but if the hypnotist tells the subject that he has been deposited on an ice floe adjacent to the North Pole, he will shiver and turn blue from the cold."

"I know all that," said Mark. "I've experienced it from the viewpoint of the subject. But what causes it? How does the hypnotist get his subject into this condition?"

"Oh, so you want to be a hypnotist!"

"No," Mark denied. "I just got an idea, a little while ago. An idea of how I might make this little rebellion of ours pay the sort of dividends the rebels think it will."

"That's fine," Omega applauded. "Tell me about it."

"After you tell me what causes hypnotism."

"GETTING stubborn again, eh? Whenever you get an idea, it's such a momentous occasion that you want to enjoy it all by yourself. I've a notion to leave you to your own devices. Then where will you be?" Omega twisted the wrinkled old face into an expression of extreme malevolence. But Mark knew he didn't mean it, so he just grinned.

Omega finally relented. "All right, I'll tell you. The force which enables the hypnotist to subdue the will of the subject is a variety of thought wave. Thought, as you should know, is a wave which ranges among the shortest of the vibratory scale. Hypnotism is at the longer end of the thought range.

"You have an analogy in light waves. As you know, there are several distinct waves in the range which we call *light*. At the shorter end are the violet and ultra-violet. At the longer end are the red and infra-red, known as heat waves. In the thought range are also several distinct vibrations, with varying characteristics.

"At the lower end of the thought ranges is the one which I employ frequently. It enables the user to manipulate the forces of nature as he wishes. With it he controls

those energies which pervade all space. He can change energy into matter, or matter into energy, in any combination he wishes. One of the simplest manifestations of this is the lifting or moving of bodies of matter by causing this universal energy to do the work. You have heard of humans who had this power, though none of them actually knew what he was doing. It is called *telekinesis*. But of course no human who ever possessed the power had enough intelligence to use it for any but the simplest of exercises. Almost invariably they would set themselves up as having supernatural powers, and astound people with exhibitions of chair lifting and table shaking.

"Slightly longer thought waves can be projected. This is call *telepathy*. Further along the range of thought is the wide band which controls the movement of animal bodies. These waves are common to all forms of life, however unintelligent. They carry the motor and sensory messages to and from the brain, and may be either voluntary or involuntary. These require a medium, such as nerve tissue, for their passage.

"Toward the longer end of the range we have the waves which enable humans to reason logically. They possess pretty well developed ability in this division, compared to the lower animals. And longest of all the thought waves is that of hypnotism. It appears in humans occasionally, though seldom to any great degree.

"Most hypnotists among humans have found it necessary to have the subject concentrate on some bright or rhythmically moving object to subdue him. Here, the subject is using his own limited powers to hypnotize himself. Erlayok is an exception in that he needs only the subject to concentrate momentarily on his eyes. His own power does the rest. Everything clear?"

Mark thought for a moment. "Why do some have it and others not?"

"For the same reason that some people can hear lower notes than others. And for the same reason that bats can hear notes totally outside the range of human hearing. The sensory organ involved is tuned a bit sharper. It's the same with this hypnosis business. Erlayok was born with thought apparatus of slightly wider range in one direction. Use and practice have made it powerful.

"You, yourself, have the same property. But the fact that you don't know how to use it has caused it to remain undeveloped. The same goes for telekinsesis. If you knew how, you could develop the power of your brain to equal mine.

"You could create matter from energy! You could move mountains! But you don't know how to use consciously any but a small band of the thought range you possess. You can use only the third and fourth waves in the series. The motor and sensory waves which all animals use, and the reasoning band common to humans. You have good control of the latter, because of constant practice during the nights when other humans have to sleep."

MARK nodded gravely. "You mean that these mental powers are there to the same extent that the unused muscles of my feet are present. I've never learned to pick up objects with my toes, but the muscles and nerves are there just the same. Some people know how to use them, but most don't."

"Correct," Omega agreed. "Some people can wiggle their ears independently. Others can make ridges in their scalps. These muscles are present in all humans, but very few know how to control them. As far as that goes, only a few people ever make any great use of the third division of thought waves. As you are well aware, most people don't know how to think. Any effort along those lines gives them a headache. Maybe it's just as well, though. There'd be an awful high suicide rate if humans once began to realize what futile sort of beings they are."

"Phooey!" said Mark. "But you've told me what I want to know. There is a way to make this rebellion result in sufficient good to warrant the bloodshed."

"Getting back to that idea, eh?"

"You know, we humans are not quite the primitive savages you would imply. We construct mechanical aids for our limited senses. We make instruments which can detect ultra-violet and infra-red. And other machines which manufacture them. The same goes for the sounds which our ears can't detect."

"That was thousands of years ago," Omega reminded. "Humanity has fallen back a long way since then. Man has his hands full feeding himself, now."

"The people of the Moon are worse off than that," Mark countered. "They're dead! Except for one unfortunate survivor."

Omega nodded with unaccustomed gravity. "I get your point," he admitted. "You mean that while my race is dead, with the exception of one representative of high attainment, your race, even though at low ebb at present, has possibilities of becoming great. Greater than I. Consider me properly squelched."

"Check," Mark said. "It will be millions of years before the earth will produce an intelligence equal to yours. But the fact remains that the human form of life has a certain indomitable spirit which can overcome all its shortcomings, if given time. It lags at times, and seems to have been lost, but always forgets errors and sets itself a new goal."

"Admitted," said Omega. "That's why I've taken steps to see that the race does continue. But what's that got to do with your idea?"

"Nothing except that mankind's past efforts to supplement his senses mechanically have shown me that it should be equally possible to duplicate the waves of thought, especially those of hypnotism. Before I submitted to Doc Kelso's new anaesthetic, I used to spend most of my time fooling with radio and other wave equipment. I know a little something about it.

"NOW suppose I should design a machine which would project a beam of thought waves in the range of hypnotism. Suppose this beam extended in a straight line for several hundreds of miles, and transmitted the suggestion that danger was present in the vicinity. Anyone approaching the line of the beam would be suddenly stricken by a surge of man's strongest emotion, fear. And the closer a person came to the beam, the stronger would be the emotion. That person would have to turn back!"

"It could be done, I suppose," Omega admitted. "But what good would it do?"

"Well," said Mark, "suppose I placed the transmitter so that the beam extended along the border to the country controlled by the Mics. And another one along the northern border of England. And a few more along the coastline."

"Maybe you got something, son," Omega said. "It would prevent any fighting along all those beams. The Brish could not be invaded from any direction."

"Nor could the Brish invade," Mark added. "It would allow them to disband their armies safely. The men thus liberated would seek other forms of employment and thus shorten the working hours of everyone. There would be that many more producers, with no need for added production. The taxes would come down and money could be spent for useful purposes."

"Utopia!" said Omega. "But that would leave the country isolated. Nobody could get out."

"I'd leave gaps in the beam for shipping. They would be small and easily defended."

Omega was enthusiastic. "Splendid!" he exclaimed. "Half of mankind's troubles abolished in one fell swoop. What's holding you up? Get started!"

Mark spread his hands and smiled. "I need help," he confessed. "*Your* help."

"But what could I do for the colossal intellect that can bust out with an idea like that?"

"Don't be a worm. You know perfectly well I need to know the exact wave length and frequency of the hypnotic vibration. And I need instruments and tools. Unless you can create the desired projector—"

"I'm afraid not," Omega said, all seriousness now. "You see I have no flair for things mechanical. Without trying to run down your ability, mechanisms are primitive. For millennia I have been making the things I need directly from the raw energies which are available everywhere. Or converting those energies to any purpose I might have. But for me to work with a machine such as you propose would be as hard as for you to make fire with a pointed stick. But I can make tools and equipment for you to experiment with. I used to spend a lot of time in the old General Electric and Westinghouse laboratories, and I know what they look like."

"Fair enough," said Mark. "I'll need a lot of stuff. And there isn't much time. Tomorrow the games start. I'm going to fight in them, you know. Duke Jon's idea."

"What do you want to bother with that for? You can walk out of here right now, and put all your time on this business until you get it finished."

"Won't do," Mark snapped. "If I go back to rebel headquarters, Murf and the rest of them will want to start the rebellion right away. And if I disappear, the whole thing will fall through. There would be no use protecting the country with my idea, if I leave the nobles in power. They'd just put the armies on boats and start wars of conquest.

"The only thing I can do is show up each day at the games, and work here in the prison the rest of the time. As long as my friends, the rebels, know that I'm alive, they'll wait for me."

CHAPTER XIV

THE IDES OF MARK

IT WAS fortunate that the prison had been emptied on the night previous. As a result Mark and Omega had plenty of room to work in. Omega, his memory of the instruments and machines he had seen as faultless as if he had been working from blueprints, constructed devices in use during Mark's earlier life, almost as quickly as Mark could describe them.

Before long the cell block looked more like an electrical laboratory than part of a prison. The two guards remained timidly in the outer room, playing a desultory game of cards and staring moodily at the door to the prison.

When Mark had assembled all the things he needed to begin work, he suddenly snapped his fingers and made an exclamation of dismay. "Power!" he exclaimed. "I have batteries enough to conduct experiments, but once I manage to project the proper wave length I'm going to need a lot more than batteries can give. Or, in fact, more than I can get from any compact means I'm familiar with."

"Don't worry about power until you manage to design a transmitter for the hypnotic wave," Omega advised. "Once you have a machine for making that wave you will have all the power you can use."

"Just how do you figure that?"

"I already told you that hypnosis is a wave only slightly separated in frequency from the one which controls the energies of space. They're both waves of the same band—thought. Consider the analogy of sound waves. If you design a machine to produce the sound known as 'G,' you ought to be able to adjust the same device to produce 'A'."

Mark's eyes popped. "You mean it lies within the mechanical genius of man to produce a machine which could create matter from energy?"

"Why not? I remember one race of reasoning animals, no more intelligent than humans, who managed to supply all their power that way. The inventor was one who was gifted with the ability to use, to a small extent, the telekinetic power of his own brain. He determined the wave-length and duplicated it by machinery.

"The outfit wasn't nearly as versatile as a brain, but it was compact and easily constructed. Used universally, it supplied all the power needs of his people. Unfortunately the race was snuffed out thousands of years ago by an unexpected *nova*. Their planet was completely destroyed. And there were no survivors,

because they were all on it. They hadn't managed as yet to utilize telekinesis for space travel."

"Too bad," said Mark. "But if they did it, humans can do it."

"Sure. But don't get cocky. It would be a lot better to aspire to the ability to do those things mentally. Mechanical perfection only leads to degeneration. Once a machine will do a thing for you, you no longer try to prove your own ability along the same lines. Did you ever see the fellow who used to pound on an adding machine? Do you think he would have made any attempt to improve his own ability to add or multiply? Of course not. The machine could beat him every time. So it would be silly.

"But for our present purpose all that will be needed, once you figure how to produce a wave as short as thought, is to adjust the machine to transmute spacial energy into the required amount of electrical energy. It should be simple."

Mark screwed up his face as he tried to think of a certain little point which had popped into his head as Omega talked—and had popped right out again.

He gave it up and frowned at the darkness of the corridor. The sun, he noticed, had ceased to shine through the window. It had changed its position as the day wore on. He mentioned that he would need light to work by. Omega, with appropriate mystic wavings of the hands, changed the chemical structure of the surface materials of the walls and ceiling so that they emitted a soft glow, making the corridor as light as Mark could wish.

"Cold light," Omega explained, airily. "The same principle as the light contained in the end of a firefly. Your scientists were working on it, but they never quite got it."

MARK worked feverishly the whole afternoon. He had all the equipment he could possibly use and he had a dozen ideas as to how he might manufacture the desired wave. Each of these ideas had to be tried, and the task involved a terrific amount of labor.

Coils, inductances, vacuum tubes, and a myriad of other devices had to be set up and wired for each experiment. Omega had told him the exact properties of the waves and how it should be impressed to deliver a constant message of danger when picked up by a human mind.

Aside from the mere postulate, Omega wasn't a great deal of help. He offered a host of suggestions, most of which Mark vetoed impatiently.

Sometimes he would look at the apparatus Mark was hooking up, and shake his head, unable to follow the intricacies presented by the vibratory changes in progress in the various devices. Here was an endeavor in which Mark's intellect outshone that of the almost omnipotent Omega. The devising of instruments to aid his weak body and limited senses was man's forte, while Omega needed no such aptitude. His was the direct method of twisting the forces of nature with his mind, without the circumlocution of cumbersome mechanical devices.

Finally Omega, deciding that he was more hindrance than help, went into the guard room and amused himself by annoying the guards. Presently two new men appeared, one of them a sergeant, to replace the missing two. Omega went back to Mark.

"You can keep them occupied as you did the others, can't you?" Mark said.

"Sure, but their coming made me think of something. You said you were going to participate in the games. Suppose after you get through entertaining the crowd tomorrow, the authorities decide to keep you in some other prison? There is one closer to the arena than this one. And I can't spend all my time watching over you. I have several things which require attention, off and on."

"What do you suggest?"

Omega walked his decrepit body over to the spot where Mark was bending over an unfinished hook-up. Mark looked up and felt the impact of the ancient one's eyes. For an instant his senses reeled, and then he felt normal again.

"What did you do?" he asked, startled.

Omega grinned, toothlessly. "It just occurred to me that if you possessed about ten times the hypnotic power of Erlayok you could suggest to your captors, without them even suspecting it, that it would be safer to return you to this empty prison where four guards could take turns watching you."

"No doubt," Mark admitted. "But I don't get it. I haven't any hypnotic power at all."

"I told you that all humans have the brain structure necessary to generate the waves. But only a very few ever learn how to use them. The portions of the brain which could be so used remain undeveloped in the others. The same applies to telekinesis and telepathy. Why even your own scientists recognized the fact that only about two-fifths of the human brain was ever used. What the other three-fifths was for they they didn't know.

"And if you had learned to exercise, early in life, that portion which emits hypnotic waves, it would be pretty well developed by now. About ten times as well developed as the same portion of Erloyak's brain. So I just developed it for you!"

MARK looked unconvinced. "But . . . I don't feel any different." He stopped and puckered his brows in concentration. "You forgot something," he finally said. "I still don't know how to use it, even if you did alter the structure of that portion of my brain. It's like a big muscle without any nerves to operate it."

Omega crouched down until his eyes were on a level with Mark's. Suddenly Mark felt an almost irresistible desire to go to sleep. But knowing that sleep was one thing he didn't have any need for, he automatically fought against it. And as he fought, he tried to create a similar suggestion in the mind of Omega. A futile gesture, of course, for the mighty mind of Omega could not be downed. But the effort gave Mark his first practice in the use of his new faculty. He was like a fledgling trying its wings; a boy boxing with his father and learning to coördinate hand and eye.

"Now," Omega finally said, "suppose you command the two new guards to come in here."

Mark considered the problem. It was very likely that the guards he had chased out of the corridor would try to prevent the new ones from coming back here. They wouldn't want the replacements to know that their prisoner had the jail under his control, even if they weren't the sort to try to spare these new men from an experience such as they had undergone. The old guards wouldn't use force to prevent the new ones from coming back. They would just discourage the idea. Therefore the proper procedure would be to . . .

WEARILY, the guard at the left of the table removed a cud of tobacco from his mouth and heaved it through the open doorway as the new men entered. His companion was stubbornly retrieving two cards which had tucked themselves up his sleeve while he was shuffling the recalcitrant deck. He looked up and smiled in relief at the sight of the replacements. Maybe he would get a little peace now.

Carefully he laid the deck on the table and watched it for a moment. Surprisingly it seemed inclined to accept his authority and remain there.

"Sit down, boys. I'll deal you a hand," he invited. "I'm Edmun and this is Spud."

Spud ejected a flake of tobacco from his mouth and looked triumphant when it plastered itself against the wall. He smiled his welcome.

The newcomers seemed disinclined to join in the game. They announced a desire to look over the prison. It was one they had never been in.

"It's like all the rest of them," Edmun said. "Come on. We need you in the game."

"When I go into a new place," said one of the newcomers, "I like to let the lads in the cells know who I am. So I won't get any nonsense off them later on."

His companion nodded.

"There's only one in there," said Spud. "He won't give any trouble. We don't even have to feed him."

"Don't have to feed him?"

"No. The Duke said to starve him so he'd be more ferocious in the arena tomorrow."

"A prisoner of the Duke's, eh? I'm going to see that boy. The Duke don't often put anybody in jail."

"He's nothing much to look at," Edmun said. "Let's start the game."

The two new guards looked at each other. One spoke the thought which coursed through both their minds: "There's something funny here," he muttered.

"We're going in," the other announced.

"You're wasting your time," said Spud. "Let's play."

The two exchanged glances and came to an unspoken agreement.

"We got lots of time," said one, opening the inner door. The other followed and closed the door. They looked in amazement at Mark and Omega standing among the strange equipment on the corridor floor, and gazed incredulously at the illuminated walls and ceiling.

"Clever," Omega applauded. "Putting that suspicion in their minds did the trick. That's the sort of thing you might have to use tomorrow."

Mark looked speculatively at the guards, who were too astounded to do more than gape. "I'm not so sure that they wouldn't have come back here anyway," he said.

"Try another experiment," Omega suggested. "Something you know very well they won't do. You don't have to be subtle, you know. After all, nobody would believe a guard who accused his prisoner of hypnotizing him. Mow 'em down."

BY this time one of the new men got a grip on himself. He drew his sword and stepped forward. He was going to find out very quickly why these prisoners weren't in their cells, and put them where they belonged. And quick.

His eyes bored angrily into Mark's. For some reason his stare didn't seem to have its usual effect. Mark didn't seem to be afraid at all. His eyes were the friendliest the guard had even seen. There couldn't be any harm in a man like that. He stopped, undecided. And then he realized what the whole unusual situation meant.

Dimly he remembered the fellows in the outer room saying something about this fellow participating in the games tomorrow. He had thought that the man was to be one of the victims of the orgy, but he knew now that he had been wrong. This lad was designing some sort of torture machine with which to entertain the crowd in the arena. And the old man was helping him. They were both public-spirited men, anxious to please the throngs who were to witness the holiday games.

He squinted at one of the nearer of the machines. He couldn't make much of it, though the thought occurred to him that if a man was forced to step in it he would certainly get his feet all cut up on those glass tubes and sharp wire ends. A thing like that would be better if it had a knife concealed among those coils.

"Here," he said. "Maybe you can use this."

The sword, with which he had originally intended to force the prisoners back into their cells, he extended to Mark, smiling in his desire to be friendly and helpful.

Mark handed it back. "No," he said, "I don't think I can use it." He picked up the weapons of Edmun and Spud, which were as rigid as they ever been, and offered these also. "You can return these to the other guards. Now suppose you men go back to the guard room and leave me alone. I want to get this finished before the week is over."

The guards nodded quite happily and went away. They closed the inner door tightly, lest Mark be disturbed by the sound of the card game. They looked sheepishly at the other two guards.

"Why didn't you tell us he was busy and didn't want to be disturbed? Let's start that game."

Edmun and Spud stared at each other uncomprehendingly, as they returned their

swords to their belts. They decided not to ask about what had happened inside. Edmun resolutely picked up the deck and dealt four hands, his confidence in his ability to control the cards vastly restored. None of them misbehaved. Spud brightened up, and cut himself a chew of tobacco. For a minute he masticated it furiously and then spat hopefully into a corner. The result was wholly gratifying. He beamed at Edmun and the game went on.

Mark watched the door close and looked at Omega. "If they send soldiers for me tomorrow, it would look funny if those men were out of uniform. Better to let them have their swords."

Omega nodded. "I guess you're satisfied now."

"Perfectly. Handing over their weapons was one thing there was no chance of their doing accidentally. Let's get back to work."

"Go to it," Omega said. "I'm no help to you, so I'll leave you to figure it out for yourself. There are some other things that need my attention. See you later."

The old man's body faded abruptly and was gone. Mark looked at the maze of apparatus spread before him and felt a sudden loneliness. Omega's return had filled him with a new enthusiasm, but with his going it seemed to have gone also. He wished he had never fallen off that cursed boat. It had embroiled him in a set of circumstances which was keeping him from the one place in the world that he wanted to be . . . At Nona's side.

Yet he knew that he couldn't stop now. He had to finish the job. There would be an eternity of time to enjoy Nona's company, when this work was done. And millions of people would be the happier for his labor. The thought seemed to give him a new vigor. With flying fingers he went back to the intricate wiring.

Heedless of time, he continued to work, while the sun faded in the west and the night began its long, quiet reign. Several times he ripped his wiring apart in exasperation. Once he produced a vibration which seemed to shake the whole building. Cracks appeared in the walls and the cell doors shook and rattled. With a quick glance at his meters he snapped off the current.

The vibration was a very short one, even shorter than the cosmic rays. But it was still far too long to approximate the waves of thought. These seemed to defy his efforts. With a sigh he tried a new hookup. There was an answer to the problem, and he was determined to find it.

CHAPTER XV

THE GALA OF FOOLS

MORNING came, though Mark failed to notice it until he heard the sound of the gongs announcing the end of curfew. Shortly after the sound had throbbed into silence, Spud appeared, carrying a set of manacles and a leg chain attached to a heavy iron ball.

He stopped short at the sight of the apparatus-littered corridor. The lighted walls he didn't notice, for the sun was streaming in the window.

Mark looked up, disturbed by the rattling of the chains. "Quiet!" he snapped.

Spud looked apologetic. "They'll be coming for you pretty soon," he said. "The people who take part in the games are kept under the stands during the day."

"I really shouldn't spare the time, but I suppose—"

Mark frowned as he held out his hands. Although he had been consistently failing to solve the problem, he had a notion that he might get the answer very soon. Just before the ringing of curfew's end, he had experienced a return of the nebulous idea which had popped into his head while Omega had been talking.

But before he could pin it down, curfew had rung and Spud's interruption did the rest.

Somehow he knew that if he could follow the thought through, he would have his answer. It had something to do with the fact that the same machine would produce both the hypnosis wave and the telekinesis wave which would furnish the power for its transmission. The clue lay

in the short difference in wave length between the two.

Spud snapped the manacles on his wrists and clamped on an ankle iron. Then he lifted the iron ball and offered it to Mark. Mark took it gravely, and they went into the guard room. Edmun was dozing in a chair; the others weren't in sight. Spud pulled a chair from beneath the table and gave it to Mark. Then he made himself comfortable.

"Tell me about these games," Mark requested, more to pass the time than anything. When the soldiers arrived to escort him to the arena, they would have no reason for going back into the prison for their man. And from Spud's viewpoint, it would be much better for no one to know that Mark had pretty much the run of the prison. And it was equally desirable, for Mark, that no outsider learn of any unusual doings here.

Spud's eyes lit up at the thought of the games. Suddenly voluble, he recounted the things he had seen during the celebrations of previous harvest festivals. As he talked, Mark felt a chill taking form inside him, gripping frostily at the pit of a long disused stomach. Spud wasn't describing a series of games at all.

The Duke had said that he thought Mark would have an even chance of surviving a week of these events, and Mark had visualized some sort of primitive rough and tumble where men's limbs were in danger. Some form of game in which sides would be formed and men would pit their strength and durability against one another. Hazardous and brutal, but not necessarily fatal.

But Spud was gleefully and with elaborate detail describing a simple routine for slaughter. He told of unarmed men pitted in mortal combat against equal numbers of armed and armored soldiers; of fights between prisoners armed with daggers; of animals from lands far to the south stalking men and women trapped within the arena.

Mark shuddered. And these barbarians were the people he was trying to help, For a long minute he contemplated giving up the whole idea of the rebellion. If this was the sort of thing that they liked, they weren't worth lifting a hand for.

BUT then he remembered a certain news picture he had seen when an apparently high state of civilization had flourished on the earth. It had dealt with a public hanging which had taken place in his own country. The picture had shown a morbid throng standing on tiptoe, that no gruesome detail would be missed. A mother was holding aloft a small girl.

And only a short step further back in the history of his people there had existed barbarities of almost the same sort as the ones that Spud was so gleefully describing. Accused witches had been burned at the stake. Small boys had been put to death in this very land for the heinous offense of throwing stones at the constabulary. Torture was an established institution in the good Christian days of Richard, the Lion-Hearted—and even later. Scientists of a few hundred years prior to Mark's birth had been stoned and burned, for the crime of consorting with Satan.

Yet the close descendants of the very people who had fostered all this, were the humane and kindly, the enlightened peoples of the twentieth century. Had human character changed so abruptly in the course of a few hundred years? Hardly.

If conditions were changed so that the Brish could consider themselves free human beings, the more humane aspects of their natures would come out. He hoped.

Mark knew that he still felt surges of primitive savagery within him. Such instincts, of course, only came to the fore during the heat of battle, but they were there, nevertheless. And he was the product of a gentler era. It was natural that during the present age of misery and suppression, the tougher elements of human nature should predominate. But the very fact that the gentle Jon, Duke of Scarbor, was a man of some popularity, proved that the better instincts still survived.

Having settled this point in his mind,

Mark became even more determined to go on with his plans.

"Get those two new guardsmen in here," he commanded. Spud, interrupted in his glowing story of the games, stared, then jumped to obey. He returned in a minute with the others, who were red-eyed and angry at being disturbed.

"Waken Edmun," Mark directed. "And all four of you sit side by side on that bench."

Wonderingly, the guards obeyed. Mark faced them with a stare. In a few moments their eyes glazed, the lids drooped wearily.

"On the floor at your feet," he said, "you see pieces of sandstone. The blades of your daggers could use a little sharpening."

All four drew their weapons and glanced stupidly at the gleaming blades. Then, as one man, they reached down as if for the piece of sandstone. There followed a brilliant performance of the motions used to sharpen knife-blades. Mark was satisfied that the men were fully under his control.

"That's enough," he said. "Replace your knives and drop the sandstone. Now, listen carefully. In the prison corridor are several machines which are extremely dangerous to touch. Don't for any reason go near them. If any new prisoners are brought in, take them to the cell block on the top floor. Sudden death awaits the man who molests those machines!"

Nodding his satisfaction, Mark woke the guards. That ought to do the trick.

IT WAS perhaps a half-hour later when a peremptory hammering sounded on the outer door. Spud answered it, and in strode a soldier who had been with Jon when Mark had been snatched from Erlayok's torture chamber, accompanied by another, who had helped Erlayok in the same chamber. A sudden suspicion flashed in Mark's mind. He remembered the cat-ate-the-canary expression that he had last seen on Erlayok's face. A possible explanation seemed to suggest itself in the presence of this man.

"Why are you here?" he demanded.

Erlayok's man grinned maliciously. "To see that you get what's coming to you," he informed. "Erlayok runs the show, you know. And he'd be disappointed if his star performer didn't show up. He doesn't trust the likes of this lad here."

Jon's man paid no attention. Mark guessed that this wasn't the first insult he had swallowed on the way over. But he had evidently been given strict orders from the Duke to stay out of any battles which might interfere with his job.

"And you're here," Mark guessed, "to see that I do my performing in the arena only, and not to an audience of Erlayok's men?"

"Exactly," the man said, smiling. "I'm Chumly. The Duke's orders were to see that you are protected. But of course you'll be on your own when you enter the arena. Shall we start?"

Erlayok's man made an insolent gesture and mimicked, "Shall we start?" Then he roared with laughter. Mark reflected sadly that Erlayok's men all seemed to own a lamentable sense of humor. He turned to Chumly. "A real wit, your friend."

"On the way over I decided he resembled some obnoxious little dog, yapping at his betters," Chumly replied. "But on the other hand, a dog has some admirable characteristics, even those little yappers. On second thought I should say he reminds me of some dirty, wallowing pig. I've noticed something of the odor, too. He needs a bath."

With a roar of rage Erlayok's man whipped out his sword and started for Chumly. Mark stopped him with a look. The weapon clattered to the flagstones of the courtyard, and a glassiness replaced the anger in the man's eyes.

"You're a hybrid," Mark stated. "The spawn of a dog and a sow."

The man promptly dropped to all fours and waddled across the court behind them, yapping occasionally in a dejected sort of way.

Chumly looked back at him and chuckled. "That's a trick worth knowing," he said. "His Highness told me you were an unusual man, but I didn't expect any-

thing like this. You stand a good chance of coming out of that arena alive." He said the last in a voice which implied that such things were practically unheard of.

