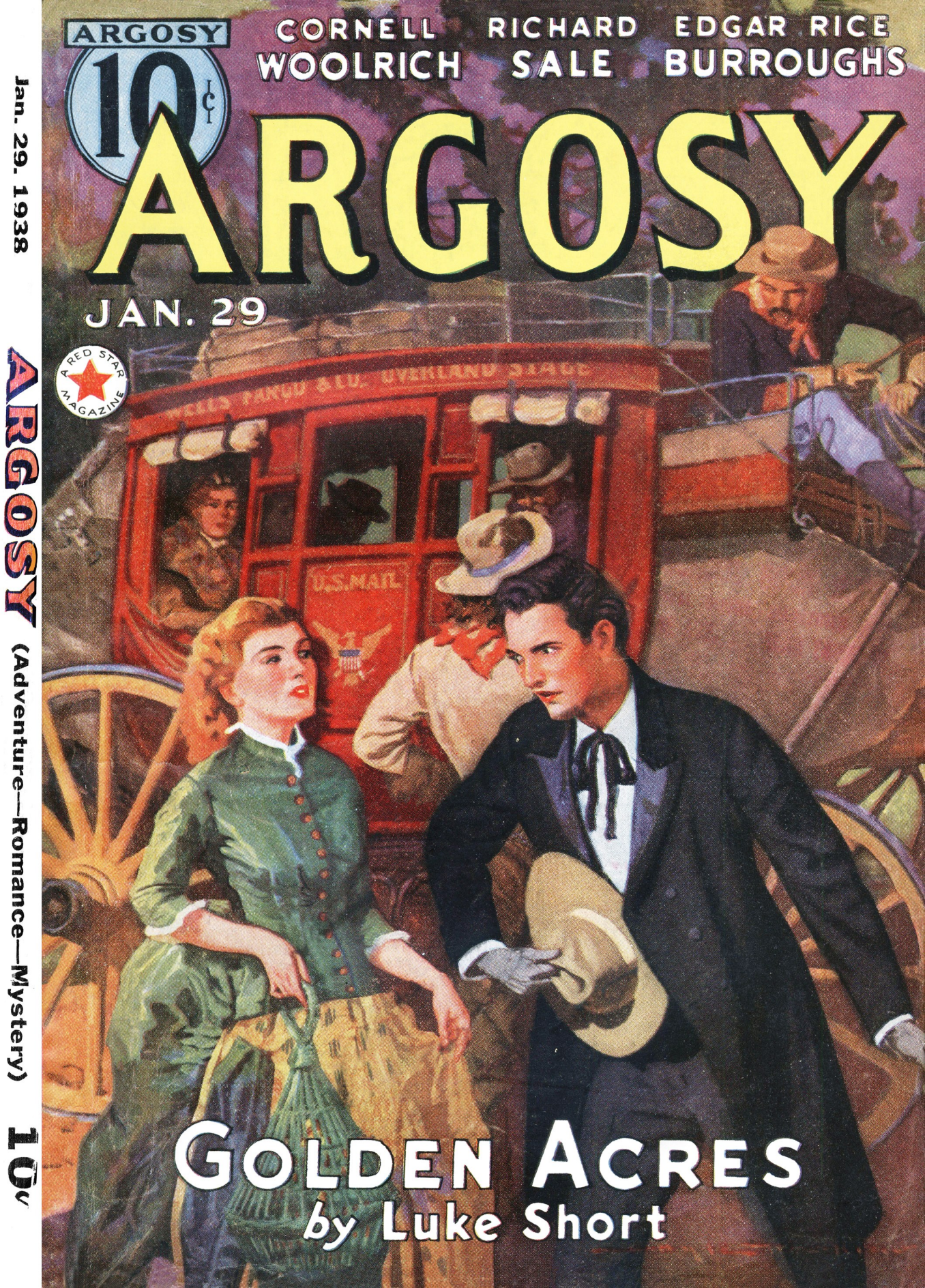

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EARNINGS

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Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

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Golden Acres

By LUKE SHORT
Author of "King Colt," "Tough Enough," etc.

CHAPTER I

TUNNEL

BOOMING Tronah stepped up a pitch at six o'clock evening, when the shifts at the mines came off, and like a great lusty caterpillar, the town turned over in the colorful cocoon of its own din.

Charles Bonal regarded the scene from the open window of his suite in the Union House with an affection that was tempered with disapproval. Behind him, the waiter set a place for one at the massive desk in the middle of the huge paneled room. Bonal sniffed the faint hot breeze riding off the Piute sink. Its clean odor of sagebrush and a suggestion of sun on rock was fouled a little by the smoke and fumes of the stamp mills scattered to the east and south of town, but it was there nevertheless, the all pervading smell of the desert.

The Boom Towns of the Old West, with All Their Tumult and Their Brawling, Their Glamor and Romance, Spring to Life Again in This Fine New Novel by the Talented Author of "King Colt"

"All ready, sir," the waiter said, and Bonal nodded. Below him in the dusk, the street was jammed with a continuous line of creeping ore wagons, nose of each lead team to the end gate of the wagon ahead, while around them and between them, almost oblivious to them, the noisy crowd milled. Three years of bitter complaint on the part of the merchants had never succeeded in rerouting to a sidestreet this endless caravan of ore-freighters on their way from the mines to the stamp mills, for this was a boom town, and ore was king. Charles Bonal was glad of it for the two-thousandth time.

He sat down in the deepening dusk to a lone meal, linen napkin under his short, bristly beard, and ate as ferociously as he talked and moved and thought.

He had lighted a cigar and poured himself an ample slug of brandy when the waiter returned to clear the desk.

"Send my daughter in," Bonal said curtly, "—if she can be spared."

He was squatting beside the small safe against the back wall when the door opened and Sharon Bonal entered. The noise of a party died out as she closed the door behind her.

"No lights again," she said reprov-

ingly. Crossing to the desk, she lighted the kerosene lamp and by its glow, saw her father raking sheafs of banknotes from the safe into a canvas sack. Observing him as she did now, he was a bent little man in broadcloth with a squarish head which had the alert, aggressive set of a terrier's.

He said without looking around, "Having a good time?"

"Except for you being gone, Dad."

Bonal grunted again, but this time he turned around and set his cigar on the edge of the desk, squinting through the smoke that drifted past his eyes. He was about to return to his business, when he looked up at her, and then, slowly, like a man treating himself to a rare pleasure, observed her carefully. Under his gaze Sharon backed away, picked up her full skirt and curtsied demurely, smiling. Her dress was of yellow silk, spangled with tiny blue corn-flowers, and the wide neck and full short sleeves left her shoulders and arms bare, so that the sheen of her flesh contrasted to the dark wash of her chestnut hair. Only the slight dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose saved her from regality—that and a kind of warm impudence in her blue eyes. For both freckles and eyes Charles Bonal was thankful, for they were reminders of Sharon's mother.

"Like it?"

"Yes. . . ." Bonal answered absently, and turned to the safe again.

Sharon said, "Is that money, Dad?"

"Have you lived in mining camps so long you don't know a greenback when you see one?" Bonal answered, without turning around.

"Stupid. I mean, where is it going? And how did it get here?"

Bonal hefted the sack, slammed the safe door shut and stood up, tying the drawstring of the sack. He did not answer.

"You're going to gamble," Sharon said, without reproof, and with some interest.

"I won that last night. Tonight, I'll triple it—and I think I'll bring back something else." He walked over and took down his beaver hat from the antler hatrack and put it on, so that it rode his head with an uncompromising squareness. Standing just out of the circle of lamplight, he watched his daughter a moment, scowling. She came over to him.

"The last night you'll be here, Dad. I thought we might spend it alone."

He gestured with his cigar toward the next room, and the movement was at once dry, ironical, explanatory.

"I'll send them packing if you say so."

"Why should you? I'll be busy."

She brushed a streamer of cigar ashes from the lapels of his coat, adjusted his bow tie and gave the bottom of his waistcoat a yank, straightening out his pleated shirtfront which had a tendency to creep toward his neck.

"Will you come in and say hello?" she asked, smiling a little, making her voice purposely gruff in mockery.

He scowled. "They weren't asked in my name, were they?"

"You know they weren't. I wouldn't dare."

Behind his beard he smiled a little and removed the cigar from his mouth. "You would that. Good night."

DOWNSTAIRS, the lobby of the Union House was thronged with men, and a cloud of acrid tobacco smoke billowed around the high chandeliers overhead. To Charles Bonal, who had known this town when it was a wild camp of tents and rock huts and

brush shacks, this hotel was an irritating badge of Tronah. Though it was three stories, it fronted on a street that was alternately bedded in six inches of muck or dust; though its hundred rooms had shiny new plumbing, only a third of them ran water; although its lobby and corridors had rolls of red plush carpet, bright paint, brassy murals, crystal, and gilt rococo gingerbread-work, the lobby fell short of elegance. It was typical of a camp whose boom had known no planning, whose gamblers possessed no shrewdness, whose foresight reached barely into tomorrow.

Making his way through this jam of men, Bonal was greeted on all sides with a quiet respect by the men in frock coats and white shirts, but the men in boots and corduroy were more jovial and friendly. Without removing the cigar from his mouth, Bonal nodded here and there; and all the time, the sack of money was tucked under his arm as if it were ore samples, or even provisions.

On the street, he turned into the tide that overflowed the boardwalk, letting it carry him downstreet. It was only here that a man could best understand the lure of money, Bonal thought, as he submitted himself to the jostling, irresponsible crowd. Men of all nations, whose old country ways had not yet been filed down by the hard and fabulous life of this boom town, mingled here: Shallow-hatted Chinese were side by side, with swart gaudy Mexicans; stocky central Europeans rubbed elbows with Cornishmen; there were dour Welshmen and the ebullient, omnipresent Irish; solid Northcountry English were here, to work out the remainder of their lives in the mines they understood; Germans, Canucks, Greeks, Jews—every race and every color tramped these rotting boardwalks between the flimsy false-front shanties and stone buildings, for Bonanza was a word understood by the whole world. And through this stream, day and night, dominating and jeering and cursing and liking it, were the Americans, a booted, hard-fisted, swaggering, hard-drinking mob, most of whom were ex-army men—tough to the very core of their truculent irreverent souls.

Ahead of him, down the street there was a constant din, centered about the front of the saloons and gambling halls. And in the dust which moiled up from the unceasing feet of the freighting mules there was the smell of whisky. It pervaded the work and play of this street with its fifty saloons, until it became part of the smell of sage, and alkali and manure and powder-reeking ore and sweat and humanity.

Across the street, in front of the bright lights of Temple's Keno parlor, a man ballyhooed the games in a raucous, good natured voice, designed to entice the miners away from their wages. And they went in, so that the entrance was clogged with them, for gambling was in the blood of this camp, and had built it. Bonal eyed them with a disapproval he did not voice, for in all this mass, there was no one he could talk to.

He passed up a dozen saloons before he came to where the Melodian's busy swing-door of walnut fronted squarely on the street, so that every time a man came out, he apologized automatically to the person who was sure to have been hit.

THE Melodian's crowd was not large. It was the best saloon in Tronah, patronized by the monied men, the superintendents of their mines and

mills, and the better gamblers. At its rich mahogany bar, only a dozen men engaged in conversation, for this was the dinner-hour lull. No hostesses were employed here, which contributed to its quietness and air of sedateness. The wall seats were lined with leather, the waiters were in uniform, and the gambling tables toward the rear were ringed with chairs, a sure sign of calm in a feverish town.

Bonal took his brandy at the bar, talking idly with one of its customers until he felt a man come up beside him. In the bar mirror, he saw the man and beneath Bonal's beard there was again a small smile.

"Evening, Mr. Bonal," Phil Shay said, and he was smiling, too, as if there was an understanding between them, which there was. Taller by some eight inches than Bonal, younger by some twenty-five years, there was yet a look in his gray eyes that was similar to that in Bonal's. Shay owned the Melodian, and yet there was nothing about him that smacked of the tavern-keeper, none of that professional easiness of manner that did not distinguish the chaff from the wheat. On the contrary, there was a kind of sternness bred into that lean face which had not picked up its weatherburn from saloon air. The set of the frock coat on Shay's overwide shoulders was not right; it pinched at the shoulder seams, as if it was too tight, suggesting that he would be more comfortable without it. He moved with that stiff grace of a man who has spent much of his life in the saddle. His hands were long-fingered, square and bony when fisted, scarred in innumerable places, with a stiff brush of dark hair across the back of them which could not be as black as the trim brushed hair of his head.

Bonal, regarding him in the bar mirror, nodded pleasantly recalling all he knew of this man's brief history. A week ago Phil Shay had come to Tronah, and inside half an hour had picked up old acquaintances, veterans of a dozen gold camps of the past. They all knew him well; they all drank with him, but not so well as he. Early in the morning, they had roistered as far as the Melodian. It was Phil Shay who went to the faro table and quietly bought into the game. Inside an hour, the faro banker had hunted up Morg Buchanan, the owner of the Melodian, with the news that his bank needed more money or the game must shut down. Morg Buchanan had taken over the faro bank himself. He kept it for exactly thirty-seven hours of straight playing, at the end of which time he had lost his money and the lease on his saloon and all its fixtures to the gray-eyed stranger with the run of luck.

That was his history, Bonal knew, and yet it told nothing about the man except that he knew how to crowd his luck. It was the quick judgment of him, his ruthlessness, his gambling and his stamina that Charles Bonal read into that winning streak, and he knew he had found his man. In that bony face, with its wide mouth and the deep-set black-browed eyes, there was something that Bonal recognized and wanted and had to have. He could even do with the quiet mockery, which was in the eyes now, and which was seldom absent from them.

Phil Shay said now, "Am I in for it again?"

"You are," Bonal said quietly. "As soon as I finish my drink, if it's agreeable to you."

"How many lickings do I have to take from you?" Shay asked.

"One more. Your last."

Shay smiled at this, but said nothing. He had noticed the canvas sack which Bonal had brought it, and he surveyed the tables at the rear. Presently, when Bonal had finished his drink, they went over to the faro table in the rear corner. With a word to the house man, Shay took his place behind the table at the box. The four men idly gambling at the green cloth paid no attention to the change. It was only when Bonal laid the canvas sack on the corner of the table, started to play that their attention was aroused. Two of them dropped out to watch, but the other two played on, their small bets trailing Bonal's stakes.

WITHIN an hour the saloon started to fill up, and the word soon got around of the game at the corner table. Another overhead lamp was brought by one of the waiters, as the circle of watchers increased.

After two hours of play, when the other two players had been replaced by three more affluent men, Shay, who had been losing to Bonal and consistently winning back a tenth of his losses from the rest of the table, said, "Maybe you'd like a back room, Mr. Bonal."

Bonal looked up. "Would you?"

"It's your pleasure."

"I'd like to stay here," Bonal said, and added drily, "I'll trim you in public. I told you last night I would."

Shay smiled and said nothing, and the play went on. There was little conversation in the circle of watchers, for faro is a game of thought, demanding quiet. At a little after eleven, Bonal called for a chair. At midnight, Shay called for a box of cigars. At one, Shay said, "If I've calculated right, Bonal, I'll have to close my house games for funds."

"Are you going to close this game?" Bonal asked.

"Certainly not. That was our agreement."

Bonal nodded. Shay called a house man to him and talked briefly with him, then returned to the game. At a little past two, Shay said, "Now I'm down to the lease. Are you interested?"

Bonal raised his shrewd glance to him. "Depends. If I leave it, will you still try to operate the place?"

Shay smiled narrowly. "I don't like it much. If you'll accept it, I'll gamble it and the fixtures."

"Done."

At three, when all but the poker tables toward the front were abandoned, and the crowd at the bar had become larger and noiser, Bonal leaned back in his chair and regarded the chips in front of Shay. "I believe if I win this, you're through."

"That's right." Shay looked at him questioningly.

Bonal carefully lighted his cigar. "My boy, you've got several hundred dollars there—too little to do much with except gamble. You might even gamble well enough with it to start winning from me. Therefore, I'm finished." He picked up his hat and regarded Shay placidly.

"Step in my office, will you, Mr. Bonal?"

"No. You cash in my chips and come with me, please," Bonal said calmly.

"But the lease?"

"We'll arrange that later. Come with me."

The chips were converted and Shay and Bonal left the Melodian. The crowd on the streets had thinned out somewhat, but the sidewalks were still thronged, and the endless line of ore wagons rumbled their slow way down the street.

At the hotel, Bonal led the way up to his suite and turned the lamp on the desk a little higher. While he got the brandy and glasses from the cabinet, Shay sat down and looked around him. He was facing the door, so that when it opened, he saw Sharon slip through. For a moment, they both stared at each other, and then Shay came to his feet, silent, his expression one of puzzlement.

Hand still on the doorknob, Sharon looked around her. She was in a gray wrapper, her tawny chestnut hair loose about her shoulders.

"Do you make a practice of walking into hotel rooms at night?" she asked quietly.

Over in the dark, out of the circle of lamplight where she could not see him, Charles Bonal chuckled. "This is Phil Shay, Sharon. My daughter, Shay." Then he added to Sharon drily, "He came up because he was asked."

Sharon's face relaxed a little, and only then did Bonal understand that she had been genuinely frightened. She came across the room and nodded slightly to Shay, who towered above her in muteness.

"May I stay, Dad?" she asked.

"No. You can't even have a drink with us," Bonal said gruffly. "This is strictly business, dear."

Sharon came over and kissed him and Bonal said, "I'll come in later, Sharon. Go to bed."

Sharon went back across the room. On her way, she looked long, frankly at Shay, who returned the look with a kind of brash hostility before she closed the door.

BONAL ripped off his tie, pulled off his coat, hauled a chair around where he could put his feet on the desk, and sat with his hand cupped over the brandy glass. The cigar he offered Shay was refused, and while Shay drank, Bonal regarded him covertly.

"What do you do now?" Bonal asked finally.

"I'll see what your proposition is first," Shay said.

"How do you know I'm going to make you one?"

"You aren't the kind of a man who breaks a gambler for the fun of it," Shay told him quietly.

Presently, Bonal said, "That's right. But you aren't a gambler, either," and he added, "I don't mean that offensively."

"I've been one for a week now—a good one."

"But not before that."

"No."

"You have no liking for it?" Bonal asked.

Shay looked at his brandy. "For gambling, yes. For being a gambler, no."

"Then you're not sorry I broke you tonight."

Shay's quick smile was dry, amused. He said, "Bonal, are you trying to make me thank you for breaking me? Every man wants money. I want it, too. There are other ways to make it besides gambling. I prefer them, I think, but when I began I didn't have a choice."

Bonal only grunted, and then he said abruptly, "I suppose you know I'm in the thick of a fight."

"From what I hear, you always are," Shay replied.

"I don't mean that kind—quarreling over mine shares, jockeying stock. That's a pillow fight for a man with money. I mean a real fight." He paused and added bluntly, "A fight for survival." He gestured toward the table, where the canvas sack of banknotes and

gold still lay. "For instance, these winnings from you tonight will be sent by messenger to the coast tomorrow. Very likely, this messenger will meet my creditors on the way to here." He smiled faintly. "Haven't you heard that, even?"

"I'm a working man, Bonal. That's my kind. We don't hear things you big augurs don't want us to."

"You resent it?" Bonal asked shrewdly.

Shay nodded faintly. "A little. But someday I'll be one of you and do the same thing."

Bonal smiled secretly. "Then you haven't heard that work on the Bonal Tunnel has stopped?"

"A rumor, yes."

"Well, it hasn't," Bonal said flatly. He drank off his brandy and rose and walked around the desk.

Talking, he moved the lamp over to the corner of the desk and from the bottom drawer drew out a heavy paper which unfolded into a map approximately the size of the desk top. Shay rose and stood before it, a large-scale map of the Tronah section: and Bonal let him study it. Presently, Bonal put a grimy finger on what appeared to be a large woolly caterpillar running north and south across the map, but which in reality was the Pintwater range, the group in whose eastern slope the Tronah gold and silver field was located. A dozen crosses in blue pencil located the town and principal mines of the slope. Bonal ignored these, and jumped to the other side of the mountains to place his pointing finger on a stream bed which paralleled the western slope. Where he placed his finger there was a red line which ran from the stream straight east halfway to the mountains. He said, "You've never been across, have you?"

"No."