Mark scarcely heard him. So Jon had said that he was an unusual man. Mark tried to think why. His action in stopping the runaways could have been done as well by a thousand other men. It might have been that business of bending the cell bars, but Mark didn't think so. Then he remembered the Duke's dramatic entrance in to the torture chamber. Had the Duke seen his flesh emerge unblemished from the branding iron? But he had made no mention of it. And certainly his surprise would have been equal to that of Erlayok and his men. He would surely have questioned Mark once they were out of the place. Unless he already knew . . .

"When you rescued me yesterday, did you break right in, or were you outside that room for a while before the Duke entered?"

"We were there for a few minutes," Chumly answered. "The Duke stood outside the door and looked in. The rest of us couldn't see anything, but I could hear the Earl talking. The Duke broke in when they were going to burn out one of your eyes." Chumly's admiration for his companion showed in his face. "You sure held out on them, didn't you?"

That answered the question in Mark's mind. The Duke *did* know. He became more convinced when he considered the fact that only two guards were being used to escort him to the arena. Erlayok had sent his man merely to check up on Jon, to be sure that he didn't let Mark escape. But Erlayok probably thought that Jon would dispatch several soldiers for the errand. And the fact that only one of the Duke's men was sent to guard him, meant that the Duke might want to give Mark an opportunity to escape. Or it might also mean that Jon knew that Mark had no intention of escaping. His attempt to puzzle out the possibilities of the situation was interrupted by a commotion to the rear.

THE antics of Erlayok's man were attracting due attention. He was doing his very best to carry out Mark's command by behaving in the probable style of the hybrid he firmly believed he was. He barked and then grunted, alternately.

Upon their arrival, Mark broke the spell, but not until several of the soldiers present had seen him bury his face into a pile of garbage, barking happily as he did so. Chumly removed Mark's chains, and joined the other soldiers.

The arena was like a huge ball-park. The stands would easily hold the population of a fair-sized city. The prisoners were herded into spaces beneath them. Dozens of soldiers were guarding the doorway which led to the street, but only one was stationed at the barred portal entering the arena pit.

Mark's nose was assailed by a multitude of odors, all offensive. The predominant one was of close-packed humanity, and that was the least pleasant of all. Mingled with it was a variety of others originating from other such enclosures as the one he was in. These were animal odors, and among them he detected the strong fragrance of the lion. This was probably one of Spud's "animals from lands far to the south."

From his position near the barred door to the arena he could see that the stands were rapidly filling up. Evidently the entertainment was to last for the better part of the day, for he noticed that many of the spectators were carrying packages of food. Directly opposite the prisoners' pen was a series of ornate boxes, equipped with plush seats, and attended by uniformed lackeys. Obviously these were reserved for the nobles and their families. Some of them were already occupied by gaudily dressed men and jewel bedecked women.

THERE was a sudden murmur in the stands when one of the boxes, a prominently situated one, was almost filled by the gross bulk of Erlayok. Behind him came two young women, richly appareled, who seated themselves at his side. Hand-

some and assured, they were quite apparently members of mankind's oldest and most enduring profession.

Erlayok looked about him. He frowned as he noted that the most elaborate of all the boxes was still empty. This one was no doubt the one reserved for Jon. And the Earl was probably piqued that he should have to wait for the appearance of one whom he considered a useless puppet.

Mark grinned, and hoped that Jon would keep him waiting for an hour. He was disappointed, though, for scarcely had Erlayok made himself comfortable when the Duke appeared, alone. The murmur which arose as the crowd saw him, deepened Erlayok's frown. Jon was obviously the more popular man.

The first event was one which was calculated to start the day off with a bang. A stentorian-voiced announcer described it to the avid spectators. Four condemned men were to be forced into the pit, each armed with a dagger. A lion would then be loosed. The cheers which greeted the announcement told Mark that this was evidently the sort of spectacle the people wanted. He experienced a momentary return of the revulsion he had felt before.

The feeling left when he noticed the expression of distaste on Jon's face. The Duke sat alone, and this further cheered Mark. It indicated that although Jon was obliged to attend this affair, due to his position, his family didn't care to.

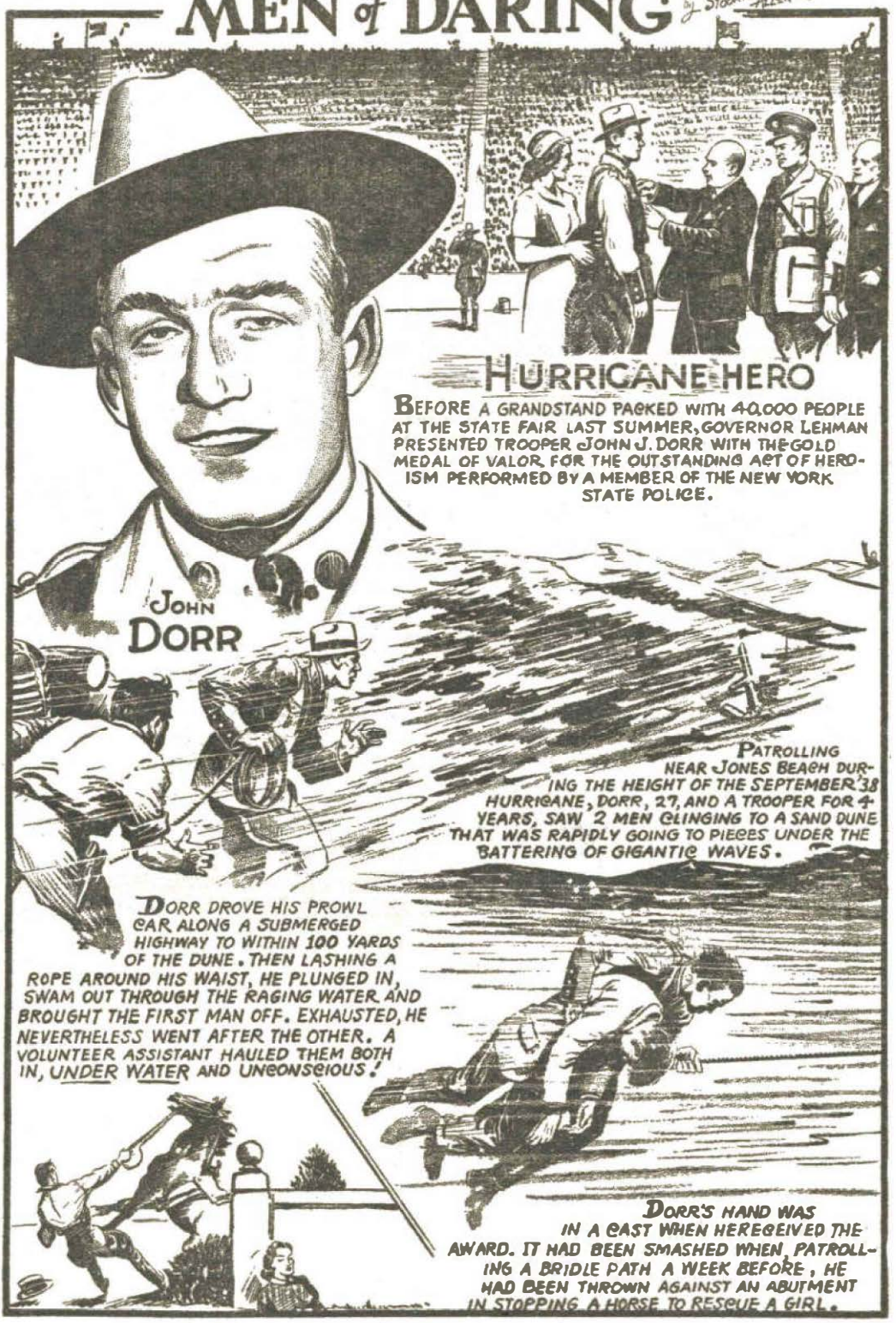
He was suddenly jolted by a rough shove from behind. Wheeling, he saw the face of the man he had humbled in the street. He was leering in a most horrible manner.

"It's your turn now," he grated, handing Mark a short dagger and brandishing a borrowed sword to protect himself. "Let's see you go out there and stick that in the lion." He burst into gales of laughter at the thought of anybody managing to do any harm to a lion with such a puny weapon. Mark took a deep breath and went. . . .

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

MEN of DARING

by Stookie Allen



A True Story in Pictures Every Week

The Dust on the Trail

Mud Camp was asleep and forgotten—until a murmur of danger began to run through its long abandoned mines, and the Stranger came riding to a rendezvous with a burro's ghost

By ARTHUR LAWSON

Author of "Music for Muchacho," "Epitaph in Red," etc.

Short Novelet

I

THE Stranger rode into Mud Camp looking for a man. He did not know his name, nor where he could be found. He knew nothing at all about him except the rumor that had come up the owlhoot trail telling of trouble—trouble the law had been unable to reach. Herds had been stampeded over cliffs and ranches burned; and Charlie Starr had been bucked off his horse and had died of a broken back.

There was a last glow of sunset in the sky when the stranger trotted onto the rutted street and put up his horse at the livery, as was his custom. Then he walked over to the barber shop for a bath and a shave. Cleaned up, he dropped in at Aunt Nancy's Café to try her famous square meal and afterward he wandered on to the biggest saloon on the main stem. The Gold Brick was the name of the place. It was the only saloon operating in town. And, except for the bartender and the Stranger, it was empty.

"Prosperous looking dive," the Stranger said mildly, lifting one booted foot to the rail, leaning on the mahogany with his right elbow. "Hope you won't take offense if I sorta offer to buy a drink for the house."

The bartender grinned. "Stranger, you can buy all the drinks you want for the house, and welcome to it. But you won't go broke in here doing it."

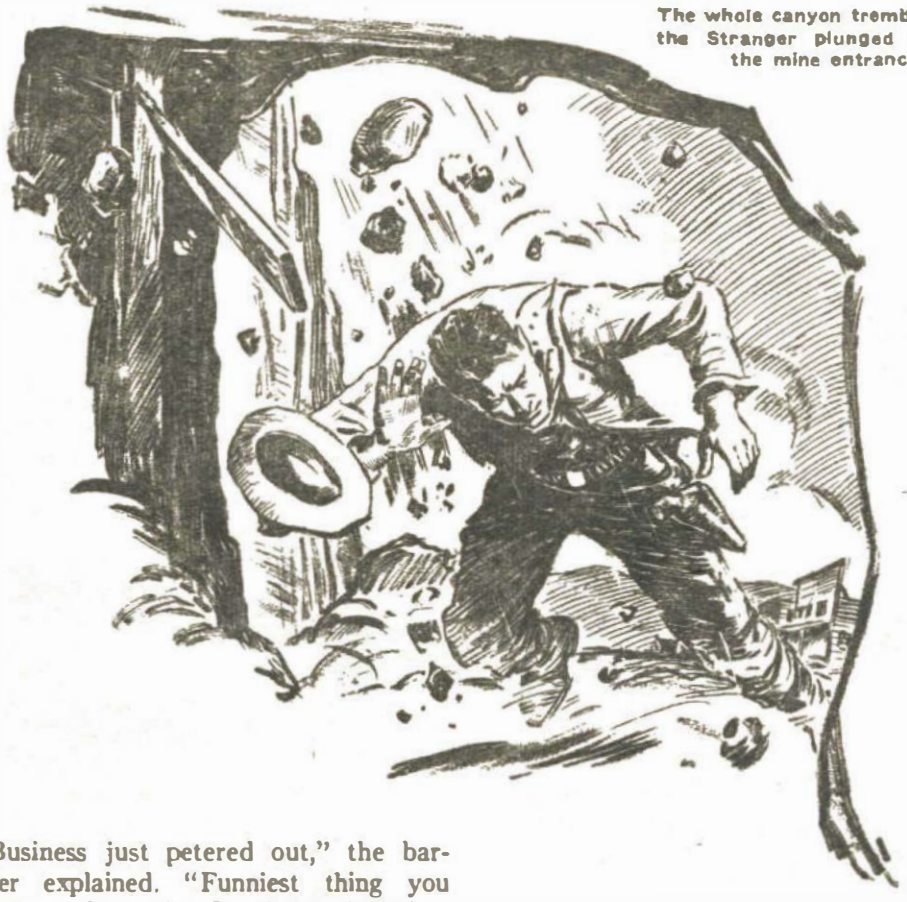
"If I stand in just the right place," the Stranger said, "it looks like there were three of me reflected in that mirror. You put that up just to kid yourself into thinking you had three times as much business, or to worry the cash customers into believing they are triplets?"

"When I put that up," the bartender told him, "I didn't have to kid myself about anything except that good times would last forever. Stranger, when I nailed that mirror to the wall this place was so packed with hombres trying to spend their money there wasn't no room for them to bend their elbows in." He suddenly looked very gloomy. "Stranger, name yore drink and stop reminding me of them days."

"Just trot out your favorite brand, a new bottle, and you and me'll see what we can do to it."

The Stranger let the barkeeper talk over his drink. He listened, kept the talk going, but he learned nothing new. There had been big money in Mud Camp before the rich vein of the Dead Man's Mine ran out. There had been good money when Mud Camp turned into a cattle town. But the place was dead now, deader than a good Indian, and of the rumors that had brought the Stranger to town the bartender made no mention.

That was odd. Generally, if the livery boy did not give the Stranger the town's whole history, the barber would. If the barber was tight-mouthed, the waitress in the local eatery would talk her head off. If she chanced to be shy, the barkeeper would have all the news and be ready to spill it. But in Mud Camp nobody knew anything, and nobody said anything.



The whole canyon trembled, and the Stranger plunged through the mine entrance

"Business just petered out," the barkeeper explained. "Funniest thing you ever seen. Like the Dead Man's Mine. Richest vein in the world—just vanished. Like the cattle business. We still got it, but it ain't no good. Nothing's no good in this town no more, Stranger."

Gold veins peter out and grass is eaten and good ranges become bad. Overgrazing, drought or grasshoppers will kill a range and turn a prosperous village into a ghost town. But all that takes time, and the grass that bordered the trail to town had been lush and green when the Stranger rode along that afternoon.

"Guess nobody eats meat any more," the Stranger observed.

The bartender looked relieved. "That's a way of looking at it. Have a drink on me, mister. Fill 'er up to the brim."

"Thanks!" The Stranger poured a whisky, raised it to his lips. "On the way in today, riding down Black Canyon, I noticed a cellar hole. Looked like a mighty nice house had burned down there recently."

The bartender blinked swiftly. "Funny thing—girl lives out there, nice kid, too. Knocked over a lamp one night and the place burned down. Went to sleep with the lamp burning. Had a nightmare. Dreamt she heard voices. And when she woke up the place was in flames. Must of kicked it, or something, thrashing about when she was dreaming about those voices."

The Stranger shook his head. "Tough luck," he said, "especially for a girl."

"Mighty tough," the bartender agreed. "We all felt mighty sorry for her, mister, mighty sorry."

THE Stranger went away from there. He crossed the street to the Quartz House, decrepit now, the wide veranda

sagging. The boy dozing over the desk looked up dreamily, swung the register around and pointed with his finger where the Stranger should sign.

"Two bucks," he said, "with clean sheets."

The Stranger wrote carefully: *Horace T. Wainwright, Jr.,* stuck the pen back into the bowl of shot.

"Take any room," the boy said. "They're all empty."

"They all got clean sheets in them?" the Stranger asked.

"No, they ain't!"

The boy stood up. "I'll get you some. We don't have no chambermaids no more. Guess I'll have to make up yore bed."

He led the Stranger upstairs, took some musty-looking linen from a closet, turned into the nearest room. It was on the street, giving a good view of the Gold Brick. The kid struggled with his sheets.

"Funny sort of town," the Stranger said. "Kinda like a ghost town."

The kid glanced up, frightened. "It ain't funny at all," he said definitely.

"Just exactly like a ghost town," the Stranger went on. "Full of bones, even. Coming in by way of Black Canyon, four five miles up I passed a place where the river was running over a whole shoal of bones. Never seen so many in my life. Under a bluff it was."

The kid's eyes were white. "Mister"—He got it off fast as if he had rehearsed it—"come to think of it, that was a funny thing. Only natural, though. Had a thunderstorm and the whole SM herd stampeded right off that bluff. Scared, they was. Steve says somebody chased 'em. But everybody knows it was the lightnin'."

"Hmm," the Stranger mused. "Cows do get worried when the thunder starts rolling."

"That's what I say," the kid said eagerly. " 'Course it was the lightnin'!"

The Stranger handed the boy three dollars, two for the room, one for himself.

"Now don't go spending that wildly," he said.

"No, sir!" The kid grinned. "Thanks, mister. And if you want anything, just set up a holler. If I don't come right off, holler louder. Sometimes I don't hear so good."

He went away, his short steps ringing down the corridor; there was silence as he slid down the bannister, a *clump* when he hit the bottom. The Stranger closed his door, took off his boots, rolled up a blanket and stuck it under the top sheet. Then he blew out the lamp, made the bed creak, dropped his boots on the floor, and tiptoed over to the window.

He settled down there, but he did not have long to wait. The hotel boy, his hand closed over a silver dollar, appeared outside, looked up and down the street, then scurried across the road to the Gold Brick. Almost immediately he hurried back, stopping for only a second in the lobby—long enough, the Stranger reasoned, to read the name he had signed on the register. Then the kid ran across the street again into the Gold Brick.

The Stranger waited five minutes for the kid to re-appear. When he did not show up the Stranger went to his door, hollered down the semi-dark hallway.

"Hey—kid—hey!"

The sound echoed dismally, died down. The Stranger called again. This time the kid came up at a run, his eyes frankly frightened.

"Yes, sir, mister. What can I do for you?"

The Stranger handed him a couple of dollars. "I can't sleep," he said. "Run over to the Gold Brick and get me a bottle of Red Eagle. Guess that should put me to sleep."

"Guess it will, mister."

After the kid had brought the bottle and gone again, the Stranger sat down at the window where all the town could see him and pretended to drink. He sat there long enough to make his act look convincing. Then he clumped across the room and stretched out on the bed. After a while he got up very quietly, sprinkled a little whisky around the room to raise a smell, and finally curled up in the corner behind the door and went to sleep.

II

THE slight sound of the door opening wakened him. The only light in the room came from a lantern hanging before the Gold Brick outside. It dimly outlined two figures, one short, the other tall, moving silently toward the bed. It glinted on two shotguns.

"Just stop right there," the Stranger said softly, "and don't turn around. I've been waiting for you."

The two figures stopped. The Stranger reached out with his toe, kicked the door closed. As it banged, the two intruders jumped uneasily. The Stranger laughed.

"Kinda uncomfortable having the tables turned, huh?"

"Damn you," the taller one said bitterly, still facing the bed. "I should of known this was a trap."

"A gent as smart as you should have known," the Stranger agreed. "Me, now, to tell the truth, I was kinda surprised it worked. Up where I come from it wouldn't have worked on a kid only hock high to a stunted cow."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" the man snapped. "You trapped us. We bit. What skunk's trick you got up your sleeve now?"

"None!" The Stranger spoke mildly. "Supposing you two just lay yore shotguns down on the bed. Supposing you take off your belt guns, too. That's the idea." The weapons dropped on the sheet. The two prowlers stood irresolutely. "Now go over and stand by the window where I can see you better."

"And get plugged in the back," the tall man said.

"You go over there," the Stranger said, "and hurry up, or you'll get plugged anyway."

The smaller one followed orders quickly. The big one started to follow, then abruptly swung on his heels and dove for the Stranger. As he did so he yelled:

"Beat it, Helen!"

The Stranger gasped. So the small one was a girl, was she? So the big boy friend would take an almost fatal attempt like this to get her out of the trap they had walked into. Love was wonderful, even when you were in the business of stampeding steers to their death, and burning houses. The Stranger had not expected anything like this.

The cowboy came at him, a blur in the darkness. Sitting where he was, there was no way that he could escape the onrush. He timed his movement carefully to the wild tackle, smashed up with his sixshooter, grunted with satisfaction when the barrel slapped against the cowboy's skull. The cowboy, unconscious, plunged on, came up against the wall and collapsed like a wet sack.

The Stranger said, "Now, don't try any stunts, Helen."

The girl had not moved from the window; he saw her outlined in the yellow glow from the glass. She could not be over twenty, by the slimness of the waist, and her hair was golden in the lantern light, falling in soft curls under the brim of her wide hat.

"Helen," the Stranger said, "this is kind of a surprise party for me. I wasn't expecting you. Right behind you is a lamp. Supposing you sit on the floor and light it. There's matches beside the lamp."

The girl vanished from the light rectangle of the window, but the Stranger knew she was following his orders by the sounds of her movements. The match grated, flared up. The back of the girl's head was to him as she lifted the lamp chimney and touched the flame to the wick. Then she turned, facing him, and her wide eyes were the blue of a moon-lit sky.

"Ma'am," the Stranger said, "this is the damndest surprise I've had in a long time!"

THE girl bridled. As her eyes became used to the brighter light, some of the fear left her face and defiance took its place. "I don't know you," she said, "how'd you know me? And why is it a surprise if you knew who you were trapping?"

"Ma'am, you gave me your own answers. I was trapping a couple of skunks. And look at what I caught?" The cowboy had come to and was sitting with his back propped against the wall. The Stranger went on: "I wouldn't put you two down as the kind of folks who'd burn out some lonesome girl and run a couple of thousand steers off a cliff."

"How'd you know who I was?" the girl said shortly.

"I didn't," the Stranger said, "and I don't now. Supposin' you tell me?"

"You called me Helen!"

"So did your friend here. He called you Helen first."

The girl's glance moved to the cowboy who remained sullenly silent; then she looked back to the Stranger.

"You're dealing the hand," she said. "Suppose you call the cards."

The Stranger smiled at that. Here was a girl who was not only lovely but full of spirit. Here was the kind of girl he liked. the kind he had almost married once, so long ago now it seemed as if it had been only a dream.

He stopped smiling.

"Okay, ma'am." He stood up, stepped silently over to the door. Suddenly he twisted the knob, yanked the door open and grabbed the hotel boy who had sneaked up to listen to the excitement. Before the boy could let out a cry or try to fight back, the Stranger had him in the room with the door closed behind him. The kid was too scared to do anything but stand there, trembling.

"Glad to see you," the Stranger told him. "So you're a little rat, huh? You know what I do to little rats, don't you?"

The kid could not talk. The Stranger asked softly: "Know these people? Know their names? They ain't telling."

"It's—Steve McLane," the kid stuttered. "an' Helen Dover. They said they was friends of yores. I didn't know, honest, mister. That's what they said."

"You're lying to me."

The Stranger was putting things together. It was the SM herd that had been driven over the bluff up Black Canyon SM could be Steve McLane.

"Now Helen ain't the girl whose house burned down when she was having a nightmare, is she?"

"I don't know how her house burned down!" the kid cried. "How'd I know?"

"It wasn't any nightmare," the girl cut in. "That fire was set!"

"And I'm telling you," Steve McLane told him, "that if you pull any more stunts like that, I'm going to kill you if I have to take you from the back." His voice broke. "I'm going to kill you anyway," he said in deadly earnest.

"Talkin' kinda big, ain't you, cowboy, for a feller who's just had his stinger pulled?"

The cowboy shut up. After a moment the Stranger said:

"Now I want to know just who sent you two up here to plug me!"

"I suppose you don't know?" the cowboy said.

The kid's eyes were rolling, hunting for escape. The girl studied the Stranger.

"Mister," she said, "I don't know what your game is, but I guess I might just as well tell you how come we dropped in to visit you. If you know about it already it won't harm any to tell you again. If you don't know, then we've got to beg your pardon."

Her hand moved toward her breast.

"No!" the cowboy snapped.

The Stranger moved slightly so that the lamplight glistened on his Colt.

The girl reached into her breast pocket and produced a bit of folded paper which she handed over to the Stranger. The Stranger saw Steve's muscles tighten, saw the kid's glance flash for the door. He passed the paper back to the girl.

"Suppose you read it," he said.

He did not miss the girl's glance of appreciation, nor the sudden disappointment of the cowboy and the kid. Those two had been ready for a break when he turned to the paper.

"Mister," Helen said, "that's the end of any funny business I'm going to try

with you around. I don't know who you are or what you're holding in your hand. But I'll bet they're all aces."

"Four of them, anyway." The Stranger smiled. "Now read that."

Her long lashes shadowed her blue eyes as she read:

"The gent you want is at the Quarts House—a friend." The lashes flashed up. "It's spelled with an 's'."

The Stranger looked at the kid.

"I didn't write that." The boy's voice was hardly a whisper.

"'Course you didn't," the Stranger said softly. Of the girl he asked: "Who handed it to you?"

"I found it—found it in the shanty where I'm living on my spread. It was just there." Her voice caught. "Mister, I kind of think you aren't the gent I wanted. He sent me this. I don't know who he is, mister, but he's got everybody in this neighborhood frightened of their lives. When I mentioned that I didn't believe Steve's cows just ran off that cliff of their own accord, my house burned down. When Charlie Starr said he'd damn well find out who set that fire, we found him dead next day of a broken back, like he'd been bucked off a horse."

"Charlie Starr," the Stranger asked, "who's he?"

The girl glanced at the boy whose face had blanched, then at Steve McLane. The Stranger could not read their signal. The girl said abruptly: "Charlie was my foreman, my only hand." She hesitated, then burst out: "It's Hell, Mister! It's worse than Hell. *He* tried to get me here tonight, and I don't know why. But I came because I'd walk into any trap just to get a shot at him."

The Stranger was smiling thinly. "Ma'am, if I were you I wouldn't talk so free about this gent. Maybe this little rat will go tell him. Maybe I'm him, Helen."

The girl's eyes widened. She sucked in her cheeks. Steve McLane said coldly, "Okay, mister, wind up your dirty work. You found out what you wanted to know."

The Stranger stood up, moved over to the bed. There he said, "I haven't found out all I want to, cowboy, not yet." He holstered his six-shooter, picked up the two shotguns and handed one to the girl, one to Steve McLane, butts first. Then he tossed Steve's gunbelt over to him.

"Beat it," he said harshly. "And look out for bushwhackers. Your friend ain't going to like you any more for this little visit."

The kid made a dash for the door. Casually, the Stranger put out a foot, tripped him. The kid landed hard.

"You're staying," the Stranger said.

THE Stranger sat on the bed listening. He heard the rattle of hoofs as Steve McLane and Helen Dover left town, heading up Black Canyon.

"Now I never seen a kid like you for nerve," the Stranger said. "Nerve of a rat."

The boy's sharp eyes flashed. "You're going to call me a rat once too often."

"I sure am," the Stranger agreed affably, "if you act like a rat again. Or even like a skunk."

"Honest to God," the kid cried, "I didn't write that note. I wouldn't do nothing to hurt Miss Helen."

"You and the barkeeper were cooking up something against me. You went over and told him my name. You told him I was asking about Steve McLane's place. And you lied to me about those bones. Besides, you told the bartender that I had to drink whisky to go to sleep." The Stranger talked in an even monotone, pounding it home, watching the kid squirm. "You and that bartender kinda figured I was after your boss, didn't you?"

"Ol' Pete Brecker?" the boy said with amazement. "Mister—"

"Who's Pete Brecker?"

The kid's freckled face broke into a grin and it seemed to the Stranger that he had seen this youngster before some place. There was something strangely familiar about the boy that he could not place.

"He's my boss, mister. You got me wrong there. I thought you was this gent

who burned down Miss Helen's house and chased Steve's cows over that cliff and murdered my—" the boy flushed crimson. He ended brokenly, "So did Bull.

"He's the keep over to the Gold Brick. He thought so, too. Damn it, mister, him and me don't even dast talk about those things." He suddenly realized that he might already have talked too much. "Bull and me don't even believe them things. Anybody's house will burn down if she has a nightmare and cows are always running over cliffs, just for the heck of it. And Pa never could ride worth a damn anyway. He was always getting bucked off a hoss."

Pa? The kid had slipped. Pa must be Charlie Starr, and now the Stranger saw the resemblance in this boy. Sure, the kid must be Charlie's son.

"How old are you?" the Stranger cut in.

Puzzled, the boy answered: "Thirteen."

"When I was thirteen," the Stranger said blandly, "I could lie a lot better than you, kid. When I was thirten, my old man was shot in a range war and my mother burned in our cabin. I got to be pretty tough after that."

The boy's face tensed again. "Mister, you ain't—"

"I'm going to beat you plenty, kid, if you don't start showing some guts. I don't like kids who are scared of the dark."

"Honest to God, mister," the boy broke out, "I ain't afraid of anything—but him."

"Who's *him?*"

The boy began to tremble again. He shook his head dismally. "I don't know, but if I did . . ."

"Okay," the Stranger said. "Run along."

The boy was so weak his thin legs would hardly support him as he went out the door. His feet dragged along the corridor, clumped down the stairs, for this time he did not even have the spirit left in him to slide down the bannister.

The Stranger listened to the echoes run through the empty hotel, rolled over on the bed and turned down the lamp. The first streaks of dawn were graying the sky when he kicked the blanket off the bed and closed his eyes.

He had set a trap for a wolf and had caught three lambs.

III

IT WAS apparent that none of those three knew the identity of the mystery man who had been causing so much trouble at Mud Camp, and probable that nobody else in town would talk at all. But the Stranger could not doubt that the little affair of last night would bring out the man he was seeking—either bring him into the open or force him into arranging an "accident" for the Stranger.

It might be a shot in the back. More likely it would be something less direct though quite as effective. Something would fall on him, or his horse would kick him to death, or the muzzle of his six-shooter would become clogged causing the gun to blow up when he tried to fire it. Something would happen to him—and very soon.

His spurs rattling, he went down the corridor into the lobby and nodded at the hatchet-faced oldster who was sitting behind the desk.

"Morning," the Stranger said. "Hope my friends didn't keep you awake last night. Just a little party."

The old man shook his head, kept his feet on the desk as he spoke.

"Not at all, mister. Ain't no business these days anyhow. And I sleep like a rock. Deafer than a dead rabbit. Used to know your old man, Mr. Wainwright."

"Glad to meet you," the Stranger said. "You must be Pete Brecker. The old man used to mention you."

"Been running this hotel ever since your father struck gold in the Dead Man's Mine. Them were the good days, Mr. Wainwright. Old Horace took millions outa that mine. Spent it like water. Thought the vein would run on into China."

"Yes sir," the Stranger said. "He spent every cent of it. Died broke as a whisky bottle a mule's stepped on."

The Stranger moved toward the door. "Be seeing you. Got to get some breakfast.

I could eat a whole setting of fresh eggs."

"Ain't thinking of re-opening the mine?" Pete asked.

"Not exactly." The Stranger talked over his shoulder from the doorway. "I was just passing through, Mr. Brecker. Thought I'd drop around and look at the old man's town and maybe see what kind of a hole he dug. Never been here before. Pop ran out on Ma and never told us where he was going. Never knew nothing about it until we read it in the papers that he'd made a strike."

"Them were the days," Pete Brecker said dreamily.

The Stranger passed on. At Aunt Nancy's Café he was given the best of service, though the stout, middle-aged woman who ran the place kept a tight mouth. The news had gone around that the Stranger was interested in Mud Camp's troubles and, judging by Aunt Nancy's treatment of him, he knew that she at least believed him to be the man back of it all.

She did not want to offend him. She had no desire at all to wake up some midnight with her little restaurant burning down around her. He tried to make conversation with her but failed, gave it up finally and wandered out into the street.

He dropped in at the general store to buy a shovel and a pick. Carrying these, he walked the entire length of the main street, past deserted houses, old saloons that were caving in, a bank that was closed. At the end of the street was a little plaza, and in the middle of this a statue of a burro.

The Stranger stopped to read the inscription that was engraved deeply into the statue's base. Once that carving had been filled with hammered gold, but someone had chiseled it away long ago.

Genevieve Simson, a dang good burro and friend

The Stranger shook his head. That little beast had taken old Horace T. Wainwright straight to the quartz vein which had made him his fortune. Maybe it would take the Stranger to the man for whom he was hunting.

Since nobody else would talk, maybe he could squeeze a word out of this patient stone burro.

Genevieve Simson's rear end was toward the town she had helped found, and rumor had it that old Horace had placed her in that manner so that she could keep her eye on the Dead Man's Ranch. So the Stranger knelt down, using her ears and the hump of her tail as sights, and discovered that rumor was right, that the statue was aimed straight for the mine dump which marked the lower border of the SM ranch.

It was interesting, he observed, that the mine was just half way between the SM corrals and bunkhouse and the scorched trees that marked the spot where Helen Dover's house had stood. The Stranger shrugged his shoulders.

He picked up his tools and carried them back to the hotel. On the way he observed that Bull, the bartender, was sitting in the sun before his saloon whittling busily at a stick of wood. On the other side of the street, old Pete Brecker dozed with his chair tilted against the hotel wall. Further down, the local storekeeper was studying his window, while the barber swept off his sidewalk.

Even Aunt Nancy was out this fine morning shaking a tablecloth and the boy at the livery stable was exercising a horse before the barn. The Stranger smiled at each citizen as he passed; at the hotel he let his pick and shovel clank together loudly enough to wake up Pete. The hotelkeeper's eyes were bright, showing no signs of sleep.

"Seems like all I do," he said, "is snooze. Takes young fellers like you to be up and going."

"Bet you could rastle down the biggest ox in Black Canyon," the Stranger said affably. "It took real he-men to stick it out when Mud Camp was roaring, according to Pa."

Pete Brecker's thin, rugged face looked pleased. "Could once, but them days are

gone. Thinkin' of prospecting a little?"

"Was," the Stranger said. "Just an idea. Never can tell, Mr. Brecker. Maybe one more swat with a pick will uncover that lost vein."

"Now, me," the oldster said, "I even thought of that myself. Done some digging in the Dead Man. Found nothing but rock, so I give up. But you might be the lucky one, like yore Pa."

The Stranger went into the hotel. When he came out half an hour later the town was deserted again. The only person he could find was the kid who was sitting behind the desk again reading a Western magazine.

"Still scared of the dark?" the Stranger asked.

The kid stuck out his jaw. "I ain't scared of anything," he said.

"You want to come prospecting with me?"

The kid's eyes bulged. "I ain't going down in that mine!"

"Just a little mouse," the Stranger said, and went out.

THAT there had been work done in the Dead Man's Mine recently, was obvious. Near the entrance there had been some effort made to hide the fact—sand had been strewn in the old roadway to cover tracks—but the passing of shod hoofs was evident in occasional patches of crushed grass and brush. The Stranger left his horse tied outside for everyone to see, then stepped into the darkness. The candlelight shone fitfully, showing moss-covered beams and further along picking out brighter bits of shoring that had been placed there since the mine had been deserted.

He kept on, stopping to listen now and then, until he was about a hundred yards down the main shaft. Now and then he passed black holes of shafts leading off the main tunnel. Most of these had caved in. Only one had been used in recent years and the Stranger turned into it.

He set his candle down and whacked at the wall where digging had been done lately, but he found no sign of quartz or gold. He put a couple of bits of broken rock in his pocket, then set down the candle, and retraced his steps to the mine's opening. He felt sure that he had found out what he wanted to know.

The Dead Man's Mine obviously had some connection with the trouble at Mud Camp. Everyone in town knew that the Stranger had gone up to the mine. Judging from the hotel boy's remark, they had been fairly sure he was going there after he bought the pick and shovel and took a sighting over Genevieve Simpson's ears. All he had to do now, he figured, was to lay low and wait.

He stayed near the mine opening watching his horse until his eyes became used to the bright daylight. The roan cropped peacefully at a bit of brush, chewed the leaves reflectively. A horse is a pretty good watch dog. This one had not scented any newcomers. On his stomach, the Stranger wriggled out the entryway.

The horse's head yanked up. The Stranger hissed softly to quiet the beast, worked through the brush to the side of the mine. There, among the rough rocks, he climbed up the side of the canyon until he was about thirty feet above the roadway, and settled down. He could see the town from there and the path leading to it. To the right was the SM ranch. It was very interesting, he thought, how the facts were dovetailing. That drift from which he had taken samples of stone was headed in the general direction of Steve McLane's corrals.

As he waited, the horse snorted once, reared up, then settled back. From the spot where he was in hiding the Stranger could not see what had disturbed his mount, and he was about to go down to investigate when two riders appeared from the direction of town. One of them was small, with long golden hair; the other tall and broad shouldered; and both rode as if they had been born in a saddle.

They came swiftly, turned up the path to the mine, halted momentarily, then dis-

mounted and approached on foot. Helen Dover kept close to the brush on the right while Steve McLane hugged the left side. The girl held a shotgun ready. The cowboy had a six-shooter in his fist. As they reached the turn in the path, the Stranger saw Steve McLane nod grimly to the girl. Steve's lips formed soundless words that the Stranger could only guess at.

"It's him!" he thought Steve said.

Then the two vanished under the overhanging lip of the main shaft.

The Stranger gave them plenty of time to get well inside before he started working his way down the canyon wall. It seemed that all his traps were going astray, or he had lost his ability to figure the next move. Last night he would have sworn that these two were the innocent victims of the unknown killer. Now he wondered. Did they still think that he was the man they wanted?

He was not yet down to the tunnel level when his horse suddenly plunged again, broke loose and went galloping down the path. Almost instantly, the whole canyon seemed to tremble, then groan. There was a dull thunder like an explosion, followed by a growling deep within the mine. A puff of whitish dust burst into the sunlight, and the earth settled under him.

The Stranger stumbled down. Across the path the brush rustled and he just glimpsed the dark coat of a vanishing back. He could not draw his gun in time and pursuit was useless, for the dust haze had already obscured his view and the fleeing man undoubtedly knew this country better than he did. Plunging through the cloud, the Stranger swung to run into the mine opening. There he stopped, for small broken bits of rock were still showering from the roof. And far inside the shaft continued to crumble.

IV

HE GROPED through the choking dust until his hands came to the cave-in. He could see nothing here, but he judged that the fall had occured near the only side tunnel that had been worked. It must have completely cut off that tunnel. He yelled, listened to the echoes and thought that he heard a faint tapping from the other side of the broken wall. He could not be sure whether it was the blood pounding in his ears or the dropping of stone down that tunnel.

He turned back to the entrance and ran down the path. He climbed into the saddle of one of the horses still tethered there, a big black gelding that must have been Steve McLane's, and spurred toward town. At the Gold Brick Saloon he leaned from the saddle, poked the batwing doors in and yelled at the startled barkeeper:

"It's a cave-in! At the Dead Man. Steve McLane and Helen Dover are trapped!"

At the store and the livery he repeated his call, at the barbershop and the hotel. There he found only the boy, looking scared stiff, his magazine forgotten.

"Come on!" the Stranger ordered. "We got to dig them out. What's the matter with you?"

The kid's knees wobbled.

"You done it!" he screamed.

The Stranger spurred the horse up onto the veranda and into the big room. He caught the kid by the back of the collar, yanked him up onto the horse.

"Listen here, kid—it don't matter who did it. That girl's trapped in there. Are you going to help get her out or are you going to rat again?"

"Mister," the kid said, "she always treated me right. If she's hurt I'm going to kill you."

"Okay!" The Stranger bit his words short. "Get a shotgun and come along. Kill me later."

He waited until the kid had scuttled out back somewhere to reappear with a sawed-off twelve-gauge and a pick. Then, with the kid riding behind the saddle, he jumped the roan back into the street. Nobody had followed his call. The town was as deserted as ever, so he turned again to the saloon. Bull Sims, his fat face white, cowered behind the bar.

"I'm not going up there!"

The Stranger's hand curled around the butt of his six-shooter. From behind a kid's high-pitched voice broke in.

"You shore are, Bull!"

Bull's eyes dropped.

"Coming?"

The bartender came out slowly, the fear bred in him by the Stranger's eyes and by the kid's crazy look of determination greater than any fear of the unknown. They went from there to the barbershop, even to Aunt Nancy's, collecting up one more helper in each place, finally to raid the general store for picks and wheelbarrows. It was on their way back toward the mine, the kid and the Stranger herding along their motly rescue crew, that the Stranger sighted old Pete Brecker trying to hide behind a shade in one of the dirty windows of the Quartz House.

"Come down out of there!" the Stranger yelled.

Pete ducked.

"I'll get the old snake!" Aunt Nancy growled, and with a brand new shovel in her capable hands she went off in pursuit. She was back in a moment with the spindly hotel-keeper in tow, cursing with picturesque enthusiasm.

So they marched on, past Genevieve Simson who had seen that mine grow into a bonanza and turn to a graveyard. They went along the curving path to the mine, and the kid's eyes were snapping, black and damp.

"She treated me good," he muttered.

The crew trudged into the black maw of the dead Man's Mine where the white dust was still settling. A six-shooter and shotgun drove them on.

THE kid and the Stranger worked shift-and-shift, taking turns at the guns and at the digging. They let only Aunt Nancy leave the mine, for she had proved she would stick it out and somebody had to run to town for food and coffee. They kept the picks and crowbars biting into the pulverized rock, throwing back huge chunks, lining the wall behind them; carting out barrows piled high with smaller stuff. But the progress was slow, and as they moved on they had to shore up the roof above them to prevent a second and more disastrous cave-in.

"Look at that!" the Stranger said to the kid as they changed shifts. The boy had been heaving rock. Now it was the Stranger's turn.

"I seen it already," the kid said. "It wasn't done by no wood ticks."

The Stranger had pointed out a cross-beam sawed nearly in two, splintered the rest of the way.

"You done it," the kid said.

"Look at it again," the Stranger suggested.

"You could of done it a couple of weeks ago," the boy suggested. "You've been around these parts long enough. Hiding out, likely."

The Stranger returned to moving rock. They worked through that night and mutiny was imminent more than once—puf off only by the determination of the men behind the guns. And dawn was graying the tunnel's mouth before they knew whether or not they were digging up a tomb. Dawn had come when Bull Sims dropped a rock and whispered hoarsely:

"Listen!"

The tapping was faint but unmistakable, and the little knot of men who had been working under duress broke into a cheer. From the other side a cheer came back, faint as an echo, and Bull Sims pitched into the rockpile again.

"I gotta stop!" It was old Pete Brecker. "It's bustin' my back."

"You ain't stopping!" the Stranger said.

"It's all going to cave in," Pete whined. "I worked this once. The timbers is all rotten."

"You ain't got long to live anyway," the Stranger said. "Get going!"

Pete heaved a rock. The stable boy wheeled away another barrow of rubble. The storekeeper smacked his pick into the pile ahead of them. The barber put his shoulder to a crowbar and cursed.

"If I only had my scissors I could trim this down in no time," he said.

"And cut their throats doing it," Bull put in.

Aunt Nancy's huge figure darkened the entrance.

"Here it is, boys. Eats!"

They stopped hardly a moment to gulp coffee and biscuits and bacon, then were back at the task again. The Stranger was working with a pick. Sound from the other side was becoming more audible now, a man's voice, the scraping of rock indicating that Steve McLane was digging from his end. Then, suddenly, the Stranger's pick went into nothingness. For a moment he was stunned. Then he yelled:

"We're through!"

"Thank God!" the girl cried beyond the dark hole.

And for a second the Stranger was off his guard. It was an accident, it seemed like. As he reached in to pull the girl through the small tunnel he had made, the top of it collapsed on his head. He sensed it coming; cried out a warning to her, and tried to duck back to safety. As he did so, something solid crashed into his head and knocked him senseless.

THAT "accident" was not quite as effective as some had been in the neighborhood of Mud Camp. It did not quite kill the Stranger.

He awoke with a terrific headache. Automatically, his lean, strong hands, blistered from the pick handle, dropped to his sides. His guns were gone. He reached for his breast, and his shoulder holster was also missing. Then he became aware that the room he was in was strange to him and that somebody was there with him.

Slowly he turned his head.

"Hello, Steve," he said.

The cowboy shifted his shotgun slightly so that the big bore pointed straight for the Stranger's eyes.

"Take it easy," he said. "I'm nervous. I didn't like it back in that hole for two days. Neither did Helen."

The Stranger sat up. His head throbbed wickedly. He could not remember very clearly just what had happened to him. He had reached into the opening through the cave-in to help Helen out and something had hit him. But it had come down too hard and too suddenly for the natural fall of a rock from a height of only a few inches.

"This is a funny way to show gratitude," he said to Steve. "After all I did to get you out of there. I had to shoot up the whole mob to get them to help dig."

Steve McLane said, "You've outsmarted us all enough for one hombre. You ain't going to do it again."

Steve's finger around the double trigger looked mighty scary to the Stranger. The Stranger closed his eyes to erase the pounding in his head. The clink of glassware was in a room not far from here, and the place smelled the sour odor of old beer. Footsteps approached now and a door opened. A voice with the chime of silver said:

"Bring him in, Steve. Everybody's here."

Steve ordered, "Come on, mister."

The Stranger stood up. Steve edged around to keep the shotgun bearing on him. The girl, Helen Dover, moved back out of the doorway, her golden hair shining in the light of the barroom's big lamps, her blue eyes dark and troubled. The Stranger smiled as he stepped by her, and she said in a whisper:

"I hope they give you an honest trial, mister. The kid told me how you drove them up to the mine."

"Helen!" Steve cut in.

The Stranger went on into the main room of the Gold Brick, halted by the bar. Before him, the citizens of Mud Camp were assembled, all of them, the strange skeleton of a town's inhabitants.

"Looks like a party," the Stranger said. "A bit of a surprise to me, though."

"It's a bigger surprise than you think," Bull Sims said.

"Is it on the house?" the Stranger asked.

"It's on the town," Pete Brecker cut in. "We're trying you for murder, mister, and for arson and for wilful slaughter of

cattle. We could try you for blowing up mines, too, and lots of other things, but we'll just let them go."

"That's decent of you," the Stranger said.

He leaned back against the bar for support. The moving around had made him sick. That smash on the head . . . he remembered now, it had not been a rock that had hit him. He had gotten his head out of the tunnel before that knockout blow hit him.

"Pete," he said, "did you smack me on the head with your shovel?"

The little hotel-keeper was not taken aback as the Stranger had expected. He said, "Suppose I did? You're on trial here, I ain't. You're answering the questions, not me. And suppose I did smack you on the head with a shovel?"

"I was just wondering," the Stranger said. His glance moved from Pete Brecker to Steve McLane, on around the circle before him. Steve had lost a herd. Helen Dover's house had burned down. The kid's father had been murdered. Everyone here had suffered from the depredations of the mysterious rider who arranged everything to look like an accident; and everyone here believed they had finally caught their man. If old Pete admitted the Stranger's accusation, it would only make him a hero in their eyes.

There would be no mercy in this lynch court.

"Let's get on with the hanging," the Stranger said coldly.

V

PETE BRECKER, being the oldest inhabitant of Mud Camp, took the double part of judge and prosecuting attorney.

"Mr. Stranger," he said, "ain't it true that you pretended to be Horace Wainwright's son, even though you knew he never had one?"

"True enough," the Stranger said.

"Ain't it true you done it with the thought of establishing a claim to the Dead Man's Mine?"

"Sort of," the Stranger said.

"That proves it," Bull Sims put in. "Only trouble is that you were afraid somebody else might put in a claim so you figured on chasing Steve and Helen out and when Charlie Starr discovered what you were up to you roped him off his horse so he broke his back."

"You boys got the story right down cold," the Stranger said, "like you had rehearsed it. Why don't you get on with the hanging?"

There were six guns trained on the Stranger by half a dozen people all anxious to shoot. There was also, in this group, the unknown man who had been at the bottom of all the trouble at Mud Camp. It looked to the Stranger as if this killer was helping to arrange another "accident" in the guise of a legal-looking lynching.

It was neat and pat. They would hang him, or shoot him down in an attempt at escape. And then what?

"Boys," the Stranger said, "there's a drift off that main tunnel that runs right under Steve's ranch. Steve, it'll make you a millionaire."

The cowboy was suspicious. "You won't get any of it," he said.

"Neither will you—if you hang me," the Stranger said.

The girl stepped forward as if to speak. Steve McLane stopped her. Old Pete Brecker said abruptly:

"Let's quit this talk and get on with the trial. The joke's on this stranger, here. There ain't no gold at all in that drift. I oughta know. I been fooling around in that mine for twenty years now, ever since it closed down, thinking I might find that lost lode. But the lode's as lost as ever."

"Maybe this feller found something," Steve said. "Let him talk."

The reaction on Pete Brecker was immediate. "He'll only talk us into another trap."

"That's right," the Stranger said. "That's exactly right, Pete."

The Stranger was remembering things. Pete Brecker had claimed to be so deaf that all the ruckus the first night the

Stranger was in town failed to wake him. Pete had claimed to be so old and feeble he had to spend half his days and all his nights in sleeping. But it had taken a strong man to smash that shovel on the Stranger's head, and only a husky could have pulled Charlie Starr from a horse with such force that it would break his back—a big gent like Bull Sims.

The Stranger wondered.

"Let's get going," Pete Brecker said hastily. "I guess everybody knows this feller is guilty. He's as much as admitted it."

"Let's hang him," Bull said, "then go up to the mine and see what he found."

Bull grinned and winked. Both projects —a lynching and a gold hunt—seemed equally satisfying to contemplate. "I bet," Bull continued, "he did strike a vein at that. Hargin's first, though."

The Stranger's time was being counted in seconds. One false move on his part and he'd be shot. There would be no waiting for the semi-official execution. So he turned his back on the assembly, and rested with one elbow on the bar and said:

"A dying man's got a last request coming, ain't he?"

Nobody answered.

"I'd sort of like a drink of whiskey," the Stranger said.

In the curiously-shaped mirror he could see himself three times. He could see Pete Brecker only once, but Aunt Nancy and Steve McLane, who were on each side of him, were reflected from both front and side views. It looked as if the room were packed with people.

"I guess you could have a drink," Bull Sims finally said, "if there ain't no objections. I don't see why not."

The Stranger saw Pete's lips twitch. Pete had not drawn his gun during all these proceedings, but now his hand was resting near his ancient holstered single-action.

"No objection," he said.

Bull walked around behind the bar. He set the shotgun on a shelf under the mahogany counter and placed a whisky bottle and a glass before the Stranger.

"Help yourself," he said, "you'll need plenty where you're going. I hear the Devil invented drink but's been too busy lately to make a new batch."

The Stranger filled his tumbler. The feel of the bottle in his hand was good. He had used bottles before as weapons, but never with six guns against him.

"Gents and ladies," he raised the drink to his lips, "to the Devil."

He drank, and the burning liquor cleared his head and primed him with quick strength.

One of his hands still encircled the bottle. He felt pretty confident of that hand, able to make it do what he wanted it to. If he only got the chance. . . .

"Okay, boys," Pete Brucker said. "Let's get it over with."

Bull started reaching for his shotgun. Steve McLane edged in closer. Pete drew his six-shooter, pointed it for the middle of the Stranger's back. The barber and the storekeeper moved in from their positions. And the two youngsters, the one from the livery, the one from the hotel, twitched nervously as they lined up their battered weapons.

The Stranger stood quite still.

Only Aunt Nancy and Helen Dover refrained from joining the converging lynch party. Aunt Nancy was still silently watching from her stand near the bar to the Stranger's left.

Very softly, the Stranger whispered: "Aunt Nancy, you see any dust on Pete's coat the day the mine caved in?"

Aunt Nancy studied him closely for a second or two.

HER eyes shadowed, brightened. "Mister," she said aloud, "even if I did, I don't know what it's got to do with—" Suddenly she turned to Pete Brecker and the Stranger could no longer see her face reflected in the mirror. But he had already noticed that the little man who claimed to be deaf had heard his whisper. Now, Aunt Nancy, wise from many years on the frontier, understood what the Stranger was

driving at—and she remembered. "Damned if I didn't! Pete, you scoundrel, what were you doing up there?"

No one else but Bull and those two had heard the Stranger's whisper.

"I got it cleaning out my attic!" Pete Brecker said.

"And was this hombre here," she indicated the Stranger, "up in your attic with you? I remember now. Only I was too excited to mention it. You was brushing it off when I caught you. The same kind of dust we all got on us working up there!"

Bull, elbows on the bar, frowned and began to scratch his head. Helen drew breath sharply. The two kids stared, puzzled by all this talk.

"What in hell's going on?" Steve McLane cut in.

"Ask Pete Brecker," the Stranger said coldly. "Ask him where he was the night your cattle stampeded. Ask him where he was when Helen's house burned down. Ask him where he was when the mine caved in."

"Heck, he was up in bed," the kid chimed in, "with his door locked. I tried to wake him up but he's too deaf to hear a cannon go off."

The Stranger smiled thinly. "You see him there?" he asked.

The kid from the hotel shook his head and looked important. It was his turn to talk, and he made the best of it. He said:

"No. Steve and Miss Helen come hunting for you. They was mad. They said they had decided you killed my old man. So Pete told them you were up to the mine. Then they rode away and he got a headache and went to bed."

"That's funny," Aunt Nancy said. "He just told us he got that mine dust on him cleaning his attic."

"Sure," the Stranger said quietly. His back itched. By the mirror he could see old Pete's wrinkled face tightening and the gunhand growing tense. "Too deaf to hear a cannon—but with ears sharp enough to hear me whisper just now to Aunt Nancy. Too weak to lift a spitoon—but strong enough to toss rocks around that mine, to put up his own shoring, and to break Charlie's back."

Pete Brecker's lips twitched, and in the mirror the Stranger could see him taking tiny backward steps toward the door. Suddenly he said in a low, bitter voice:

"I found it. It's mine. I found that lode. And you can't steal it from me now."

The Stranger swung around. Pete had moved back to a spot where the triple-faced mirror showed his side as well as front view and the Stranger saw Pete's left hand drawing something from his pocket. It looked like dynamite to him, and as he swiveled he heaved the whiskey bottle straight for the little man's chest. Then he kept going around and leaped over the bar.

"Duck! Flat!" he yelled.

The bottle whirled, sending out a spiral of whiskey. It seemed like hours before it struck Pete Brecker's shoulder, and hours more before the dynamite stick dropped to the floor. Pete's shot smashed the mirror behind the Stranger, and the Stranger grabbed for the shotgun that Bull Sims had been drawing from under the bar. Pete fired again, leaned over to pick up the dynamite, and the Stranger no longer had any alternative. The man was crazy. He would blow them all up even if he went with them.

The Stranger let go with both barrels of the shotgun and the heavy charge of buck kicked little Pete Brecker out the swinging doors. A second later the doors smashed back in, flew off the hinges, and it felt as if a huge hand had slapped the Gold Brick Saloon. The building shuddered. Part of the front wall caved in. Splintered glass tinkled everywhere. And then, after a while, there was silence. The Stranger stood up in the mess of broken glass. Before him the rest of the group were getting to their feet.

The Stranger said, "Sorry I had to be so rough, folks. Now, if somebody will get my guns I'll be on my way. There's work waiting to be done over the mountains."

The kid helped him get away that

night and it was no easy task for the citizens of Mud Camp were determined that he should stay. News of the strike would bring boom times to their nearly deserted town. They would need a lawman, and who would be better than this stranger who had ridden in to free them?

The kid had brought his own horse as well as the Stranger's and was waiting with them at the statue of Genevieve Simson.

"Where are you going, kid?" the Stranger asked.

"I kinda thought you could use a pardner."

The Stranger smiled down on him. "Not now, kid. Your Pa was my pardner once, long ago, down along the border, and—"

"My Pa?" the kid burst out.

"Ol' Charlie! But Charlie got a job, working for Miss Helen. And you gotta carry on, kid, where Charlie left off. If that vein amounts to something, Steve and Miss Helen are going to be rich. There's going to be a lot of gold around here and a lot of people like Pete Brecker who'll want that gold. You got to stick around and side Miss Helen, like your Pa would have done."

"Sure, mister. I guess you're right. I guess she'll need me."

In the moonlight the youngster looked as if he could deal with any future threat to Helen's safety. He sighed, for the trail was bright ahead of him.

But he would stay.