"That red line," Bonal said quietly, "represents the Bonal Tunnel, a tunnel cut out of rock that is driving into the Pintwater range. So far, it has covered two miles and a half of the proposed distance of three and a half miles. It ends here." He pointed to the termination of the red line. "It will end here." He put his finger on a spot just east of the exact center of the Pintwater range. "It will end there," he added grimly, "if I have to dig out the rest of it myself, and with a spoon."

WHILE Shay studied the map, Bonal sat down. His eyes looked tired, pouched with weariness, but the indomitability of them was unmistakable. A man of wisdom would have called Charles Bonal a fanatic, and he would have smilingly agreed and proceeded with his fanaticism. He did so now, his voice almost musing, but harsh.

"I've spent a week inquiring about you," he said abruptly. "You seem to have hit a good many gold camps. You've worked men, lots of men. But you're not an engineer. Is that right?"

Shay looked up from the map and nodded.

"You don't have to be an engineer to understand that tunnel," Bonal said. "But you have to understand human nature to know why it's necessary."

Shay said nothing, and Bonal hunkered down in his chair.

"When they started mining on this field," he said in a harsh condemnatory voice, "they sunk their shafts where they found the ore—almost on top of the Pintwater range. When they got down to a depth of a thousand feet, they struck water. It filled their shafts. Instead of cutting upcasts to drain the water out, they bought pumps instead."

He raised a warning finger to Shay. "Right now, they've got in operation the biggest pumps ever invented, and they're barely keeping the shafts dry. In another year, the shafts will be so far down that no pump invented, no pump that ever will be invented, will be able to clear them of water."

"Borrasca," Shay murmured.

"Exactly. *Borrasca*—pay out. There will be millions of dollars in gold and silver still in the ground—and it will stay there if I don't save the fools."

"How?" Shay asked curiously.

Bonal pointed to the map. "That tunnel. It starts on the other side of the Pintwaters. It will go straight into them and halfway through them to touch the very bottom of the deepest mine shaft on this field. When it does, it will drain the water from these shafts and save the field." He chuckled, almost with pleasure. "Since these fools didn't ask for a Messiah, I'm giving them one. One with a beard, too."

Shay was looking down again at the map when Bonal said, "Will you take the job?"

"What job?"

Bonal slowly raised in his chair. "The job of putting that tunnel through—superintending it. I can't be here. I've got to raise money. Tonight, I'm leaving for Mexico City. I've been refused loans from coast banks, from London, from Europe, from our own government. Men are laughing at my scheme, but I've got to get money for it." He paused, watching Shay. "You're to put the tunnel through. You've got to drive these buckos, fight with any weapon short of murder, fight without money, without enough men, and with a swarm of toughs and bankers taking turns at trying to down you." He rose and came over to the desk to face Shay. "I won't put a good face on it, Shay. Some interests in this ore field won't stop short of murder to kill this tunnel idea. The men I can trust are few. You'll be one of them. The only thing I can do is pay you well, insure your life and depend on your loyalty. Is that enough?"

Shay nodded, still looking at the map.

CHAPTER II

CHAMPAGNE OR RYE

SHARON woke at noon and found Sarita, her Spanish maid brought from San Francisco, standing over her.

"How long have you been here?" Sharon asked.

"Ten minutes, Miss."

"What time is it?"

"After twelve, Miss Sharon."

"Heavens. And I'm to have lunch with Hugh at twelve-thirty. Is he here?"

"Yes, Miss."

Sharon rose on one elbow and looked around the room. Her clothes were laid out, and everything was in order. Still, the hotel room was depressing, and she lay back on the pillow, after dismissing Sarita. Her conversation with her father at four o'clock this morning was still running through her mind. He had finished his business then, had wakened her to say goodbye and had talked for more than an hour sitting on the edge of her bed. And in that hour, she learned many things. She wondered if she was remembering them rightly, or if she had been so sleepy that she had things confused. Hadn't her father said that he'd hired a new superintendent—this man whom she'd met earlier in the evening—and that he was a professional gambler? Yet this couldn't be right. Sharon scowled and looked down at the bed-

spread. Yes, there was a smear of ashes that her father had dropped from his cigar, and the dirty marks of his boots where he had rested them on the edge of the bed, so she knew she hadn't dreamed it.

Throwing back the covers, she rose and walked over to her dressing table.

It was a little less than an hour later when she appeared in the parlor of the suite. Hugh Mathias was standing there smiling, and she walked over to him and received his kiss on her cheek and then said, "Good morning, darling."

Her blue dress gave color to that drab room, even to the neat black broadcloth suit that Hugh was wearing. Another man might have exclaimed over the dress, but Hugh Mathias did not. His frank blue eyes admired it, and Sharon understood and smiled back at him.

"You've been drinking," she said, pointing a finger at him.

"Customers. A machinery salesman this time. I'm going to hire a secretary with a cast iron stomach to receive my callers." Hugh grinned down at her. He was tall, and wore his clothes with the easy grace of a man used to fine living. He had a mobile, friendly face beneath a smooth cap of neatly groomed blond hair, and he looked as immaculate in his way as Sharon did in hers.

"I've ordered. Shall we eat here or downstairs?" he asked her.

Sharon said, "This is stuffy. Let's go down."

Once in the gilded dining room downstairs, they were shown to a wall table and Sharon looked around her. Immediately, she smiled at this pretence of elegance. In San Francisco, there was a beginning of fine living, and they had tried to ape it here. But the room smelled of cooked food, the waiters were unshaven and it was easy to track a round dozen of the less well-dressed diners across the red plush carpet by the dirt they had left on it. The slovenliness of the frontier still stamped it.

"I'm sorry I was late, Hugh," Sharon murmured. "Dad came in just before he left and we talked till all hours of the morning."

"Was he sober?"

Sharon looked swiftly at Hugh, but the smile on his face took away the impertinence of his question.

"Of course. Why?"

"I've been hearing things."

"Like what?"

"Like this new superintendent. Have you heard it, or did he tell you?"

"He did," Sharon laughed. "And I've been wondering if I was sober when he told me. What have you heard?"

"Do you know him?"

"Met him."

"He's a gambler," Hugh said. "He owned the Melodian until your father won it from him."

"So that was it," Sharon murmured. "Go on."

"I'd hate to think your father would place a man like that in such a responsible position without knowing his background. I wonder if he did know it?" Hugh mused.

"Is it awful?"

Hugh shrugged. "Your father knows how to pick men—or says he does. This time, he's got a wrong hunch. Shay is a tough. He's notorious."

"A—a killer, you mean?"

HUGH nodded, and at the look of concern in Sharon's face, he said quickly, "Oh, not a camp bully or a renegade. He's hit every gold camp in

the last ten years. He led the rush up the Frazer. He was at Reese River, Rawhide, Tonapah. He's built railroads, won and lost fortunes. He hasn't got a profession." He paused. "He's something of a legend among a certain class of people."

"What class?"

"Professional mining men, cowmen, railroad men." Hugh grinned. "Men that live by force, I should say."

"But the killings."

"I used the wrong word," Hugh said casually. "He's handy with a gun. I don't think he ever committed an unprovoked murder. Is that better?"

"It's bad enough," Sharon said, as the waiter brought their food.

Hugh told her more. It seemed that yesterday Bonal had called on him, had told him of his intention to hire a new superintendent, and had asked Hugh to give all the assistance which he, as manager of one of the largest mines in the Tronah field, the Dry Sierras Consolidated, could give to the new man. "So you see he'd been planning on it," Hugh finished lightly, and shook his head, puzzled.

Sharon said nothing. This was as close as Hugh ever got to criticizing her father, but she knew his feelings. Charles Bonal was playing for the hugest stakes of his career, and things were going against him; now was no time to swap horses in mid-stream.

Sharon saw the desk clerk making his way across the fast-emptying dining room to them. He paused at their table and handed Sharon a note.

"Mr. Bonal left this at the desk this morning, Miss Bonal. He said not to wake you to give it to you."

Sharon thanked him and opened the note, read it, and over her face was a look of annoyed amusement. "Speak of the devil." She handed it to Hugh. He read:

Sharon: I forgot to mention the finances. Phil Shay is my agent here now. You'll have an allowance of two thousand a month. If it's necessary, go to him for more. Only go easy, honey.

Love,

C. Bonal.

"He wouldn't sign it 'Father,'" Sharon said, laughing a little. "That's too sentimental."

Hugh made a wry face and laid the note on the table. "Shay's your banker too, then."

"I don't think you like him, Hugh," Sharon said teasingly.

Hugh shrugged. "I don't like his reputation." He put down his napkin and tapped the note. "Darling, if you'll marry me now you can forget things like that."

"But I can live nicely on two thousand a month, Hugh!" Sharon protested.

"But why have to?" He leaned forward. "Don't you think I've waited long enough, Sharon?"

"Be patient, Hugh."

"But how can I? There's no end to this fight of your dad's. We'll both be gray when it's over." He laughed at her, but his eyes were urgent. "Do you *have* to wait, Sharon?"

"I promised Dad."

"Get him to absolve you. There's no reason why he shouldn't."

Sharon studied the table musingly. "You don't understand. When we're married, Hugh, Dad is going to rent five city blocks of San Francisco for the wedding party. He'll float a boat in champagne. He'll hire a private car to take us east. In London, Paris, Rome, Vienna, he'll rent whole floors of hotels." She looked up at Hugh with quiet appeal in her eyes. "Can't you see, Hugh. That's the way he wants to do it. He's contemptuous of money.

That's his way of showing his contempt."

"And you?" Hugh said quietly. "Do you like the idea?"

Sharon smiled impudently. "I do. I think it would be fun. I think it would be fun because he'd think so."

"But it won't be his wedding trip!" Hugh said with quiet vehemence.

"You're wrong there, Hugh," Sharon said quietly. "It will be. It will be the last thing he'll ever force on us. I—I think I ought to allow him that. And he can't afford it now with his money tied up in this fight. Isn't it all very simple?"

Hugh shook his head in puzzlement and lighted his cigar. He looked at his watch, signaled to the waiter and said to Sharon, "I'll have to go, darling."

"But it's only three."

Hugh stubbornly stuck to his point saying he was required at the mine and saw Sharon to the foot of the lobby stairs, where he took leave of her. Climbing the stairs, Sharon wondered what she could do until dinner time. In the afternoons, she usually rode with her father whose restlessness took him over the entire camp. She was suddenly lonesome without him, and just as suddenly reproved herself for it.

IN THE sitting room, Sharon found a man dressed in a dark blue uniform of livery, and she recognized him.

"Hello, Ben."

"Note for you from Miz Comber, Miss Bonal," Ben said, trying to hide the indelicate wad of tobacco in his cheek.

Sharon took the note. It was from Maizie Comber, and asked if Sharon could return with the messenger.

Sharon got a light wrap, too much against the heat of the desert afternoon, and went down into the lobby, preceded by Ben. At the hitch-rack a black red-wheeled top buggy hitched to a beautiful team of bays was waiting, and Sharon climbed in. Ben swung the buggy around into the stream of traffic and they made their slow way north, heading out of town.

Immediately, the heat of the desert sun drove through the buggy top and was all around her. She lay back on the cushions, lips parted a little for air, and watched the colorful parade. It was at times like this that she could not understand this boom camp of Tronah, nor her place here. Abruptly to the west, the gaunt and savage Pintwaters tilted to serrated peaks, their burned and scarified slopes like some gigantic sneer of nature. There was color here, but dark and ominous color of tawny cinder and without a sight of the blessed green of foliage. The high mines up near the peaks she recognized by the jutting shelf of dump heaps, but they were almost invisible unless an observer knew their locations. Here, then, was this strange camp of Tronah, a town sprung up on the very desert at the base of a desert mountain range. Water was piped thirty miles from the blue sierras to the west. Every stick of lumber, every bit of firewood, every bite of food—everything that went to make up life had to be freighted in here. It was not entirely real, Sharon thought sometimes, as she considered it. To the east, there was a vast expanse of rock and sand reaching halfway across a state. Only rare waterholes made it passable at all. To the south and the north it was the same, endless desert, different only in the gauntness of its rock and sand. Overhead, all day long, the sky was barren of clouds and the sun poured its thirsty heat down on everything alike, searing it, draining it of life.

Later, when they mounted one of the many ridges, the town disappeared and there was nothing, save this rocky and rutted road, to indicate that man had been here. The desert swallowed it up, the long gray sage-stippled miles of sand and rock to the east meeting the rise of the foothills in an unbroken line.

Perhaps in defiance of this awesome sight, Sharon said, "Is Mr. Comber back yet, Ben?"

"Yes, Miss Bonal. He got back last night. Late, I reckon."

"Too late to see Dad?"

"Yes ma'm."

The road angled in toward the mountains here, and then fell abruptly into a little valley. The eye was drawn immediately and irrevocably to one spot in this valley, for here were three tall cottonwoods, the only green of this landscape. The house beneath them was only secondary, although it tried bravely to be the main attraction. It succeeded only in being defiant.

Of cut stone, masoned with the skill which only wealth can buy, it stood sturdy and square, three storys, with a gallery running across the front and white-painted gables jutting from its slate roof. A graveled drive looped a wide fountain in front of the house where a thin stream of water rose high and fell upon itself in this still desert heat.

A woman was waiting on the porch, and when Ben wheeled around and pulled the team to a halt at the steps, the woman said gruffly, "Ben, you look at that pair of bays."

Ben said, "Yes, Miz Comber."

"They look black to you?"

"No, Miz Comber."

"Why ain't the blacks hitched?"

Ben spat heartily and pushed his hat back off his forehead. He acted now as if he were used to this, and on more familiar ground. "Miz Comber, you can't keep a pair of high-blood horses like this penned up without they don't get fattern hawgs."

"Then use the brown buggy, you fool!"

"You tole me to take the black one."

"Brown with the bays and this one with the blacks!" Maizie Comber glared at him, and entirely without ill feeling. She was a middle-aged woman with a pleasantly blowsy face holding deep lines of character incised beneath the flesh of easy living. Her hair, black shot with gray, was piled high on her head, and held a magnificent shell comb. Her gown was a gorgeous and elaborate affair of red silk, and down the front of it were food stains. A pair of easy-fitting and worn Indian moccasins peeped out from beneath its hem.

"Come on, Sharon, away from that old fool," she said bluffly.

SHARON was smiling as Ben, grinning sheepishly, helped her down. A monstrous fortune dug from the Tronah field had not changed Maizie Comber from the rough and good-natured wife of a rough and good-natured freighter. She was as plain as in the days when she used to water her husband's freight teams at the stage stop west of Placerville.

Following Maizie, Sharon walked through the foyer and into the wide hall that ran almost the length of the house. Inside was a kind of opulence that was breathtaking. Through the great double doors to the right, the oak parquetry stretched through three big rooms, the first a salon, and was brought up against the far wall of the third room where a great fireplace, flanked by tall fluted pillars of Carrara marble, rose almost ceiling high. This room was the library, where or-

dered rows of books, some of them collectors items, filled three big walls. They were dusted weekly and never opened, for neither Abe nor Maizie Comber liked reading. The big salon held a great bronze piano with mother of pearl keys. On the far wall was a Romney portrait, untastefully flanked by two huge tapestries, one depicting the story of the prodigal son, the other the seige of Troy. Frail gilded chairs were grouped about the wall. A vast mirror, edges a gilded writhing of rosebuds covered the wall opposite the piano. The windows, of French plate glass, were hung with Venetian lace and blinds. Overhead, twin crystal chandeliers glittered, while yards of Oriental rugs underfoot almost subdued their elegance.

The other rooms were like these, rich, expensive—and tasteless. Maizie padded down the corridor, oblivious to it all, and opened a door which let onto a small corner room. Sharon caught sight of a woman just rising out of a chair in front of a table holding a silver tea service.

"Beulah, pick up them tea traps and clear out," Maizie said. "Bring some more." The servant rose and started to clear the table and Sharon glanced obliquely at Maizie. But Maizie was unashamed of the fact that she had been discovered taking tea with her servant, and Sharon loved her for it. This room was as simple as Maizie's simple tastes could make it. The chairs were old, comfortable, and the mahogany secretaire in the corner was scuffed and unpolished. The rug was plain and worn and the only pictures in the room were photographs of the old Petersburg mine where Abe Comber had made his money. Moreover, the room had the air of being lived in, held the smell of food, of perfume, of tobacco.

"Sit down, honey," Maizie said, waving Sharon to a chair.

"Ben said Abe got back last night," Sharon observed.

"Drunk," Maizie said laconically. "Somebody sold the old fool a lumber business out on the coast, too."

"Dad will be sorry he missed him."

Maizie sniffed. "He will not. Nobody's sorry when they miss Abe Comber drunk."

"Maizie, you know that isn't true," Sharon protested. "He drinks too much, but then all our men do."

"It's not the drinkin', it's the wakin' up," Maizie growled. "He's too old to carry on like that, Sharon. A body can't live with him. This mornin' he barged around like a crazy man until I drove him out of the house."

Sharon laughed in spite of herself, but Maizie ignored her.

"That's what I called you over about."

"What?"

"Sharon, I've got to send my orders for next week's party off on tonight's stage. I talked it over with Abe at breakfast. Everything went along fine until I asked him how much champagne to get. Then he was mad."

MAIZIE got up, threw out her chest and took long strides across the floor, talking in a deep, gruff voice that mimicked her husband's. " 'Woman, champagne is a swill made for Frenchmen. No self respectin' American would drink it, and I won't have it served in this house. The only liquor I serve here is whisky, good American whisky, rye preferred. If it's good enough for me to drink, it's good enough for my guests.' "

Maizie paused and glared at Sharon, her kind old eyes angry, and then she smiled. Sharon laughed outright.

"Whisky for women," Maizie observed grimly. "A foreign opera star as the guest of honor, and I'm to serve her a hooker of rye whisky." She crossed the room and sat down and called. "Beulah!"

There was a rustling behind the door and the knob turned and the servant entered, placing a tray of tea things on the table.

Maizie poured two cups of tea.

"What do you want me to do, Aunt Maizie?" Sharon asked.

"What do you like in this house?" Maizie countered.

Sharon frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what gadgets in this house do you like? Any rugs? Any of those gimcracks out in front? Do you like any of 'em?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Then I'll sell any of 'em to you. In return, I want two thousand dollars." She murmured into her saucer, "I'll show that old fool!"

"Is it money you want, Aunt Maizie?"

Maizie nodded. "We fought. I told him I'd order champagne and he said I wouldn't. He said he wouldn't give me any money and that he was ordering the rye this morning."

Sharon set down her cup of tea and laughed until tears were in her eyes. Toward the end, Maizie laughed too, but her grim old fighter's face had not surrendered one jot of conviction.

"I'll lend you the money, Aunt Maizie, but there's no use of selling any of your belongings." She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. "Besides, Abe will have forgotten it in two days."

"Of course he will, but it'll be too late to get the champagne here. Then he'll be mad because we haven't anything to drink except that hogwash that he'll be able to pick up at the saloons. I know him."

"Can I have Ben for a couple of hours?" Sharon asked.

Maizie again yelled, "Beulah!" and when the servant appeared, said, "Tell Ben to come here."

Sharon borrowed pen and paper and wrote a note: "Will you please give bearer two thousand dollars immediately. Sharon Bonal."

When Ben appeared she gave it to him and said, "Do you know Phil Shay?"

Ben's wary face broke into a smile. He said warmly, "Gosh, yes. Who don't?"

"Ben!" Maizie said sharply.

"Yes, Miz Bonal," Ben said humbly.

"Will you take this to him over at the tunnel, Ben? Wait until he gives you a package and bring it back to me here."

"And you'll ride a saddle-horse," Maizie put in.

Ben took the note and went out. Two hours later, he was back at the Comber mansion and was shown into the dining room, where Maizie and Sharon were eating from solid-silver service.

He gave Sharon the note, and she opened it, frowning a little as she noticed that the note was the only thing Ben carried.

The note said: "I will not. Phil Shay."

CHAPTER III

TOBER TALKS

BEN had been gone an hour. Phil Shay shoved his plate away from him and reached for his pipe. Suddenly, the heat of this tiny mess hall was too much for him, and he rose, stepped

over the bench and went outside to lean against the door jamb. The thin cotton shirt he wore was even too much for this heat, and the high boots he was wearing were hot and uncomfortable.

The rocks still held the heat of the day, but a faint breeze stirred off the slope hard to the east. Dusk was just lowering, blurring the hard shape of the mountains into a more kindly form. From his position in the door, he could hear the hammering clatter of pots and pans in the cook-shack just off the small mess room, and as counterpoint to this din, there was the roar of the big mess hall on the other side where the hundred workmen were eating now.

He raised his gaze up the slope a little. There, already lighted by a dozen kerosene flares, was the entrance to the tunnel, and he could see into its depths until the angle shut off sight. As he watched, four mules emerged, dragging a string of loaded ore cars behind them. Their pace quickened as they came down the slope and took the slight run up to the dump heap where the dump crew blocked the wheels of the cars and dumped them. The lanterns that hung on the collars of the mules winked dimly in the dusk. The night was silent then, except for the steady hammering thud of the compressor pumping air into the receiving tank for the drills at the tunnel head. Down by the dry stream-bed in a huge corral, a fight started among the mules and then stopped, and Shay had a swift picture of the beasts eating after the day's work, impatient with the heat and the work.

It lay spread before him, all the machinery of this complicated mechanism, and it was his to drive. Over across from the mess hall, he knew the exhausted men would be dragging to the bunkhouse to tumble in their beds, worn out from working at the tunnel heading in one hundred degrees of heat. Somehow, this camp had a sodden air of stubbornness, but only that. The fight, the drive was lacking. He knew the feeling well; it was a feeling bred by hopelessness, when men work only for wages and not for a goal. Already, in the minds of these workmen, the tunnel was abandoned. It was only a matter of time until they would be laid off. This was the thing he had to fight. All this day, he had watched these men as he pried silently into every corner of this sprawling outfit. He had asked questions whose answers he did not comment upon and each man had eyed him, not with hostility exactly, but taking his measure. A new man Bonal brought out to break, he could almost hear them say.

Beyond him, he heard a man rise and leave the table, and the sound of footsteps paused behind him. He looked around. It was Reed Tober, the assistant superintendent.

"We'll pull this shift off at midnight," Shay said.

There was no answer, and it irritated him. Tober, he knew was not yet through sizing him up, and although he admitted to himself that in Tober's place, he would have kept his silence until he knew his man, still this passive and non-commital submissiveness angered him.

"You hear?" he asked, almost sharply.

"Why?"

SHAY glanced up at the man. Framed in the doorway, the light behind him, Tober might have been stamped out of leather. His face was burned blacker than his dark hair, so that the whites of his eyes gave him

a perpetually staring look. Slight of build, not so tall as Shay, he had that leaned-down, long-muscled grace of a race horse. His face was a Texas face, with thin, tight muscles stretched under the skin of it. It was bony without being cadaverous, intent without being fanatic, and held that quick, febrile intelligence seen sometimes in a good bird-dog. To disguise the possibilities of that face, Tober moved with a lazy indolence that held the explosive threat of a coiled spring. To a man not acute of perception, Reed Tober was as unreadable as the back of a playing card. Right now, he was studying Shay with calculating, questioning intensity, and Shay knew that he was going to break this man's reticence tonight. For Reed Tober, assistant to a round half dozen harried and bedeviled superintendents, had outlasted them all. He would outlast Shay, or so his tone implied.

"I'm laying a double track down before the morning shift," Shay said. "There's room in the tunnel, isn't there?"

"Not much to spare."

"Equipment? Track?"

Tober turned and said quietly, "Kelly." A stocky man with a longhorn mustache and the brawny arms of a mine worker came to Tober's side.

"Pull the crew off the head at midnight. Rip up that spur track and measure it, and measure the dump track too. Check the track in the warehouse. If you're short, roust out a crew of teamsters and go freight some rails from the Golgotha. If the watchman won't give it to you, go round to Miss Vannie Shore's place and tell her you're from Bonal. I want enough to make a double track that will clear the tunnel mouth by a hundred feet. I want it in by six—and working."

Kelly stepped out past Shay and was gone into the night.

Shay said to Tober, "Why wasn't that done before?"

"Money," was Tober's laconic answer.

"About this upcast," Shay went on coldly. "You've got two from the slope down to the tunnel already, but it's not enough ventilation. You're past due putting one in now. Those men are working in close to a hundred degrees. Where's your next upcast?"

"I'll put a crew on it tomorrow."

"Why isn't it in there now?"

"Money," was Tober's answer again.

Shay removed the pipe from his mouth with an impatient gesture. "Money, hell. You're working six shifts of four hours each in the tunnel head now. Put an upcast in there and you could work three eight hour ones. Isn't it cheaper?"

"Labor's cheap. Drills and powder and rigging cost money—or so Barnes thought."

"Barnes is gone. I'm boss here now. Put an upcast in. Order a couple of Root blowers from the coast tomorrow."

Tober only nodded. It went on like this. With a brutal disregard for the other man's feelings, Shay ticked off the changes, never failing to ask why they hadn't been done before. He found that Tober had planned most of them, knew how to make them, knew their costs; and the reason they hadn't been done was always the same: money. Cruickshank, the engineer; Peters, freighting super, and Hardeston, the gray little bookkeeper, all left the mess hall, walking between Shay and Tober, and not once did Shay stop. He could feel the edge mounting in Tober's voice, could feel the cold rage of the man, and it pleased him.

Finished, he was silent. His pipe had died. He struck a match, lit up, then said pleasantly, "All right. I've told you what's got to be done. Now tell me how much money I have to do it with."

"None," Tober said quietly, then amended this "or close to none."

"Let's see the books."

TOGETHER, they skirted the mess-hall and came out into the rough street on which the half dozen buildings fronted. Tober tramped silently past the bunkhouse and stopped at a rough slab shack at its end. He unlocked the door, lighted a lamp, and Shay looked around him. In one corner was a high desk littered with draftsmen's tools, in the other the desk of the bookkeeper. Two deal chairs were against the wall. Tober opened the door in the far wall, and with lamp in hand, entered. This room was almost as spare as the first. It had a low desk against the wall, and a wreck of a swivel chair was pulled against it. A squat square safe huddled against the far wall. There were two other chairs in the room, a calendar, and a run-down clock.

Putting the lamp on the desk, Tober knelt before the safe and opened it. He drew out a ledger, which he laid on the desk looking evenly at Shay as he did so. There was good-humored malice in his eyes.

Shay swung a leg onto the desk. "Sit down, Tober."

Tober pulled out the swivel chair and sat down. Shay ran a musing hand over the ledger, his gray eyes speculative.

"I've had this job less than twenty-four hours, Tober. I've been pretty rough tonight, haven't I?"

Tober only nodded.

"I've been in this town less than two weeks. I've picked up gossip, a lot of it bad, about Bonal. I talked to him last night for three hours. I didn't find out much." He looked up at Tober. "How does Bonal stand now?"

"He's strapped."

"I know that. But what's he fighting besides lack of money? Who are his enemies, and how do they fight?" He paused. "I know what's got to be done here. I want to know what's got to be done away from here."

Tober relaxed a little. He cuffed his Stetson off his forehead and reached for a thin cigar in his shirt pocket and lighted it, then exhaled slowly.

"Know how this tunnel started?"

"No."

Tober told him how Bonal had conceived the idea, and how he had put it before all the mine owners. Bonal's scheme was to start his tunnel on the other side of the Pintwaters, dig straight into them, and touch the mine shafts when they had reached a depth of some two thousand feet. He was to drain these shafts of the water that was flooding them, and in turn, would collect two dollars for every ton of ore that the mines raised from ground drained by his tunnel.

"But he needed cash to swing it," Tober went on. "So he went around to all the mines and got them to subscribe to part of the cost of the tunnel."

"Then he's already spent their money?"

Tober said wryly, "He never got any. They signed up to subscribe, and then broke their contracts." He studied his cigar thoughtfully. "You can buy any jury in this district, you know. The court claimed the contracts weren't legal."

Shay was curious now, watching Tober's face. He knew all this was

preliminary to answering his first question, as to who was fighting Bonal. He said then, "But the tunnel is sense. Couldn't these mine owners see that?"

"Ever hear of Servel Janeece?" Tober countered.

Shay nodded. "He owns a couple of reduction mills here."

"He owns them all," Tober corrected him. "He's the man that killed the tunnel."

Shay scowled. "How did he?"

"Laughed it to death," Tober said curtly. "Janeece understood one thing about this tunnel, I reckon—that when it went through, his business was finished. These mines, instead of hoistin' their ore a thousand or so feet and then freighting it five miles to his reduction mills, would shoot it through Bonal's tunnel and down to the reduction mill Bonal aims to build yonder on the river bank. Janeece saw if the tunnel went through, he was done for, and he tried to kill it."

"But how?" Shay asked.

"Janeece's mills are backed by the Pacific coast banks," Tober said. "Of course, they wouldn't loan Bonal any money. Then Janeece, to boot, bought into several mines in the Tronah field and started the rumor the tunnel couldn't be put through. He got engineers to swear to it. Herkenhoff—he's the manager of the Pacific Shares mine—is an agent of Janeece's. He broke his contract with Bonal. The rest did the same. And Bonal didn't get a cent from them." Tober shook his head slowly and dropped his cigar on the floor. "Bonal's a fighter, but even a fighter's got to eat."

Shay rubbed a hand over the ledger, back and forth, watching his hand. "What does this Janeece look like?"

"It don't matter," Tober drawled. "You'll never see him. He works through a dozen men. Without ever leavin' his office there at his big mill, he's killed Bonal's credit all over this country." Tober was about to elaborate, but he only said briefly, "Men work for him, that's all."

"But what kind of men?" Shay insisted.

Tober's gaze swung up to him and regarded him thoughtfully. "Men like Chris Feldhake, for one. Herkenhoff for another. But Feldhake is the dangerous kind. He'll do anything for money—from a killin' to a bribe."

Shay said nothing, thinking, and Tober said quietly into the silence, "You better pack a gun from now on, Shay."

"Why?"

"Because," Tober said steadily, "I think you can swing it. I think Bonal's found his man. And if he has, there'll be trouble—real trouble. And it won't be with banks and loans now. It'll be the other kind of trouble."

Shay looked at him a long time and then dropped his gaze. "Thanks," he said.

Tober said nothing.

"How much money have we got?" Shay asked then.

"Not enough to meet this week's payroll," Tober answered. Their glances met. Shay scoured his face with a hand and then smiled a little, finally laughed shortly. Tober rose now and went over to the safe, and after opening it, pulled out a large cashbox and laid it on the desk. "All we got is in there," he said quietly.

"Let's count it, then."

Tober opened the box, and then, his hand still on the lid, paused and looked up at the door. Shay turned. Someone entered the other room.

A sudden flood of anger swept over Shay. This was a woman's step.

CHAPTER IV

LET 'EM DRINK RYE

SHARON BONAL stood in the doorway. Shay looked at her a long moment, and then took off his hat. Tober grabbed for his too, his face surprised out of its impassiveness.

"Good evening," Shay said quietly.

Sharon nodded briefly. "Is there any place we can talk?" she asked.

Shay looked at Tober and Tober tramped stiffly out.

Shay motioned to the swivel chair, but Sharon seemed not to notice it. There was an expression of cold pride in her face as she said, "I want that note explained."

"It explains itself," Shay answered quietly.

"Are *you* to tell me how much I'm to spend?" Sharon asked quietly.

"It seems that way."

"On whose authority? My father's?"

Shay said quietly, "Sit down, please. This will take some time." He stood motionless, his tall figure stamped with a kind of ruthless dignity as he waited for her to move. Sharon swept across to the swivel chair, Shay's gaze following her with a wary curiosity.

He sat down on the desk then, one leg over the corner. "If your father's memory hasn't failed him, he put two thousand dollars to your account the first of this month. This is the eleventh," he began quietly.

Sharon said, "I want two thousand dollars. The subject of my money is no business of yours, even if you seem to make it."

"You won't get it." Shay's voice was hard, final. "If you won't be reasonable, there's no reason why I should."

Sharon hated him then, and he could see it in her eyes. He also observed the color creep into her slim throat and up into her face, and he waited quietly for the blow off. It didn't come, for Sharon's reply was almost apologetic.

"Maybe I have been a little high-handed, but you can hardly blame me. Father turned over all his affairs here to a perfect stranger, then skipped out to Mexico City. I think your note was insolent, but then that's a matter of opinion." She paused, getting Shay's nod. "It happens that Dad has given me money this month. It also happens he told me to go to you if I needed more—and I do need more."

Shay smiled thinly. "This is a boom camp, Miss Bonal. Food is pretty high—about three dollars for a good meal. A cheap hotel room is double that, and a good one about five times that. But it happens your food and rooms are paid for. I made sure of that last night." He added drily, "That leaves two thousand for entertainment. Enough, isn't it?"

"I want this money for a loan," Sharon said coldly.

Shay shook his head. "That's too bad. Your father is fighting for loans too. He borrows money, you loan it out. It doesn't work."

Sharon kept silent, studying his hard and ruthless face. There was a touch of mocking humor behind those gray eyes, but the face showed only a granite stubbornness, which only served to strengthen Sharon's own. Still, she had enough common sense to know that this was not a man like Hugh who, at the first sight of a woman's displeasure, gallantly gave in.

SHAY was saying, "As long as I haven't been minding my business, I'll step out of line once more. Is the loan for a person in need?"

Sharon considered. "Yes," she said honestly.

"A friend of yours and your father's?"

"Of course."

Shay said carefully, "Would less money do?"

"I think not."

"If it's financial trouble, you're being too generous. Your own father has enough of that kind. But if it's for a needy person, I should think you could spare a hundred or so from your allowance. If not I can lend it to you."

"Two thousand dollars," Sharon repeated firmly. "And I've got to have it before the night stage."

Shay's eyebrows raised a little. "Someone leaving?"

Sharon nodded imperceptibly, and Shay rose. "All right. I'm going over to Tronah. I'll go with you to see this person," he said, his eyes steady and watchful.

Sharon made an involuntary movement of protest, and then she knew that she was trapped. "I lied," she said stubbornly. "Nobody is leaving. It's for an order that has to go out on the night stage."

"Ah," Shay said quietly. "Now we're down to it. An order for what?"

Sharon raised her furious gaze to his. "You didn't believe me?"

"I don't believe you know anyone in need," Shay said frankly. "You'd avoid knowing them. An order for what?"

"Champagne!" Sharon said sharply, stamping her foot. "There, you know it! Maizie Comber's husband has refused to pay for the champagne Maizie must order for a party. He's threatening to make her serve rye whisky. I offered to lend her the money!" Her eyes were blazing. "Is there anything criminal in helping a friend?"

Shay shook his head and said gently, "It's no dice. No, you can't have the money. And good night, Miss Bonal."

"But I promised her!" Sharon said angrily, rising. A note of pleading now mingled with the exasperation in her voice.

Shay looked long at her, his fist clenching unconsciously. Impulsively, he reached over and flipped open the top of the cash box.

"Maybe I'm a little unreasonable," he drawled softly, pointing to the neat stacks of ragged banknotes in that box. "There's a little over twenty-five hundred dollars in that box. We meet a payroll of four thousand tomorrow. Your father's in Mexico City. My job is to drive this tunnel through and that's all the money he left me to do it with." His hand dropped to his side. "Maybe you can tell me how I'll meet the payroll this week, let alone next week. Maybe"—and his voice carried the overtones of savage scorn—"you'd like to lend me two thousand dollars from your allowance, so I can meet the payroll."

Sharon felt her face go hot.

"Maybe," Shay went on brutally, "it won't do any good. Maybe Bonal's whole scheme will cave in on him." He finished bluntly, "Times like this, I hope it does. You might find then how easy it is to pour a man's blood and bones and soul down the throats of your friends, and still have them call it champagne."

Sharon brushed past him to the door, and was almost through it when she stopped and turned. "It might be a good idea for you to leave, Mr. Shay. Father will be in San Francisco tomorrow, and I'm going to the telegraph station now."

"Yes, it might be a good idea," Shay conceded. He heard her go out, heard the fading beat of hooves.

SHAY looked down and found that his fists were clenched. Slowly his anger died, leaving only a rooted contempt for Sharon Bonal. Striding over to the desk, he looked down at the cash box. He thought he understood Bonal now, and there was no anger toward him. Bonal had succeeded thus far by hiring men and sucking them dry, by placing on their shoulders a burden whose enormity crushed them. What held Bonal's tunnel scheme together now was himself, Phil Shay, a gambler, a stubborn man, a new man, and he had something less than twenty-four hours in which to effect a way. Bonal, with that shrewd and ruthless judgment that could gauge to a nicety the precise mixture of vanity and pride and ability that drove a man, had named his man and left him to fight it alone. If Shay won this time, there were other fights. When he lost one, he would go the way Barnes went, and the way of the other five superintendents. It was a hard game Bonal played, and it took hard men to back his hand.

Shay turned away from the cash box, smiling a little to himself. He paced slowly around the room, his restlessness kindled by the knowledge that this box on the desk held failure for him—failure before he started. Still, if he could meet tomorrow's payroll and the next, still ramming this tunnel on and on into the Pintwaters, he knew that Bonal would not fail him. All Bonal wanted was a man who wouldn't let him down.

Shay turned his head abruptly and looked again at the box, his breath held. It was the work of only a few moments to stuff the bank notes into a sack, put the empty box in the safe and lock it.

Tober was waiting outside, leaning against the bunkhouse, smoking in moody silence.

"Have a horse saddled for me," Shay said, and walked past him and into the bunkhouse. Tober stood motionless, watching Shay's back. Then he smiled into the night, his thin, secret smile, dropped his cigarette and headed for the corrals.

Inside the bunkhouse, Shay turned up the overhead lamp and went over to his bunk in the corner. From underneath it, he dragged out his small trunk and lifted it to the bunk. A moment later, he drew out a Colts .44, spun its chamber and felt its loaded weight under his fingers and rammed it into his hip pocket and went out, his boots purposeful on the scuffed floor.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Neptune's Poke

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE
Author of "Christmas on the Trail," "West to Siberia," etc.

I took my gun and went out of the cabin, watching the plane swoop down for a landing

I

MR. K. SATO who runs the Japanese hotel where I stop when I'm low in funds knocks on my door, sucks in his breath and says, "Excuse please and thank you very kindly, but young caller here to pay respects to Honorable No-Shirt McGee."

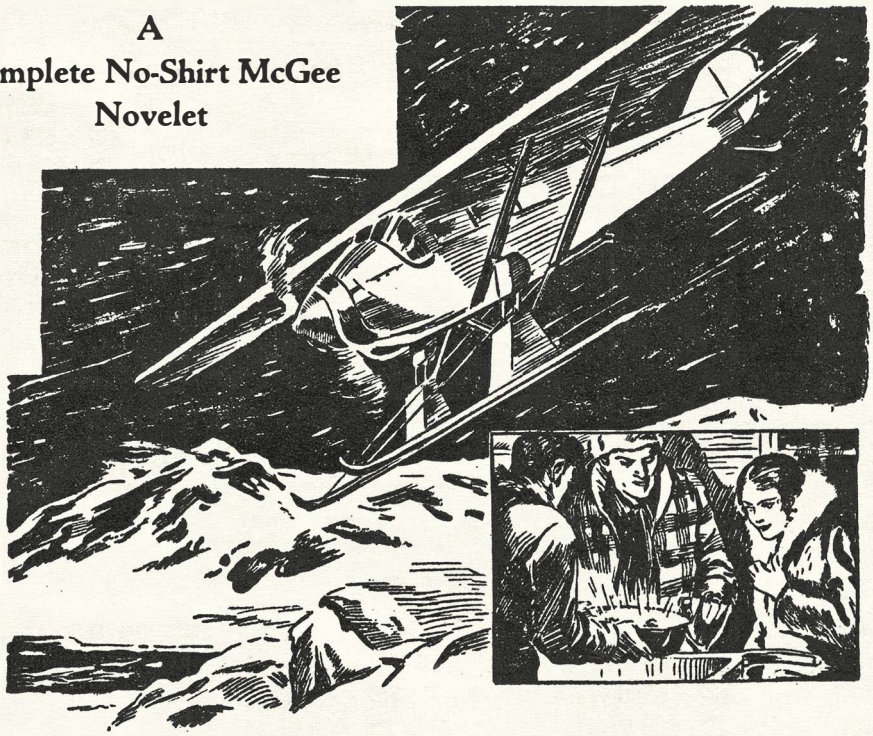
Bein' in a festive mood I bows from the hips, sucks in my breath and bares my teeth in an Oriental grin and says, "Thanks to you so much, what name of honorable visitor, please?"

"I believe name Dennis Kelly, shall send him up too soon?"

"I never heard of him," I answers, "but send him up too soon, or even sooner. It's probably some cuss who's heard I'm a soft touch for a loan."