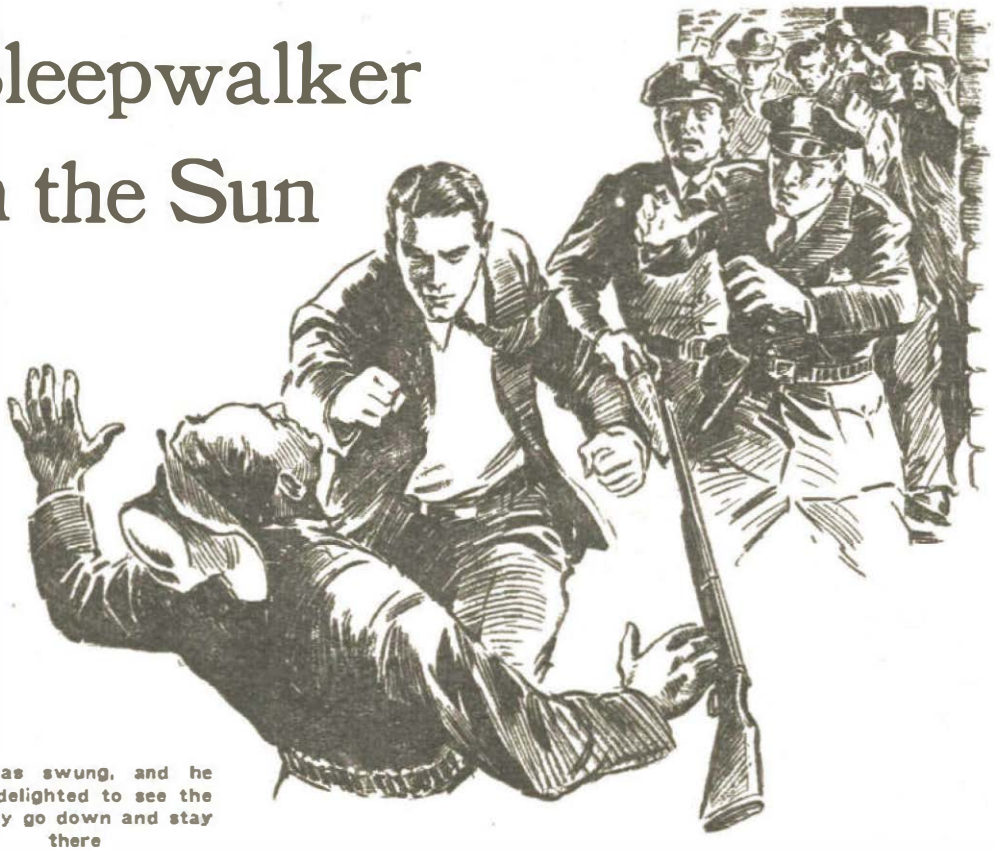
"And let it be a lesson to you," the Stranger said.

"What?" the kid asked.

"Gold drove Pete crazy — but what tripped him up?" The Stranger hesitated. "Only a little dirt. Just think of the trouble a little dirt got Pete into. I guess he wished now he took a bath regular."

He rode away, leaving the puzzled boy behind wondering if that last remark had been meant as personal.

Sleepwalker in the Sun



Thomas swung, and he was delighted to see the deputy go down and stay there

By CHARLES BONNER

Author of "Missing Person," "Like Distant Thunder"

Dreamer, do you hear the sound of the world outside your window? Step out then, with both fists swinging, and maybe you'll meet up with a solid, satisfying dream

IT WAS mid-day in the small, New England industrial city of Canton; and midnight in the room.

The brown rep curtains, embossed with tarnished gilt thread, were drawn tightly across the tall windows which filled one side nearly to a ceiling ornamented with hexagonal plaster straps in favored Victorian style. The furnishings were solidly black walnut, a tall bookcase-secretary standing against one wall, a blank-faced wardrobe against another. Between the two arched doorways which pierced the third wall---opposite the windows—stood a heavy, marble-topped commode supporting a silver vase of stiff straw flowers, a grudging and somewhat startling concession to color in the general pall.

But—no sunlight.

Planted squarely in the center of the dim old Brussels carpet, which gave out an unforgettable scent of the eighteen-eighties, was a large, flat-topped desk also walnut. This, except for a small quadrangle to accommodate writing blotter, pen tray and inkpot, was covered with books, opened and unopened, old and new newspapers, magazines with dog-eared

covers, yellowed pamphlets and neat piles of manuscript.

Beyond the thick walls of the room an attentive ear might have caught the dim rumble of the city; but it would have seemed no more than a cosmic murmur. Inside there was only one sound, inconsiderable of itself but given value by the very depth of the silence. That was the thrust-thrust of a sharp steel pen.

So absorbed was its wielder that he didn't raise his horn-spectacled eyes when one of the arched doors opened to admit a stiff, dark, rod-like figure. Bertha Hendrick advanced a few steps and halted, still within the dusk which enfolded everything outside of the single, conical splash of light from the green-shaded student's lamp on the desk.

"Mr. Jeffers is here," she said tonelessly.

The thin thrust-thrust of the pen went on.

Silently, Bertha moved nearer. The length of her cylindrical black alpaca skirt hid her feet. It made her progress resemble that of a dummy on rollers. Stiff hands folded on a flat stomach and waxen features, now palely illumined by the outer aura of the lamp, aided the impression.

"Mr. Jeffers is here," she repeated. "It's about them proxies again."

Still no response, except a little fiercer cutting of the pen, like a tiny rapier.

"All you have to do is sign," she persisted.

A final parry, a brief triumphant flourish and Thomas Treadwell sat back in his chair, his lean strong chin thrust sharply up, his dark eyes scowling pleasantly out of a curiously young-old face.

Scholarly eyes, they were.

"WHAT did you say, Bertha?" he said. It was an amiable voice, but both flat and hollow, like that of those who do not speak much or hear at all. It went on mildly, "Haven't I said I wasn't to be disturbed?" Long fingers arranged pages of manuscript nervelessly.

"It seems to me I told you that years ago."

"Ten years," Bertha said mechanically. "It was after your twenty-first birthday and you'd come into all this and that hussy had just slapped your face. You were standing just there. It was then you said, 'Unless I ring, don't ever come in here, Bertha. I can stand women only in very small doses.' That's what you said."

"Yes, that was it," Thomas Treadwell said, a faint smile flecking his lips.

"But you never rang," Bertha said with resigned finality. "And the proxies have to be signed every year."

"All right, Bertha," Thomas said. "But I couldn't possibly see Jeffers." He shuddered. "It's blanquette of veal tonight, isn't it?"

"Yes." Stiffly, she thrust a sheaf of papers in front of him. A bony finger touched three places marked (*L. S.*). "Right there," she said, "and there and there."

"I like blanquette of veal," he said, and picked up the pen. He trailed it three times where an "x" had been penciled. "Now, will you run away?"

Bertha collected the papers, flapped them in precise little jerks to dry. "Mr. Jeffers—" she began.

"Not possibly," he said, aiming the pen at the manuscript.

The door opened and a thickset man entered. His face was full and sober and distinguished chiefly by a heavy gray brush mustache, trimmed with razor neatness at the bottom.

He looked worried.

Thomas raised his head and stared at him. "I'm not at home, Jeffers," he said quietly.

"So sorry," Jeffers said. He put his derby hat down on the commode, moved slowly up to the desk. "You might kick me out. I suppose you could. You're a good deal younger. But, even in the act, I should contrive to get in a few words that you've got to hear."

Thomas leaned forward, started to speak, restrained himself, nodded to Ber-

tha. "You'd better go," he said. "This might be unpleasant."

She studied him silently for a moment, then said, "A row wouldn't hurt." And rolled herself out.

Jeffers, on the other side of the desk, leaned on ten strong square fingers.

"I'll make it short," he said. "The company needs you, Thomas."

Thomas took off his spectacles, folded them and tucked them in his breast pocket. His face came extraordinarily to life. His eyes were large and clear and gray and belied the sobriety of his mouth.

"I signed the proxies," he said.

"It's your company," Jeffers said.

THOMAS'S lips relaxed and he scattered a few flies with his hand. "I wouldn't know what on earth to do with it," he said. "I told you that ten years ago."

Jeffers' head was bowed patiently. "The Treadwell Company has been in your family for a hundred years. I promised your father—"

"It's no use," Thomas said, recovering his glasses. "Thank you very much, Jeffers. You have my proxies and you can run the show. I don't really care whether you run it well or not. Now, go along like a good fellow. I've got my work to do."

"Your work," Jeffers said.

He picked up a piece of manuscript embellished with a pasted cut-out of a curious creature resembling in part a man and in part a fish.

He read deliberately: "Dagan, a very ancient Babylonian and Assyrian deity symbolizing fertility. Probably identical with Dagon, the Philistine fish-god which was worshipped at Gaza. From word *dag* (fish) and/or *dagon* (grain)."

Putting the sheet down, he studied Thomas soberly. "It's a far cry to broadloom carpet weaving, Thomas," he said.

Thomas's lips parted over his strong teeth. "Far, Jeffers," he said. "Far. Now, If you'll just let me alone with my gods . . ."

"False gods."

"At least they're dead. They can't do anyone harm. While your Mammon is still very much alive."

Jeffers' shoulders stiffened. "That isn't all, Thomas. It isn't only money. There are things going on out there you should know about. We're likely to have a strike on our hands—the first in the history of the company and—"

Thomas raised his hands before his face protectively. "You're the president," he said. "Handle it any way you want. I'd rather not hear about it."

"For ten years you've scarcely stirred out of this place," Jeffers said sadly, and waited.

"Well?"

"It would help to have a Treadwell show his face."

"There are no more Treadwells," Thomas said.

Jeffers didn't hear. He leaned over the desk. "It's not only the company, the plant, Thomas. We can run that well enough. It's the town and the people. The Treadwell family built it, and it grew. Why, this house was once in a park a mile out of a little village. Now it's the dead center of a city, a teeming, roaring, modern city."

"I don't hear anything."

"Don't you?" Jeffers paused. "Don't you hear the world out there, behind those closed curtains—a world of work and love and hope and greed—and hate?" He looked a little ashamed of his eloquence.

Thomas smiled faintly. "Why should I? We each pick our world. You picked yours. Very well, listen to it. This is mine."

"Among dead deities?"

"Even so, some of them are very lively. Now, you take Pan . . ."

Jeffers looked at him for a long, silent moment; then turned and went out.

Thomas picked up the pen and began, "While the Egyptian divinity Horus is generally represented in art as having the head of a sea hawk . . ." He halted his pen briefly and thought, "I've got

them licked. They can't touch me." Then the thrust-thrust filled the still corners of the room.

FOR a second after the crash came, Thomas sat unmoved and unbelieving; his pen actually completed the word, "Isis."

When he turned, he saw the torn curtain, the glimmer of sunlight through the rent, the gleam of broken glass on the floor. It was a few more seconds before his eyes picked out the pear-shaped object three feet from the desk, six feet from where he sat.

Fascinated, he stared at it, at the short string attached to it, burning. An inch. A half inch. He stretched out his hand, and the grenade burst. It was a mild and disillusioning pop.

"They've got to do better than that," Thomas murmured, but then he understood.

They had done well enough. Tear gas.

Choking, gasping, he reached for his handkerchief, but it was too late for any good. The fumes had already reached his eyes, and the tears welled up and out, beyond his control. Half blind, he staggered up, started for one of the doors into the interior of the house, suddenly changed his course and made for the tall french windows. He could no longer see six inches before him but his hand, feeling the heavy curtains, ripped them apart. He sent his foot crashing through one of the windows.

The large pane of glass broke, tore free from its ancient moldings, fell outward and crashed on the brick path below. Thomas squeezed his body through the opening, remembering from his childhood the drop of ten feet. Braced by his elbows, he hung on the window ledge for a second, then jumped.

And, for the first time, he heard the roar of human voices, raised in hate, pain and fear; as his feet touched the ground, he felt the surging strain of bodies against his own. But, as yet, no intelligence came through his tortured eyes.

He could feel a large hand laid flat against his shoulder. It gave a vigorous shove. "Stand on your own corns, buddy."

"Wherein'ell did he come from?" another voice said.

"Popped out of that house where the bulls landed one of them tear bombs."

Dabbing his eyes with a balled handkerchief, Thomas felt himself being borne backward by the press of many bodies. He sensed the direction. It was up Cartwright Street, away from his house. The realization caused a faint stir of resentment in him.

"Excuse me," he said to the elbow in his chest. "I want to go back to that house."

A shrieked female laugh in his left ear made him jump a little. "Ha! Ha!" she said. "He wants to go home!"

THE painful mist in his eyes relenting somewhat, Thomas was able to make out an ancient hag with long, greasy gray hair and a wild, sunken eye.

"What's so funny about that?" he said frigidly.

"You stand a lousy chance," the man with the elbow said.

Thomas followed the elbow until it was lost in a massive bicep which in turn merged with a huge shoulder attached to a bull's neck covered with ringlets of black hair. In front of all this was a neanderthal face, adorned with a cheerful grin. Thomas was fascinated. It was all so wonderfully physical.

"Like one of the lesser Mayan divinities," Thomas thought.

The man gave ground before the pressure of the crowd in front, carrying Thomas with him. He could now see that the entire street was jam-packed from building line to building line with struggling, howling humanity. To him it made a senseless picture; and he felt little curiosity as to its meaning. He was concerned mainly with the personal inconvenience and the danger that he would not be able to recapture that brilliant inspiration about Isis.

His friend of the elbow said, "Do you want me to boost you up, buddy, so you can have a look-see? The boys are giving the coppers plenty."

"I'm not interested in parades." Thomas said.

"This ain't no parade. This is a war."

"I suppose you'll be telling me that they're about to storm the Bastille," Thomas said witheringly.

"Careful of your langwidge, pal," the man said kindly. "There's ladies present."

"There were ladies present at the Bastille," Thomas said irrelevantly. "Why don't the police clear the street? It's damned annoying."

"Say, look here, you don't happen to be a scab in this here war?"

"There are no skin diseases in the family," Thomas said flatly. "War? What war?"

"Class," the man said informatively. "We've got a strike on against the Treadwell plant. The bulls have just busted the picket line and let the scabs in. But we'll get 'em yet."

"I'm sure you will," Thomas said without enthusiasm. "Now, will you let me pass, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Mike," the man said. "Look out, there! They're sure pushin' hard up front." He held out his hand. "Mike Haley to you. And what's your monnicker?"

"Thomas Treadwell," Thomas said promptly. "How do you do? And do you mind getting off my foot?"

■

MIKE looked at him with astonished interest. "Why that's the name of the guy that owns the works. What a coincidence. Absentee landlord, he is. That's what it says right on page twenty-four of our union book."

"You must let me have a copy," said Thomas. "Well, goodbye, Haley. I've got to get back to work."

"Go to it, pal, but I don't see how you're going to make it."

"This way," Thomas said. "I had quite a knack for it once." He folded his arms over an imaginary football and picked his first hole. "Excuse me," he said and went through.

He repeated the maneuver with uniform success, changing signals to "Pardon me" and "If you don't mind" until he found himself opposite the mouth of a little alley half a block from his home.

Police, company police and sheriff's men had cleared a space around the entrance to this alley, making a sort of reserve station for several armored cars. But, to Thomas, it was simply an obvious short-cut to the street on which his house fronted.

A burly deputy, complete with badge, cartridge belt and rifle barred his way.

"Nothing doing, buddy."

"What do you mean?" Thomas said. "I want to get to my house."

He tried to keep his voice at the dead level of technical politeness which he'd found, through the years, was the best way to keep people out of his life; but the repeated invasions, that afternoon, of what he regarded as his inviolable privacy, were building a slow anger.

"Nothing doing," repeated the guard, shifting his gum and looking steadily over Thomas's head.

"Look here," Thomas said, "I don't ordinarily depend on it, but the name is Thomas Treadwell."

"Make it St. Peter, it's all right with me."

Suddenly, all traces of the retired philosopher went out of Thomas Treadwell; he re-achieved the gloriously blind rage which had dragged three tacklers across the Princeton goal line late in the season of 1929. They, too, had made the mistake of getting in his way.

The right cross was beautifully timed and landed precisely on the point of the jaw. Before Thomas's fascinated gaze, the deputy turned up unseeing eyes and sank in slow motion to his knees, then toppled over on his face, very exactly. A roar of glee went up from the crowd. And then a sound more ominous, a warning murmur.

"Heads up!"

"Look out, buddy!"

"Beat it!"

Thomas looked up to see the detail bearing down on him: four blue-coated policemen, tugging at their holsters.

For a moment he stood rooted with indecision. Then, to a suddenly whispered, "Quick, we can make it!" and a strong tug at his sleeve, he responded automatically. He turned and followed the lead of the hand that held his. With the owner of that hand, he broke into a run.

THEY had a start of a dozen yards. It was enough. The crowd smashed the lines and surged in protectingly between them and the police.

"They won't dare fire into the crowd," the girl said. The short laugh that followed was bitter. "No matter how well they're greased."

They reached Marble street, crossed it, still running, and were abreast of the front door of Thomas's house. The ugly filigree iron grilling on the portico had never looked so comforting to him.

"Thanks," he panted. "Here's where I get off."

But the girl tightened her grip on his hand. She evidently didn't understand. "You can't stop now," she said. "That bull is finished. You've got to blow. I've got a jalopy at the corner."

The reached it a hundred feet ahead of the first policeman, brandishing his revolver. He held his fire as the running, howling mob converged in front of him.

She had the key in the switch and the motor going in a split second. Turning the corner at Marble and Sixth, they tore down the block to Poplar, eased into the normal, slow-moving traffic of that main thoroughfare. The sinister wail of sirens sounded behind them.

"No need to be conspicuous," she said, halting conscientiously for a boulevard stop. At Sixteenth, with two other cars, she turned right, drove halfway down the block, drew up to the curb and turned off the motor.

"We'll wait here a couple of minutes," she said. "Just another Ford, black, five years old with a young couple necking. Indistinguishable as a million Japs."

He looked back through the rear window. A police cavalcade of cars and motorcycles, whistles and sirens blowing, were streaming down Poplar. One motorcycle turned and roared down on them.

"Young couple necking," she whispered. She put her hands behind his head and pulled his face down to hers. She placed her lips against his.

The motorcycle went past without slacking speed.

She straightened up and fixed the thick, waving hair behind her ears.

"I'll find you a hideout," she said.

Then, for the first time, he really looked at her. And what he saw unscrewed the lid of the casket in which Thomas Treadwell had lain for ten years. The specific items which performed this engineering feet were a solemn oval face framed by a cloud of dark hair and pierced by two large, clear deep-blue eyes. They were aided by a pair of sharply curved lips which signaled both rebellion and tenderness.

With simple awe, Thomas said, "The expression they used before my incarceration was: 'Where have you been all my life?' " He was astonished that his tongue worked so well after the years of near silence.

"Thanks," she said without smiling. "And thanks for clipping that heel. I hope—and believe—you did him in."

A FEW minutes earlier Thomas might have shuddered with distaste and apprehension at this idea. But at the moment it seemed normal and proper, if the lady wished it.

"Was he an enemy of yours?" he said conversationally.

"A natural enemy—of ours."

"Ours?"

"Certainly," she said, opening a chaste onyx compact. She smudged a finger on the pad of lipstick, transferred it to her lips with swift, even strokes. "Enemies of the movement. Worse than scabs, those

special deputies. They have all the authority of the law to beat us up or shoot us—and they're paid for it by the Treadwell Company."

"That's all wrong," Thomas said sincerely. "It should be stopped."

She closed the compact with a definitive snap, and looked at him sharply. "By the way, what's your local? I don't think I've seen you around."

"My—what did you say?"

"Your local."

He thought fast. "I'm from out of town," he said. "Just interested."

"Oh," She seemed relieved. "Mine is twenty-six. Trimmers and Cutters."

"You work in the Treadwell Company?"

"Naturally. That is, I did until we went out on strike this morninig."

Thomas calculated his next words carefully. "I've just come up from Worcester," he said. "And I don't think I've got all the facts of the situation here. Perhaps you could—"

"The facts are just one," she said with decision, patting the postage-stamp white handkerchief in the breast pocket of her jacket. "The Treadwell Company owns Canton lock, stock and barrel, body and soul—the works, the stores, the city administration, the police and most of the workers' homes. And the Treadwell Company is owned by one Thomas Treadwell, who doesn't exist."

"I see what you mean."

"I mean he's an absentee landlord. Never shows his face, delegates everything to a bunch of old dodoes who haven't heard that labor has put on long pants."

"You seem very well informed."

The pretty shoulders in the neat blue jacket straightened back with a little prideful gesture. "I ought to be. I'm secretary of Local 26 and I wrote the section in the Handbook on the Evils of Absentee Landlordism. Look out! The bulls!" And she swiftly buried her face in Thomas's neck.

When the motorcycle had machine-gunned past, Thomas emerged breathless. "Do you think it's quite safe here?" he asked.

"Probably not," she said. "It's getting dark. I think we can chance a drive." She stepped on the starter.

"Where to?"

She said executively, "It's out of town for you until this thing blows over."

"Say, you don't really think I put that fellow out?"

"No—worse luck. But you'll have to lie low for a few days. I've got some friends in a little place called Maryville. It's about twenty-five miles off the main road. You can hide there until I give you the all clear."

He looked wonderingly at the soft profile. heard amazed the gentle voice proclaiming this hard-boiled strategy.

"Does this happen often," he said, "this whisking away of the criminal?"

She shook her head solemnly. "But the Handbook tells us what to do in every emergency. Are you set?"

"Set?" he said. "I've been set for ten years. And now I hope Maryville is a thousand miles off." He shouldn't be talking like this, he decided. He shouldn't be talking at all. He was bound to give himself away.

"You're not afraid?" she said.

"That isn't exactly the sensation," said Thomas, unable to keep his eyes off her lovely, serious face. He realized that he was still collecting deities.

IT BEGAN to rain as they drove out of town, and she said her name was Margery Manton and the lights of her car were none too good, and Thomas said his name was Joel Rogers and that he liked the name of Margery and hoped she would never let anyone call her Marge. They made the correct turn off the highway onto the Maryville road and then Thomas took the wheel.

It was his first drive in ten years and the most agreeable in thirty-one. There were long intervals during which there was no conversation about economics or labor

strategy or capitalist oppression, and he learned that Margery lived with her mother who wasn't too old to go to union dances and was full of beans and could cook them like nobody's business.

"Won't she be worrying about you?" Thomas asked conscientiously.

"She's trained to expect sudden absences. That's union discipline."

"Is your mother a member, too?"

"Lord, no. She's too busy with her dogs and my brothers."

They drove on through the night and discovered that they both liked football, hamburgers and Charley McCarthy; and that they detested ping-pong, boiled dinners and Charles Dickens. But they didn't discover Maryville.

The best they could do with the car's feeble lights was to pick out a keeling, withered signpost which read, *Maryville, seven and one-half mi.*" So they stopped at a roadside tavern ten miles further on. Through the windows they could make out the conventional bar, tables and a coin player-piano.

"Do you like dancing?" Margery said in a voice which clearly hoped to pile up a collection of mutual tastes.

"Yes. No. That is," Thomas replied hurriedly recalling his ten years' absence from the stag line, "My work keeps me much too confined."

"Your work?"

"In the cause."

But, after gratifying their admitted appetite for hamburgers, Margery tried a tentative nickle on *I Didn't Know What Time It Was* and Thomas found himself on his feet, his right arm supported in semi-spherical comfort, his left out like his own Egyptian goddesses. They were all 1929 steps, but Margery seemed to find them good. While he found the faint perfume which clung to her superlative. Not perfume, he informed himself nostalgically. Sachet. Old lavender sachet.

It was all right.

The proprietor said that Maryville was close to seven and a half miles, according to his reckoning, and Thomas paid for the sandwiches. They got into the car, but he didn't start it immediately.

"I think perhaps I ought to go back," he said, responding feebly to some command of conscience."

"And be popped right into jail?" she said. "It isn't any good." He thought her eyes, in the light from the tavern, flashed momentarily a deeper color. "I *know,*" she said. "I've been there."

"You? How could *you—*"

"For making a speech."

"What kind of speech?"

"Listen to this: 'When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.' What do you think of that?"

"It sounds familiar."

"It should. That's the start of the Declaration of Independence. But they gave it a new name. They called it 'inciting to riot', and clapped me into jail." Her voice wasn't resentful. It was somberly thoughtful.

"It's all the fault of that Thomas Treadwell. If we could only talk to him face to face, we might get somewhere. We're human. We're good Americans. We don't want the earth. We just want Canton. We want it to be the decent, happy place it should be."

"You ought to tell this fellow," Thomas said.

"You can't talk to a ghost."

He started up and drove thoughtfully into the even blanket of rain. Margery's head nodded and finally came to rest on his shoulder. She didn't awaken even when he stopped at the little box of a railway-crossing guard to inquire how far it was to Maryville.

"'Bout seven and a half miles," the man said.

"Thank God Maryville isn't gaining on us," Thomas said.

"How's that?" the man said.

"Much obliged," said Thomas.

HE DROVE on for hours, straining his eyes down the road to follow the feeble lights through rain and dark, selecting turns and obliques at random in his search for what seemed a highly hypothetical Maryville. But he didn't much care.

The time came when his eyes would no longer stay open to follow the road or his mind awake to wrestle with the problem. There was just nothing to do about it. So he slid the car off into the grassy roadside and slipped down into the seat until his head rested against the back.

The warm sun shone on his eyelids and finally forced them open. He dug his knuckles in the corners and took another look at the signboard. There could be no doubt about it. The black letters fairly grinned with the news, *Canton, one mile.*

"That settles it," he said, and gave himself up to a longer period of creative thinking than he had indulged in for years. At its conclusion, he shook Margery's shoulder gently.

She came awake slowly and he was positive that dreams still lingered in her eyes. They looked like nice dreams. It was a wonderful world.

"Your cheeks," he remarked gratuitously. "It must be the early sun."

She ignored that coldly. "Where are we?" she asked.

"There's unmistakable evidence that we've driven in a circle. I've done that all my life. Don't you think it's about time I stopped?"

"Maryville?" asked Margery in bewilderment.

"No," said Thomas, "Canton—and that settles it. It's destiny. Canton can't escape me and I can't escape Canton. If we'd made Maryville, it might have been different, but now . . . Do you believe in signs?"

"I do," Margery said vigorously. "There's every sign that you've gone nuts. And, if that signboard reads correctly, we've got to make treads. Move over. I'll drive."

But Thomas didn't budge. Instead he yielded to an impulse that would have astonished old Bertha as much as it did himself. He cried suddenly, "Look out! The cops!" And before she could check his findings, he pulled her head down to his.

"You don't have to be so realistic," she protested unconvincingly against his shoulder. "You know darn well there aren't any cops."

BUT, when he raised his eyes again for another look at that morning sun, unfamiliar for so many years but now seeming to herald not only a new day but a new destiny, it was to gaze squarely into the uncompromising faces of two blue-shirted, Sam Browned policemen. They were Treadwell specials.

"We have," he murmured to Margery, "cried 'wolf, wolf' once too often."

"The jig is up, Buddy," the heavier Sam Browne said, opening the door.

Thomas sighed. "I suppose so," he said. "But before you start mussing me up, I might as well tell you I'm Thomas Treadwell."

"And so I'm Annie Laurie. Well, you can tell that to a little guy I know with a wooden hammer. You're the scab that bopped my pal or I need a new pair of goggles. What say, Bill?"

"How *is* your friend?" Thomas asked with false nonchalance as he tried to avoid the look on Margery's face. But he couldn't. It was as if a tire iron was prying up the corner of his eye. He saw first blank astonishment, then hurt disillusionment, then white fury.

"You cheater!" she whispered viciously.

"At least you believe me," Thomas said, "and that's the only possible basis upon which to start the new life. Emily Post says—"

"I'll never in my life believe another word you say!" Margery cried helplessly.

"Joel Rogers, my eye! Oh, what a rotten trick! To think that I spent all those horrid hours trying to save you from— Oh!"

Margery Manton was reduced to speechlessness and sat glaring impotently at Thomas, as the officer called Bill suggestively presented a pair of handcuffs.

But Officer Harry suddenly went a sickish white. "Hold on, Bill!" he said. "By cripes, it *is* him!"

Hurriedly he produced from his hip pocket a much-folded copy of the *Morning Clarion,* opened it with trembling fingers to the front page and compared the murky newsprint reproduction of a photograph fifteen years old with the smiling original in the jalopy. The caption proclaimed, *Plant Owner Missing.*

With horrified faces, the policemen's heads wagged from paper to Thomas.

"Awfully sorry, sir," Harry said finally. "But none of us had ever laid eyes on you before."

"That's all right," Thomas grinned. "You will—from now on. I intend to be a visible boss. Well, shall we move?"

But Officer Harry was looking hard at Margery. "Clear case of kidnapping, wasn't it, sir. Don't you think I'd better put the bracelets on? I know her. She's a trouble-maker."

Thomas set his jaw and bit on his smile. "I guess you're right," he said, taking the manacles from the policeman. He quickly snapped one on Margery's wrist, the other on his own. "Now, darling, if you will just turn the ignition switch—"

Officer Harry's face was a moon of bewilderment. "Can you drive like that, sir?"

"I don't know," replied Thomas, "but I might as well start trying. Now, you fellows just go on ahead as escort, and toot it up loud as we get into town."

The smile came to Margery's lips and eyes and chin as Thomas got into gear, and he thought it was more spectacular than any sunrise he remembered.

"The visible boss," she murmured.

Loot Lies Deep

I carried Scanlon into the lounge, and Linda followed us with the cocktail shaker

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

TWO men had been murdered by the time we found the gold, on that screwiest, crookedest of all treasure hunts. The wireless operator went first; then Buck Bosworth, wealthy rounder who had hired him.

And as for me—Bat Mason, reporter, sent along to cover the cruise—two attempts had been made on my life; and I'd finally been accused of murdering Bosworth, beaten up by the crew, and locked in my cabin.

It was a pretty business.

Mrs. Grace Taver, society racketeer who'd organized the cruise, owned the yacht *Condor* on which we sailed. But Captain Hoke Scanlon, who'd already done a stretch for second-degree murder, visited me in my cabin to let me know that he had bought the ship. Threatening me with a frameup which might hang me for Bosworth's death, he offered me an out.

I WAS to take a dinghy and slip away under cover of night, sailing for some Caribbean port. With me would go Grace Taver and Vicky Seymour, a faded glamour girl who was one of the party. Nothing was said, however, about Arthur Hislop, a chiseler whose way on this trip had been paid by Vicky Seymour. He and the captain seemed to have cooked up something between them.

And Linda Haywood, beautiful debutante of that season—Hoke Scanlon made clear his intention of keeping her on the yacht with him.

Before we reached the showdown I was expecting with Scanlon, shots burst out: Garside, the mate, had led the cutthroat crew in mutiny, and they were taking away the gold in a lifeboat and dinghies. Scanlon, though wounded, gunned a number of them down; but the ones who were left threatened to come back and take the women on board.

And then the yacht crashed, shuddered. We had run on a reef—and the lifeboat was coming back. . . .

This story began in the Argosy for December 30

CHAPTER XXI

MEET ME WITH GUNS

I WENT out of the doghouse door as if I had been shot from a catapult. Sailor-like, I thought first of the ship. She was still bumping and grinding under my feet and heeled over at a slight angle to port.

I leaped for the rail. The reef was right under us; a long streak of phosphorescence indicated the shelf of rocks upon which the *Ulvik* had foundered.

I ran to the stern bitts. The anchor chain was there, all right. Part of it, I mean. Just inboard of the stern chock it came to an end. The shackle connecting the shots showed that Hoke had guessed right.

Somebody had removed the pin, thus severing the chain. We had been moored fore-and-aft, and had been set broadside upon the reef. Obviously the bowline had been unshackled, too.

Art Hislop's gun barked from the starboard rail. I glanced by him, conscious of another sound beside the heart-stopping one of the steel hull grinding on the reef: the purring of the lifeboat's engine. There she was, just coming within range.

Even as I saw her, tiny flames winked from her bow and an instant later there was a singing crack over my head as a bullet sped past. Three or four loud clangs as other bullets struck deckhouses and hull plates.

The captain was coming out of the doghouse. He was crawling on his hands and knees. On two knees and one hand, rather, like a three-legged animal. And Linda, beside him, trying to lift him to his feet. He floundered to the edge of the deck, carefully worked his right hand—his gun hand—out ahead of him and then flopped on his stomach. He aimed carefully and sent three shots out into the darkness.

Grace Taver and Vicky Seymour were on deck, too. "If you'll give us guns," Mrs. Taver said, raggedly, "we'll help."

"There aren't any more," I snapped, hurriedly. "Get below. And you, Linda, too. No good getting yourself killed."

"Bat!" the captain said wheezily. "Duck into the lazarette. The door at the aft end of the passageway. There are four rifles there and enough ammunition to last a week. For both automatics and rifles there are bullets. Hurry. We can hold 'em till you get back."

I raced through the doghouse, through the lounge and down the companionway to the corridor below. There was a clatter of footfalls behind me. I glanced back over my shoulder. It was Linda, her face flushed, her dark hair flying.

"You'll need help," she called, breathlessly. "I can carry."

No time even to answer. As a matter of fact she was safer here, by far, than top-side. Which one of the mutineers had said he chose her—the dark one, the one who had her picture in the papers? I wished I knew. My fingers craved a hold on his throat, ached to press down on his windpipe until his eyes popped and his swollen tongue protruded.

THE lazarette was 'way aft, in the very curve of the stern. The door was open, the unshaded drop light burning as the mutineers had left it when they had ransacked the room for its bags of gold.

They had taken more than the gold, too. Emergency provisions to restock the boats were here, and in a fine mess, as if they had broken open the packing cases and selected enough additional rations to last them for days.

At the far end was a locker whose door swung with the bumping, grinding motion of the yacht. On the deck in front of the door were thirty or forty empty ammunition boxes. Had they taken it all?

No; on the shelf were a lot more. I stuffed as many into my pocket as I could manage.

"Give me some," Linda said.

There she was, right beside me. She must have heard what that sailor in the boat had said, but she looked excited rather than frightened. What in her experience had taught her—this society girl—to be useful in a catastrophe, when the

yacht was grinding herself to pieces on the rocks and when a boatload of desperate men was on its way to overwhelm the ship?

I piled the heavy boxes of ammunition into her cupped hands until she could hold no more. Beside the locker, carefully racked against the wall, were four Springfield rifles. I yanked them loose, bundled them in my arms and turned.

"Let's go!" I snapped.

But I didn't go. Not that very moment. Linda was still standing there, her eyes big and round under their heavy, curved lashes. I bent down swiftly, put my lips to hers in one hard, quick kiss, then shouldered her toward the door.

"Scram, darling!" I commanded.

Without a word she wheeled and dashed forward along the companionway, and I was hard on her heels, urging her on to more and more speed.

We went through the doghouse at a run. Grace and Vicky were both in there, looking as if the end of the world had come.

The shots from outside were loud here. The noise they made entered through the open door and bounced back and forth from wall to wall and from ceiling to floor; it multiplied the effect and sounded as if an army were at battle.

I stopped Linda short at the door. The non-shatterable plate glass, an inch thick and designed to withstand the breaking seas of ocean racing, would protect her here.

"Throw them out," I said, jerking my chin at the ammunition boxes, and slid past her.

For a moment I couldn't see, there on the moonlit deck. But I had sense enough to stoop low. Which thoughtfulness saved my life. I felt the hot air stirred by the bullet which instantly whined past me.

"The rifles!" Hoke snarled.

"Some ammunition for my automatic!" Art begged.

I dropped the rifles. Boxes of ammunition skittered on the deck. Art and Hoke pounced on them like kids after a dropped dollar bill.

Now I was beginning to see. While Art and Hoke scrambled for the rifles and ammunition I got my gun out. I still had a partially-filled clip. I threw myself face down on the deck, crawled to the scuppers on the high side and scanned the darkness for the lifeboat.

I couldn't see the boat itself, but it was easy enough to see where it was on account of the tiny threads of gun-flame which leaped out from its oncoming bow. I emptied my automatic at it but it didn't swerve an inch.

Then suddenly, and from right behind me, came the heavy bark of a service rifle. Hoke was there, his left arm useless, swiveling the barrel on the rounded edge of the scupper as if on a tripod.

He was making small grunting sounds as he breathed, but his concentration was complete. He was aiming carefully before every shot as he slammed one bullet after another into the boat out there in the moon-dusted darkness.

I ran back to get a rifle. Art Hislop picked one up, but was having some trouble with the bolt.

I shouldered him out of the way, scooped up a Springfield and some clips. But by the time I had dropped to the deck beside Hoke, his patiently searching bullets had done the job. The lifeboat had swung in a large half-circle and was heading away from the stranded *Condor*.

"That's enough, Bat," Hoke said in half a voice. Laboriously he turned his strained face toward me. "Look, Bat," he whispered, "we all of us—make mistakes. Don't let those hombres aboard, even if you have to kill every lousy one of them. You can't imagine the things—they'll do —if they get aboard and—and—"

A long sigh ran out of him. As if he were just too tired to go on, he put his cheek down on the deck and lay very still.

THAT was on Monday evening. The mutineers managed to get back aboard the yacht on Wednesday morning, just before dawn. I guess it was my fault.

I shouldn't have let myself become careless.

But after all, a man can stand only so much, and you must remember that I had taken a pretty tough going-over before the mutiny started.

What I really needed was a couple of days in bed to let my muscles—and my ribs, if one or two were broken, as I suspected—have their chance to recover from the beating I had received. A fine chance I had of anything like that!

I thought, when Hoke Scanlon passed out on deck, that he was as dead as a salt mackerel. How could I guess the quantity of blood that a man like that can lose and still live?

In the midst of disaster you can't make carefully considered decisions. You just go ahead and do the thing that appears best at the time. The afterdeck was not a pretty sight, with the bo'sun and the captain each sprawled in their puddles of blood. But there was, I thought, no hurry about them. They didn't have anything to do from now on. The sharks, too, could wait. I had the ship to take care of.

The lifeboat had come to a stop well out of range and was drifting there, so that was not a menace for the moment. I simply could not stand the horrible grinding and bumping of the lovely yacht on the rocks without trying to see if there wasn't something I could do about it.

The chances were ten to one she was a total loss even with the sea as calm as it now was—a million to one if a squall or a nor'easter came along to kick up a sea. But in the meantime I'd have to try to do something.

"Hislop," I snapped, "stay here and keep your eyes on the lifeboat. I'm going forward."

"Why?" he drawled.

"Why not?"

"Why are you going forward?"

It was in me to tell him it was none of his business, but I knew this was no time to fight with him. We had enough troubles without that.

"I'm going to see if I can do something to get us off these rocks," I said, keeping my tone level.

"Oh, all right," he returned, "but it seems to me you are getting pretty bossy."

"I am," I said. "There are three women to be taken care of. Do you know enough about boats to handle the job?"

He looked at me, taking his time before answering. "The job is yours," he said waspishly.

I knew I should get away from him before I took a swing at his puss, but I just couldn't make my legs answer the commands of my brain. I stood there, staring at him through a pink haze of anger.

"Listen, Hislop," I said, my voice low and flat and hard, "you and I have a little talk coming up. Remember you kicked me this afternoon?"

He had his gun barrel in his hands and I could see lines of strain come into his entire figure.

"Yeah," he retorted. "I kicked you. So?"

"So this, you slick-haired gigolo," I snarled, keeping my eyes on his gun, "as soon as we know the women are safe, I'm going to pull the greasy hide off you, inch by inch."

The gun barrel was moving ever so slightly. It would take me just three running steps to dive under it. But once I did get under it there would be plenty of grief. I had to pull my neck in, much as I hated to.

"Wait a minute before you start shooting, Hislop," I said with savage intensity. "You need me now. Without my help keeping off the mutineers, you and the women haven't a chance in the world. So keep your shooting at me until this ruckus is over. Then you'll have all the opportunity you want."

CHAPTER XXII

HERE COMES THE SEA

I TOOK a chance. I turned my back to him and marched forward. But I don't mind telling you that the muscles all up and down my spine crawled in anticipation

of the sudden numbing shock of a bullet.

The bullet didn't come right away, so I knew he was thinking it over. It didn't come by the time I had reached the bow, so I knew I had sold the rat a bill of goods.

I almost forgot Art Hislop while I tried to figure out what might possibly be done to save the ship. As I had guessed, somebody had unshackled the anchor chain just inside the chock and had let the outboard end slip off into the sea. Was there, I wondered, any way to kedge off the reef?

There was an electric winch I could use to drag the bower anchor up from below and an electric windlass for getting it overboard. But that wouldn't do the trick. It would have to be carried out into deep water, then the windlass could put its pull against it and possibly swing the bow off the reef.

But the spare, or bower, anchor for a yacht of this size would weigh between three and six hundred pounds. Perhaps more, since she was cruising in hurricane waters. How was I going to get that into the dinghy?

And if I managed to ease it down into a dinghy by the davits and windlass, how would I get it overboard and into the water three or four hundred feet off the starboard bow? Not a chance in the world.

Each time the *Condor* lifted and bumped against the reef it was as if someone were hammering my heart. How long could she stand it?

I dived down the fo'c'sle companionway. No water there. I ran down the long passageway which led to the engineroom. The big Diesel, sleek and polished under the drop lights, was silent. I looked through the gratings into the flywheel pit. There was water there and my spirits dropped with a thud.

Perhaps, I told myself, it was ordinary bilgewater, neglected by the crew these past few days. But I couldn't convince myself. To me it looked as if some of the plates, perhaps along the garboard strake, had been punctured by the rocks.

I went around to the controls to see if I could possibly start the motor and—with Art Hislop at the wheel—get her off the reef. But this stopped me: if her bottom was punched in, I would get her off the rocks only to plummet to the bottom as the *Ulvick* had gone. No profit in that.

I could imagine Art and the three women and myself in one of the sailing dinghies, trying to run away from the motor lifeboat. The idea stank.

I moved rapidly past the little auxiliary which was keeping the batteries charged, passed through the steel door which separated the engine room from the guests' quarters. They looked strangely deserted.

The door to my former cabin was ajar on the hook. I glanced in as I hurried past. The place was still in a mess. How long had it been since Hoke and his stewards had ransacked it, trying to find the letter I had concealed there? Days? Months?

I hurried up the stairway to the main lounge. Then into the doghouse. To my astonishment Hoke Scanlon was lying on one of the red-leather settees, and his eyes were open. He looked as if he had lost ten pounds in the past hour. His skin had a bluish pallor and his mouth looked tight and drawn.

"You're hard to kill, Hoke," I told him.

The three women were in there. Linda was standing over Hoke, a glass of water in her hand. The others were sitting helplessly on the opposite settee, just looking. They had that same vague, half-stunned look on their faces that a newspaper man often sees in the expressions of disaster survivors.

They stared at me as if they were looking right through me to the bulkhead beyond.

"What you need," I told them, bluntly, "is a good big shot of straight liquor. Then you'll snap out of it."

"Why should we want to snap out of it?" Grace Taver asked me, tonelessly. "What is there left to snap out to?"

"You're still alive, aren't you?" I said. "And there's still a million or two dollars'

worth of gold in those dinghies floating astern."

Hoke dragged in a great deep breath. "I still feel her on the rocks, Bat," he said in a voice that was hardly stronger than a whisper.

"She's still on," I replied. "She'll probably stay on unless we get a wrecking tug to pull her off before the next storm. Too bad you had to kill off all the men who could use the wireless, isn't it?"

GRACE TAVER came to life, stirred uneasily. She looked as if she were trying to gather sufficient ambition to accuse me of Buck Bosworth's murder. Then she subsided as if it were not worth arguing about—as if nothing were worth arguing about, even the presence of a man she considered a murderer.

"Linda," I said, "how about you and Vicky fixing us something to eat? Shake up a couple of strong cocktails—double ones—first. Then look over the refrigerator and cook us some steaks big enough to satisfy a cannibal. We all need stimulant and some hearty food."

"Come on, Vicky," Linda said immediately; and it occurred to me to wonder whether this wealthy girl had ever cooked a meal in her life. "Grace," she said after a moment, "you come, too."

But Mrs. Taver was too whipped down. Or perhaps she thought of the sinister crew of that lifeboat, drifting out there in the darkness. She just shook her head and sat still, gazing at us with eyes that seemed not to see what they were looking at.

Art Hislop appeared framed in the doorway, tall and solid and muscular. His uneasy gaze touched me for an instant. Then by habit it drifted to Hoke, and away.

"What's next?" he asked.

Before I answered I went into the little cubbyhole off the port entrance to the doghouse. This was the chartroom and used by the navigator in figuring out his courses. I took the book of tide tables from the rack, thumbed the pages and studied it at some length. I slapped the covers together and walked back into the doghouse.

"I don't know what's next," I said, honestly. "It's almost high tide here now, and we'll never float off—not with the list she has now. I'm going down and start the bilge pump in a few minutes, but I think this grinding she's getting has holed her so she's taking water. Maybe I can lighten her so the tide will float her off, but I doubt it."

"No," said Hoke in a husky whisper. "I can feel her. She won't—float off."

Definite strain was in Art Hislop's face and his fingers were digging into the door frame as Hoke's had dug into the rail. He turned his head away and glanced off across the water, his quick eyes searching the moonlit sea for the silent lifeboat.

"So this," I went on, slowly, "is what we'll do. That lifeboat has only a limited amount of food aboard for a gang that big."

"A week," murmured Hoke. "If they're careful."

"For the five of us," I went on, "we probably have food enough to last a month."

"Three," Hoke whispered.

Linda and Vicky came back from the service pantry with a frosted shaker and five glasses. Linda had made daiquiris, and must have used a three-ounce jigger. She poured them out. They had power.

"Gimme one," Hoke begged.

Linda looked at me.

"Give him all he wants," I said. "Nothing could kill that monkey."

We each had two or three and color came into our cheeks and our voices grew louder, more confident. Even Grace Taver perked up.

"THIS is my idea," I continued; and the girls, who had started forward, stopped and turned back to listen. "If a storm doesn't blow up and tear the hull out of us, we can stay here indefinitely.

"If I find she doesn't float off when I've pumped the bilge dry, I'm going to open the seacock and take in just enough water so we'll settle hard on the rocks and stop this motion. Then it'll be a case of

outwaiting the crew—of keeping them off the ship until they run short of provisions and have to start for the coast and—"

"You'll have to kill 'em all," stated the captain, definitely. "There's nearly two millions in those dinghies. They'll never go ashore without that money."

"Give it to them, then!" cried Grace Taver in a breaking voice. "Buy our safe passage ashore for two million dollars!"

"They'd take the money," Hoke said, "but you couldn't trust them to deliver the goods."

"Why did you hire such a crew?" she screamed.

"Wait, Mrs. Taver," I snapped. "We'll have lots of time to talk that over. We're going to plan now. We are going to stand two-hour watches on deck, keeping our eyes on that lifeboat and looking for any vessel that might pass. Can you girls shoot rifles?"

All three shook their heads. "I could learn," Vicky said, and Linda nodded in agreement.

"I'll teach you in the morning," I promised. "Anybody can shoot an automatic, once it's charged. Art will take the deck until midnight, then Linda until two in the morning. After Linda, Mrs. Taver, Vicky, and then Art again."

"And what will you be doing?" Art asked in a nasty voice.

"Don't worry," I snapped at him. "I'll be doing my share. If the boat starts toward us, all you have to do is to start firing at it whether you hit anything or not. Then we'll all pile on deck."

"I'm taking my watch," declared Hoke.

"You're going to have your bandages changed and then you're going to turn in on the divan in the lounge. We're going to feed you raw beef juice and whatever else we can to get your strength back. Personally, I don't care whether you die or not except that you are one more person who can handle a gun if need be. Is that clear?"

Hoke managed a weak grin. "It's clear enough," he admitted. "But I'm not figuring on dying. I'm coming back here when I get well and pick up the rest of that gold."

"What do you bother to get well for?" I asked, harshly. "You won't be needing the gold when you'll only live to be hanged."

"Bat, don't!" Linda begged.

But Hoke still contrived to smile. "He thinks I killed those two, Buck and Timmons, Linda," he said, hardly above a whisper.

Art Hislop was still standing in the door, watching us. There was no use my trying to argue with Hoke. After all, I did want him to use a gun to help us hold off the mutineers. I gave Art Hislop a hard stare.

"What you're supposed to be doing," I said, clearly, "is to be watching for that lifeboat. If you're going to soldier, let one of the girls stand your watch."

With an effort Hoke Scanlon lifted his head. "Yeah, Art," he said. "And if you have to shoot your gun, why don't you try to hit something?"

FOR a moment I thought Art Hislop was going to get ugly. He stared at me, and then at Hoke Scanlon, and the veins began to stand out on his forehead. If he had gotten lippy, I'd have tangled with him then and there, for my nerves were all rubbed raw. But he shrugged and swung away into the outer darkness.

"Why do you keep nagging at him?" Vicky Seymour cried in a breaking voice.

"Why do you think?" Hoke Scanlon snapped at her.

I slid my hands under him and carried him into the lounge, where the built-in divan was almost as wide as a bed. Linda followed us in, bringing the cocktail shaker. Hoke and I each had another big drink and I guess we both felt better. I know I did and Hoke's pulse became steadier. I changed his bandages so the blood wouldn't cake on his wounds. Then he dozed off, his breathing definitely more regular.

Linda and Vicky went forward through the slanting passageway to the galley. I followed them as far as the engineroom.

I made a lead line out of a piece of string and a small end-wrench and sounded the water in the flywheel pit. Then I got the bilge pump started.

It didn't do any good. When I had run the thing for twelve minutes the water was nearly an inch higher in the pit than before. And by the way the *Condor* was grinding her bottom against the reef, it wouldn't take very much longer to rip out her entire garboard strake.

Fortunately the seas weren't large, but there was enough lift to them to pick her up and put her down, and that I'd have to stop by decreasing her buoyancy. I found the seacock and opened it, standing close beside it so I could shut it the moment she stopped grinding on the rocks. The sound of water swishing back and forth on the bilges increased.

"Dinner, Bat!" Linda called, hurrying through the compartment on her way aft with a loaded tray.

And this was an unbelievable thing: Here we were, hard on the rocks out of sight of land, with no chance at all of floating off, and with a lifeboat full of armed plug-uglies just waiting for a chance to come aboard *(I'll take the dark one!)* yet Linda's voice was as cheerful as that of a cricket on the hearth.

I looked up. Her dark hair was all awry and she had a spot of soot on the end of her sweetly-curved chin and she looked as if she were much nearer seventeen than her true age, twenty.

But Vicky, following her with another big tray, was twenty-two and looked thirty. She plodded heavily along the gratings and the only color on her cheeks was that she had taken out of a box. She didn't even glance at me as she went by. She just looked ahead and that without interest, as if she didn't care where she was going so long as she followed Linda.

"Come on, Bat!" Linda called again, just as she was stepping over the combing at the afterdoor of the compartment. "I have a steak here as thick as a two-rib roast. Come and get it while it's good."

"I'll be right with you," I promised.

I could see water now sloshing over the edge of the flywheel pit. Dollops of it ran across the corrugated iron decking and then sluiced back into the bilges when it struck the gratings. But the motion of the *Condor* had changed. She did not lift so high on the waves; settled back with a heavier thump in the troughs.

I wished I knew where there were other seacocks. I would have liked to run the water in faster, before she tore out her entire bottom.

There came a time when she hardly lifted at all. Then, two or three minutes later, she remained glued to the rocks by her own weight. But I could see water now in a wedge-shaped pool along the port side of the hull. It had taken more to weigh her down than I expected.

I left the seacock open for a minute or two longer, then closed it tight. It was good to feel her steady under my feet instead of grinding away at those rocks. She couldn't sink any more. The only danger was a heavy squall or a north-easter which might carry her over the hump into the deep water beyond.

Well, that I would have to chance. If it happened, with all that weight in her, she'd go down so fast we would scarcely have time to jump overboard and cut the dinghies loose.

CHAPTER XXIII

HYSTERICS DE LUXE

GRACE TAVER could not eat. She sat before a portion of steak, crisply brown on the outside, beautifully red within, that would have done credit to the chef at the Ritz, and she couldn't even chew a mouthful. This I saw through the companionway, for I had relieved Art Hislop on deck and was having mine from a tray passed up to me by Linda.

Mrs. Taver looked as if she had seen the end of the world—her world—and perhaps she had, at that. How, after this, could she ever make a living thinking up stunts for her wealthy friends? Buck Bosworth already dead, and I'd have hated

to carry any life insurance on the rest of us.

It was messy on deck. There was plenty of blood around. And Art Hislop hadn't done anything about the bo'sun.

I did something about him. I did the only thing I could. I slid him overboard. Then, in a broom locker, I got a wet mop and did what I could about getting the blood stains off the planking.

Then it was better. I stood at the rail on the high side, letting the soft tropic winds touch my face—winds which had come from Trinidad, from the Grenadines, from Barbadoes, and from three thousand miles of ocean beyond. The stars were hot and bright, and close enough to touch.

Just to my left I could hear the rubbing of the gunwales of two dinghies, floating astern with nearly two million dollars in gold piled on the floorboards. And out there, nearly a mile away now on account of our rifles, lay a motor lifeboat, with men in it who were waiting to take our lives—and two millions in gold.

I couldn't see the thing. It was too far away to be visible in the pale wash of the half-moon. I wished it would come closer so I could keep my eye on it.

Art Hislop, having finished his dinner, returned to the deck to stand the rest of his watch. I didn't speak to him. There was something about that lug that made my back hair lift.

I inspected the rifles, which leaned against the wall of the deckhouse. I had my look to see if their clips were full. I took up the automatics, looked at them. I glanced over the boxes of ammunition to see that the cartridges for the rifles were stacked separately from those which fitted the automatics.

I went into the tiny chartroom looking for distress signals for use in the off-chance that a passing vessel should be sighted in the night.

There was a fine English-made outfit there: a heavy bronze pistol, six long-burning red flare shells, and four magnesium parachute flares. And beside it two boxes of spares, one of each kind.

I lugged the whole business to the deck, put it down against the starboard wall of the doghouse, and loaded one of the parachute flares in the gun.

Then I realized how fine a target I made—and Art Hislop as well—moving back and forth in front of the lighted windows of the deckhouse. The entire yacht, I told myself, must look like a Christmas tree.

I went down into the lounge. Hoke Scanlon had dropped off into an uneasy sleep. but there was a little more color in his face. His lips didn't look so blue.

Grace Taver was sitting in one of the big chairs, not doing anything, just watching me with that somnambulistic stare of hers. If her favorite beauty operator could have seen her now she—or he—would have keeled over in a dead faint.

Her face was like a wax mask that had been put too near the fire. It sagged. She had a couple of extra chins I had not noticed before. Even her hair showed her total loss of morale. It had lost its sheen, somehow, and looked more like a wig than ever.

I routed her out of there. What she needed was to be doing something. I got her to her feet and started her looking for some flashlights. She found four somewhere. I took one, put the other three on a table near the door.

Then I went over the entire ship, turning out all possible lights that would shine through portholes and windows.

WHEN I got back to the lounge I snapped out everything but one dim, well-shaded light over a writing desk. Linda and Vicky were there now. They had been to their cabins and had changed into slack suits and tennis shoes. That, I knew, was Linda's idea, and I glanced at her approvingly.

"I don't like the dark," said Grace Taver, suddenly. "I have never liked the dark. At night I sleep with a light in the room. Bat, turned on the lights."

"Sorry," I said. "Why give those birds out there too many breaks?"

"I don't care how many breaks they have!" she cried shrilly. "Vicky, turn on the lights."

Uncertainly Vicky took a step toward the light switch. I took her by the arm and stopped her.

"No, Vicky," I said, gently.

"Then I'll do it!" Mrs. Taver flared. "I'm not going to—"

I put out my hand and stopped her. Instantly she was a fighting fury. She went at me with her fingernails, clawing at my face. I grabbed her wrists and held them, waiting for her boiling blood to cool.

But suddenly she began to laugh, struggling all the time. Her laughter increased, while tears came to her faded eyes and she tried to pull out of my arms. Hoke Scanlon lifted his heavy lids and watched us with lackluster eyes.

Art Hislop's big figure suddenly filled the doorway. And Grace Taver's hysterical laughter continued.

I pulled my hand back and slapped her. The sound was like a pistol shot in that big room.

"Stop it!" I snapped. "Stop it right now!"

Her horrible laughter was choked off as if I had closed my fingers around her windpipe. Her eyes widened and she began to cry in great, choking sobs. The fight went out of her. She sat down heavily in one of the big chairs.

"Oh, you—brute!" Vicky breathed.

Linda gasped, put out her hand and took hold of the back of a chair, but she didn't say a word. Art Hislop came rushing in through the door, his face working.

"You rat!" he snarled. "You—"

I wasn't taking any more of that. "Shut up!" I cracked. "And don't bother me. Put your hands on me and I won't waste time fighting. I'll just blow your damned head off."

I guess it was my expression that stopped him. He stopped, all right. He stopped so suddenly that his feet skidded.

"Bat," said Hoke Scanlon, his voice hardly above a whisper, "what a team we'd have made, you and I!"

But I wasn't listening to Hoke. I was putting the full pressure of my glare upon Art Hislop.

"You're supposed to be standing watch," I said icily. "Or have you decided to mutiny, too?"

"Mutiny against what?" he said, furiously. "Mutiny against whom?"

"Against me," I said, not giving an inch. "And since you're asking, I'll tell you. For now, at least, I'm captain. So get back there on deck before I give you a going over."

It was touch and go for ten or twelve seconds. And I didn't care which way it went. I was pretty tired of Art Hislop.

"Don't be a fool, Art," said Linda in a voice that cut like a razor blade. "Can't you see? He means it."