Mr. K. Sato disappears and presently returns with a young cuss who has the stamp of the natural-born miner—long

A
Complete No-Shirt McGee
Novelet



Schemer Kelly had nothing to leave but McGee's friendship, a horse-laugh and a crazy idea.

legs, short back, wide shoulders and not too smart-lookin'. Minin', you know, takes a weak mind and a strong back. It takes a back strong enough to pack heavy loads, and a mind weak enough not to realize what a fool its owner is.

This cuss has black curly hair and Irish blue eyes and the bright, hopeful smile of a young preacher facin' his first congregation. "He's prob'ly from the Chamber of Commerce," I thinks as I shakes a hand bigger'n mine—and a lot softer.

"I'm Denny Kelly," he explains, "and I've brought you my father's will."

"You brought me your father's will?" I yelps. "I don't know your father and I ain't no probate court."

"My father was Terry Kelly," he explains.

"Never heard of him," I answers.

"Up in Alaska, in the early days," he patiently continues, "they called him Schemer Kelly, I believe."

"Schemer Kelly!" I exclaims. Then my mind goes back to Dawson, Nome, Fairbanks and other gold camps, big and little. In them days there was a reason for every nickname. Kelly was always hatchin' some scheme to either make a lot of money without him doin' any work, or figgerin' a plan whereby gold could be wrested from Mother Nature's bosom without too much wear and tear on the human system in general and Schemer Kelly's in particular.

Once he tried to promote an electric

power-plant to give lights all winter long. It was his idea to build a flock of windmills and harness 'em to a generator. The trouble was the wind didn't blow much in the winter at that camp. And it blew all summer when we had twenty-four hours of daylight. Another time he tried to make the rise and fall of the tide pump water for sluicin' purposes into a dry region. He formed the Kelly Fresh Egg Corporation, too. The idea there was to operate a fast gasoline launch from them gull islands to Nome, bringin' in fresh-laid gull eggs three times a week.

You'll gather Schemer Kelly had what is sometimes called a fertile mind, but the trouble was he never harvested any crops from said fertile mind. Knowin' him as I did, I knowed it would be just like the cuss to hatch out some scheme on his death bed—a scheme that would involve Mrs. McGee's boy, No-Shirt. He'd hooked me a half dozen times. So when I takes another look at Schemer's cub, standin' there beamin' and hopeful, just as I'd seen Schemer stand before me, I fears the worst. "A will," I says, "should be filed for probate in a recorder's office."

"Not my father's will," he explains. "This is no ordinary will."

"That's right," I admits, "it couldn't be, when one considers the source. Well, let's have a look at it.

THE lad hands me a document which is dated the twenty-fifth of the previous month. "When did your father pass on to his reward?" I asks.

"On the twenty-fifth," young Kelly answers. "He had an idea, called for a lawyer, dictated his will and as soon as it was ready he signed it, then died."

"A schemer to the last," I says to myself. The first paragraph reads:

> To my beloved son, Dennis Kelly, I give and bequeath a strong, healthy body, my viewpoint on life and my ability to plan to lighten the labor of myself and mankind.

The second and third paragraphs just about knocked my eye out. They reads:

> To my beloved son, Dennis Kelly, I also give and bequeath the friendship and stout loyalty of No-Shirt McGee, of Alaska, knowing the said McGee will assist my son, as he invariably assisted me, in my efforts to lighten the burden of mankind.
>
> To Hank Beasley, I give and bequeath one long horse laugh. He never saw the day when he could victimize me with his crooked deals and double-crossing ways.

The will ended with the usual flowery legal language, which don't make sense, but does make lawyers happy.

Well, I leave it to you if it ain't an innovation for a man's friendship to be bequeathed to his heir. My first urge was to tell young Kelly to get out and never cross my trail again. Schemer's deals had made me a laughin' stock throughout the North.

But a man can't be tough with a kid who has just lost his father. "I'm glad to meet you," I says weakly.

"That's mighty fine of you, Mr. McGee," he says. "Father's last words were, 'Go to No-Shirt McGee with your scheme, he won't fail you.' "

So he has a scheme and he's so young he ain't hardly dry behind the ears yet? By golly, it proves he's a true Kelly. . . . "What's on your mind?" I asks, feelin' funny in the stomach—like a man does who's about to be hung, married, or asked to testify at a revival meetin'.

"I plan to gather the gold cache known as 'Deep-Sea Nuggets'," he answers.

I has a cracked lip, so I grabs it quick to keep from makin' it worse by laughin'. Schemer Kelly had put in long periods of hard thinkin' on that same problem. So had many a smart man who hadn't Schemer's reputation for thinkin' up queer things. Maybe I'd better explain about them deep-sea nuggets.

. . . . It was back in the gold-rush days that Schemer Kelly sets down on a ridge and says, "No-Shirt, get a willow branch and keep the mosquitoes off'n me while I do some thinkin'."

So I builds a smudge, grabs a willow branch and starts fightin' mosquitoes as big as hummin' birds. Schemer relaxes and says, "Below us, No-Shirt, you can see hundreds of men, breakin' their backs packin' grub; invitin' rheumatism by wadin' icy creeks; wearin' out their hearts relayin' grub through passes."

"Yes," I says, "they're huntin' for gold. And it's tough goin' what with the tundra wrappin' itself like snakes around their feet, not to mention the niggerheads. But they've got to go to the gold, you know. It won't come to them."

"Yes," Schemer says, almost goin' to sleep on me, "but consider the lost motion and wasted energy. A man goes here and digs. No gold! He goes there and digs. No gold. What he should do, No-Shirt, is to set down like we're doin' and figure out where he'd go if he was a nugget lookin' for bedrock to bed down in."

"Sounds logical," I says. The lazy cuss had a way of makin' everything sound logical.

"We know the gold flow followed certain general directions," he continues, "Central California, then Northern California; then on through Oregon and into the Cascades of Washington state. Keeping on northward we find concentrations on the Fraser River and Barkerville, British Columbia. Then there is the Cassiar in Northern B. C. and of course Klondike. That brings us here."

"It sure does," I admits. "And we're clearin' out of here right now. I'm gettin' tired of keepin' mosquitoes off'n you."

"Have a drink," he says, "I'm beginning to see a great light."

THE drink makes a reasonable man out of me so we stays there most of the day. Towards bedtime he suddenly says, "That's the spot right over there." And he points to a gash in the mountains everybody was passin' up.

But when we reaches the stream next day we find why folks are passin' it up. It's hungry ground. Oh, you could get plenty of colors, but no pay dirt. It's a short creek, as Alaska creeks go—about thirty miles long and pretty fast. The water's mostly clear, because there ain't no glaciers in the country. The creek is full of trout, and I knew there'd be a salmon run durin' the summer. That would take care of our fish needs and dog food.

Lookin' around through the binoculars I spots a berry patch, which is a indication there'd probably be bears and squaws in the country before snow flew again. We could use the bears' hides and the squaws would come in handy dryin' salmon. "She's a fine set-up," I tells Schemer Kelly, "but there ain't no gold."

"They's got to be gold," he answers. "I've figgered it all out."

. . . . Well, to make a long story short, the danged cuss is right. We finds dikes across the stream had acted like sluice-box ripples and caught the gold. It was down pretty deep, but it was there. There bein' no annual floods,

the stream hadn't gouged out the dirt behind the dikes and carried the gold off.

We're up to our ears bedrockin' the creek to find where the gold is richest when Hank Beasley and his outfit jumps our ground. Hank had come prepared. He was only a kid, but he'd learned a lot. He brought in a big supply of grub, two-fisted bruisers from Seattle's waterfront, a gunman or two with plenty of ammunition, and, last and most, he hadn't forgot to bring along his own recorder and judge.

You can figger what happened. I hightailed it to Nome for a lawyer and when he brought up the case before the judge, the recorder produced records to show our claims was ten miles up the creek. The judge knew danged well the recorder had doctored the records, but he never batted an eye.

After the hearin' was over I says to Schemer, "Maybe you can scheme some way of gettin' at that gold."

He don't say nothing much. We move up the creek to what's supposed to be our claims and I puts in two days keepin' mosquitoes off'n Schemer while he rassles with his problem. "The first thing," he says at the end of the second day when the whisky's gone and I'm ready to strike, "is to put the gold beyond Beasley's reach. The second, is to then get the gold before he does."

It don't make sense to me. We put in two weeks packin' powder from Nome to the creek. The first time there's a big rainstorm he blasts off a shoulder of rock and dirt and blocks the stream. The rain not only gives us a fair-sized lake behind the dam, but feeds water enough into branch streams below the dam so the main creek continues to flow through Beasley's camp.

They're so interested in minin' they ain't suspicious when the creek don't rise with the rain. Later, when it commences to dwindle they figger most of the snow has melted off and a low water period can be expected. It all works out just as Kelly had schemed.

When the lake is ready to go over the top of the dam Kelly blasts off more ground two miles above and starts another lake. When this lake is ready to spill over the top he goes down to the lower dam and blasts out a notch. The water pours through, breakin' away the dam in big chunks and pretty soon there's a solid wall poundin' through the canyon.

What the water does to the silt that's piled up behind the rock dikes is plenty. It gouges it out and takes gold, boulders and everything else along with it. The Hank Beasley outfit can't help but hear it comin'. They run for their lives to high ground and watch the water take everything includin' their camp and bunkhouse with it.

It's hours later before the stream goes down. The whole bunch kinda goes crazy. They can see nuggets behind the dikes—nuggets the water missed. Just about the time they jump in and begin to pick 'em up, the second lake comes down. When it gets through, there ain't nothin' left. The nuggets are somewhere's in the Berin' Sea. In other words, they're deep-sea nuggets now.

And what's more they belong to anybody who can get 'em. "Well," Schemer says, "we beat Beasley."

"Sure, but we also put the gold where we can't get it," I observes.

"That," he says, "is a problem I'll have to solve."

. . . . Every nut in the North tried to solve that problem in the next few years. Somebody put in a dredge and a storm battered it to pieces and tossed the remains onto the beach. Beasley tries minin' in a divin' suit, but the

water's too cold and he can't stay down long enough to locate the gold.

Schemer Kelly comes North with a suction outfit on an old steamer. He's fired up a bunch of rich cusses in Seattle and they're backin' the scheme. I'm along on a percentage basis. I get a percentage of all that's sucked up. At the end of the season my percentage is three indignant crabs, a couple of dozen shrimp, two squids and fourteen astonished clams.

I gives the squids to a squaw who drops 'em into a kettle of boilin' salmon, and turns the rest into a seafood salad. The ice comes down from the Arctic early that year and smashes the steamer and everything—includin' my Sunday clothes—goes to the bottom.

Other expeditions didn't fare any better and fin'ly even Schemer and Beasley gave it up as a bad job. Well, you can see how I felt when Schemer's cub barges in all het up over the idea of gettin' gold that had already cost more'n it was worth. "I suppose your father left you money enough to finance this proposition," I suggests.

"No," he admits, "I sort of figured you might be in shape to do it."

"I'm afraid I can't," I answers. "Just what is your plan to succeed where others have failed?"

"It isn't my plan," he frankly admits. "It was father's. And it is so simple I am amazed that he, or someone, didn't think of it before."

II

DENNY KELLY puts in the next half hour explaining his plan. It seems he had taken his father's basic idea and added a few frills of his own. "First we locate the gold, with nature's assistance," he says, "and next, with nature's assistance, we take it out. Of course," he admits, "there is a slight element of danger, such as—"

"Such as the Bering Sea spillin' in on you," I interrupts. "Son, it's the screwiest scheme I ever heard of."

"And for that reason, should succeed," he argues. "Now I need your help. If you aren't in funds, then come along for board and room and I'll pay you ten percent of what we take in. I shall require someone, with a broad knowledge of the North, that I can trust."

"There ain't no doubt about me knowin' the North," I admits. "But there's one thing your father didn't mention in his will. Along with my friendship he left you Hank Beasley's hate. That's a legacy that you don't want to forget or you'll wake up some mornin' and find yourself holdin' the sack. By the way, does Hank know your father willed him a horse laugh?"

"Naturally. A copy of the will was forwarded to him," Denny explains. "My lawyer is very thorough in such matters. Everyone mentioned in the will was given a copy."

"That's bad," I informs him. "It'll get all over Alaska that Schemer Kelly willed Hank Beasley a horse laugh. Hank ain't the kind to take it settin' down. Now the next question before the house is finances."

"Then you will give me the benefit of your friendship for ten percent of the take?" he says eagerly.

"I ain't one to go to court and break a man's will," I confesses. "If your dad willed you my friendship, then that friendship is yours such as it is."

"I have someone who will back me, in case you didn't care to avail yourself of the opportunity," Denny explains. That sure sounded like old Schemer hisself. He used to offer me

the chance of a lifetime and when I didn't have the money to accept he'd trot out another backer.

Denny Kelly leads the way downstairs to an automobile that is waitin' on the Skidroad. In case you don't know, the Skidroad in Seattle is where loggers, miners and others out of work, or in town on a bust, hang out. A guy on a soapbox was goin' strong and he had quite a crowd, but the crowd, to a man, was lookin' at somethin' special in Denny's car. She couldn't have weighed more'n a hundred pounds soppin' wet. She had a face that was purty as a picture, but with plenty of strength of character. She was pretendin' she didn't notice the admirin' gaze of the Skidroad lads, but I could tell she wasn't missin' a thing. I says to myself, "She'll do and she looks plenty smart—too smart to be backin' Denny Kelly's screwy scheme."

She looks up when we approach and smiles at Denny in a way that told the whole story. She was in love with the cuss. Well, I couldn't blame her. His enthusiasm and confidence had kinda got under my skin and made me wish I was younger and could tackle crazy dreams and maybe make 'em come true just because I had so much faith in myself and my dreams.

"Mary," Denny says, "I want to present our partner, and guiding director, Mr. No-Shirt McGee." He turns to me and says, "Mr. McGee, this is Mary Logan, my backer and fiancée."

The girl gives me a firm little hand and I knowed right then and there she was no clingin' vine. She'd stand on her own hind legs wherever she was. She has on a trick hat and there are curls stickin' out where they'd do the most good. You know, the kind that look as if they'd escaped, but are really put there after a lot of thought.

"Has Denny told you everything?" Mary asks.

"Yes," I admits.

"And what do you think of it?" she asks, and I knowed she wanted me to give the idea three rousin' cheers.

"Fine," I answers.

"Liar," she calls me sweetly. And I wished I was twenty-three about that time. "You know it is a mad, desperate gamble," she says. "But how I love it." I sure liked her for that, and told her so. Again I was on the way to becomin' the willin' slave of a beautiful woman. That's a failin' of mine.

"It's only fair to tell you, Miss Logan," I says, "this scheme has never been done before. It ain't even been tried. And the whole bunch of us is liable to be arrested and tried before a jury of six."

"What do you mean by a jury of six?" she asks.

"When folks up North are arrested and charged with insanity," I explains, "they are examined before a jury of six people."

"I know I'm just going to enjoy every minute of it," the girl says.

I don't say much then, but a couple of days later when Denny and me gets down to cases and are makin' plans I say, "Hadn't you better leave her behind?"

"Oh no," he answers. "She's all for it. She's backin' the proposition and we can't leave her out any way."

I scratches my head. "You're liable to lose your girl," I suggests. "Some of them young sourdoughs are mighty fast workers. I've seen school teachers land on the beach at Nome and before they could reach the school room some sourdough would have married 'em. It got so the school board made the girls put up bonds which they forfeited in case they married."

"And that stopped the practice?" he suggests.

"Gosh no," I answers, "the boys just paid off the bonds and married 'em anyway."

"Well, Mary is deeply in love with me," He says, kinda dignified like. "I have no fears on that score."

"She's never been worked on by a young sourdough who's had to look for months, maybe years at an Eskimo squaw." Now mind you I ain't got nothin' again an Eskimo squaw. They're all right in their place, but their place is an igloo—not a young sourdough's heart.

"Do as you think best, Denny," I warns, "but if you take a girl as pretty as Mary up North, you're flyin' right in the face of Providence."

A WEEK later I catches the *Victoria* for Nome to do the preliminary work. Nobody ever heard of placer minin' in winter when everything's froze up, so I keeps my mouth shut. First I checks up and finds nobody owns a foot of ground on the creek, which by now is knowed as Hungry Creek. That's fine, because we're goin' to need some ground. I takes an outfit out, stakes a claim on the beach just above tidewater and goes back to Nome. I files on the ground, then buys some equipment and freights in on a gasboat.

On the next trip North the *Victoria* puts into Saint Michael. That used to be quite a camp and the point where freight and passengers went up the Yukon River. But the railroad from Skagway to White Horse, and later the Government road to Fairbanks, put the river-steamer business on the bum, so Saint Michael is pretty quiet and a flock of river steamers is now rottin' on the beach.

I puts the gasboat alongside the *Vic* and takes on the outfit Danny Kelly's shipped up. It almost sinks the boat and a scow I towed out. The last sling-load is Mary and Denny in a box they use for passengers in rough weather. She's sweet enough to kiss as she steps from the box. Her cheeks are flushed with excitement and her eyes are sparklin'. "Thrilling!" she exclaims. "And I love this country already."

I'm wonderin' whether she'll be speakin' to us or not next spring after we've wintered together, but I don't say so. I takes the wheel, Denny casts off the lines and the gasboat chugs off towards the mouth of Hungry Creek. It's about that time the thing I'm afraid of, happens. A umiak, or Eskimo skin-boat, comes whizzin' over the water.

They've cut a hole near the stern, built in a well and fixed it so an outboard motor can be lowered down the well and into the water. It's a high-powered brute and three quarters of the umiak is out of water. A couple of Eskimo young men are settin' in the bow and there's a big Swede, with a wad of snoose under his lower lip, handlin' the motor and steerin' with a paddle.

He don't say a word as he passes, but them blue eyes of his don't miss a thing. They itemizes the queer cargo we've got aboard, they take in Denny's face and Mary's curves. "Who's the big Swede?" Denny asks.

"One of Beasley's men," I answers. He's got 'em scattered from here to breakfast. They can tell what's goin' on by sizin' up the freight that's bein' unloaded. Buckets mean dredges, scrapers, mean a scrapin' outfit, pipe and monitors mean sluicin' and so on."

"I'll bet the equipment on the scow baffled him," Denny says.

"We'll hear from him," I predicts

darkly. "Beasley never misses a bet."

I'll say this much for Denny, he don't act like he was afraid of anything or anybody and when we lands the scow on the beach at high tide he pitches in and helps unload. I'd hired a bunch of natives to do longshoremen's work and Denny holds up his end of it.

The first thing we do is to build a three-room shack. The little room is for Mary, the main room serves as a livin' room and has the cook stove in one end. The other room, with two bunks, is where me and Denny's goin' to bed down nights.

We stocks the shelves with canned goods, builds a meat cache and gets ready for winter. While the natives are finishin' up odds and ends, Denny gets a boat, rows up the creek a hundred feet and then dumps in a can of red stuff. It stains the water and you can follow the current a couple of hundred yards into the Bering Sea.

He keeps this up several days and makes notes on a chart, then takes soundin's. When it's all done he says, "No-Shirt, the gold washed out of Hungry Creek when my father blew up those two dams, should be concentrated along here." And he traces a pencil on the chart. "I have checked and rechecked the currents. And I've an idea the gold father washed out isn't all that's there."

"Huh?" I grunts, smellin' some kind of a scheme.

"Exactly," he says. "For ages Hungry Creek's been flowing into the Bering Sea. Certainly there must have been floods long before white men came into the country."

"Sounds reasonable," I admits.

"Then," he concludes, "there probably was a considerable gold concentration there before father's flood."

"You're a true Kelly," I says, "but don't spend an ounce of them deep-sea nuggets until you get it. Everything that's developed so far proves what you've contended. But . . . the gold is still where it was when other outfits went after it."

WE meets the *Victoria* on her last trip to Nome and gets mail from home and a few things we'd forgot to include in the first supply list. When the *Vic* heads south, the ice is movin' from the Arctic into the Bering Sea and snow's beginnin' to fly. As soon as there's enough snow on the ground to carry a sled I hitches up the dogs and goes on a caribou hunt.

In a week's time we've knocked over enough caribou to last us all winter and put it in the meat cache to freeze. For days the ice moves along the shore, sometimes pilin' up on the beach. It gets colder and colder, winds howl around the cabin, and almost as fast as leads open up in the pack ice they freeze over. Then all at once the ice in front of the cabin stops movin' and gets so still you can hear the sounds inside of your head.

"This, my children," I says, "is what is known as the Arctic night. Before spring comes and the ice goes you'll be either hatin' each other or lovin' each other more'n you do now. Winter's a fine time to get on each other's nerves. If you see me leave the cabin sudden, and take a long walk, don't think I'm crazy, I'm just tryin' to get another grip on myself."

And with this warnin' I settles down to catch up on my readin'. I'm halfway through the first book when Mary comes rushin' into the cabin. "No-Shirt," she shouts, excited as a she-bear with cubs, "I hear a plane coming."

"Like as not," I admits. "Planes fly from Fairbanks to Nome, and else-

where all winter long. Maybe he's off his course." I had a sneakin' hunch that pilot was right on his course, but I didn't say so. Instead, I loads up my six-gun, pulls on my parka and steps out into the night. It's quite a night, with the Northern Lights tossin' ribbons of colored light into the sky, and then lettin' them flutter like a mighty electric fan was blowin' 'em upwards.

The plane comes out of pink flame, circles and lands on a stretch of smooth ice, with the skis hissin' and crunchin' through the crust. A big moose in reindeer-skin parka and wearin' mukluks climbs out of the plane. He's followed by another the same size. The pilot brings up the rear. "We're lost," the big fellow says, "and . . ." He recognizes me and knows there's no use of tryin' to make a bluff at bein' lost to cover up a little first-class spyin'. "Hello, No-Shirt," he says.

"Hello Beasley," I answers. Then rememberin' Northern hospitality is extended to friend and foe I adds, "Come in and have a cup of tea."

III

THE big Swede who sized up the umiak is with Beasley. Behind him comes the pilot, a rat-faced cuss whose picture was in the papers two or three years ago. He'd been accused of smugglin' Chinese over the Mexican border. They never caught him with the goods for the simple reason he had it fixed to get rid of the evidence when gov'ment planes got after him. He'd pull a lever, and a half dozen Chinese would drop a few thousand feet like bombs.

"This is Mr. Renton, my pilot," Beasley says when I had first introduced him to Denny and Mary.

I manages not to shake hands. On the Mexican border the pilot's name hadn't been Renton. He smoked all the time down there, and he got out his cigarettes up here just as soon as he'd pulled off his parka. His hands—steady enough when flyin' a plane—are shakin' like birch leaves. His black eyes darts this way and that, as if he was expectin' an enemy or gov'ment man to pop out of a closet. The big Swede's name is Nordstrom. He's as cold as ice. His fingers don't shake, but he sizes up things with narrowed eyes and his movements are slow. He's the kind that pull through a wreck in the ice and live off the country. Leave it to Beasley to hire men at home in either the air or the sea.

"I noticed lights down here," Beasley says in a smooth voice, "and thought someone might be in distress. It has been years since anyone has carried on mining operations in the region, you know." He glances around. "You seem to be well fixed for a hard winter."

"Yes," I answers. "Mr. Kelly decided to do a little minin' on Hungry Creek. Gold is higher than it was twenty years ago. Ground that was too poor to work in them days will return a profit now. It's a gamble, of course."

"Yes, of course," Beasley agrees. He's got a big, florid face and his little eyes kinda retreat into fatty caves. He's got a short neck and when he turns his head he kinda swings his shoulders at the same time. He's pretty near fifty years old, but he ain't got a gray hair in his head. He's got plenty of drive, too, yet I know for a fact he's drunk enough whisky to float a gunboat. He talks along, but as the minutes pass he talks less to me and Denny and more to Mary. Anybody can see he's fallen hard for her.

A girl like Mary and a man like

Beasley who usually gets what he goes after can make a pile of trouble durin' an Arctic winter. After awhile he turns to Denny. "Your name is Kelly. I knew a man once named Schemer Kelly?" It was a question.

"My father," Denny answered. I guess I'm the only one watchin' Beasley's face at the time. There was plenty to be read before he drops his mask. I read fury, a lust for revenge, but mostly a kind of satisfaction that should have put the fear of the lord into Denny. Beasley wasn't forgettin' the horse laugh Schemer had left him in his will.

The three stayed most of the night, with the pilot goin' out every so often and startin' the motor to keep the oil warm. In the mornin' they left and headed for Nome.

"What do you think about our visitors?" Denny asks quick.

"They still can't figure why we're here," I answers.

Denny leads me down to the ice, beyond earshot of the cabin. "Did you notice the way he kept looking at Mary?" he asks. "Her freshness, her youth and beauty affected him like liquor. We didn't serve a drop of whisky, yet the longer he talked to her the more he flushed up. His tongue got thick, too, like a drunk man's."

"Yeah, I noticed," I answers. "I've seen him that way before. Gold, tradin' posts and wimmin affect him the same way. He don't need gold or tradin' posts. He's got plenty of both. It's the fun of gettin' what's hard to get that lures him on. He likes the pursuit and the kill. He's like a wolverine runnin' a trap line. Your father laughed at him, got the whole North laughin' at him and that stung his pride, Denny. He's goin' to take it out of your hide. And don't you think it won't be a battle. Another thing, don't get the idea you're a cinch to win. You may lose."

"What about Mary?"

"You'd better send her Outside," I advises. "She's the swellest cook I ever knowed. And I'm one of the worst, but our food will digest easier if she's in Seattle while Beasley's around."

There's a crunch in the snow and I turns to see Mary standin' there. "I heard what you said, No-Shirt," she says quietly, "but I'm not going. I am staying for two reasons. First, if Denny has a hard fight, he may need my help. And secondly, it is my money that is at stake. As to Beasley annoying me? Well, after all this is a civilized age and there are laws in Alaska."

"Sure," I admits, "but sometimes it takes the law quite awhile to catch up. And when it does, what's been done can't always be undone. I ain't heard of any laws coverin' heartaches, unpleasant memories and regrets," I adds, lookin' her square in the eyes.

"That is probably true," she answers, "now suppose we cross our bridges when we come to them. Perhaps we've seen the last of Mr. Beasley."

"Maybe," I answers. But I knowed danged well we hadn't.

TEN days later the weather clears and there's enough light to work by. Me and Denny takes the chart he made and goes out onto the ice and marks out the channel he'd figgered Hungry Creek had made in the Bering Sea. "The gold," he says, "should be somewhere along this stretch. Of course there may be rocks or submarine dikes that stopped it. But from the soundings I took, and making due allowance for it working slowly into deep water, it can't be very far from where we stand."

"How deep is the water?" I asks.

"Five fathoms," he answers ,"—thirty feet." He marks off a circle nearly seventy feet in diameter and we start diggin' out the ice which is about two feet thick. When we'd cut out a one foot layer, we shoveled it out and put in several hours skiddin' it away.

Two days later we goes out to the hole and makes an inspection. Just as Denny had figgered, the water under the thinned layer had frozen down another foot. We thins it again and waits for it to freeze. Then the temperature drops to fifty below and we could almost see it freeze down towards the ocean floor. The temperature dropped until it was too cold to work. Then it warms up to around thirty below. We puts in a little hoistin' affair —a line rove through a pulley suspended from shearlegs—to handle the ice. We're down around twenty feet when I hears a high-pitched scream that seems like it'll never end.

"That's the ice crackin', Denny," I yells.

We both tries to go up the ladder the same time. Fin'ly I gets my foot into his face and makes it to the top, with him on my heels. We're both expectin' the expansion of the ice in the sea to crack open the icy walls of the pit and let in the ocean.

"That settles it," he say, "we're goin' to have *two* ladders from now on—a ladder apiece."

"You can have your ladders," I snaps, thinkin' how many thousand years it had taken me to climb out of what looked like an icy tomb, "but I'm goin' to rig me up one of them there catapults. It's goin' to have powerful springs. When I hears ice crackin' I jumps on the catapult, presses a button and it tosses me out of the pit."

"It might toss you too high."

"If it does, I'll have a parachute handy," I answers. "Golly Moses, Denny, you don't realize how fast the ocean will come in if the ice ever breaks on us."

"Not much chance of it breaking," he argues. "The arch can resist tremendous pressure. An ice arch, laid on its side in the manner of speaking, protects us on all sides. That's all a circle is—a progressive arch."

"Yeah," I answers, "and expansion can break anything. Contraction can pull anything apart."

That night we builds another ladder, and runs an electric-light line from a portable generator to the pit. The ice is quiet and we take turns diggin' and haulin' out slabs. "No-Shirt," Denny yells, "come here. I can see bottom."

It's almost breakfast time and I'm sleepy and hungry, but somethin' in his voice makes me forget both. I runs down the ladder, gets down on my hands and knees, and sure enough there's bottom. It's kinda distorted when viewed through the ice, but there it is. Bottom fish, attracted by the light are movin' around.

"We've got to be careful now," I warns, "because if water pressure shifts the sand around the edges, the bottom of this here ice cistern we've dug may blow up in our faces."

We're both crazy to see what's under the sand and muck, but just the same we knocks off for three days. When we returns she's froze deep into the sand. The two of us are fit to be tied as we start movin the last of the ice in the center of the pit. It ain't long before I turns over a slab that's mostly black sand. "There's a nugget!" he yells. "A big one."

"You're lookin' at a frozen clam," I answers, "it ain't heavy enough to be gold."

He breaks up the mess with a hammer and it's a clam all right. Back we go again. We move a square yard of dirt without restin' and when we fin'ly get the kinks out of our backs there's Mary standin' on the edge of the pit sayin', "I've been telling you it is time to eat, for the last five minutes."

"Eat?" I yells up at her, "what's that?" And we keep right along diggin' towards bedrock. After awhile she comes down, too, and takes a hand.

Suddenly I yells, "This sand ain't frozen. We've gone too deep in our excitement."

Denny and Mary both get what that means. Water may seep through the sand under the frozen slab that forms the bottom of our pit and spurt up through the hole. Once it starts, it'll move fast. And it won't stop until the pit's filled.

"Clear out, Mary," Denny orders. He stares at the sand a few moments, then scrapes up enough to fill a bucket, which he sends to the top. I stays down and knocks loose the black sand frozen to ice slabs and sends up the chunks, then starts to follow, when somethin' catches my eye in the soft sand. It looks like the back of a clam where the hinge is. I puts it in my pocket and climbs out.

MARY and Denny are packin' the bucket of loose sand to the cabin and when I gets there Denny is pannin' some of it. The three of us bend over that pan, forgettin' the caribou roast Mary's got in the oven, and all the Chechako grub she's cookin' on the stove.

The last of the sand goes over the edge of the pan leavin' a dollar's worth of course gold in the bottom. "Huh," he grunts, "no nuggets."

"Gold runnin' a dollar a pan ain't to be sneezed at," I suggests to him.

"Yes," he answers, "I know, but we've been weeks getting down to thin gold. A shift in the ice pack will destroy our work in the matter of minutes." I knowed he was thinkin' about the risk of the sea breakin' into the pit and wipin' us out, too. But he wasn't sayin' so and givin' Mary somethin' to worry about. "We haven't struck the real pay, yet," he adds, "and we may never strike it."

He's pretty discouraged for the moment. That meant we'd have to prospect around. Go this way, then that. And whichever way we went we'd have to move a thirty-foot wall of ice. And we'd have to move it slow, givin' it time to freeze back.

"Maybe this will help some," I suggests, handin' him the object I'd picked up.

"A pound nugget!" he exclaims. "Where'd you find it, No-Shirt?"

"Saw a bit of it stickin' through the loose sand," I answers.

He grabs Mary and starts waltzin' around the room. Pretty soon they wraps their arms around me and the three of us waltz around, knockin' over chairs and shiftin' the stove a couple of inches. "If there's one big nugget there," Denny yelps, "there'll be others. The larger ones are probably nearer the creek mouth. Obviously the coarse gold and fine stuff would move farther to sea."

. . . . So two days later we goes down to bedrock in the center of the pit, then gradually works towards shore. As fast as we get a load of dirt we hoist it up and dump it onto a sled that's restin' on skids so the runners won't freeze to the ice. It takes ten or twelve hours hard work to load the sled. As soon as this is done we breaks out a tractor and hauls the load to a

flat point about ten feet above the frozen surface of Hungry Creek.

Each night we thaws and pans enough dirt to check on the values. Once in two or three days we find a big nugget. There may be more in the dump, there's no way of tellin'. We're only sure the values are gettin' better as we work shorewards.

In big stampedes I've seen men work until they drop in their tracks. There was no need of it. Their claims were theirs, there was law in the country so nobody's goin' to jump 'em. And what they didn't take out that season they could take out the next. But there's somethin' about it all that gets a man. You know each shovel of dirt is worth somethin'. The more shovels the more money and it's a case of drive until you drop.

With us it was different. Any second the ice might shift and the pressure split our pit wide open. It was a case of getting out as much dirt as possible while the gettin' was good.

Sometimes I'd drop in my tracks. Sometimes it would be Denny. Mary was always hoverin' around, worryin' herself sick over our physical condition. Me and Denny was almost skin and bones, and yet we ate like horses.

We keeps movin' along, followin' a channel of gold-bearin' sand, mixed with frozen clams. As we break off slabs of ice from the wall ahead of us, we piles it up behind. It freezes and helps brace the pit—keepin' it from growin' too long. Also it saves hoistin' it clear to the top.

WE'RE in the midst of cleanin' off bedrock muck, studded with nuggets, when Beasley's plane drops out of a moonlit sky. You can't cover up operations like our's, and there was no law against him landin' on the ice.

He walks over, the frost glistenin' on his parka fur. But the glisten of his eyes is brighter. We climbs up our ladders and says, "Hello, Beasley. Won't you join us in a cup of tea?"

"Later," he answers, and I can see he's thinkin' just about as fast as he's ever thought in his life. "Who's scheme is this?" he asks.

"My father's," Denny answers, and there's plenty of pride in his voice. "He said that while you couldn't reach bedrock in a caisson during the summer or fall when there were storms, you might in the winter. It was his idea the cold air would build an ice caisson if a man gave it a chance."

A couple of miles offshore the ice cracks, and the scream and groan of it carries far on the still, frosty air. Beasley jumps as if he'd been shot from behind. "I wouldn't work down there for all the gold in Alaska," he says. "The strain of knowing you might be cracking ice, will break a man's nerve." He looks hard at our faces. "You show the strain. You're beginning to crack already."

"When we feel we're cracking," Denny says, "we take a look at the dump on shore. The ice can't reach that."

"You deserve all you get," Beasley says, "and I hope you get a million dollars. You're the two nerviest men in the North. But you need help. Why don't you hire some of the natives in the region?"

"We tried," I answers, "but they lasted only until they hears the ice crack, then they hightails it home. The last one didn't even stop for his pay."

"All of which gives me an idea," Beasley says.

I was afraid of that, but didn't tell him so. It's against his nature to let them deep-sea nuggets slip through his

fingers. Somethin' in his voice puts plenty of fear into Denny's heart. It showed on the kid's face. I couldn't expect him to wear a poker face after what he'd been through. "What is your idea, Mr. Beasley?" he asks. And he almost holds his breath while waitin' for Beasley's answer.

"My best claim on Hungry Creek," Beasley explains, "was mostly quicksand. We felt if we could reach bedrock it would be covered with gold, because obviously the gold would sink fast in quicksand. But we never could hold back the water. I'm going to try your method, Denny. Dig down, let it freeze, then dig again. And I thank you for the idea."

Denny's relief is pathetic. He brightens all over. "Golly, Mr. Beasley," he says, "I hope you strike it. And you won't have to worry about the ocean pilin' in on you, either."

Denny sleeps like a top that night, but I don't. I know Beasley too well. My first thought is to throw a guard around the pit to prevent Beasley from tossin' in a dynamite blast and crackin' open the wall of our ice caisson. But my second thought is better. Beasley always did follow the cat's-paw method and let others pull his chestnuts out of the fire. He'll let us lift the gold-bearin' sand off'n the ocean floor. While we're doin' it, he'll figger ways of gettin' his clutches on it.

It's a long time before I can go to sleep. And when I wakes up, feelin' like the last run of dog salmon, I ain't any better off. But I don't tell Denny my fears. He's staggerin' under enough strain as it is.

IV

BEASLEY sleeps on the cabin floor that night and the next mornin' saunters over and takes a look at our dump. It's quite a mound, frozen solid and covered with snow. We had gone over it a lot with the tractor and flattened out some of the rough spots and frozen chunks of gravel and sand had fallen into the holes. It was pretty solid, but it was hard to tell how many cubic yards of dirt it contained. And no man could even guess it's value. There was prob'ly many a man-sized nugget covered with frozen muck.

Around noon Beasley asks if we want any letters mailed and says he'll take 'em to Nome. He turns his charm on Mary, and slaps Denny on the back. But I can see I'm just a pain in his neck. He knows I know him.

He takes five letters for Mary and two for Denny and he's gone five days. When he comes back you'd have thought our claim was a piece of China and a Japanese air fleet was comin' to bombard it. All the planes in Nome were in the air. They circled low, picks out nice landin' spots and then their skis kiss the snow and they glides to a stop.

Pilots get stiffly out and come runnin' over to our pit. And while they're standin' on the edge, lookin' down at the muck we're puttin' into our big bucket, the ice screams and groans like the Berin' Sea was goin' to crack wide open.

Them fliers will go out in any kind of weather, but I can tell by their eyes they don't want any seagoin' placer minin' in their lives. It makes me begin to wonder why I'm such a fool as to keep on diggin' out frozen gravel from the ocean bed.

The planes unload a couple of tons of equipment and several men with the Beasley stamp on 'em—heavy-jaws, bashed-in noses and mighty fists. They hauls the outfit over to Beasley's old claim and a couple of 'em start puttin'

an old cabin into shape. The planes leave and come back the next day with another load.

I count noses. There's Beasley, Nordstrom, the big Swede, and five others. They commences diggin' a shaft through the frozen quicksand. They work days and let it freeze down nights. Not bein' up against water pressure like we are, they can leave a thinner skin around their caisson.

Beasley is very neighborly. He's got some fresh vegetables that was flown up from the States and he brings 'em over to Mary and says, "You cook 'em, and we'll all eat 'em."

That night I look at fresh green peas, meltin' butter and a swell-smellin' steam assailin' the nostril and I says, "Beware o' Greeks bearin' gifts and don't eat no green peas." But the flesh is too cussed weak, so I eats my share.

Beasley starts a song and Mary and Denny join in. It's funny how quick a little singin' will turn strangers into friends. "Come on, join us, No-Shirt," Beasley says. He turns to Mary. "You may not know it, but you're harboring a singer under your roof. No-Shirt is a basso-profundo . . ."

"Cut out the personalities, Beasley," I warns. "Nobody can call me a basso-profundo. . . ."

"He is complimenting you, No-Shirt," Mary interrupts.

"He never complimented me in his life," I growls.

"No-Shirt's basso-profundo was famous in Dawson," Beasley continues, "where he was one of a barber-shop quartet. He had quite a range and could even rush in and give the tenor a boost when he started slipping."

They all urges me, but I didn't sing. After awhile I goes to bed, and when I gets up the cabin's quiet. I sneaks out to the pit, catches up a pick and starts diggin' at a toe of gravel stickin' out from the ice wall. The gravel resists a couple of seconds and I puts on the pressure. It comes slowly, then lets go so suddenly I fall sprawlin'. On hands and knees I stares at a irregular piece of dirt six inches thick, about seven inches wide and a foot long.

The pick point has slid off a nugget, leavin' a deep, wide scratch on pure gold. It's a sight that takes my breath away. Besides this big nugget, there's a flock of little ones. They're stickin' out like raisins in a puddin'. They's more where they came from. I tries to lift the chunk and it runs so heavy to gold I can hardly budge it.

I goes up the ladder quicker'n a Eskimo can skin a mouse and makes even faster time to the cabin. "Roll out, kids," I yelps, "I've just stuck a pick into Neptune's Poke."

IT ain't no time at all they're comin' down the ladders to see the find. I turns the light on full blast and the three of us just stares. "The concentration goes under the ice wall doesn't it?" Denny says at last. "There's no tellin' how far, either."

"Here's somethin' you haven't noticed," I says. "The first gold we took out hasn't been disturbed in thousands of years. This gold has come out of that river in our time. See it's got different stains on it."

"Then it's the gold father's floods gouged out of Hungry Creek," Denny cries. "We've found it at last."

"That's the way I figger it," I says. "But no word of this to Beasley. He's liable to make some kind of a claim—throw the whole business into court."