Art, still standing motionless, glanced at Vicky, who was shaking all over, and at Grace Taver, who had her face in her hands and was bawling like a spanked baby. Then abruptly, he turned on his heel and tramped out. Vicky fidgeted for a moment or two and followed him.

I am a sucker. I never could stand seeing a woman cry.

"Linda," I said, "turn on that light near you. One more won't do any harm."

She gave me a steady look. "No," she said firmly. "If turning them out was a wise idea a few minutes ago, it still is."

I GOT out of there. I can handle men, all right. If I couldn't, I wouldn't have had what small fame I have as an amateur racing skipper. But I'm not the one to do anything with women.

You can make a pretty fair guess as to how a man will react to a given problem, a specific danger. But let's see you guess that far ahead about a woman.

Take Vicky Seymour, for instance; she had been around. She must have known this Art Hislop was a rat. Yet she yearned after him as if he had been Tyrone Power, Errol Flynn, and Robert Taylor, all rolled into one.

Take Grace Taver, a tough old campaigner if ever there was one. In her time

she had been just about everywhere, seen just about everything. Yet here she was, reduced to the consistency of a dish of warm gelatin because her plans had gone pop in her face.

If there were one woman aboard you would have thought could take the bumps, you'd have chosen Grace Taver, but now she had gone all to pieces.

Take Linda Haywood; you know what she looks like because you've seen her picture a hundred times. Would you ever pick her to win, place or show when the decks were skiddy with fresh blood, when she knew what would happen to her if those mutineers managed to get aboard, when the very foundations of life as she had once known it had disappeared in one great explosion of violence?

You would not!

It felt good to be out on deck, away from all that. It felt good even with Art Hislop sharing that deck with me, and that's saying a lot because I had had just about all I wanted of that louse.

I wasn't feeling too perky myself. My body ached. My chest hurt every time I breathed deeply. My left eye was swollen tight shut at a time when I needed both eyes and could have used a couple more in the back of my head.

Whenever I looked at Art Hislop, with Vicky standing beside him at the rail, every nerve in me craved to walk up to him, remind him that he had kicked me, and slap his puss clear around into his back hair.

Deliberately I turned away from him and walked forward along the high side, not daring to remain aft any longer for fear temptation might overcome me. We had few enough defenders aboard the *Condor* now, even counting the women. The yacht couldn't spare either Hislop or me.

And this I knew; when the time came for me to settle my account with him, one or the other of us would then and there vanish from the roll of able-bodied fighting men. That was written in the book.

CHAPTER XXIV

CAPTAIN DAMOCLES

THAT night seemed like an age. I was too uneasy to settle down and I prowled all night. Now and then I would sit in a deck chair and sleep for perhaps three minutes, perhaps five.

One after another I got the women on watch: Mrs. Taver, Lindy and Vicky. To each of them I gave one of the rifles, with a lesson in using it. I told them if they saw or heard the lifeboat they had only to point in the general direction of the thing and pull the trigger.

And if they felt like screaming, to go ahead and indulge themselves.

Mrs. Taver was in pretty bad shape. She had the jumps. And after she had scared the hair off all of us with a false alarm twenty minutes after she had gone on watch, I sent her below and took over her duty myself.

She thought she saw the lifeboat. I was up in the bow having my look around there when her gun went off and her scream tore the quiet of the night into ragged tatters.

I went back under four bells and a jingle, and by the time I got there, the others were pouring out of the doghouse. Even Hoke came stumbling out.

I grabbed up the heavy bronze pistol, pointed it straight into the air and sent a parachute flare soaring up into the darkness. It exploded at a height of about 150 feet and hung suspended there beneath its silken parachute while the incandescence of its burning magnesium lighted up the sea for a quarter of a mile around.

There wasn't anything there. Not a thing. But from somewhere far beyond the limits of its refulgence came whistles and catcalls. The sailors in the lifeboat were giving us the bird for our jumpiness.

We all looked at one another and were shocked by our own appearance. Under that dazzling white light all the natural color was gone from our faces. Only the women's rouge showed, and that looked blue, as did our lips.

"Nice going, Grace," Art Hislop snarled. "I could have used that sleep."

"I—I thought I heard voices right out there," Mrs. Taver faltered, pointing at the water only a few hundred feet off.

"Voices carry over the water at night," I said. "It's all right. I'd rather have a dozen false alarms than have them get aboard unannounced."

At my kindness she began to cry again.

"Linda," I said, quietly, "I'll stand the rest of her watch. Put her to bed."

"But I don't want to go to—" she began.

"Shut up!" Hoke snapped. He was leaning weakly against the wall of the doghouse but his face was savage. "Zipper your lip," he added, "and do what he tells you. Does he have to get into a debate every time he tells anybody anything?"

He turned, tiredly, and bracing himself against the wall with his good arm stumbled into the doghouse.

"Come on, Grace," said Linda, softly.

At that, I didn't blame her for thinking somebody was coming close to the stranded yacht. Two or three times as I prowled the deck I heard voices from across the water and stood in frozen silence, gun barrel braced on the rail, until I realized that those sounds were running with the soft night wind.

But just the same, I was relieved when the first pink glow appeared in the eastern sky and I could see for myself that the boat was riding to a light anchor just beyond rifle range.

I GOT out the binoculars, a fine German set, and looked at the boat. When I first got it into focus I had a shock. There was only one figure visible in the field of the glasses. Then I realized that the others were asleep.

But somehow that was not reassuring. Their patient waiting, I mean. They did not have inexhaustible supplies of food and water. Some of them must have been wounded and in urgent need of medical attention. That they should wait out there, then, served definite notice upon us that when they considered the time ripe they would attack.

I wished they would do it now and have it over with. I knew now what that old turkey, Damocles, must have felt like with the sword hanging by a silken thread dangling over his unprotected conk.

Did I say the night dragged by? Well, the day dragged even more slowly because after the women had taken naps to make up for their loss of sleep while standing watch during the day, there was not enough for them to do.

So I invented things, and drove them to work. After they had gotten the meals and cleaned the galley, their cabins, the lounge and the doghouse, I had them provision the two dinghies which still lay astern, heavy with gold.

I inspected the sailing gear which Hoke Scanlon had put aboard—how long ago?—in the hope that I would take the women and get out of his way.

Masts and sails were all in good shape, though since they were designed for one-class racing there was a little too much sail area to suit me. Still, you could always ease the sheets in a squall.

Hoke Scanlon was still weak, but was gaining strength rapidly. I waited all day for his fever to start, but I guess he was too tough. The clinical thermometer which was a part of the first-aid kit indicated that his temperature did not rise above 99.4 all day.

And after dinner that night he staggered out on deck, found himself a rifle that suited him and sat in a deck chair facing the starboard rail. From time to time he leveled the binoculars upon the motionless lifeboat, and when he did, his hard-blocked face set itself into a cruel and vindictive mask.

You would have thought that Art Hislop believed us all to be contaminated with some vile and loathesome disease, so carefully did he keep himself apart from the rest of us all that long, hot day.

Which was, of course, a thing I could bear with fortitude, if not contentment.

Grace Taver seemed that day to have

gotten some hold upon her screaming nerves. Or maybe it was because little Linda remained constantly near her, working with her at their chores.

Twice during the afternoon I saw Linda save Grace's nerves from a break. Both times Grace stopped working and stood by the rail, her faded eyes dully considering the motionless lifeboat out there. And after she had watched that distant boat for a while Grace's face would start working, and her fingers would begin drumming on the rail.

And then Linda, quiet and competent as always, would call her and ask for a lift on some chore she was doing. Invariably Grace would move to help her and this would ease the tension on her nerves.

ABOUT sunset we were galvanized into attention by the sight of the lifeboat heading directly toward us. We all got rifles and pistols and lined the rail. Hoke Scanlon, who was watching them tone:

"That's funny. They've got somebody's shirt tied to an oar. It's a white flag, I guess."

I got a megaphone and stood watchfully at the rail. When they were within the sound of my voice, I yelled:

"That's close enough."

Apparently the sound of their motor drowned out my voice, for they kept right on coming. I fired a shot toward them. That stopped them.

"Fire low," Hoke murmured, "and see if you can hole the bottom of the boat. Then we can pick them off one at a time while they are swimming in the water."

"If you fire before I tell you to," I said, "I'll wrap this gun barrel around your neck."

Hoke's drawn face thinned down still more. "You'll do what?"

And Art Hislop glanced swiftly at Hoke, then at me. "Tough guy, eh?"

"Tough enough," I agreed instantly. "If you don't believe it, remind me to demonstrate after we see what these lugs want."

That made sense. They both transferred their attention to the lifeboat, which was now silently drifting just within rifle range.

"Hey," someone shouted across the water. "How is it to let us come alongside and talk?"

"Talk from where you are!" I commanded.

There was a brief colloquy among the men in the boat before their spokesman—the man at the tiller—shouted again.

"We'll make a deal," he called. "Give us half the gold and we'll see that you get safely to La Guaira. We promise."

"Tell them we will!" Grace Taver begged.

"We'll kedge you off that reef," the mutineer continued, his voice very mild and persuasive, "and then you can sail straight to the coast if you want to. Or we'll come aboard and help you sail in."

"Grace is right," Art Hislop said. "Without them we're stuck here and—"

I lifted the megaphone to my mouth. "If you're figuring on getting to the coast, you'd better be starting. We're sitting pretty here right now. We don't need your help. So be on your way."

"Mr. Mason," said Mrs. Taver, her voice becoming shrill, "you're not captain of this yacht and—"

"You're wrong," I said, not taking my eyes off the lifeboat. "I'm captain until Hoke gets well enough for me to turn command back to him."

"Or I take it away from you," Hoke added, smiling inscrutably as he, too, kept his gaze upon the lifeboat. "He's doing all right, Mrs. Taver, so better let him alone."

He chuckled audibly. "Besides, I'm owner of this yacht right now. I bought it from you and it's so entered in the log. If I want to turn over command, see, to Bat, you're just a guest and you haven't anything to do with it."

IT WAS a funny thing: this man Hoke was a blackleg, a convict and a murderer. Undoubtedly, I told myself, he had come into my room, or sent someone into my room, to cut my throat.

Yet at this moment I almost liked him.

From the boat came a voice clearly across the placid sea.

"It's your last chance," it warned. "What good will the gold do you if you're too dead to spend it? Going to let us come alongside?"

"Come one foot nearer," I said, "and we'll all start shooting."

The man's voice was almost cheerful as he called. "Okay. It's you who are sticking your neck out, so don't blame us if we chop it off just under the ears."

Hoke, who had been fooling with the rear sight of his rifle, lifted the gun and took steady aim. Just as he was squeezing the trigger, I pushed the gun aside.

"You damned fool!" he blazed at me. "Do we have to wait until they board us before we kill them? Are there game laws on them? There won't be any game laws on us when they come aboard!"

"Time enough to kill them when we're sure they're coming aboard," I said.

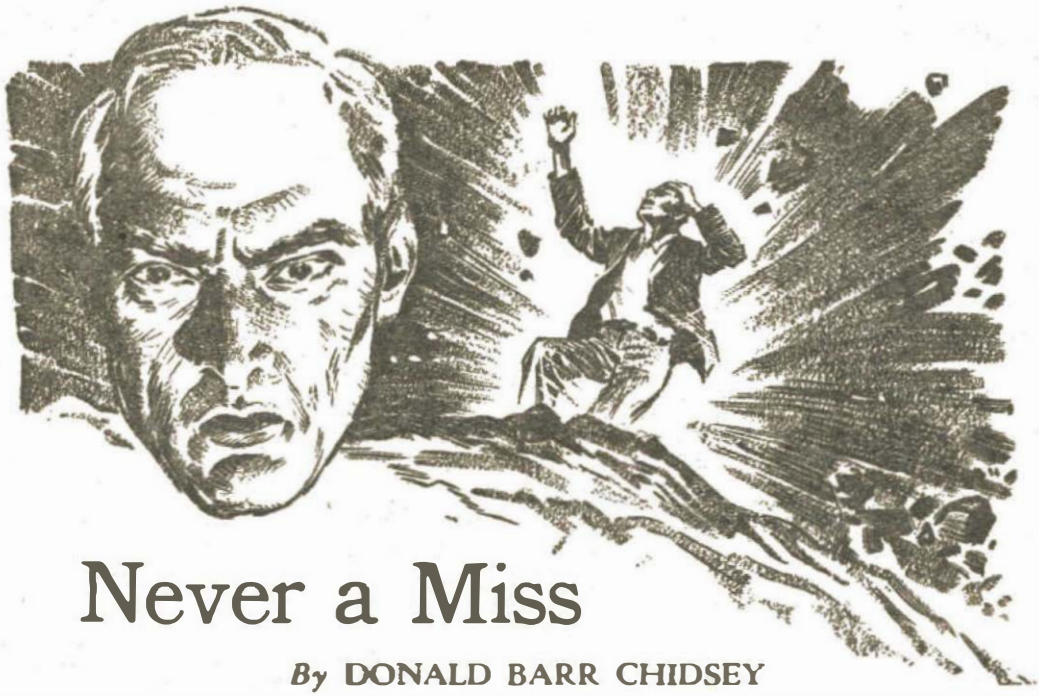
"So now you believe in Santa Claus!" he rasped. "What do you think they're waiting for if they're not coming aboard? You don't see them starting for the coast, do you?"

Out there in the boat they had circled away again and were heading out to get beyond rifle range. Once there they stopped their engine and dropped their light anchor. I took the binoculars out of Hoke's hand and counted them.

There were thirteen visible above the gunwale. Thirteen who were apparently well enough to fight. Thirteen against three men—one badly wounded—and three women. In the eyes of my mind I could see those thirteen desperate men charging murderously along our decks at night and— Oh, nuts!

Condor, I reflected cynically, was the name of this yacht. I knew a more appropriate name—*Vulture!*

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



Never a Miss

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

Author of "Chaos Is a Quiet Place," "Little Rat, What Now?" etc.

The brief history of a strange little man who created mayhem out of test tubes, who lived quietly and happily in the company of Death

KENDAL was twisted and gnome-like, and when he looked up at anybody, it seemed to be through smoke, in a murky light. Though he wasn't, he should have been a hunchback. He squinted. In his presence you sniffed saltpeter and heard small hammers echo through caves no human dared to visit; yet his meager face never suggested a beard, he had no jutting stomach but on the contrary was appallingly thin, and surely there was nothing merry about him.

Fantastic he was, yes. But you could not imagine him playing at bowls, whether in the presence of Rip Van Winkle or anybody else.

That smell, however, was not necessarily the product of an imagination affrighted by this bent, scowling midget. It could be real. Even his outer room, a narrow bedroom containing the bed, one chair and five crammed bookcases, even there the stench was choking. He seldom invited customers into the inner workroom, where the odors originated, and they seldom asked to see it. They were tough, professionally so, but there were some things they could not stand. Many, indeed, refused even to wait in the bedroom.

Kendal himself didn't mind. So saturated with the stench that he was for all practical purposes a very part of it, he worked on. It was said of him that he had not left his apartment in seven years, and that a touch of sunlight would kill him. The first part of this was probably the literal truth, and the second part was a sound enough figure of speech. As for the customers, he despised them.

Least of all did he like Joppy.

"And I want it right now, and I'm going to stay here till I get it." Joppy flipped the end of Kendal's nose with a finger. "That clear, sweetheart?"

After a moment Kendal said, "All right, I'll make up one," and started into the workroom.

"I'll come along too," said Joppy, pushing past him.

Most of Kendal's customers went about armed; not one was notably respectful of the sixth commandment. Kendal, however, had them frightened from the beginning, by the very nature of his business.

A man who handles dynamite, cordite, gelignite and blasting gelatine as though they were that much dough to be made into cakes, a man habitually banked by picric acid, dinitrotoluene, glyceryl trinitrate and such-like substances, could always point out, as now and then Kendal did, that with a jog of his elbow he could eliminate himself, his visitor, the apartment house and indeed the greater part of that particular city block.

Such a man was better treated gently. If you did plug him or sock him, how did you know what he might fall against? Kendal's customers, even when he snarled at them, were ludicrously polite. Excepting Joppy.

Joppy, having no imagination, had no fear. There was nothing defensive about his bullying: he was utterly pleased with himself. He not only did not know what propylene glycol dinitrate was, or anhydrous magnesium perchlorate, or trinitrotoluene (though possibly he had heard of it as TNT), but he didn't give a damn.

"You going to chuck this yourself?"

Kendal climbed a stool, and his shadow, after swooping and swinging on the wall, abruptly slid into a tiny formless mass. Joppy dropped into a chair, stretching his legs.

"Naturally I'm going to chuck it. What did you think I was going to do, keep it on the mantelpiece for a souvenir?"

Joppy laughed. Kendal said, "Don't throw your head too far back. If you should happen to knock over that retort—"

It was amazing how any man could hate any other man so much. It amazed Kendal himself. Ordinarily he only despised his customers, strutting morons who suddenly and sensationally had learned to make brutality pay. They came and went, here as outside, talking big for a little while, smoking expensive cigars, and then they disappeared. Kendal did not care.

JOPPY was different. Why he was different Kendal could not say. The lout was similar in appearance and manner to others who came. Brass and much noise, nothing else. But to Kendal he typified all those swaggering lunks, fawned upon by their own kind. He was more than the worst: he was the lot in a single man.

"Come on, come on! Didn't I tell you I ain't got all day?"

Kendal, impassive as a stage Chinese, went to work.

There was not much good stuff left in stock, and he was reluctant to part with it. He started to fool with sulphide of arsenic and potassium chlorate, calling himself a fool as he did so. You could never trust those chlorate mixtures. Temperamental.

"Say, is it all right to smoke in here?"

"No."

"Well, make it snappy then."

"All right, here you are. Hey! don't hold it like that!"

It was an aluminum shell, round, its only opening a slot about an inch long out of which protruded a curved lever. It was about the size of a baseball.

"You wanted it in such a hurry, so this is what you get. You're going to use it tonight, of course?"

Kendal was looking up into the fat arrogant face.

"I'm going to use it in less than an hour."

"Going to chuck it far?"

It was not like Kendal to ask questions like this. Joppy stared in suspicion at him.

"What is it to you?"

"Because it's timed. You squeeze this lever down—"

"Yeah, and then how long does it take?"

"Half a minute to a minute and a half. I can't tell you more precisely, since you

won't give me time to make you one right."

"That's close enough. Gimme."

Even Kendal gasped at the way Joppy took the bomb.

"Easy now! That thing's delicate! If that lever's moved—"

"It'll go off when you say it'll go off. You never made a miss yet, I'll give you credit. What's the matter? Nerves bad?"

"I just don't want to see you blow yourself to bits," replied Kendal with some dignity but no truth.

Joppy paid and went. Kendal, sitting down heavily, heard the hall door slammed. Kendal found some difficulty in breathing. For he'd been reminded, by that butcher, of something he seldom forgot and which only his rage could have blurred in his mind—his reputation. Morally he asked himself no questions, told himself no lies. Professionally he was touchy as a musician. He was, as he himself would have informed you, a master. Joppy had said it: he never made a miss. His contraptions did what he said they would do. He knew his job.

But that thing was going to go off in Joppy's hand. The sulphuric acid would not work its way through a capillary tube, as Kendal had originally planned. There wasn't any capillary tube. The lever would press directly upon the phial itself, which was very thin, and would smash it. Kendal had said—with a mad impulse he could not understand—that it would take half a minute to a minute and a half. Actually, the explosion should be instantaneous.

He sat breathless at the thought of what he had done.

IT WAS not often that customers asked for high explosives. The greater part of his business was in ordinary pipe bombs, filled with black powder and set off by means of safety fuses; super-giant firecrackers which made a terrific noise but seldom did any real damage—"persuaders," his customers called them.

Kendal also put up for sale very thin phials of vitriol, hydrochloric acid or nitric acid, which could and not infrequently did ruin thousands of dollars worth of suitings or dress materials in shops where the proprietor would not listen to reason. He sold bombs which splashed henna or anilin, staining things disastrously; which spread thermite fire; which corrugated and rendered opaque the surfaces of plate-glass windows, not breaking them and therefore giving the owner no opportunity to collect insurance.

On his shelves, too, were jars of pure white zinc valerate, valerianic acid crystals, ammoniated valerian, colorless butyric acid, asafetida, yellowish hydrogen sulfide which smelled like a violent concentration of rotten eggs and putrid fish. Of these and other materials he could concoct a bomb which would not only empty any place of business or amusement, but would keep it empty for two or three days.

This was business, and Kendal, though he liked it, took it for granted. Sometimes he would see in the paper accounts of damage and death caused by these articles of his manufacture; but his only feeling would be one of pride when his customers told him how wonderfully well his products had worked.

But then, he had never before put anything personal into a bomb.

HE SAT aghast. Until now his reputation had been a material thing, like a coat to be worn, like a vase which could be picked up and fondled. Until tonight he had been, or thought himself to be, incalculably above the worldliness of those thugs who came to him, hats in hand.

For perhaps twenty minutes he sat motionless, a man dazed. Then, with a little gurgling sound far down in his throat, he stumbled out of the apartment. He went just as he was, no hat, no umbrella.

It was raining, an oblique, heavy rain that was almost sleet. Kendal yelled for a taxi.

"Where'll it be, buddy?"

He had no idea. It came to him that he knew nothing at all about Joppy ex-

cept the name; he didn't even know whether that was a Christian, given or nickname. Where did the man spend his time, and with whom? Which was his gang? Why should he wish to kill somebody?

"A newsstand."

The driver stared. "I got a sporting final *Call* here myself if you—"

Kendal had remembered something, a fragment, at the time almost unheard, important now. A man who on two occasions had come to the apartment in Joppy's company had once congratulated Kendal on the efficacy of a stench bomb. "Caught 'em just as Gable was going into a clinch with Lombard, and there wasn't anybody in the place stayed long enough to see them break."

Moving pictures, then. Something to do with moving picture theaters.

Yes, here it was! District Attorney Grant stated emphatically that he would smash the Independent Neighborhood Theater Owners; he would jail those monsters of greed and violence its racketeering directors, once that courageous man James S. Radney had told his story to the grand jury. District Attorney Grant pointed out that other independent theater owners, when they saw what Radney's fearlessness brought him, would come forward and reveal threats and extortion. District Attorney Grant added that he might possibly assign a bodyguard to Mr. Radney both at his place of business and at his home at 1317 Westhall Terrace. . . .

There was a tall iron-picket fence; there was a light in a second-floor front window; and hunched below this window, inside the fence, was a shadow, a two-dimensional Joppy, his right arm drawn back, his right hand high.

Kendal yelled something, or thought he did. At any rate Joppy either heard him or

(*Please turn the page*)

LOOKING AHEAD!

THE WHITE OOMAILIK

Tim Banning was a man built for the enemy world of the North; the sinew and the granite courage of a Maine whaling clan was in him, and he could brave the knifing wind and the limitless white, frozen miles to reach the stranded men—whom he would have to conquer to rescue. Beginning a powerful novel of Alaskan adventure, by

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

SENOR FLATFOOT

The general didn't care who got shot for killing his brother, so long as the shooting took place in a hurry; and it was necessary to erase a mountain in order to do anything about it. But a certain New York shamus named O'Rourke decided to make different arrangements. A chuckle-making novelet of tinpot politics south of the Border, by

CORNELL WOOLRICH

Also fine fiction by C. K. Shaw, E. Hoffman Price, and others

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—FEBRUARY 3rd

sensed his approach. Joppy's head turned for a split second. Rain made him seem to shimmer and waver like a figure in a very old movie film.

But how the strange little fellow Kendal looked to him in that moment is, unfortunately, not recorded.

USING mirrors and specially made sticks like the teasing needles of a microscopist many times magnified, and working in the middle of a field, under a temporary roof of slats, his body protected by sandbags, the police explosives expert disassembled it.

He did a thorough job.

"Those chlorate bombs are usually amateur jobs," he reported later, "but this one was beautifully made. Except for one thing. There wasn't any sulphuric acid in the phial. The maker must have just plain forgot it, if you can imagine such a thing."

. . . "Had to think fast," Joppy told the Boss next day. "I'd squeezed that little lever, and naturally I expected the whole business to go off. So whether he saw me or not, I had to chuck it."

"Never known Kendal to pass out a wrong one," the Boss mused.

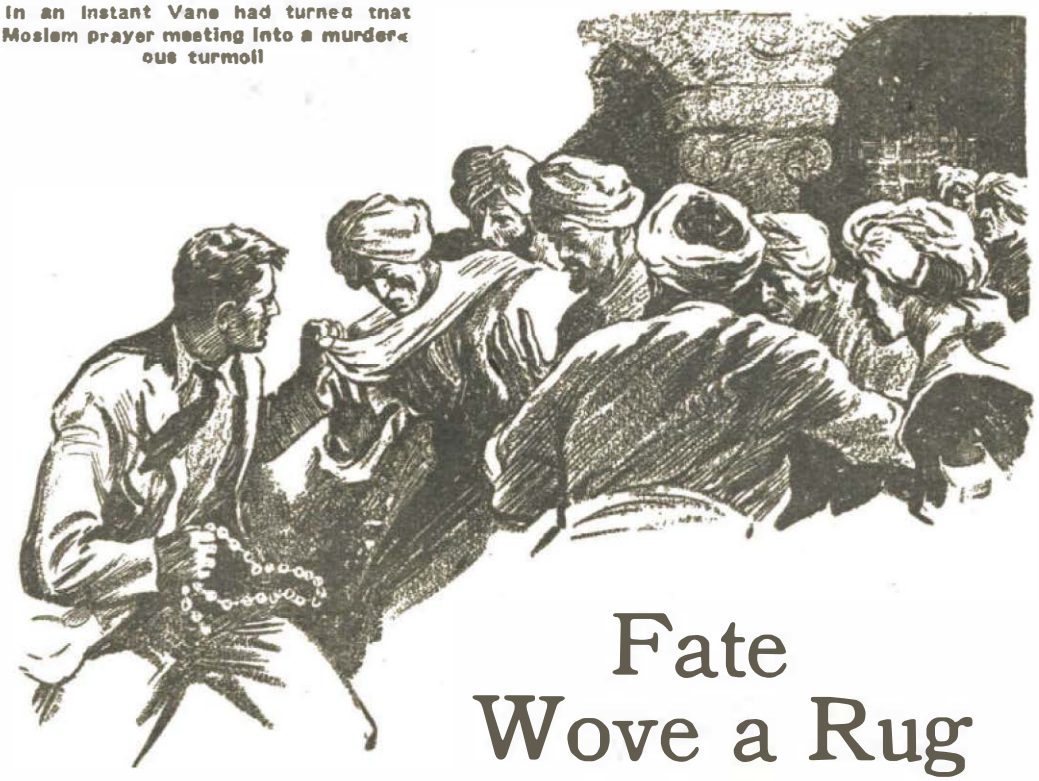
"Well, his record's still perfect." Joppy chuckled, picking up a paper. "It says here that Radney must have seen the thing come through the open window, and that he'd been suffering from fatty degeneration of the heart for some years anyway—"

"Sure, a hundred percent—perfect. Still there's something funny about it. That little guy without any hat or coat—*his* ticker calling quits on him at the same time."

"It says here it was stenosis of the coronary arteries."

"Whatever it was," the Boss replied impatiently, "it means the guy was so excited that his heart stopped. Just like Radney's. Funny thing, no matter how you look at it. . . . They haven't identified that little guy yet, have they?"

"No. It says here nobody seems to know who he was."



In an instant Vane had turned that Moslem prayer meeting into a murderous turmoil

Fate Wove a Rug

By C. DAWES APPLETON & EDWARD C. GOODWIN

NINE years ago Richard Vane was a prodigy, an expert in Persian dyes. Commissioned by an American foundation to discover and to reproduce chemically the fabulous "lost purple," Vane was trusted with the secret of the dye by the Parsees. But it was stolen from him by the servants of the hated tyrant Emir Akbar Iskender, and Vane was completely discredited. Down and out now, he is bitter and without hope—until he meets his old friend, Bahram Parviz, the Parsee scholar, under strange circumstances in New York.

Bahram Parviz has been mysteriously wounded, and Vane tends him, learning of the fantastic project which the old man has in mind. The Parsee possesses a beautiful rug, the property of his family for generations, which bears the image of a green parrot. This rug is, in fact, a map, showing the hiding place of an enormous emerald, carved in the form of a parrot; and it is Bahram Parviz' plan to search for this great jewel in the desert reaches of Iran.

The old man begs Vane to accompany him and his grandson, Jansar, and Vane agrees, for here is his opportunity to repay his debt of friendship to the aged Parsee—and to revenge himself against the Emir Akbar.

THE long arm of the Emir reaches the little party quickly, for on shipboard Vane is attacked by a Moslem who carries the brand of Iskender—a nicked left ear. At length, however, Vane, Bahram Parviz and Jansar arrive safely in Baghdad; but Vane is further disturbed by the fact that young Jansar regards him with hostile suspicion.

Then in the market place where he is making arrangements for a caravan, Vane comes on a villainous fellow of his acquaintance, Mousstaffa Ali, the wool dyer from Afghanistan. Clearly Mousstaffa has fallen from his high estate as a dyer, and his eyes hold a queer shame and a suppressed hate that intrigue Vane. Mousstaffa begs for employment, and Vane hires him, knowing there will be need of a good fighting man in the desert, which is ruled by Iskender. Vane does not see that the wool dyer's left ear is nicked. . . .

The first installment of this two-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for January 20

CHAPTER VII

THE DYERS OF YAZD

THE shadow cast by the desert fastness of the Emir Akbar Iskender was a long one. It reached out from towering walls of rough masonry across fields of waving poppies, purple and white, and made itself felt by the lonely little caravan winding across the gray face of the Dasht-i-Lût, still half a day's journey from the Oasis of Yazd.

The boy, Jansar, seemed to feel that shadow first. He dug his heels into his donkey's sides and rode closer to the tall gray camel on which his grandfather dozed, drooping wearily, muttering the interminable litanies that seemed to sustain him.

The old man rode wrapped to the nose in layers of fine wool the folds of which he put aside to smile down at the lad wanly, with a dwelling tenderness.

"Is that—it?" Jansar asked, very low. His young face was white and pinched, his eyes enormous, ringed with shadows of exhaustion, yet burning with the memory of another journey in which he had played no part. The journey of his father, Kavadh, that ended in failure, in torture, in death at the hands of the Emir. "*Agha,* is that the place—those gates?"

"The gates of the palace of Ahriman, the Evil One, himself," Bahram Parviz said bitterly. "Keep thyself warm, boy. A cold wind springs up. How fares the little bird?"

"It is warm in my breast," said Jansar. "*Agha,* I have seen many birds flying above us while you slept—great birds of prey. Vultures, many vultures—"

"I have not slept!" snapped Bahram Parviz, to change the subject. "Vane!" he called to the dim form on horseback that was turning back toward them even now. "Vane, my friend—do we make camp tonight, or push on?"

"As you wish, *agha,*" Vane called back instantly. "But for my part, I say push on. We can be in Yazd by midnight."

"Then let us, by all means," said Bahram Parviz, relieved.

Vane, Vane. . . . always Vane, the boy thought, sullenly. And my grandfather can still call him friend! He is old and forgives too easily. Does he also forget? This man has betrayed us once. Will he not do so again?

Jansar lashed his donkey and forged on ahead, alone, only to be recalled by a sharp word from the Afghan who laid a rough, restraining hand on the beast's bridle rein.

"Not so far, nor so fast, little one," Mousstaffa Ali said brusquely. "The arm of the Emir is long. He clips the wings of little parrots that try too soon to fly."

Speechless with anger, Jansar brought the whip down hard upon the big hand that had reined in his animal.

Then words came, iced with fury, with outrage. "Who gives orders to the son of my father?" Jansar said.

The Afghan grinned, turned Jansar's beast about and sent it back toward Bahram Parviz with a sharp crack across the rump.

As he drew up alongside his grandfather and Vane, the boy heard the American say, with a chuckle:

"Once there were thirty thousand caravanserais in Persia, and the greeting was *Salaam aleikum.* Now they're filling stations and the man says, 'How many, please?' "

"Yet the face of the desert is unchanged," Bahram Parviz said. "And the hearts of men."

"And false friends remain false friends," Jansar muttered, between his teeth. "And murderers, murderers!"

He rode on, looking back from time to time at the receding walls of the palace of Iskender, towering above the rock ribbed desert and the poppy fields that washed the rough foundations with purple and white. Twilight added thickening veils of violet that darkened rapidly, blotting out the scene as the thin caravan crawled on, silent now except for the shallow, discordant music of camel bells.

There was beauty here, but he had no heart for it.

THE boy was nearly asleep in the saddle when they entered the Oasis of Yazd shortly after midnight and put up at an hostelry for the remainder of the night. Bahram Parviz had Parsee friends at Yazd. He proposed to call upon them in the morning and make other arrangements for their sojourn.

Vane stood alone on a roof top that night, watching the moon grow pale over the ancient buildings of the Oasis.

The old man and the boy, and even the fierce Afghan who had saluted the gates of Yazd with a gesture of hatred, were asleep.

What a fool I was, Vane thought savagely. What a fool! I had the chance of a lifetime in this place. And I had to miss!

It came back to him in a sickening rush—the scene his eyes had fallen upon that last morning when he went to his laboratory on the edge of the fabulous waters of Yazd, those legendary waters whose solvent properties contained a portion of the mystery of the priceless purple of ancient Iran. He found ruin. Chaos. His equipment destroyed, his notes scattered, torn into confetti.

But that was not all.

He was called before the local council and fined exorbitantly—almost to the last *khran* of the amount the De Longue Chemical Research Foundation had placed to his credit.

It had been a magnificent, a truly Oriental cleanup. With a law glibly quoted to refute his every claim, an edict to match every protest, and more fines to silence him.

For in the lavish destruction of his belongings there had been one exception. He marveled now at the exceeding care with which it had been guarded from damage—that small case of aniline dyes, the sample vials that he had been warned by the Parsee *panchayat* and by Bahram Parviz, himself, not to try and transport into Persia.

His protests, reasonable, at first, then passionate and profane, as hope ebbed, had fallen like spent bullets at the feet of the aged blind man who sat in judgment upon him.

That was one more thing to make the whole affair incredible to him in retrospect—that blind leader of the artisans of Yazd, master dyers, every one. And this man with the white filmed eyes and long, prehensile fingers was their master. He could distinguish by touch the last detail of patterns he would never see again—this man who was called *tudjar,* and who ruled the town.

And behind the *tudjar* loomed the [illegible]st, intangible, incorporeal shadow of his overlord, the Emir Akbar Iskender.

To Vane's desperate, infuriated eyes that shadow seemed to soak up the deepest purple, the mysterious hue that lay just beyond his tantalized grasp, the closely guarded secret of the Parsees.

For everything had been confiscated, even the paper on his person. The formula he carried in a money belt about his waist was gone and was now, he knew, in the possession of Iskender.

There was ample proof of this in the flood of Persian purple that inundated the rug industry from that day on.

Vane tried to duplicate that formula in the few days that remained to him at Yazd. Aided by Mousstaffa Ali, the Afghan, he labored with his broken equipment, straining frantically to remember the constituents of the dye. But the task was hopeless.

His money was gone, his life in danger hourly. He could not die without making some sort of report to those who had trusted him with money and with more than money.

He left Yazd and returned to the United States with the tale that broke him. The truth, which was met by the scientific world with scornful laughter.

All this passed in review before him that first night of his return to Yazd, as he stood smoking on the roof of the caravanserai, looking out over the lightless city.

The present he forgot.

HE did not know that beneath him Bahram Parviz slept but fitfully, thinking of his murdered son, his aged mind tracing the intricate pattern of his rug, planning each step of the exploration of the ancient garden where the emerald parrot must be hidden.

He did not know that the Afghan, Mousstaffa Ali, did not sleep at all, but paced the narrow confines of his room like a great cat, lashing himself to a frenzy of fanatical hatred now that the object of that hate was within his reach. The man who had robbed Mousstaffa Ali of his pride, his inherited pride of artisanship, the man who had reduced him from the rank of "dyer of reds" to one that ranked beneath the most despised of all —the lowly dyer of black. Less now even than a dyer of black, Mousstaffa Ali was crazed with the blood lust of Khorassan, and to satisfy that lust, blood must be shed, even though it be his own.

Mousstaffa, the Afghan, knew that they had not entered Yazd unseen. The darkness of the town was wholly deceptive.

Mousstaffa knew that there were eyes upon them as they rode into the courtyard of the caravanserai. That even now in the house of the blind *tudjar* there must be a hastily summoned gathering of the master dyers of the town, to discuss and vote upon what action might best be taken to rid the Oasis once more of the invading foreigner.

But Mousstaffa Ali had but one hope, one ambition. He cared less what happened to Vane and the two Parsees than he cared for the direction taken by one hair blown from his own head. He was a discredited man. He was an outcast from the trade he loved. And knowing that it might cost him the right hand he needed, Mousstaffa Ali proposed to be reinstated in his craft. But how? That problem kept him long awake pacing the narrow confines of his room, while the American smoked overhead.

The boy, Jansar, awoke once, precipitately, as if he had been called. Wide eyed in the darkness beside his dozing grandfather he sat erect, listening most acutely.

There were footsteps, pacing to and fro. In the room next to his and also over his head. Two sets of footsteps, pacing restlessly.

Jansar held his breath. Then, still holding it in almost complete suspension, he crept from beneath the rug that covered him and passed through the arched doorway that led from his chamber to that of the Afghan, Mousstaffa. It was empty.

Jansar continued his explorations.

On the rooftop the American stood looking out over the city, his cigarette glowing in the moonlight, a dot of burnished gold on a veil of silver.

With a sudden start the American dropped the cigarette and crushed it with his foot, his tall body bent in an arc of tension as he peered over the edge of the roof into the quiet street below.

Then he set his hand on the edge of the low parapet and, to Jansar's stunned amazement, vaulted into the darkness.

The boy ran to the edge of the roof and looked over, expecting to see Vane lying at the foot of the wall, broken. But he was running along a narrow ledge of stone on which the wool dyers aired their skeins by day. Running with his long body bent low, intent and purposeful. He disappeared into the shadows.

The boy hesitated only for an instant, then followed Vane.

HE dared not take that leap into darkness, but let himself down cautiously, hanging by his hands until he was fully extended; then he shut his eyes tight and let go. He landed on the narrow ledge and crawled forward in the direction Vane had taken.

Jansar's suspicions of Vane had become an obsession with him. He longed for some proof of the American's double dealing, something that would open his grandfather's eyes.

He saw Vane now in a patch of moonlight ahead, leaning forward, looking down into the street once more, and heard him say low and urgently:

"Mousstaffa! Mousstaffa Ali!"

Jansar thought scornfully: Good! They are birds of one feather. Perhaps I can snare them both with a single cord.

But there was no answer from the street below.

Vane moved on, disappearing into darkness, and the boy followed him quickly, jumping from the end of the ledge to the adjoining roof top which was suffused by a faint, reddish glow.

He heard a murmur of voices and the glow deepened as he sped on, and presently he saw that voices and glow both rose from the central courtyard of the house on which he stood. But there was no sign now of the American.

Jansar crouched low and crept toward the opening.

He fell back, startled. Immediately beneath him now was a gathering of many men, seated in a half circle about a large brazier of charcoal that cast a lurid glare upon their multi-colored robes and dark, intent faces, gleaming upon their eyeballs as they stared at a man who sat alone, confronting them.

The walls of the courtyard were banked with many large looms on which were rugs and carpets in various stages of development, and the boy Jansar caught his breath at the magnificence of these weaves, the riot of color and design. By these rugs Jansar knew that this was the house of the *tudjar* or head man of the town, master dyer, mayor, banker, notary and chief magistrate.

And the men gathered before him were the dyers of Yazd.

That it was a secret conclave Jansar knew, also, because their costume was forbidden by the Shah's edict decreeing "international" or European dress, whereas these men wore each the garb of his own art. The dyer of yellows was stained from head to foot with the tints drawn from saffron and sumac roots, from tumeric and ochra; the dyer of blues was bright with indigo, and the dyer of reds resplendent with the rich tints of madder and sheepsblood, beetroot and Campeche wood and rochella, the lichen that grows on the rocks of Eastern seas.

Beside these were the dyers of greens, browns and grays, and the despised black —the viciously corrosive black that is made of iron filings, vinegar and rind of pomegranate.

The dyers sat, crosslegged, on fine carpets while ranged behind them were their assistants and apprentices, their clothing daubed with the same honored tingents.

Jansar's eyes, like twin saucers of black enamel, traversed the glowing chromatic crescent and came to rest upon the star between its cusps—the *tudjar* himself, garbed in white.

The face of the *tudjar* was fat and dark and glistened with its own oil. He wore an enormous turban to which he raised his hands frequently, adjusting the folds with long, prehensile fingers curiously slim. His lips moved as he addressed one man or another who responded instantly, yet he did not turn his head, or move his eyes that were fixed upon a point above the charcoal brazier.

And these eyes made Jansar suck in his breath with a little gasping sound of disgust and fear, for they were white. White eyes, opaque and lusterless, filmed with ophthalmia.

Jansar shuddered, and felt sick.

His gaze, averted from the *tudjar*, fell upon a long dark form lying at full length on a tile-topped wall some twelve feet high, skirting the courtyard on three sides. The fourth side was formed by the house, on whose roof Jansur now crouched.

The man on the wall, not twenty feet away, was Vane. He lay with his chin cradled in his folded arms, surveying the scene below as if he were at a play performed by mountebanks.

CHAPTER VIII

WHITE EYES OF JUSTICE

BUT even as Jansar looked at him, Vane stiffened, lifting himself slightly, for the voices in the courtyard had risen angrily.

Then Jansar saw what his dazzled eyes had failed to see before: Mousstaffa Ali standing some paces from the *tudjar,* erect, defiant, yet with his wildness somehow subdued, as if he stood at the bar of justice. Beside him stood a figure brilliant with a hundred shades of purple, violet, heliotrope and lavender—the dyer of purples.

The lost purple of Iran! The purple of the Parsee formula, the closely guarded secret of the *panchayat,* the formula the American had lost. This hue could only have come from that, Jansar Parviz, the weaver, knew.

The hubbub of voices ceased abruptly at a word from the dark lips of the *tudjar.* In the silence that followed Mousstaffa Ali stepped forward and began to speak, sweat beading his swarthy face.

Simple words. And few. The rough, strong dialect of the Afghan mountains fell from his lips like blows from a weapon. Yet they were words of pleading, passionate and proud.

Mousstaffa Ali, the man of Khorassan, desired to be reinstated in his craft. To be restored to his post as an *al boyajji,* beloved of the Prophet.

"I did no wrong!" he cried. "I served the infidel as do you all, because it was my trade! Yet when he was gone I was spewed forth from the *boya khaneh* like some stinking carrion, rejected of vultures!"

"Silence," commanded the *tudjar.*

And there was silence once more. No man moved or seemed to breathe. Mousstaffa Ali, himself, stared at the *tudjar's* blind eyes now as if he sought in their cold, lusterless film the judgment of the brain behind them.

The *tudjar* said then, slowly: "You have asked for justice. Justice will be done. You ask no more?"

"No more," said Mousstaffa Ali.

The boy, Jansar, shot a glance at the American who had lifted himself upon his elbow now. The Afghan is a son of Islam and my enemy, the boy thought grimly, yet he is a man. In the hour of danger would Vane stand so firm?

The voice of the *tudjar* below recalled him to the scene.

"The cloth!" the blind *tudjar* commanded, and immediately it was spread before him, a white cloth, thick, probably of wool. It had a ceremonial look; it belonged to a ritual. The boy chilled to see it.

"Now bring the sword!"

The red glow of the brazier bathed the naked blade with crimson, glistening and dark, and the Afghan stared at it, rigid, like a man already transfixed. Like a man who knows his doom.

Jansar wished to be brave. But his small body shrank and he gnawed the back of his hand until there was the taste of salt in his mouth. A fleeting glance at Vane showed him the American crouched on the wall now, like a creature poised for the spring. He will do nothing, Jansan thought. What can *he* do? They would tear him as hawks rend a fowl. He would not dare—

"Justice," said the *tudjar,* again, and the word had a mocking sound. "Listen well, Mousstaffa of Khorassan. You have been an *al boyaji,* a dyer of reds, beloved of the Prophet. So shall you be again! The price is small to pay. You know the edict of the Shah which forbids the false dyes of the infidels from entering the land of our fathers. You know the law of our ancient brotherhood. He who defiles with false dyes one *batman* of honest wool . . . what is the price he pays, Mousstaffa of Khorassan?"

Mousstaffa Ali's throat worked, briefly, convulsively.

Then, slowly, he held out his right hand and gazed at it, as if it were no longer attached to his person.

"Your right hand," affirmed the *tudjar.* "And the blood of your veins must dye this cloth. That is the law!"

And from the throats of the dyers came a low, moaning sound of affirmation. A strange sound, without any note of imprecation, without passion, without pity:

"That is the law!"

RIGID, motionless, his desperate yellow gaze fixed upon the white eyes of the *tudjar,* Mousstaffa Ali stood with his

right hand extended over the white cloth upon the ground.

The sword, held now by the dyer of purples, rose in a gleaming arc and hung suspended for an interminable moment. Then it was lowered carefully, slowly, to mark the place upon the wrist where the blow must fall.

The boy Jansar sobbed noiselessly, just once. He had no love for this son of Islam. Yet every nerve in his body rebelled against this outrage.

The sword rose again, swiftly, decisively—

But the American on the wall said: "Hey, there—wait a minute!"

And Vane landed with a gentle thud of rubber soles precisely in the middle of the proceedings.

Again the sword was lowered. The dyer of purple looked at the *tudjar*.

The boy Jansar fought down a wild giggle of relief. What good could come of this? The American was insane! He heard Vane say in the Iranian tongue:

"This is not justice! This is not the law! There is nothing in the edict of the Shah that decrees that any man shall lose a hand, or any member, for such a misdemeanor."

But his words were drowned in an uproar of voices as the dyers narrowed their gaudy circle and pressed him menacingly.

Then silence fell again in obedience to the *tudjar's* uplifted hand and the bright tide of robes receded slightly, leaving a small space clear about the four central figures in the drama. Watching from his rooftop, Jansar knew, with the ancient wisdom of the East, that such dramas end in blood and do not end, ever, until that seal has been put upon them.

"This voice," the *tudjar* said. "It has been many years since I have heard this voice raised in protest against my judgments!" He was smiling now—not a good smile. A writhing of dark lips that showed no flash of white behind them, only greater darkness. "Have you been wise," the *tudjar* asked, "to return to Yazd?"

"*Agha*—go!" said Mousstaffa Ali, harshly. "I thank you, but go, while there is time."

"No," Vane said. He was calm, had been calm until that moment. But that calm exploded when many dark hands reached out to persuade him roughly, when dark bearded faces pressed about him and the smell of spices and sweet tea warmed and thickened by the breath of alien bodies crowded him too closely. Suddenly, blindly, he struck out.

Then Jansar saw all that riot of color break and pack and whirl together like a child's toy made up of many pieces, like a kaleidoscope.

He saw the flash of a bright sword—but it was in the right hand of Mousstaffa Ali now, not severing his wrist. And the American was fighting with his fists, as was the violent habit of his kind, laying about him with smashing, flailing blows that registered with almost mechanical accuracy.

Jansar danced on his dark roof and squawked with excitement. But the shout of exultation gagged him suddenly when he saw that Vane was cornered in an angle of the wall, cornered and reeling, bleeding from the cut above his eye, fighting still but more slowly. He was one man against five who, luckily, were much in one another's way.

Then Mousstaffa came to him, laying about him with the flat of the big sword, and Jansar was glad of that because too much blood now would mean more blood later on, much more—the blood of the stranger and subsequently, no doubt, his grandfather's and his own.

Mousstaffa must know that, because he was using the sword like a rod, beating them with it, making clear a passage for Vane to escape from his corner, which he did.

But the dyers were mad with fury now. There was no hope in anything but flight.

And the American saw to that. With a violent lunge, Vane dived for the great brazier of live coals that was the sole illumination of the courtyard. Seizing it by one end, he tipped it over, scattering the

fire like a shower of meteors. The bright coals flashed in arcs and skipped across the earthen floor like flat stones on the surface of a pond.

Then there was darkness filled with shouts and curses. Jansar heard a familiar chuckle as a long body hurtled past him, followed by another, and he knew that Vane and the Afghan were running back over the rooftops to the *serai* and that all he had to do was follow them to be safe.

LATER, in his grandfather's room at the *serai,* Jansar brought sweet oil and many cloths and bound up the American's burned hands, like a small brother. His dark eyes dwelt upon the American's battered face with passionate approval, and Vane knew that this was victory, indeed.

"*Agha,* I'm afraid we'll have to get our little treasure hunt started tomorrow, early. I don't trust these hyenas," he said to Bahram Parviz. "The *tudjar* is going to think up something clever to make it harder for us."

Bahram Parviz nodded gravely. "Let us start at dawn," he said. "I know the situation of the garden, less than half an hour by camel from this place. We shall see."

But Vane was disturbed. "I'm afraid I've messed things up again," he said uneasily. "But you couldn't have stood there and seen a man's right hand cut off, *agha!*"

"I know that *you* could not, my friend," said Bahram Parviz, smiling. "You should not be exposed to the troubles of another. You are too susceptible to infection."

Vane chuckled. "It's as good a sickness as any other to die of."

"It is one you may well die of," Mousstaffa Ali said darkly. "If he dies—the man we left in his own blood back there in the courtyard of the *tudjar.*"

Vane whirled to confront him.

"Did we hurt somebody?" he snapped. "How much?"

"Enough," said Mousstaffa Ali, with relish. And then, as though it were an afterthought, he added complacently: "And he is a cousin of the Emir, himself—of the Emir!"

CHAPTER IX

THE SHADOW OF ISKENDER

IT was a ghostly caravan, the little string of animals that wound out of the Oasis of Yazd at dawn to find the garden of the rug. Too little sleep and the sharpened apprehensions of Vane and the old man made them both irascible and argumentative for the first time in their relations.

They disagreed about the figures in the rug, the directions indicated. The boy was called upon to resolve these points.

The place was no longer, properly speaking, a garden. Overgrown with weeds and wild vines, it lay at the foot of a wall of rock.

The figures in the woven diagram led inescapably to that place, following the tangled growth of ancient plants and trees that had once been carefully planned. Roses, apricots and laurel, poplar and pomegranate, and winding in between and among them the thin trickle of what had once been a crystal stream—all these were here, precisely as patterned in the rug.

And when the green parrot flashed from the background of the rug under Jansar's expert manipulation of the fabric, it was seen to occupy a position exactly in the center of the wall of rock.

Baffled, Vane stood looking up at it. There was no apparent opening.

Vane looked down at his bandaged hands, then up at the sheer face of the rock traced here and there with ropelike fibers of old vines, honeycombed with small crumbling indentations which hardly offered foothold.

"I'm going up there and look around," Vane said to Bahram Parviz.

But the boy protested instantly. "Let me go!" he begged. "I am small, light."

Mousstaffa Ali put in his word. "It will not hold your weight, or mine, *agha,*" he said to Vane. "Look, this young tree. If we climb this tree together, the combined weight of both our bodies will bend it toward the rock and I can begin to climb from there."

"Good!" Vane said. "Let's go. But I'm doing the climbing." He turned to the boy Jansar who was pale and heavy eyed with loss of sleep. "Keep watch," he said. "Somebody may have followed us. How much of a whistle have you got?"

"On my fingers," Jansar said, grinning, "plenty, Mr. Vane."

"I'll be listening," Vane told him, with an answering grin. "I ought not to be more than an hour."

But the Afghan shook his turbaned head. Time was for men, not goats, he thought; and only a goat could scale that crumbling wall of stone.

The sun was high, beating heady scents from the thick undergrowth, pressing down the boy's heavy eyelids with hot fingers, when Vane reached a point less than a third of the way up. His big body was dwarfed by the glaring wall of stone, spread-eagled, clinging with toes and knees and the fingers of the burned hands.

The Afghan was still in his tree, watching Vane's progress from that vantage point, and Bahram Parviz sat crosslegged on the ground beside the spread rug, dozing, with his back against a pomegranate tree.

Jansar stretched himself at full length and tried to keep his eyes focussed on Vane's inching form; but the glare, the heat, the mingled scents of the old garden fell upon him like the slow, inexorable progress of a drug. And he slept. . . .

He was roused by loud outcries and lamentations from his grandfather, and a noise of bushes beaten by the crashing progress of three men who were running from the scene.

The rug was gone!

JANSAR set his sick lips to his fingers and sent a piercing whistle out into the hot blaze of noon. His eyes were stung with tears of furious shame, blind with them so that he did not see Vane scramble down the face of the rock with five times the speed of his laborious climb. When his vision cleared, he only saw that the face of the rock was bare and for one sickening moment he thought the American had fallen.

Jansar turned his face to the trunk of a tree and beat upon the rough bark with his fists, choking back the sobs that unmanned him. Then, as a big hand fell upon his shoulder, he whirled to find Vane looking down at him with great understanding, yet with no humiliating softness in his bloodshot blue eyes. There was cool displeasure in his lean, tanned face; exasperation, but not anger.

"That was a pretty dumb trick, kid," he said. "Asleep, eh?"

"Yes," said Jansar. His black eyes did not waver, but his sick soul was in them. A beating would have been better than this.

Vane shook his shoulder lightly. "Okay," he said. "They've got the rug. Let's go get it!"

And Jansar nodded, mute.

"There doesn't seem to be any opening up there at all," Vane told Bahram Parviz on the way back to Yazd. "Do you recall anything else in the design that might suggest another angle of approach to that rock?"

The old man considered. He was pallid with disappointment and exhaustion, his pitted temples throbbing with a quick, uneven pulse. Then he shook his head.

"I should have to see it before me now, to know," he said. "And I feel that I shall never see it more. One of those men, Vane, had the ear."

Vane was silent. Iskender. If it was, in truth, Iskender's men who had taken the rug there was slim hope of recovering it now. The walls of the Emir's palace back there on the caravan route to the north were thick and strong and tall. A man would need some special passport to enter there, and there was none that would take him out.

Mousstaffa Ali, brooding also, fingered the nicked lobe of his left ear. But he said nothing.

No words came to Jansar's lips at all that day, and no food passed them except a little cool sherbet and hot tea flavored

with cardamon in the Afghan style, brought to him by the man of Khorassan whose savage face was a riddle. The boy studied it in the lavender twilight of the small room at the *serai* where he rested by his grandfather's orders. He had slept heavily, waking with a vague plan stirring in his feverish young brain.

Jansar fingered a small, cool object in the folds of the girdle he wore over his robe. It was a weaver's tool, fashioned like the blade of a knife with a small hook at the end. He was never without it.

"Wait," he said, suddenly, as Mousstaffa Ali moved to leave the room. "In the palace of the Emir Akbar Iskender—do they make rugs in that place, Mousstaffa?"

Mousstaffa Ali stopped short and stood with one foot slightly off the ground, like an animal arrested. His back was turned to Jansar. His tawny eyes flared swiftly, briefly, and his tight lips showed the flash of his small, pointed yellow teeth.

"Yes," said Mousstaffa Ali. "Rugs are made there. By boys, like yourself. Fine rugs such as are best made by small fingers. When the fingers grow too large—" he stopped.

Jansar's eyes were burning now with the light of a purpose. "Yes?" he said, quickly. "When they grow too large?"

"There are vultures that fly over the palace of the Emir," Mousstaffa Ali said. "Many vultures."

He went away.

That night, while the great birds huddled in the stony crevices of the ancient walls of the palace of Iskender, a small figure on a large donkey brightly caparisoned rode along the caravan route to the North.

This was Jansar.

The poppy fields flowed purple and white about the foundations of the castle, and the feet of the donkey pressed them down as Jansar circled the great building, looking for an entrance.

Then moonlight fell upon tall gates of brass, dark and corroded by time, embossed with Arabic inscriptions, texts from the Koran.

Jansar rode close to them and pounded upon them with his fist. They resounded with the metallic thunder of a massive gong. Then after a moment they parted for the narrow space of a yard and Jansar spurred his donkey forward with his heels, muttering a prayer and a promise, and the name of his father, Kavadh.

Above him the great gray vultures stirred, revolved and plumed themselves with their fierce beaks, then settled back into the light slumber that was, in fact, a vigil.

The massive gates closed noiselessly behind him.

CHAPTER X

THE GREEN BIRD KNOWS

"VANE! Vane! The boy is gone! Vane, my friend!" It was Bahram Parviz' voice, edged with frenzy, tearing through the thick veils of sleep. Vane stirred heavily, then lunged into full consciousness to find the old man bending over him, clawing at his shoulder, his bearded face blanched and distracted, piteous in the peacock tinted dawn light that filtered through the latticed window.