"No-Shirt," Mary says seriously, "are you sure you haven't made a mistake in Mr. Beasley. I know he's home-

ly, drinks too much and all that. But he's had a lot of disappointments in life. He was orphaned when he was seven, and has taken care of himself since he was nine years old. The world wasn't easy on him and it's made him hard and bitter. Only the other night he was telling me he thought perhaps he had misjudged the world generally—that his viewpoint was narrow because he had seen only the wrong sort of life. Lately, he says, he is finding people are pretty fine and generous. He is trying to respond in kind, I am sure."

You folks who've been around in the world won't have no trouble seein' through Beasley's game. You know leopards don't change their spots and men of Beasley's type don't suddenly get soft hearted and turn their back on pokes of gold as big as Neptune's. But I can't risk arguin' the point with Mary and perhaps drivin' a wedge between us. I have a sneakin' feelin' Beasley's workin' to that very end. So I says, "Far be it from me to push a man down if he's trying to make a better man of hisself. The only Beasley I know is the old one. If there's a new one comin' along I'll be the first to extend the hand of brotherly love and fellowship."

"There," says Mary in the tone of a girl who thinks she's won an argument, "I knew you would take that attitude. I don't think we need to feel the slightest concern over Mr. Beasley. He is too interested in his own prospect. In fact he feels indebted to us because Schemer Kelly's method solved his own problem."

"He should feel that way," I agrees. "Now suppose we have somethin' to eat."

Denny's a young cuss with a cast-iron stomach. He's excited and bolts his food, then streaks it for the mine. I ain't so young as I used to be. I'm excited, I bolts my food and danged near passes out. Gas forms around my heart and Mary gets scared. She gives me some water and baking soda and makes me lie down. The first thing I know I'm wakin' up. Mary's shakin' my shoulder and half sobbin', "Wake up! Something terrible has happened!"

"Water break through?" I asks, scared stiff.

"Yes," she answers, "but Denny stopped it. He's down there, now."

Denny stopped it!

It gives me a queer feelin' and I don't have much trouble figgerin' what happened. Denny sees Neptune's Poke. He takes a pick point, drives it in and cracks the ice. Water starts spurtin' through. He grabs a sack, or a piece of his clothes or somethin' and tries to hold it back. He does hold it back, while the ice slowly forms around the break.

I figger he's up to his elbows in solid ice, by now. But I'm wrong. He's in a slab of ice to his hips. My mind, for some queer reason, goes back to Schemer Kelly's will, *"To my beloved son, Dennis Kelly, I also give and bequeath the friendship and stout loyalty of No-Shirt McGee. . . ."*

It looks as if I has my work cut out for me if I'm goin' to make said friendship worth anything. I hurries down the ladder and kneels beside the kid. "I tried to pry out that hunk of gold," he whispers, "the water started coming through in a fine spray. I wedged a sack into the place and tried to hold it with my hands. No go. I put my back against a block of ice and drive both feet against the sack and that partly stops it. Ice formed from the leakage and that sealed it."

"Why didn't you let the whole works go?" I says, thinkin' no amount of gold was worth a man's legs.

"And lose all we've gambled on?" he asks. "Not me!"

I gets busy chippin' ice. It's a hour's job, but fin'ly he's free except his feet. I shifts' the shear legs, lowers the tackle and secures him. "Now Mary," I orders, "stand by. If the water busts through, haul him clear. Don't mind me, I'll scoot up the ladder."

I WAS afraid to chip Denny's feet free so I shaves off the ice with a chisel. It takes an hour and he's in pretty bad shape. Mary hauls him up while I climb the ladder. She lowers him to a hand-sled and we streaks it over the ice to the cabin.

The first thing we do is to put his legs into a tub of cold water to thaw away the ice. The nights are still long and it gets dark while we're still at it. "Denny's got to go to the hospital at Nome," I tells Mary. "We'll have to stomach our pride and ask Beasley to send him there in his plane."

"I'll ask him," Mary quickly offers.

But I shakes my head. I don't want her under no obligations to Beasley. "I'll do the askin'," I answers.

It's about a quarter mile between the two cabins and I makes it in record time. Beasley hisself answers my knock. He looks surprised when I show up, because I ain't been callin' on him like Mary and Denny has. "Denny's legs are frozen from the hips down," I says, "you know what that means."

"Yes," he answers, "it'll take two hours to get the plane ready. First we have to warm up the oil, then the crank case. Then we'll have to fill the crank case with the hot oil and go about the business of warming up the plane itself." As he finishes talkin' the pilot starts fillin' a can with oil, which he places on the stove.

"We'll bring Denny to the hangar," I says. "And thanks." I slips from sight in a hurry, then doubles back and presses my ear again the wall.

Beasley's talkin' and there's plenty of satisfaction in his voice. "I told you, boys, if we just laid low something would happen. And it's happened. Denny will be in the hospital for weeks."

"And Mary will be with him," the pilot cuts in, "which won't be so nice for you."

"I'll take Mary in stride," Beasley says. "That leaves nobody on the job here, but No-Shirt McGee. And there's a man I've wanted to deal with in my own way for a long time. Beasley Luck, as it's known in the North, is holding out."

I lingers a minute, hopin' to hear more, but they starts talkin' about Denny's frozen legs and whether Mary will marry him or not if they're cut off. Unless I've got Mary sized up all wrong—and I don't think I have—she'll marry Denny, win, lose or draw.

As soon as I gets back to the cabin I fills a tub with kerosene. Denny's legs are free of ice and I gets off his boots and clothes. Then I takes Mary aside. "The time has come for you to be braver than you've ever been in your life," I warns. "When the frost starts leavin' the marrow in Denny's bones, it's goin' to be pretty terrible."

She's pale as a ghost, but her chin's up and she looks me square in the eyes. "So I've heard," she anwers.

Denny's conscious by this time and his mind is clear. He knows what's comin' off as soon as I lowers his legs into the kerosene. Mary sets in a chair and kinda pillows his head on her shoulder. "I may say things I don't mean," he tells her in a slow, haltin' voice. "Things might come out when my legs get to hurting. But remember

this, I love you better than life itself. I haven't any regrets. I'm not going to lose my legs. We are going to take a fortune out of that dump when the ice goes out and we can run the dirt through sluice boxes. Then we're going to be married and go on a long honeymoon. And we're going to be happy. Going to be happier than any other couple in the world—happier . . ."

He couldn't say any more just then. I didn't want to look up. It was too much like pryin' into the private affairs of a couple of young lovers. His fists was clutched to the arms of the chair and she was holdin' her cheek against his and whisperin' somethin' while the tears came from her tightly closed eyes —came, as if they was bein' squeezed out. But I couldn't help from seein' her face as I shifts my position and get a better hold on Denny's legs and forces them into the kerosene.

When it's quiet in the room we can hear the distant roar of Beasley's plane. The motor's turnin' over slow as the pilot warms it up. After awhile it grows louder and I rushed to the window and spots it comin' over the snow, lurchin' this way and that, but always workin' towards our cabin.

"Beasley's goin' to take you to Nome," I explains to Denny.

"I'm going with you, too," Mary says quickly.

"I want you, Mary," he says, then lowers his voice, "I want you, too, No-Shirt. Bring a six-gun along. I won't let them cut off my legs."

"Sure," I says, "I'll bring a gun along." I have a hunch he figgers to turn the gun on hisself if he wakes up from the operatin' table and finds his legs gone. But I breaks the gun when he ain't lookin' and takes out the loads and puts in empty shells.

Beasley comes in about that time and says everything is ready. "Thank you so much, Mr. Beasley," Mary says, "I'll never be able to repay you."

"You owe me nothing," Beasley answers quickly. "Up in the North we hang together. It may be your turn to do something for me next time." He sees her white, scared face and slips his big arm across her shoulder. "Now don't you worry, Mary," he insists. "Things are going to be all right."

She looks into his face and sees that he means it. Sure things were goin' to be all right—for Beasley.

V

THE plane lands on a smooth spot in front of Nome and the motor's hardly quit turnin' over before they's a crowd. Somebody has a dog-sled and we load Denny on it and race to the hospital. He asks me to stick close to him and that's just what I do. "No-Shirt," he says in a low voice, "do you think there's enough in the dump to take care of Mary and me?"

Well, you've got to hand it to a kid with that much nerve. Back in the cabin he'd been tellin' Mary they were rich and would go on a long honeymoon. And all the time he had his doubts. Well, I had my doubts, too. No tellin' what was in that dump. But I wasn't goin' to send him into the operatin' room with any worries.

"She's froze solid," I says, "and we can't tell. But you're sure of five or six hundred ounces of gold. And it may run all the way to a ton."

"A ton of gold," he whispers. "Too much. I'll settle for two hundred pounds right now. That's over a hundred thousand dollars."

"A hundred thousand will buy a lot of grub," I admits. Then the doctor shows up, ready for business.

"Have you got the gun, No-Shirt," Denny asks.

"Yep," I answers and slips the gun under his pillow.

"If you don't mind, Mr. McGee," the doctor says, "I'd like to talk to the patient alone."

"No-Shirt stays, Doc," Denny says before I can open my mouth. "We've been through a lot together. When my fate is settled, then we've both got to go it alone awhile. He'll be at the mine. I'll be here. Until then, he stays."

Doc shrugs his shoulders and spends a long time lookin' at the kid's legs. "They should come off just below the knees," he says. "The effective methods taken by Mr. McGee have saved the portion above the knee."

"No dice, Doc," Denny says. "I want your promise right now that you won't amputate."

"I can't promise that," the Doc says, "when your life is at stake."

"I've a girl waiting for me," Denny says slowly, "and I plan to walk—not crawl—by her side the rest of my life. The legs stay on. If I die . . ." His hand slips back under the pillow and comes out with the gun. "Promise, Doc," he softly insists.

"You're the patient," Doc answers, "and it looks as if you're the doctor, also. I promise not to amputate without your permission." He took the gun and gives me a hard look. "If that is all settled, then Mr. McGee can leave."

I steps out into the hall and Mary's there. "I want Denny to know," she says, kinda chokin', "that no matter what happens . . . happens to his legs, we'll carry out our plans. It took courage to hold that water back while the ice slowly formed. It took more courage than I ever dreamed any man possessed."

I nods. It's one thing to jump into a river after a drownin' man. Then, you're into it before you have time to think of the danger to yourself. It's somethin' else to let your legs slowly freeze. Then, you have time to think.

AFTER they dress Denny's legs I drifts around Nome lookin' up old friends and absorbin' gossip. Two-Story Johnson corners me and says, "I hear there's plenty of money on Hungry Creek now."

"We're takin' out a little," I admits. "But we're operatin' on the floor of the Bering Sea."

"Beasley's struck it, too," Johnson says, which same is a surprise to me. "It seems like he froze that quicksand to bedrock and found plenty of pay dirt. He claims he can work faster'n you can because he don't have to contend with water pressure."

"He didn't tell me nothin' about a strike," I growls.

"It ain't likely he would. You spiked his guns on a couple of deals years ago," he says, "and Beasley's got a long memory. You ain't exactly a bosom pal."

I meets Beasley a couple of hours later. "I'll fly you back," he offers, but I declines with thanks. I'll charter my own plane. There's plenty of 'em around Nome—Alaska bein' the most air-minded region, per capita, in the world.

It's five days before I pull out. Denny ain't in none too good shape. Circulation ain't right and the doctor is afraid of gangrene, which means he may lose all of both legs and even his life. Doc was prob'ly right. Them legs should have come off below the knee.

I charters a plane because Denny's worried about how things are goin' back at the camp, and as we flies over the pit I can see somethin's happened.

The pit has drifted to the top with snow.

"Don't land," I yells at the pilot, "fly on to the nearest native village. I've got to pick up some men."

. . . . After a pow-wow I talks three husky bucks into boardin' the plane and flyin' back with me. We dig out the snow and get down to the bottom. As soon as this is done we cut back the ice that's got thick while I was away, and sends up the gravel. I keeps drivin' away until there's three sled loads, then I warms up the cat tractor and drives her over to the sleds. The bucks keep pluggin' away at the frozen dirt, so I'm alone when I takes the first sledload to the dump. It's covered with snow, but the tractor cleats dig in and I puts the tractor on top of the dump because I want all of the dirt as near the creek as possible. She digs in as the sled sticks, almost stops, then bounces ahead as the sled breaks loose.

Just then it seems like the whole world has dropped from under me. The cat falls into a hole six feet deep. For a minute I can't understand just what has happened. Then I realizes the inside of the dump has thawed, leavin' a heavy skin of frozen dirt outside—somethin' like the skin of a banana. A man or a caribou could have jumped all over the crust and nothin' happen, but the cat bein' heavy breaks through. It seems like I catches a whiff of hot, stale air. Somethin' like you smell when you open an oven that's hot and empty.

Now a lot of that dump is naturally ice mixed with gravel. If the dump thawed and the water ran off the dump would diminish in size. But water don't run very far when the weather is way below zero. So, I asks myself, where's the gravel that once had occupied the hole I'd fallen into?

I climbs off of the tractor and crawls around, peerin' under slabs of frozen dirt. I gets a whiff of hot air when I move a clod. I move some more and a hole big enough for me to crawl into opens up. I can see a blue flame, and everything's clear. Beasley's tunneled under the dump, set up a gasoline stove with three burners and put a sheet iron oven over 'em. He's prob'ly piped in enough fresh air to keep the burners goin' and the rest is a matter of patience. As fast as the inside of the dump thaws he moves it out, pans the gravel, takes the gold and disposes of the tailin's. This ain't so hard to do as you might think, what with the wind blowin' loose snow around.

Besides, Beasley can also add the tailin's to the dirt taken from his own operation and nobody be the wiser. That's my first thought. Then I has a second thought that's a honey. It's just possible that if Beasley's mixed our tailin's in his own dump he's made a bad slip. . . .

I cuts the sled loose, backs out the tractor, dumps the sled into the hole and goes back for the two other loads. The snow's blowin' steadily and I've hopes Beasley won't catch on that I'm next to his game. I want to get him dead to rights, and if I expect to live to a ripe old age I'll need plenty of help when the showdown comes.

WHILE I'm dumpin' the gravel into the hole, the three bucks've cleaned off the snow and some of the ice above Neptune's Poke. The minute I takes a look at the ice I know somethin's happened. The Neptune's Poke area has changed. What was once a mass of nuggets is now ice.

Beasley's men removed the gold while I'm in Nome, poured water into the hole and let it freeze. It was a smooth job, all right, but it weren't

smooth enough. I digs out the ice and works into the frozen gravel beyond. My pick point hits somethin' and catches. I keeps an eye on the ice and water beyond and puts on a little pressure.

There's a small blast. I sees a flash of flame, ice flies into my face and a hunk smashes against my stomach. That don't do me no good, either. It hits harder'n a fist and it's heavier. I staggers, then lands flat on my back. I tries to get up and my legs are dead from the hips down.

Water's roarin' through a hole in the ice. There's plenty of pressure behind it and it hits the opposite wall. Somethin' hits with the force of a cannon ball, cracks the wall of ice and falls back. It's a hundred pound nugget, blown out by the pressure.

I yells at the Indians, but they're goin' up the ladders as if all hell was after 'em, which it is. I drags myself to a ladder, then suddenly a big section of wall goes out. The water hits my side and knocks me again' the wall. I go boilin' 'round with the ice cakes and hunks of frozen gravel. It's a wonder I ain't crushed to death, but luck's with me. The water comes to the level of the ice. I grab, but my hand slips off. I grab again and hold it there a few seconds. The mitt freezes and I hauls myself onto the ice, pulls my hand out of the mitt and starts for the cabin. Sometimes I dog trot, sometimes I run, and again it's a stagger. My clothes is glazin' over, like a knight's armor. And like armor it breaks at the joints. I'm all in when I reach the cabin. There's a few coals in the stove and I dump all the fine stuff I can find into the stove and then begin to work off the half frozen clothes. Some garments, like my pants, has to be thawed out first. I'm blue with the cold, but I've missed the frost. I wasn't down there a long time, like Denny was.

I dries off and rolls into the sleepin' bag. The temperature in the room must be a hundred. The stove is red hot, but I shake like a leaf for an hour. Then I gets up, stokes the stove again, takes a snort of whisky and turns in.

Next mornin' I have a ragin' fever and after awhile I hears somebody yellin', "Beasley, the rat, put a stove under the dump, thawed it and took our gold. We've got to get him for that." Somebody's holdin' me down in my bunk. I opens my eyes and all I see is a dazzlin' light and somethin that looks like a human face. After awhile my eyes focus better and I see the man holdin' me down is Beasley.

After that things are a blank. It seems soft hands touch me, hot liquids are put into my mouth and fin'ly I hears Mary's voice—it's low, cool, and fills a man with hope and confidence. "Is it you, Mary," I asks.

"Yes, No-Shirt," she answers. "Word reached Nome the wall broke and the Bering Sea flooded the pit and caught you. Denny insisted I join you at once as you might have been hurt."

"How's Denny?" I asks.

"Never mind about Denny," she says, avoidin' a direct answer.

"How're his legs?" I insists.

"He's got them," she replied. And I can tell by her voice there's plenty of doubt whether he will keep 'em. Well, some more time passes and when I get my senses again I'm weak as a rag.

VOICES are comin from the main room so I figger Mary had me moved into her room where she could do a better job of takin' care of me and where I wouldn't be disturbed by the noises of housekeepin'. Beasley is

sayin': "I hope, my dear, you won't believe half of the things No-Shirt said about me. He's always had his own opinion and I confess it isn't flattering. Naturally, in his delirium, he voiced as truth what were suspicions."

"I understand that," Mary answers, "he accused you of mining the pit so that the impact of his pick would cause an explosion. Naturally that is nonsense. And he said you had thawed the interior of the dump with a—"

"That was the funniest," Beasley cut in. "When natives told me the poor fellow was out of his head and alone, naturally I hurried over. I had quite a time with McGee. He accused me of everything under the sun."

"Poor fellow!"

"And you might reserve a little sympathy for yourself, my dear," Beasley suggests. "The sea breaking through the wall was something to be expected. Even McGee would admit that. But it wiped out all of your labor and it's too late to start freezing down to the ocean floor again this year."

"We have quite a dump," she suggests.

"A pig in a poke, though," he argues. "What percentage do you get of the clean-up."

"Mr. McGee gets ten percent," she answers, "Denny and I split the remainder fifty-fifty."

"And you feel Mr. McGee's knowledge was worth ten percent?" Beasley suggests in a tone that makes me fightin' mad.

"Denny's father thought enough of Mr. McGee's ability to will his loyalty and friendship to Denny," Mary says quietly.

"That brings us to . . . us," Beasley says. "Do I need to tell you I love you; that I can give you anything you want in the world? You know I control mines, trading posts and own outright one of the largest salmon canneries in the North."

"Go on," she says. And I'm disappointed and hurt all over because she don't knock his head off. "And tell me why you're wasting time prospecting in frozen quicksand."

"Wasting time?" His voice is almost nasty. The real Beasley just misses creepin' to the surface. "I've taken out a fortune from that quicksand. Now understand, my dear," he continues, "I'm not asking you to quit Denny when he's down. See him through his trouble and then . . . come to me. Will you?"

I can imagine the cuss standin' there, with his arms half open, waitin' for her to rush into 'em. Beasley always did have a way with women folks. "I'll think about it," she answers in a low tone. And I'm fit to be tied. I never dreamed she'd even think about it. Maybe it's because I'm kinda out of step with the present generation, or somethin'. But it don't make sense after all she's said about stickin' to Denny, legs or no legs. I suppose she's had time to think it over and the martyr idea don't appeal to her.

When Beasley finally pulls his freight, there's only one thing I can think. And it keeps goin' through my mind again and again—Beasley's made one more clean-up of gold and gals. But this time he got Neptune's Poke and one of the prettiest gals that ever came into the North.

VI

AS soon as I'm able to set up with a pillow at my back Mary goes gaddin' over to Beasley's cabin. I takes my binoculars and watches her knock at the door and Beasley's men bow,

scrape and smirk. She stays to a meal and it's almost dark when she shows up. "Well," I says, "how did you find my friend Beasley?"

"Charming as usual. No-Shirt, that man is simply filthy with gold. They must have struck a pocket in that quicksand. Mr. Beasley drew a sketch of the river's ancient channel showing why the gold would gather at that particular spot. More gold came down in the new channel, and it was that which water from the breaking dams washed into the sea."

"Did Beasley say anything about the gasoline stove he had at work thawing our dump?" I asks.

"I examined the dump," she answers, "but I didn't get anywhere with it. It is frozen. And it will take drilling and dynamite to break into it."