"Gone?" Vane exclaimed, swinging his legs over the rug covered divan on which he had been sleeping. He ground the sleep out of his eyes with his fists. "Where? Where's he gone?"

"I can only fear," Bahram Parviz said huskily. He covered his face with his hands on which the veins stood out corded and knotted.

Vane looked past him and saw Mousstaffa Ali in the doorway, half dressed. His head was bare of the great turban he wore habitually.

"Look, *agha,*" he said, thickly, as if sleep still befogged his brain. "From the window—"

Vane pushed aside the jalousie and looked down into the narrow street. There was a shuffling sound of many feet and he saw many forms, shadowy in the dim light, moving all in one direction, bearing aloft a narrow stretcher like object covered with a cloth. A funeral cortege . . .

"The cousin of the Emir, I take it," Vane said sardonically.

He looked at Mousstaffa who had come to stand beside him. The big Afghan was tugging reflectively at his left ear, fully exposed for the first time since Vane had seen him.

Suddenly white faced, shaken with fury, Vane struck the Afghan's hand from his ear and examined the lobe from which a small, triangular segment had been removed. Vane wound his hand in the man's loose robe and dragged him back into the room.

"Where is he?" Vane roared. "What have you done with him? Answer me, son of a camel! Where is the boy?"

But Mousstaffa's straight tawny gaze rebuked him. He stood stock still in Vane's grasp and said, simply:

"It was none of my doing, *agha.* But I can guess. He has gone to the nest of the vultures, to find the beak that plucked forth the eyes of his father."

"How do you know?" Vane snarled.

"It is what I should do," Mousstaffa Ali said, "were I his father's son."

"He is right," Bahram Parviz said with weary despair. "Jansar has gone to the palace of Iskender. There can be no doubt of it. He feels the loss of the rug keenly, because he slept at his post."

Vane was silent for a moment. Then: "You can get me into that place, Mousstaffa. With the ticket you wear in that left ear!"

"Yes, *agha,*" said Mousstaffa Ali. "Yet I am not the slave of my ear. This was done to me in hate. I—" His rough voice changed strangely. His yellow eyes went wild. "I have a sister."

Vane looked at him keenly.

A sister! The arc of memory flashed back to a face that was the twin of Mousstaffa Ali's, save that the features were more delicate, the sharp teeth smaller, whiter, the eyes more golden, fringed with curling lashes black as coal.

Vane saw again the golden serpent gleaming at her throat, the long white hand darting at a whipping purple scarf that was like a petal stripped from a giant opium poppy, and heard a woman's voice saying sullenly:

"*I* would wear the veil! But my master —he is *Shaitan* himself and only I know what he wears above his heart!"

VANE understood. The girl on the ship was the sister of Mousstaffa Ali. And the women of Khorassan did not go abroad unveiled of their own free will, nor with the consent of their fathers and brothers. Seeing that look of insane fanaticism on the face of Mousstaffa Ali now, Vane knew that he had in him an ally who would slit the gullet of the Emir Akbar Iskender in the name of the Prophet—and count himself nearer Paradise for the deed.

Vane said, "It might be possible to gain entrance to the Emir's palace, then?"

But Bahram Parviz said flatly, "You attempt the impossible, Vane. It is suicide!"

"Worse, I think," Vane said curtly, "if I don't. Look, *agha*—this man Iskender, is he a true son of the Prophet?" And out of the tail of his eye he saw Mousstaffa's face convulsed with hate.

"No," said Bahram Parviz meditatively. "I believe that he is not. All the world may see how a man prays, but not the faith that is in his heart."

"He is *Shaitan* himself," the man of Khorassan muttered, venomously.

Shaitan himself . . . Vane remembered that the girl on the boat had called him that and more. She had told him that he would not find what he sought until he found the *imam. Imam,* he thought, puzzled. That meant "priest," and it could also mean leader, or head man.

"What have we to offer such a man as Iskender?" said Bahram Parviz bleakly. "Nothing! Not even a rug. That would have been enough to ransom even the son of Kavadh. But Vane!" The old man's face lighted suddenly with the flame of inspiration. "The parrot!"

"Would that do the trick?" Vane asked doubtfully, "if we had it?"

"The gem is fabulous—unique!" cried Bahram Parviz. "To a collector like Isken-

der—certainly! A thing he cannot buy!"

"But we haven't got the rug," Vane said, ruefully.

"I think I can remember," Bahram Parviz declared. "Come, let us go back to the garden. I will try—"

Try, Vane thought bitterly. We'd better succeed. With that dead Moslem on his way to the Emir for proper burial, we'd better make connections and quickly. His brain sickened at the word that rang in it now: "reprisals." That kid alone in a castle full of lamenting sons of Mohammed!

But when they stood once more beneath the wall of rock, rose and gold now in the light of sunrise, Bahram Parviz was forced to admit that his memory would serve him no further.

Vane looked up at the blank face of the rock and said thoughtfully: *"Agha,* why did the parrot come and go like that in the rug? What did it hide behind?"

"It was so woven," Bahram Parviz said, with the weariness of despair, "that it was concealed only by a trick of light on the face of the rug."

Vane's narrowed eyes squinted meditatively.

"So," he mused aloud. "A trick of light, eh? . . . Mousstaffa, let's go! *Agha,* I'm going to try that thing *coming down."* And he was gone, with Mousstaffa crashing through the bushes at his heels.

A FEW moments later Bahram Parviz saw Vane with Mousstaffa at the top of the cliff, peering over the side. The old man knew that they had reached the summit by way of the hill behind. But that could not, as he saw it, improve their chances of approach to the point desired, unless Vane were lowered to it.

But this was being done, even now, by means of a long strip of cloth which he saw was the unrolled turban of Mousstaffa Ali.

Vane hung, revolving slowly, like a spider on an almost invisible filament. Then suddenly, to Bahram Parviz' amazement, he vanished, as if the rock had eaten him.

But in two or three minutes he reappeared, signaling to Mousstaffa.

"Vane, you have it?" Bahram Parviz asked, breathlessly, as Vane reached his side once more. But hope died quickly in the old man's heart. Vane's face, overcast by a grayish disappointment, was his answer.

"I found the place, all right," Vane said gloomily. "No doubt about it. A small cave hidden by a sliver of stone that seems to be all one with the face of the rock, from this angle down here. A trick of light, as in the case of the rug. But there was nothing in it. Nothing."

The sunlit silence of the ancient garden seemed to mock them with its secrets—rose, laurel, pomegranate, poplar—that had led them, step by step, to defeat, at last.

Vane left the old man at the *serai.* The bitterness of age and of defeat was in Bahram Parviz' eyes, but the smile he gave Vane at parting was a talisman.

The long ride to the desert fastness of Iskender might, Vane thought, have been more productive of information. But the Afghan rode wrapped in some private and particular emotional frenzy that discouraged speech.

He grunted a few laconic responses to Vane's questions. The palace guard was made up of five hundred Arab tribesmen pledged to murder and mayhem. But the matter of entrance was simple, Mousstaffa Ali said irritably.

"And the way out?" Vane asked.

"The vultures," said the man of Khorassan, "never starve."

Maybe not, Vane thought later, lying on his stomach in a poppy field, watching the circling birds dark and immense against the twilight sky. But they'll find me tough pickings. They won't like me.

Mousstaffa had been gone a long time, he thought, as the small chill wind of early evening came up across the barren desert and bowed the white and purple flowers in a wavelike motion that seemed to break upon the rough stone walls of the palace of Iskender.

The boy—how could he have had the courage to do this? To come all this way alone and enter these massive, ugly gates

with their inscriptions warning the unclean foot of the infidel to pass them by? What was happening to little Jansar in there? What hope, what earthly hope was there, Vane wondered wretchedly, that he was not already too late? And how could he get the boy out alive? What was happening to the old man back there, alone and unguarded, at the caravanserai?

Darkness had fallen and he lay there chilled, grim with failing hope of Mousstaffa Ali's return, when he heard a stealthy movement in the tall flowers beside him. He held his breath.

"Come with me, *agha,*" a voice whispered, and Vane wriggled forward without answering, cursing the unidentifiable nature of whispers.

But it was Mousstaffa Ali.

"You have news of the boy?" Vane asked him brusquely when they were together.

"He lives," the Afghan said.

"Unhurt?" Vane snapped.

"He is brave," said Mousstaffa Ali, and would say no more.

CHAPTER XI

TREAD THE CARPET SOFTLY

THEY were drawing closer to the foot of the wall. In the vast stillness of the desert night, broken only by the faint whisper of wind stirred flowers, their own slightest movements sounded to Vane like the rattle of musketry. He crawled on, saying "Hush" to himself with every inch he gained.

"From here," the Afghan whispered finally, "you go alone. There will be a hand to guide you."

Then a soft hand closed on Vane's wrist in the darkness.

He said nothing, but allowed it to guide him forward.

The smell of damp earth and stone, a breath of musty air that smote him as if it were shot out of a funnel, the rasp of a rough wall against his shoulder were all that told him he was entering the fortress. He could see nothing.

But after a few steps the chill wind of the desert was a remembered warmth. An enveloping, penetrating cold of centuries seemed to enter his body at every pore. And the smell of something worse than death was in his nostrils. A sterile air that had never been breathed because it was not fit to breathe.

But the hand on his wrist was alive. Not warm, but cold and trembling, as if with fright. The guiding pressure continued and presently he caught a scent that he remembered, a strange perfume that had more the qualities of a drug, sweet and cloying.

His feet were on an inclined way. The ascent was very gradual but the air grew warmer, and suddenly he felt that he was confronted by a closed door. He put out his free hand and touched a wooden panel.

Then the door opened and he was drawn into what seemed to be a corridor, dark, yet not so dark that he could not see the dim form of a woman, the faint glimmer of ornaments, the shine of her eyes.

"Remain here," she whispered, "and be silent. In a moment someone will come to take you to the boy. I can do no more."

"Thank you," Vane said fervently.

"Remember," she said, with sudden intensity. "Remember the *iman!* There are too many beads in his *tasbih!*"

Tasbih, Vane murmured to himself when she had gone. The Mohammedan rosary. It had a hundred beads, one for each of the ninety-nine names of Allah: The Merciful, The Compassionate, The King of Kings, the Holy One, The Peace, The Artificer, The Slayer . . .

They raced through his mind, but he shook his head. Too many beads? What had she meant by that?

A slight sound sent him back against the wall, elbows and palms jammed against the stone, braced.

A light dawned and grew. But he could not fix the source of it. It was yellowish, undulant, as if it were carried. He reminded himself that she was sending someone to take him to the boy; but would any-

one come on such an errand attended by so much light?

He looked to the right and left hurriedly, to place himself. He stood at the end of a long corridor. There was no way out.

The yellow light grew steadily.

Vane's every instinct rebelled against meeting the bearer or bearers of it here in this blind alley.

He went forward swiftly, catfooting it along the long tiled corridor. But a sound sent him back against the wall once more, a different sound that gave him hope that he might remain unobserved. A sound of lamentation, of mourning.

A sound that grew, with the light. And he saw that many men were advancing toward him through a succession of corridors, bearing aloft a stretcher-like affair covered by a cloth.

That, Vane thought grimly, will be the cousin of the Emir again. As he watched, the procession turned off into another corridor, chanting dismally, and Vane drew an enormous breath of relief.

NOW for the boy! Why wait! The promised guide might never turn up, and if he did, there was no assurance that he would be hospitably disposed. Vane could not bring himself to trust anyone who dwelt in the palace of Iskender. Perhaps the lady wished him well, but on the other hand . . .

Vane went rapidly and nearly soundlessly down the longer, wider corridor which joined the one he had just left. The light was dimming fast and so were the sounds of lamentation.

At the end of the second corridor he came upon a series of large rooms that had the aspect of state or audience chambers, elaborately decorated in the European manner, with highly waxed floors and a sort of throne in one of them. He passed through them quickly, drawn by a checkered light from a latticed partition at the extreme end of the sequence.

Arriving there, he peered through the screen of carved wood.

The room beyond was illumined by many torches that cast a wavering glare upon a row of looms, some large, some small, at which many boys were occupied in weaving rugs, Ispahans, Teherans, Saruks.

They ranged in age from seven to twelve or thirteen years, their spare forms sharply outlined against the glowing colors of the rugs on which they labored with flying fingers. A quivering intensity made their small bodies shine with sweat, for they were naked to the waist.

At first Vane failed to see what was their incentive for such extreme activity. The colors of the rugs themselves—glowing madder, indigo, saffron—a hundred reds and greens, and above all the royal, kindling purple of the *panchayat* formula—all these had combined to blind him to what he now saw:

The livid welts and scars, old and new, that made a network on each small back.

On a raised platform that ran along behind the loom a lad of twelve or so was walking back and forth, slowly, intoning monotonously the details of design and coloring of the major pieces. The smaller rugs were woven from a small design pinned to the frame of the loom or to the fabric itself.

Then as Vane watched, spellbound, he heard the thin, insect-like whine of a whiplash and heard a stifled cry. One boy toppled forward against his rug and lay there with arms outstretched as if he were crucified. Then with a shiver he righted himself and began again, his fingers flying, while a new stripe, scarlet, angry, appeared in the network that covered his back.

There had been no sign of the wielder of that whip. Cursing under his breath, Vane craned his neck to see. Then he realized that it had originated directly beneath him.

A man sat crosslegged on the other side of the lattice work, a man with a lash some ten or twelve feet long that whipped out like a venomous tongue, touching each malingerer with a point of steel that left its mark in blood.

But the boy on the platform—a master craftsman, evidently—whirled in his tracks,

shouting an imprecation at the man with the whip. His young face was ghastly, distorted with fury and fatigue, and to Vane's horror he saw that the boy's body was a mass of scars newly made.

The shouted curses were in the Gujarati tongue of the Parsees of Bombay.

The boy was Jansar.

He fell under a wave of lashes and lay clawing at the wooden planking, mute now in his pain. Mute with the fierce pride of his race and heritage.

Vane, blind with rage and helplessness, hung on to the carved wood screen, his teeth set, forcing himself to silence. What possible help could he be now? What chance had he to get the boy out of here alive? None! None!

But in a moment it was over. A bucket of cold water was thrown over Jansar and he rose, wiping it out of his eyes, grinning his white grin, savage now in his contempt, and went back to his pacing of the narrow platform, his monotonous chanting of color and design, directing the work of the cringing lads at the looms.

The man with the whip rose and yawned prodigiously. Then, unlocking a door between the looms, he passed out and closed it behind him.

Vane saw the boy Jansar's eyes flash from end to end of the carved partition behind which he stood, as if in some desperate hope. Every nerve in Vane responded to that look. But he dared not speak. And he stood in darkness that made it impossible for the boy to see him from that torch-lit room.

Then Vane remembered the pocket lighter he carried. He fumbled for it, thumbing it into flame. He passed it to and fro in a narrow arc, like a signal.

HE saw the boy halt, transfixed. Jansar droned on, but his eyes clung to the place where Vane stood behind the screen of carved wood. It was hardly hope that Vane saw now on his white face. It was more the apprehension of some new danger.

But Jansar drew nearer the screen.

Vane ventured a word, two words that could have little meaning to anyone but Jansar in this place, even if overheard. He said, softly:

"Hi. kid!"

And Jansar, son of Kavadh, his face illumined as by a great light, answered softly.

"Hi!"

Vane gulped in the immensity of his relief. He knew that he needed to say no more. He knew that Jansar would be waiting, tense, ready, for hours if need be, with the memory of this small beacon light shining before his eyes, that word of hope ringing in his ears. Vane extinguished the lighter and glanced behind him.

There was no sign that he had been observed. He retraced his steps noiselessly.

He must find a way to break the boy out of that room. But first of all he must be sure that their means of egress was covered. Logically the thing to do was to go out as he had come in. He made his way back to the main corridor.

A low murmur of many voices met his ear as he emerged. He followed the sound. If the funeral ceremonies for the cousin of the Emir were in progress, that would help. Every devout Moslem in the place would be there.

He came out suddenly upon a balcony that overlooked a courtyard as large as a city square. It was packed from wall to wall with weaving bodies wrapped in prayer.

Vane whistled soundlessly, Mousstaffa Ali had not exaggerated. There must be five hundred Arabs in the Emir's guard.

Directly beneath him was a small, cleared space where one man prayed alone, his slim body, incredibly narrow in the voluminous robes he wore, arched sinuously as he rose and fell, his forehead touching the niche in a superb *nazamlik*, or prayer rug, on which he knelt.

Vane looked down upon him with a strange, crawling sense of repulsion, tinged with unwilling awe.

This, he knew, was Akbar Iskender.

The face was invisible to him, but not

the hands, long, thin-fingered, serpentine, fingering a large rosary.

His *tasbih* had too many beads, that girl had said. Vane looked down at it in a narrow beam of light from a brass mosque lamp that hung beneath the balcony—a beam of light that struck a flash of vivid color from that chain of beads.

Green! A flaming, intense green which held the quick inner fire of an emerald. It was an emerald, carved—Vane saw it now as it lingered in the caressing fingers of the praying Emir—carved in the likeness of a bird.

The *iman!* Vane understood, at last. Not *imam,* which meant priest, or headman, but *iman,* the central head of a Moslem rosary.

And that *iman* was the emerald parrot of the House of Parviz.

What else had she tried to tell him? That this man was satan himself and that he wore the mark of it above his heart! She had told him that, baring her throat to show him a gold snake about her neck like a Brahminical string—

Vane fell back with a muffled curse. For a mutter in the crowd below told him that he had leaned too far. He had been seen.

He whirled, to face three Arabs closing in on him.

HE HIT out, driving his fist into the dark face that pressed closest. Then laying his hand on the low railing of the balcony, he vaulted down into the heart of the praying mob.

He landed on his feet directly before the Emir who rose swiftly to his full sinuous length, arched, drawn back slightly as if poised to strike.

Vane bellowed resoundingly: "Hear me, ye Sons of the Prophet! Hear me!"

The chanting ceased. There was a menacing murmur that rose to drown his voice, but he shouted it down:

"This man is an infidel!" Vane yelled, snatching the beads from the Emir's grasp. "There are too many beads in his *tasbih!*"

"Too many beads . . . Too many beads!" That murmur ran through the crowd like wildfire. It had but one meaning, Vane knew exultantly. He had stirred their doubt. It gave him a moment more.

"Behold, ye Moslems!" Vane cried. "The mark of his true faith—the serpent string of Saiva! This man is no son of Mohammed but a Brahmin!"

His hands were twisted in the Emir's robes, tearing them apart, baring the bony breast about which hung a thin dried snake, loosely knotted, the flat head pendant above the Emir's heart.

He had revealed the serpent of the infidel, and the murmur of a dozen voices nearest him rolled back to swell into a roar of rage.

But he had forgotten the serpent's sting.

It pierced his shoulder with a single fang of steel—a thrust of Iskender's dagger. The Emir lunged once, then fell back, clawing at his naked breast, as the mob of outraged Moslems closed over him, each man seeking confirmation of this infamy—and finding it.

Vane ran frantically, clutching his wounded shoulder.

The long rosary was whipping against his side and he stuffed it into his shirt, the great carved emerald heavy and cold and satisfying against his flesh.

Jansar!

Vane caught up a small tabouret as he ran. The roar in the courtyard would have done credit to the lions of the Black Pasha of legendary fame. It took no more than that to turn a Moslem prayer meeting into a murderous orgy. A word, a grain of opium, or a verse from the Koran and the sons of the Prophet were on their way, bound for Paradise on a wave of blood. By this time the serpent must be ground exceedingly small, Vane thought, crashing through the carved screen of the weaver's room with the heavy wooden tabouret.

The boy Jansar was through the hole like a cat through a fence, upholding him as Vane swayed, dizzy now from loss of blood.

"Mr. Vane, are you all right?" the boy wailed.

But Vane was cursing woodenly, reeling.

He knew that he was going out. He couldn't hang on. Something was cut that was draining the whole strength of his body in a relentless flood.

He ran on, stumbling, dragging the boy behind him, forcing him at last toward the small door through which he had come with the aid of the girl.

"Run, kid," he commanded. "I'll be along—"

"I won't leave you!" the boy wailed. "I won't!"

Vane managed to summon from his fogged mind a lie that would serve. "Beat it," he said, thickly. "Out of here! Your grandfather is waiting for you at the end of that passage. And I've got to wait here, for Mousstaffa Ali—"

"I am here," said Mousstaffa Ali, from the doorway. "And the old one waits below with the caravan. It is best for us to journey north tonight, without delay."

Vane grinned dizzily. I've missed all my life, he thought, but my luck had to change. He pitched forward and lay still.

THE stars were rocking overhead when he came to, propped on a large donkey with Mousstaffa Ali walking beside, holding him. The slight figure of the boy was alongside, mounted, too, and just ahead was a smaller beast carrying the form of a woman. At once Vane knew who she was and noted that now she was closely veiled.

Then he heard the tinny, shallow music of camel bells behind him. Looking back, he saw the shrouded form of Bahram Parviz swaying on his tall gray camel.

"You've got the emerald, *agha?*" Vane said. "And the rug?"

Bahram Parviz laughed. "The emerald, but not the rug," he said. "You are a perfectionist, my friend. You ask too much of life. Too much of yourself. But Jansar, tell him what we do have for him—to confound his enemies, to give the lie to his detractors!"

"It begins," said the boy Jansar, "with a mixture of milk and water—"

Vane started violently, bathed in the sweat of weakness, of almost unbearable excitement. The boy was speaking in the ancient *pehlevi* vernacular, common in Western Persia in the third century.

"—milk and water," Jansar said, "in exact proportions, then madder is added, and lastly the whole is converted by sour grape-juice—"

"The purple!" Vane cried, hoarsely. "The formula! You've got the rest of it? The exact proportions? Where—where?"

"In my head," said Jansar calmly.

Vane laughed aloud. He cast a look backward at the walls of the palace of Iskender, wedges of darkness sliced from a star-filled sky. A man may outlive dishonor, Vane thought, if it does not stem out of his own wrong doing. He was leaving the Land of Ormuzd this time with full hands—victorious!

"Let the vultures have the rest!" said Mousstaffa Ali suddenly.

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

LATELY there have been a surprising number of things that we haven't been able to understand. The pressure of work or the abrupt shift from 1939 to 1940 may have brought about this unhappy confusion, but the fact remains that uncomprehension is rapidly becoming our second nature. We just stare blankly, and there are one or two people who are worried about it.

Anyway, here is the kind of thing that sends us into a coma. The letter below poses two questions which we understand perfectly and can answer. Then our anonymous correspondent proceeds to make a series of statements, simple enough in themselves and yet strangely baffling. *Why* did the writer make them? Please, what does it all mean?

UNSIGNED

I have been reading your fine "mag" for three years. Now I would like to ask several questions. Can back copies be procured? If so, how much are they? Next, Robert Carse is evidently against Franco and for the Spanish Loyalists. Since Russia aided the Loyalists, it seems only right that Germany should aid Franco. Despite statements to the contrary, Spain has not become a German province.

LOUISVILLE, KY.

WITH considerable relief we turn to the next letter. This is a list of ratings, and the whole thing is beautifully clear. We know just what our correspondent is getting at.

JULE HERFORD. JR.

I have been reading ARGOSY for two years, so since I am still a pretty young reader, I thought I would write and express my opinion of your swell magazine.

Having read the selections of some other readers in the October 28th issue, I will present my selections for the best and the worst stories so far this year.

Here they are in order of merit and demerit.

Ten Best

1. Minions of the Moon
2. Calling Dr. Kildare
3. The Ringer
4. Men With No Master
5. The Devil's Diary
6. Cancelled in Red
7. Wild River
8. Seven Footprints to Satan
9. Lost Harbours
10. Seven Out of Time

Ten Worst

1. Yardmaster
2. Shovel Skinner
3. We're Running Line
4. A Pretty Country
5. The Man Next Door
6. Big Gun From Texas
7. Great Green Serpent
8. Ten-thirty and Red
9. Mother Damnation
10. Flaming Acres

My favorite author in any pulp or slick is Richard Sale; his Civil War stories are the tops, I can't get enough of them. Also let's have more of Dan Hardin, Mike Costello, Thibaut Corday, and Zagat's swell yarns of the Bunch.

LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

ROY LEHMAN

I like nearly all your stories, but being a Texan I am especially happy when I see a Texas story. Also, I am strong for Westerns. But to get back, recently you have used several Texas stories. Arthur Lawson's "Brother Cowpoke" was swell, but I can't say so much for his "Music for Muchacho"—too much wild bang-bang. Neither did I like Perry's "Big Gun from Texas." The characters were good, but again the action was too improbable. Then, not so long back, you ran a short by Bob Obets called "Red Stallion." I felt that that story really could have happened, and have been looking for some more by the same author.

Well, I gotta get to work!

GALVESTON, TEXAS

CATARRH DISCOVERY

Four Fold Method Attacks Catarrhal Symptoms 4 Ways to Bring Quick, Blessed Relief

PAMPHLET SENT FREE

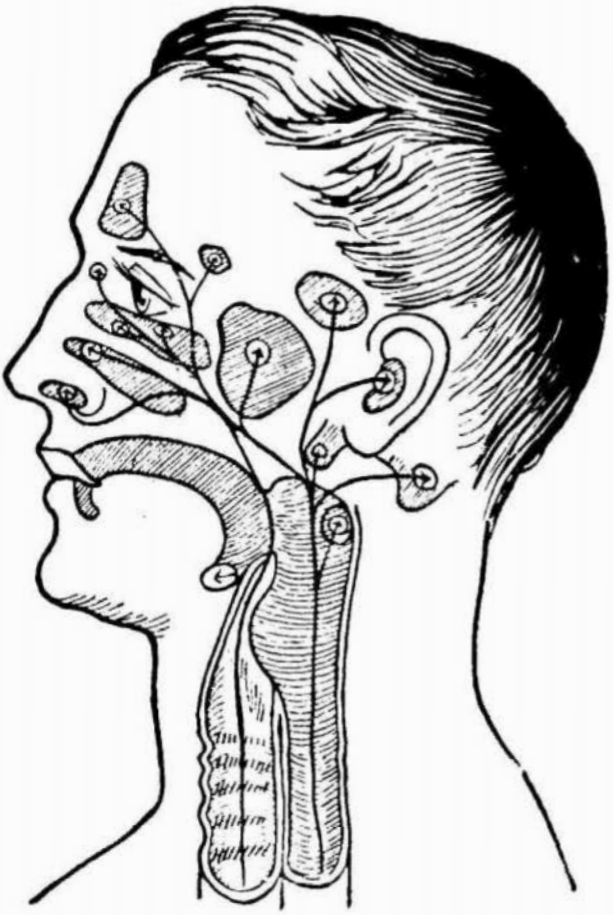
Here is a Free Offer that no reader of this magazine suffering the disagreeable, annoying symptoms of Nasal Catarrh and Congestion can afford to ignore. Are any of these troubles yours?

NASAL CATARRH, CLOGGED NOSTRILS, DIFFICULT BREATHING, HAWKING, BLOWING, SNUFFING, DULLED HEARING CAUSED BY NASAL CONGESTION.

Have you a "Catarrhal" Cough, Clogged Nostrils, Phlegm-Filled Throat? Do you have head noises, or a buzzing or ringing in your ears? Is your hearing growing dull? Does your nose feel "stuffed up" or are you continually obliged to snuffle, spit, hawk and clear your throat? Is breathing through the nose often difficult? Have you frontal headaches? Do you catch cold easily and is there a chronic mucous discharge that makes frequent nose blowing an embarrassing necessity? Have you an offensive catarrhal breath? These are some of the common, easily noted symptoms that may be caused by Nasal Catarrh and it may pay you to check them carefully.

If any of these symptoms are yours, this notice must surely interest you and cause you to write at once for 4 WAY PAMPHLET. It is free for the asking.

This new Four Fold Method goes after Catarrhal Symptoms in four different ways instead of one to clear accessible catarrhal accumulations right out of the head, throat and nasal passages. Thus it has brought quick, effective results that have already given joy and blessed relief to thousands.



The shaded portions of this diagram show the "air spaces" of the head. Catarrh collects in many of these places and causes the disagreeable Catarrhal Symptoms.

SATISFACTION OR NO CHARGE

Do you want a new joy of living? Then cut out the Coupon below and mail it today. It may open the pathway to your own prompt and gloriously welcome relief from the Catarrhal evils you know so well, just as it has done and is doing for a host of others.

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