"Listen, Mary. I know what I'm talkin' about. That gold you saw at Beasley's today is yours and Denny's. We've got to get hold of it."

"He can prove it is his. Everybody knows gold is where you find it. His men will swear every ounce was found in the quicksand at bedrock," Mary answers. "We could sue, and even if it was our gold we would have a sweet time proving it. Beasley's kind don't make mistakes, you know."

"He robbed our dump and panned the gold. Amongst the tailin's there should be clam shells. Examine his tailins' dump and see if you can find any," I suggests.

"I've seen his dump," she answers, "and there isn't a sign of a clam shell or other marine life!"

I feels like a man who had had a leg kicked out from under him. But I still have another leg and I always was good at hoppin'. A couple of weeks passes, with Beasley and Mary thicker'n thieves. He brings her home one night and all I catches of their farewell is him sayin', "Sure, you can have a church wedding, or any other kind of wedding your little heart desires. I've sent for a big twin-motored job. We'll load the gold and you aboard and set the plane down near Juneau while there's still snow on the ground. We'll transfer to a pontoon job and fly to Seattle, I'll turn the gold over to the assay office and we can take a regular transport plane to your home."

"Lovely," she answers. "But tell me, honestly, how Denny is getting along."

"Sure, I know," Beasley answers, "you won't leave until he's all right. Well, he's getting along fine. He won't be using his legs much for awhile, but he can walk now with the aid of crutches. I sent word you are well, and are taking care of McGee. That should end your last worry."

A light plane I'd chartered to bring in supplies and mail shows up the followin' day and I sends back a letter to Denny Kelly. "The time to act has come," I tells him in conclusion, "and we've got to work fast or we'll lose our shirts. And comin' from No-Shirt McGee that might sound like a wise crack, but it ain't.'"

While I'm waitin' for an answer, I cleans up my old forty-four and loads it. I can get around much better'n I'm lettin' on. And nights, while Mary's asleep, I sneak out and take walks over the ice to get stren'th into my legs.

SEVERAL days later I hears a roar and runs out of the cabin expectin' to see Denny's plane. It's a strange plane—a big, twin-motored job with wide, heavy skis. Beasley and his men cross the snow on the dead run and go down onto the ice to show 'em where to land.

It's thirty below, but they're all warm

enough what with their runnin' around. There ain't a breath of air stirrin' and the land is quiet except for the boom of shiftin' ice in the distance. I looks around for Mary. She ain't in sight. Over to Beasley's I suppose, doin' somethin' for him. As soon as I got onto my feet she put in most of her time over there.

The big plane lands, but it takes a couple of hours to get her to a safe spot on the beach. You can never tell about ice so they don't dare leave her there. There's some work, fixin' a runway, too. Mary shows up just as Beasley and his gang has knocked off on the servicin' job and are headin' for the cabin.

The girl looks gray and scared—almost sick. "What's the matter?" I asks.

"Nothing," she answers, and almost faints on me. I get the meal that night, but all she'll take is hot tea. And when Beasley comes over to invite her to his cabin, she tells him she's under the weather.

"That'll mean a delay in starting, I suppose?" he says.

"I am sorry," she answers, "but you don't want a sick girl on your hands."

"That's right," he agrees. As he leaves the new pilot asks him what the gold weighs. It's a fair question because he's got to figger his load. "Ten thousand ounces," Beasley answers, "I weigh a little over two hundred in parka. The girl about a hundred and ten in her furs and mukluks. The others will go out later on another plane."

"Ten thousand ounces!" I says to myself. "Thirty-five hundred thousand for Mrs. McGee's little boy if we can prove they're from Neptune's Poke."

At dusk the next day my plane comes in. It lands near the cabin and pretty soon I sees a figure on crutches comin' over the ice. And that ain't all. Beasley and his men are comin' from their cabin and they act like they mean business. "McGee, you're up to your dirty tricks again," he rasps. "Where's my gold. You robbed me. You aren't sick at all. You're pretending. Cover him boys."

"I guess you've got me," I says, puttin' my mitted hands into the air. But when Beasley advances I backs off. "You may have the drop on me," I says, "but you ain't goin' to search me." And I backs off some more.

"Easy, No-Shirt," Denny warns, "they're too many for you."

"Not today, they ain't," I answers. It sounds like a boast, but it weren't. It was cold facts."

I backs away towards a hummock of ice and dives for cover. "Get out of the line of fire, Denny," I yells, "and hightail it for Beasley's cabin." As he swings off I yanks out my gun. Beasley's already got his. His five men are blazin' away, but I don't pay any attention to 'em. Beasley's a dead shot and he's just executed a flank movement. I've got to get into the open before I can crawl to better cover.

I jumps up and Beasley fires first. I feels his hot lead against my shoulder, but it's only a glancin' blow. I lets him have my first shot just as he blazes away with the second. He goes down in a heap, tries to get up, but it's no go. "Drop them guns," I yells at his men, "I don't want to murder you. That's why I stalled, so as to give your hands time to get numb holdin' your guns. You can't shoot straight with numb hands."

They drops their guns, picks up Beasley and starts for their cabin. "No you don't," I answers, "take him to the plane."

"Find the gold," Beasley roars, "and let's clear out of here. I don't know how he managed it, but he's spirited it to his cabin."

"We've looked everywhere for the gold," one of 'em says.

"Everywhere except in my cabin," I answers. "Look there! I'm movin' into your's."

I GATHERS up their guns and heads for Beasley's cabin. Mary's standin' in the doorway of our's and she's pale and sick-lookin'. She follows and I have to drop my extra guns and give her a hand. Denny sizes up the situation and swings around on his crutches. He's got a six-gun in one mitted hand and he comes back, pickin' his way over the ice, findin' spots that'll support the crutch ends. It's slow work, but he makes the grade.

We arrives in Beasley's cabin about the same time. For a couple of seconds Denny and Mary look at each other and I says, "You kids had better set down before you fall down."

"I heard you were going to elope with Beasley," Denny says, "but I didn't believe it."

"That's the sweetest thing I have heard in weeks," Mary answers. "And what did you think, No-Shirt McGee?" she asks me.

"You're such a swell actress," I answers, "that you had me fooled . . . almost. Then I figgers you had to make it convincin' to fool Beasley. Say, where's the gold?"

"While they were taking care of the big plane," she answers, "I carried the pokes to the quicksand shaft and tossed them in. I threw ice in on top of the gold, then carried all the water in the house to the shaft and threw it down. The water froze and cemented the whole mass. I *had* to do something, you see, because I knew Beasley was going to take that gold out and take me with it, regardless of how sick I might be."

"What's the trouble?"

"Exhaustion, mostly, from carrying so much gold in so short a time—exhaustion and worry," she answers. "What'll their next move be?"

"They're warmin' up the motors of the big plane," I answers, "and I've a hunch I know what it is."

The pilot and Beasley takes off, but the others stay. They're fightin' mad and they takes turns seein' we don't leave the cabin. "You're going to the McNeil Island pen," one of 'em yells at me. "Murderous assault while trying to protect stolen property against the rightful owners."

"You got quite a case against me, haven't you," I suggests. There's a roar and my plane takes off and heads for Nome. It looks like it might be a race. The two planes show up early the follwin' morning, landin' about five minutes apart. The United States Marshal, the Commissioner and enough others to make up a territorial court steps out of the big plane. The marshal comes up ahead of the others. He's an old friend and says, "I don't expect any foolishness from you, No-Shirt." The commissioner shakes his head.

Beasley should've been in a hospital. My bullet had made a furrow around his ribs. But he's too worried over ten thousand ounces of gold to think of hisself. Besides, he's out to get me.

"The gold," I begins, "belonged to us. Beasley stole it from our dump while we was away in Nome with Denny. He also lifted Neptune's Poke at the same time."

"You will have to prove that," Beasley's lawyer says. He's been flown up from Seattle and is still shaky.

"We'll prove it," I says.

"I took the gold and threw it down down the shaft," Mary says quietly.

"You?" Beasley yells.

"With Denny in the hospital, and No-Shirt in bed from exposure," Mary says sweetly, "you might have known, Mr. Beasley, I'd pick up the fight where they had dropped it. I can't say I particularly enjoyed matching wits with you, but you made the rules."

"I wasn't on Beasley's ground when we had our little rumpus," I says, "in fact him and his men was on our ground. The law has a name for what happens when a man defends hisself or property again' invaders. It's called self-defense."

THE marshal and commissioner both nod. "I'll have my gold back," Beasley says. "That's all I want. I won't bring any charges against McGee."

"Danged tootin' you won't," I says.

We all go over to Beasley's cabin and it takes the rest of the day to clear out the ice and hoist up them ten thousand ounces of gold. "You'll have to swear to the identity of this gold," I says to Beasley. "Swear you know of your own knowledge it was taken from the quicksand and didn't come from under the Bering Sea."

We opens poke after poke. He looks at the nuggets and swears it's his. There're several big ones, and he tells just where he found 'em.

When he's all through I sends for Pete Terrant who's been hidin' in the chartered plane all the time. Pete's a chemist as well as the best assayer in the North. "Do I need to have witnesses testify to Pete's ability?" I asks the commissioner.

"No," he answers. "What Pete says is good enough for me. His expert testimony has stood the test of the United States Supreme Court." The marshal nods and Pete arranges his chemicals, basins, test tubes and what not.

He picks up nugget after nugget, runs it through a chemical solution and says, "This came from No-Shirt's mine! This came from No-Shirt's mine—or at least it didn't come from Beasley's."

Finally Beasley takes a nugget out of his pocket. "And I suppose this came from No-Shirt's mine, too?" he sneers.

Pete never batted an eye. He puts the nugget through the solution. "No," he answers, "it didn't. The test is concluded. Every sample submitted came from the same mine—No-Shirt McGee's."

"How about it, Beasley?" I asks. "Do you back down and call it square all around, or shall we—"

"Wait a minute, No-Shirt," the marshal interrupts. "You can't speak for the law, No-Shirt. The law speaks for itself. I'm arresting you, Beasley on the charge of robbing No-Shirt's dump and mine. I am arresting your men, also. I wouldn't attempt to start anything if I were you."

Beasley speaks sharply to his men who commenced to press around. They could've overpowered the marshal, taken the plane and flown south. But Beasley's Alaskan mines, trading-post and what not was all the bail money the North needed and Beasley wasn't jumpin' any such bail as that.

"I'd like to know how you figgered it, Pete?" the marshal says.

"It was No-Shirt's idea," Pete answers. "He figured every large nugget had cracks and holes, each of which would contain a trace of salt as a result of their being submerged in salt water at great pressure. All I had to do was to test for sodium chloride."

I glances at Mary and Denny. A lot of happiness stretched out ahead of them, but I knowed it wouldn't all be spent in honeymoonin' and loafin'. Their breed comes back to Alaska and helps develop the country. Even now Denny wasn't thinkin' of the girl or the gold. His mind went back to his old man, Schemer Kelly, who always had schemes that didn't pan out. And now, after many years, Schemer had called the turn. Denny half smiles and looks at Beasley, then at me, and he starts talking sort of slow, quoting from the Schemer's will:

> To my beloved son . . . I give and bequeath the friendship and loyalty of No-Shirt McGee . . . To Hank Beasley, I give and bequeath one long horse laugh . . .

Five Parts to the Wind

THAT menace of the highways, the drunken driver, has met his Waterloo. Heretofore when a besotted motorist swore that he had not touched a drop in months there was no exact legal way to measure the degree of his drunkenness. Now, with an apparatus no larger than a camera, police can determine to the second decimal point just how much alcohol is in a motorist's system.

This new device is the invention of Dr. R. N. Harger, a professor in the Indiana School of Medicine. Chemical tests for intoxication go back at least a quarter of a century, but in all previous methodology fluid had to be removed from the body and analyzed for its dangerous content. In the United States, where some principles of the common law still hold good, it has been doubtful, in the absence of a permissive statute, if blood or fluid could be legally withdrawn without liability to a technical charge of assault. But there is no law about using the breath a person has exhaled; when a man is finished with a breath any principle of common law from the Magna Charta down to the Sixteenth Amendment would contend that the expelled air belonged to any person who might desire it. Treading upon such firm legal ground Dr. Harger turns the drunkard's breath against him.

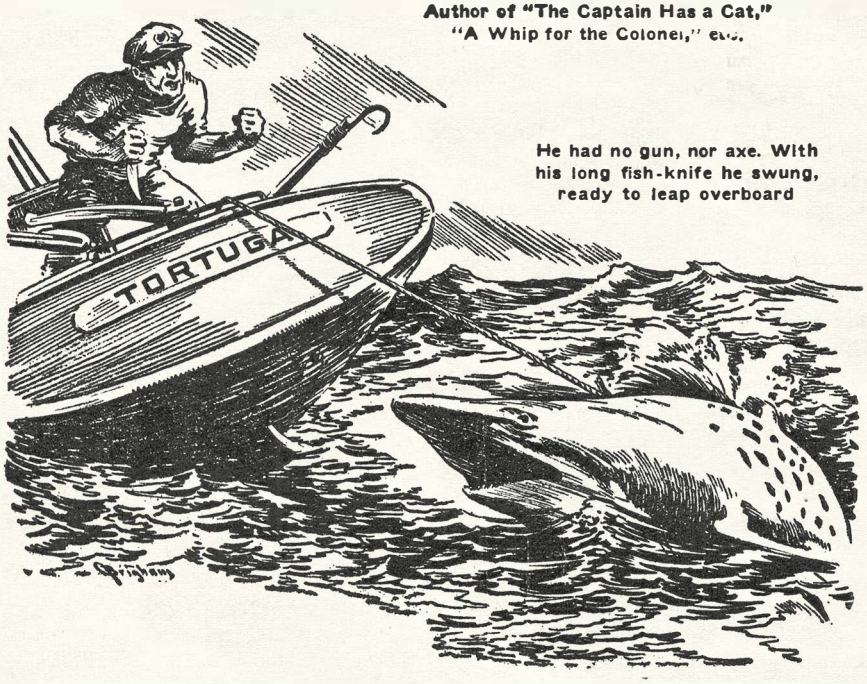
Dr. Harger's trick is to collect the breath and test it. He has perfected a reagent for alcohol—a purple solution of permanganate of potash in a mixture of sulphuric acid. When an alcoholic suspect breathes upon this reagent, the purple—out-purpled—fades. The resulting moisture is shaken well and tested. Five parts of alcohol per thousand is enough to convict a motorist of being drunk as a lord.

If the motorist refuses to breathe a tube connected with a small suction pump is held under his nose until he does. And even cases with five parts per thousand have to breathe sometime.

—*Eric Sharpe*

The Brothers Romano

By ALEXANDER KEY
Author of "The Captain Has a Cat," "A Whip for the Colonel," etc.



He had no gun, nor axe. With his long fish-knife he swung, ready to leap overboard

When they lost the shark's fin off the masthead, trouble came to the Romanos

EVERYONE called them brothers, Manuel Romano and Mike Romano. They were of the same stamp: deep-chested and swarthy with gaunt saddle-brown faces strongly lined by sun and sea. With the grim kind of silence that comes to men who take their living from the Gulf, they seldom spoke except to each other. Strangers were afraid of them. The chill blue gaze of Manuel was like a knife thrust; Mike's black eyes were smouldering pits. But the town understood them and loved them.

To the town they were brothers, for you never saw one without the other. They fished together, trawled shrimp together, got drunk together. Not entirely drunk, for on Wednesdays Manuel stayed sober enough to keep Mike out of trouble and see him home. Saturdays it was Mike's turn. They never varied the schedule, and if time passed too quickly so that you forgot the day of the week, as is apt to happen where the trade winds rustle long in the palmettos, you would know it was Wednesday night by Mike's happy tenor. Manuel's voice on Saturdays was deeper, broken with sudden virile expletives in Spanish.

They were a curious mixture of bloods. Manuel was Cuban, with a strong dash of Hungarian and Greek. Mike's mother was Italian. Everyone called them brothers, but Manuel, the

blue-eyed one, was graying and he was twenty years older than Mike. He was Mike's father.

The town loved them, but watched them a little curiously. Hungarian and Cuban, Greek and Italian. A volatile mixture. Someday, they said, something would happen. . . .

But for a long time nothing did happen; for the sea was in their blood, and the sea holds a tight rein on temperaments. During the winter months you could see their sturdy powered ketch, the *Tortuga,* chugging in from the pass with gulls screaming in her wake and her fish hatch brimming with shrimp. The mackerel runs kept them busy after that, and then the shrimp again. But September was their month.

The price of red snapper goes up in September. September is hurricane month. If you wanted red snapper in the fall of the year, the only place you could buy it was at Romano's fish house. The *Tortuga* was barely forty feet over all—too small some said for deep water and snapper work—but she was built for weather and Manuel's pale eyes could measure the Gulf's changes better than a barometer. As September approached they became more silent, and then suddenly tense and strangely eager as if they had been waiting all year for this month. Once after a blow the *Tortuga* came in with her poles swept bare except for the shark's fin Manuel had fastened to the main for good luck. The following season she limped in under power with no poles at all and Manuel's arm in a sling.

At the dock Manuel's mouth twisted in what might have been a smile. *"Madre mío,* she rough," he stated briefly. "But we breeng feesh." His eyes, though, said that he was not interested in the catch. He had met the Gulf's monster and beaten it again.

He had beaten it, but at a cost. And perhaps because the shark's fin had been lost, things went badly after this trip. Manuel's arm needed surgical treatment and it developed that he had a wrenched shoulder and torn ligaments in his back, not to speak of several crushed ribs and possible internal injuries. The doctor marveled at his fortitude and packed him off to the hospital in Tallahassee to spend two months in a plaster cast.

MIKE had never driven a car in his life. He bought a second-hand one, learned to drive it in an afternoon, and made the long trip every day to see Manuel. He would have stayed with him all the time, but the *Tortuga* was on the ways and he was busy stepping new spars and repairing the hull.

During the long hot mornings Manuel waited restlessly until Mike came. When Mike got there he quieted. Mike fed him the ice cream he always brought and the two spent the afternoons mostly in silence, content with each other's presence and knowing and answering each other's thoughts with a word or two and a movement of the head. So complete was their understanding, and so much alike were they with the sea's mark on them, that they might have been twins except for Manuel's grayness and the deeper lines in his face. It annoyed them both when the nurse entered to check pulse and temperature. She was a pretty brunette, but Mike scowled at her interruptions, big hands clenched on the bedpost, and Manuel grew restless until she left.

The girl was always glad to leave. "Gosh, those two!" she wailed at the interne. "It gives me the creeps just to have 'em look at me. Would you believe it—I think that black-eyed devil's

jealous every time I step in there!"

The truth was that it enraged Mike to have a woman do for Manuel what he could not do himself. Mike's mother had run away with an oysterman when he was ten, and in the twenty years that followed neither he nor Manuel had had much use for women.

It was curious, therefore, that a woman should be the cause of trouble between them.

Two months was a long time to spend away from the *Tortuga,* with not even a breath of the sea or the cackle of a marsh hen in the evenings. Two months was an eternity of monotony when it had to be spent puttering over new rigging and riding four hours daily in a car. One afternoon Mike came late. He was half drunk.

Manuel was sitting up, his deep chest immense with its burden of plaster and his fingers twitching along the edges of it as if he would like to tear the thing to pieces. "We no drink on de boat," he bit out. "You should no drink in de car." He had never learned to speak like Mike, who was American born.

"I drive straight," said Mike, black eyes strangely intent on the wall. "I ain't had a good drink since you got sick."

"You no t'ink o' me. The doc, he no let me drink 'ere."

Mike grinned vaguely. Liquor generally broke his reserve and made him sing, but he was preoccupied today. "We'll make up for that when you leave. I found a new place. Just opened up on the point."

"Yeah?" Manuel's cast seemed suddenly about to suffocate him. "Who run him?"

"Woman named Glory." Mike started to make curves with his hands, then let them fall abruptly as if he had done the wrong thing. "Big woman, cuss like a man. She okay."

"Woman good for fun, mebbe. Dat all."

"Sure, but you'll like Glory."

"When I'm drunk mebbe. Dey all good drunk."

"You'll like her sober."

"Carrramba, go on with you! I go plum' crrrazy in dees place. You git me out!"

"Two more weeks," said Mike. "I asked the doc."

"Bah!" growled Manuel, eying him covertly. He had missed something in Mike as soon as he appeared. He knew what it was now, and he knew the reason for it. It was something that Mike himself had not yet realized.

A BIG woman named Glory. She was an ogress who tortured Manuel's evening and robbed his sleep. Nor was she just another fancy like the girls he and Mike sometimes had fun with when they were drunk. This was something else. *"Ay mi madre,"* he moaned. "I lose dat shark fin; bad luck she come. Where I catch another fin in dees place?"

Mike's visit the next day was brief. Glory was not mentioned, but Manuel could feel her strong in Mike's mind. When he closed his eyes he could almost see her face, hear her chuckling laugh. It frightened him.

On the following day, Wednesday, Mike did not come at all. Eight solid weeks ashore is an eternity, and it was Mike's day to get drunk. He got roaring drunk in Glory's place. To quiet him she tapped him on the head with a beer bottle and put him in her back room to sober.

Manuel waited. By evening he had the nurse in tears, the interne boiling, and he had cursed the doctor three

times to his face. That night the doctor had to give him two opiates to make him sleep. When the effect of them had worn off shortly after daylight, Manuel climbed out of bed, drew on his clothes, and slipped through the ambulance door without being seen.

He made his way to Jarney's bus station, a slow, painful journey because he still wore the cast and it was only during the last few days that he had been allowed on his feet a little. He waited three hours for the bus, then told Jarney to let him off at Glory's place.

By the time the bus got there Manuel's back was in an agony from the two-hour ride. Jarney took one look at him and did not stop. There was trouble in Manuel's eye; furthermore, Jarney recognized Mike's car outside, parked in the same place where he had seen it the night before. He drove on to Manuel's shanty, forced him to bed and sent a boy after Mike.

Had the boy got there in time, all might have been well. But Mike, in a sudden spirit of repentance, started early for the hospital. He returned as fast as his old car would run, worried and angry by turns and knowing instinctively where he would find Manuel. When he reached home his head was still aching from Glory's treatment, and two blowouts had not improved his disposition.

Manuel raised up in bed when he entered, eying him eagerly, reproachfully, and then angrily. Mike glowered back. "You're some guy!" Mike raged. "I drive all the way in to see you an' you ain't there! You hadn't oughta done this—I'd a brung you home!"

"Madre mío! I should wait for you? You no come yesterday; how I know you come today, tomorrow? You maka me seeck! Go back to your woman!"

"I—I ain't got no woman! You're crazy!"

"Sure you got woman! Don't lie. I know all 'bout 'er."

"You don't know nothin'!"

"I know mucha plenty. She no good."

"Who's been tellin' you tales?"

Mike had wanted to explain about yesterday, but he did not know how. It had been a new experience to meet someone like Glory, and he didn't resent the beer bottle episode. She'd been a good sport afterward.

His hard lips went taut under an emotion he did not understand. "You wouldn't know," he bit out at Manuel, acutely conscious that Manuel did know and furious at his blind intuition.

They both understood each other too well. They glared at each other, chill blue eyes and smouldering black ones, poles that caught each other's fury and magnified it.

"Go to hell," snarled Mike, and slapped him.

"Vamos!" screamed Manuel.

Mike slammed out of the place and a minute later Manuel heard the roar of his car. Manuel raved, calmed slowly; suddenly his lower lip trembled and he sank down on his pillows.

"Ay, Mother of God!" he moaned. "What have I done? Boy he lonely an' full o' hell. Mebbe he need woman. *Ay mi Madre!* I get seeck an' world no go right." He clawed upward again and found his knife. *"Diablos!* It dees t'ing I wear. She make me plum' mad; I say t'ing I no mean." He slashed at the cast, hacked through it, began tearing it off with his good hand.

It took him a long time, for the strength had not yet come back into the arm that had been broken. But he got the cast off, cried out once at the

torture of newly-knit muscles being flexed for the first time, and then stretched out on his stomach, exhausted.

But the sea had bred tough fibers in Manuel. He was up the next day, examining the *Tortuga* and cleaning out her cabin. She lay beside the dock, newly rigged and newly painted, but between decks she was as he had left her in September. He looked hopefully for a shark's fin to fasten to the main mast—he and Mike saved them for the Chinese trade—but there were no fins among the cabin debris. Manuel cursed. "Luck no come till I catch shark. Boy no come home till then." It was a superstition left over from his days in the Bahamas. No small fin would do. It had to be the big dorsal of a leopard shark, and he had to get it himself.

He went to town and bought a shark hook with a chain leader, and learned from the chandler that Mike had shipped that morning on one of old Maltby's snapper schooners, the *Yellowhammer*. Manuel went home, stumbling and writhing inwardly. He had no use for Maltby, and the *Yellowhammer* was a cranky mongrel that had succeeded in killing a man in nearly every blow she wallowed through.

Manuel was too weak to handle sail, or to even be out in a boat alone, but he put through the pass under power and trolled for sharks all the following week. He caught sharks, but they were whites or grays; the leopards twisted off the hook before he could shoot them and the last one bit through the chain leader. Manuel hurled epithets at it, went home and took whisky money out of the hollow piling under the shanty, and got drunk. He appeared late that night at Glory's place, and he was in a mood for anything.

A QUART of liquor had put a devil in Manuel that had driven out all signs of illness. He bellowed for food and more whisky, and when Glory herself brought them his pale eyes gleamed.

He had never seen her before but he knew she was Glory. A great white-aproned reddish-blond woman as tall as he was and with shoulders like a blacksmith. She was pretty in her ample way; she had a chuckle men liked and her contralto could change to a sudden shrill tone they were afraid of. Because her place was out of town and she stayed open all hours for trade, fights were frequent. She stopped them quickly with a beer bottle, a kick, or a swift right to the jaw. What her last name was few people knew, except that it had been changed several times. She liked men, partly for amusement and mostly for the money she could get out of them. What they least suspected was the daughter she kept at boarding school—her sole love and reason for existence.

Manuel stared at her. For a moment alcohol and something in her movements turned his rage to fascination. A big, vital woman. He had never seen anything like her.

He muttered suddenly:

"Seet down."

Glory chuckled and sat down; it was good for business to get acquainted with customers, and she knew how to make them spend. She peered at Manuel. "Well for the—honest to gosh, you look enough like another guy I know to be his brother! Oh—you're Manuel!"

"*Si*," he said, chilling. "I'm Manuel."

She chuckled and opened the bottle for him; meanwhile her shrewd eyes took in a great deal. "Mind if I have a nip with you? It gits a body down,

bein' on your feet all day. Where's Mike?"

"Why you want Mike?"

"Heavens, man, I don't want Mike. I just ain't seen 'im for nigh on two weeks."

"You—you no want Mike?"

She leaned back and laughed. "That's hot. Say, what would I want with any man? I've had enough of 'em under my feet." She shrugged one shoulder. "They're all alike. They come an' go."

Manuel gasped. He stood up uncertainly, a vast relief flooding through him. And then, as suddenly as a black squall can come over a placid sea, rage shook him. His fingers clamped viselike on Glory's arm.

"You dat she-varmint dat make 'im wild! You put devils in 'im. You—"

Glory had handled all kinds of men in all kinds of moods. "Take it easy, big boy—take it easy. . . . Now," she cooed swiftly. "Sit down an' tell Glory all about it. You an' Mike havin' trouble? Tell Glory."

It was oil for turbulent waters. Manuel sat down. He thawed. She poured whisky into his glass and he poured out his woes. "An' just to think," she said softly, watching him with one eye like a cat would a canary, "I never knowed he felt that way! I guess he was lonesome, you bein' sick an' all. . . ."

She leaned closer. "You just leave it to Glory," she purred. "I'll put Mike right with you. I'll bring 'im back. Here, have another drink. Wait, that bottle's empty—I'll bring you another."

"You good gal," Manuel said thickly. "Mebbe you give me one leetle kees, eh?"

"Sure," said Glory. "I'm beginnin' to like you heaps."

It was then that Mike came in.

THE *Yellowhammer* had docked that night after a hard trip on the middle ground. Mike started straight home, his heart dictating direction. He had never been away from Manuel so long in his life. The sight of their shanty and the *Tortuga's* masts rising against the starlight sent a wave of trembling over him. Suddenly he felt a suffocating pain inside, and his right hand seemed to burn. He had struck Manuel with that hand. He wished the hand would wither and drop off.

He tiptoed to the shanty, waited outside with his mouth working soundlessly. The place was dark; maybe Manuel was in bed, ill; maybe they had sent him back to the hospital. He thrust open the door, calling.

He turned away, finally, sought Manuel in town. Manuel would be somewhere drinking. Mike had forgotten that it was Saturday night.

Someone told him that Manuel had been seen on the way to the point. . . .

Mike hurried. He was queerly cold inside now.

Within the door of Glory's place he stood long seconds, an icicle plunging through his vitals and a white iron searing his mind.

And all at once he gave a cry, strangled from torment and swift-rising hate, and he was across the floor with a knife in his hand.

Glory screamed and leapt back with the whisky bottle raised. Manuel stared stupidly, throat muscles seeking vainly to produce words.

"Put down that knife you hyena!" Glory shrilled, and hurled the bottle. Mike ducked it. His knife point opened Manuel's cheek from the eye to the jaw. Glory kicked and the knife went spinning. He struck at Glory but she rolled her head like a man and struck back. There was a man's weight behind

it and it sent Mike crashing against the wall.

The taste of hot blood in his mouth brought Manuel whirling out of his chair, tigerish and sober. "You cut me," he spat softly at Mike. "Why you do dat—when my heart have only love in eet?"

"You dirty double-crossin' mealy-mouthed catfish!" Mike said. "You take my woman away."

"I ain't your woman!" shrilled Glory. "Git out o' here!"

Mike did not look at her. "Yeah," he went on, deadly quiet, not moving. "You want my woman yourself. You turn her agin' me. Just for that—"

Manuel's eyes were little points of cold steel. "Las' time you slap me. Now you cut me. Woman, she no—"

Mike lunged at him. The two rolled thrashing across the floor, clawing, biting, spitting blood and curses. Glory swore. She seized a chair and began to lay it upon them expertly. Mike was on top, but two minutes later Mike was in the road outside with the door locked against him. Manuel, badly battered and bleeding profusely, came to an hour later when the doctor was stitching up his cheek.

THE town talked a great deal then. The Romanos went their separate ways, careful never to meet each other, Mike drinking on Wednesdays as usual and Manuel on Saturdays. Manuel lived on the *Tortuga* now, and Mike with Captain Vic Rossi, the *Yellowhammer's* skipper. The town council made an effort once to close Glory's place, but it was beyond the city limits and they were not successful. Glory laughed it off. "You'd think 'twas *me* set 'em to squabblin'," she chuckled. "Say, the next time I catch either o' them knife-totin' lunatics in here, there's gonna be a broken head." She might have saved herself the breath. Neither of the Romanos ever went near her again.

February came and went. When the weather permitted the *Yellowhammer* put out to the middle ground for snapper and grouper. Captain Vic had no sons, and he had a soft heart under his surface bluster. Mike was a sailor, something that went a long way with Captain Vic. He worried over Mike's black brooding, and liking him, sought to bring about a match with his daughter Lucia. To accomplish it he talked the *Yellowhammer's* owner into putting Mike on as second in command.

Manuel shrimped a little during the winter runs, then cursed it and began making long trips to the middle ground in all kinds of weather. He seemed to loathe the sight of land, coming in often with his ice half gone and his snapper spoiling. Sometimes he wasted entire days grimly trolling for leopard sharks. He caught sharks, but none of them were leopards. He would rave then, cut off their tails and throw them back in alive.

These outbursts punctuated periods of vicious silence. Snapper hands grew more afraid of him. Finally they refused to ship. Manuel went alone.

Few men would have cared to risk the open Gulf without help. Manuel felt better alone; his strength had come back and the ketch rig gave him no trouble. He spat whenever he saw the warning flags on the weather tower, and would start out in a half gale and have all sail drawing before he was through the channel. He seldom took in jib and mizzen until he was well over that great curving stretch of deep coral avenues known as the middle ground, ready to lash his wheel and ride close hauled while he fished.

It became common talk along the waterfront, Manuel's defiance of the weather. They wondered how long it would last, and they speculated on what would happen when he met Mike again. The Romanos had not seen each other for months.

But in July the two ships chanced to pass each other in the channel, the *Yellowhammer* wallowing clumsily under the finger of a squall she was running to escape, the *Tortuga* slicing by like a stormy petrel eager for wind. It happened near the end of the breakwater where the channel narrowed, and they passed close—Mike at the port rail, Manuel hardly a dozen feet away at the *Tortuga's* wheel. Neither one moved or said a word, but their eyes clashed across the water—chill blue eyes and smouldering black ones that locked and fought.

Every hand on the *Yellowhammer's* deck felt the impact of those glances; for days afterward they kept out of the reach of Mike's fists. Mike had almost become his old self before this. He had even started going to the movies with Captain Vic's Lucia. But when the *Yellowhammer* docked Mike quarreled bitterly with her and stayed drunk until it was time to sail again. Lucia cried as if her heart would break and Captain Vic stormed.

AUGUST came, bringing its sudden violent squalls and its threat of September. A blow put the old *Yellowhammer* on the ways for three weeks and by the time she was patched and in the water again, September was half over. The few snapper boats that ventured outside kept their radios going for weather reports and hugged the islands, ready to run back through the pass like frightened quail at the first hint of trouble. The *Tortuga* rode the middle ground alone, and there was still no shark's fin at her masthead.

But September passed with no more than a half gale, and October came in with a disarming mildness. The snapper boats put out to the banks again; stubby green and black schooners from the upper Gulf ports; former Greek spongers from the lower coast; great Cuban well schooners that could carry a live catch of fifty tons. They rode close hauled over the middle ground, scattered a few miles apart with the *Tortuga* and the *Yellowhammer* within sight of each other. More than one crew cursed the sharks that followed like wolf packs behind the ships, stripping lines.

The snapper fisherman has a consuming hatred of the entire shark family. Be it blue shark, hammerhead, white shark or leopard, they are all the same to him. They steal his fish. When they come there is nothing to do but stow lines and seek another spot.

Sharks were bad this fall; both the *Tortuga* and the *Yellowhammer* did more cruising than fishing. Sharks tore up Manuel's lines. They leaped clear of the water and seized fish before they could be drawn to deck. Finally they bit off every baited hook the instant it touched the surface. Manuel tried other locations and the sharks followed. He cursed them with a slow deadly calm, used his rifle on them until he was out of ammunition, and looked up to see the *Yellowhammer* within hailing distance. Her men were on the foredeck, hacking a luckless gray shark to pieces in an orgy of hate.

Manuel shook his fist at them. *"Mil diablos!"* he spat. "Where I go, you go! You breeng me bad luck!"

"Git away!" Captain Vic screamed back. "You breenga da bada luck yourself!"

"Bah! You better git away. Wind she come. Dat tub you got sink."

Captain Vic choked. "Bah, bah, bah at you! You beeg fool! Where da wind? Show me da wind!"

"Apaga canalla!" roared Manuel, and hurled a lead sinker at him. It fell short and the two boats drifted out of earshot of each other.

Captain Vic raged, shaking his hairy paws frenziedly. "Dama da feesh! Dama da boat! I go backa to Napoli!" He subsided finally and glared at Mike. "Da weather, you tella me. She okay mebbe?"

Mike glowered back, muttered something under his breath and swung away. The deck cleared in front of him. He went below. Captain Vic eyed the sky, which was innocent, and followed Mike down the after hatch. Mike was listening to a radio report. The report was likewise innocent, as was the barometer. If there was weather making, it wasn't on the Gulf.

But an hour later, at noon, Mike growled at Captain Vic, "We ain't got a catch yet, but I'm thinkin' we'd better git under way."

Captain Vic gaped at him. Something tense and watchful had come over Mike. Mike's narrowed eyes were fastened on the *Tortuga,* separated from them by two miles of gentle blue swells. Captain Vic followed his glance, frowning, and saw the *Tortuga's* big mains'l come down. She drifted presently under bare poles.

"Why he do dat?" muttered Captain Vic.

"Why would I know?" Mike bit out savagely. "We better head for home."

"You heapa crazy," fumed Captain Vic. "Ev'thing heapa crazy. We no catcha da feesh we go broke. We catcha da feesh."

Mike shrugged. "Okay."

The battle with the sharks started all over again.

MANUEL had no radio, nor would he have paid any attention to reports. He snorted at the thought of weather men cooped indoors, dabbling with charts and little instruments. Plague them all! What did they know of the Gulf's fits of temper? The Gulf was a caldron that brewed all manner of things; some of them were born titanically in a few minutes and were dead in an hour or two, never reaching the ears of men on shore. If you had been raised in the islands you learned to read your weather from the wind's changes, the amount of mist over the moon, the subtle movements of the swells.

It was now that Manuel showed the same tense watchfulness that had come over Mike. But under it his anger passed and he seemed calm and almost happy. He took in the mains'l, lashed everything down tight, and closed the hatches. Afterward he rolled a cigarette and smoked slowly.

Once, when clouds began to bank high on the horizon, he started the motor and idled along for more than a half mile before he realized he had been keeping the *Yellowhammer* abeam. He cursed. *"Dios mío,* why I do dat? Eet not my fault, 'e go on dat tub!"

But twice again in the next hour he ran the motor, bringing the *Yellowhammer* nearer. The clouds were turning to thunderheads, the swells growing lumpy. Once he glanced wistfully up at the mainmast, wishing he had a shark's fin to fasten there. A big leopard's fin. It had been bare for over a year.

His eyes drifted over the swells, purpling now, and rested on a great mot-

tled torpedo body several yards astern. He glared at it balefully. The shark stared back with its little cat eyes.

"El diablo grande," he muttered. "You beeg—mucha beeg." He studied it with speculative hate. The huge spotted sharks were fiends. They were afraid of nothing on earth, even rifle bullets. They would go after a man if his feet so much as trailed in the water, rolling over in a lightning rush as no other shark did, bringing up jaws that could sever steel as well as a human body. Manuel had hooked several of them during the past few months but they had been too much for him to handle alone. This one was the largest he had ever seen.

He spat at it. His eyes riveted covetously upon its tall dorsal fin, and the knife scar Mike had left on his cheek darkened and then turned white. He jabbed a crooked forefinger at the fin. "Dees time I git eet—if mebbe I have to cut eet off alive!"

Suddenly he turned, threw open the hatch, and slid down to rummage through his gear for another shark hook. There were no hooks left. But his hand closed upon a harpoon head and he went on deck and fitted it with an old gaff handle and a stout manila line. He baited a snapper hook with a whole fish, let it trail over the stern, and stood with the harpoon poised.

THE shark remained motionless, watching Manuel. Manuel swore at it softly. *"Clavos de Cristo*—you black-spotted son of a thousand devils! What for you no eat? Or mebbe you want me to put myself on de hook, eh? By—"

There was a flash of movement, a white column of spray, and shark and bait were gone before the harpoon descended. Manuel watched it come back and settle where it had been before.

He dangled another fish over the stern. The action was repeated and he missed again. His eyes became icy slits. "T'ree, four time, I git you. You eat feesh, soon you not so fast. Then I slit your white belly when you turn over."

He did it on the third attempt. The steel bit deep and the gaff handle snapped under the explosive shock that followed. But the line was fastened to the harpoon. It smoked out across the rail, jerked taut, and the *Tortuga* heeled sharply.

When the brute turned Manuel flipped the slack over the bitts. He roared his hate at it, crying and cursing and sometimes laughing as he strained with all his great strength to take in more line.

In a half hour he had it almost under the transom—a threshing, viciously lunging fury that churned the green brine to a bloody froth and threatened every second to snap the rope or tear loose from the steel. Manuel gave one quick glance over the deck. The rifle was empty. The ax was nowhere in sight. And there was no other harpoon.

He jerked the long fish-knife from his belt and leaped over the stern, directly upon the big triangular dorsal. Churning spray smothered him. The rough hide scraped flesh from his arms. He hung on and slashed deep with his knife. The shark spun clear and its tail slapped the water with a sound like a pistol shot. Manuel was thrown a dozen feet. He came up swimming, the knife in one hand and the big dorsal fin between his teeth, and struck out with all his remaining strength for the *Tortuga's* bow.

Other sharks had been attracted by the blood. Manuel could hear a horrible

lashing and snapping coming from the stern. He whirled once and stabbed at something that streaked close, then reached the bobstay safely and drew himself on deck. He roared exultantly when he had lashed the big fin to the mast, and with both fists shook his defiance at the black skies. "Blow!" he screamed. "Blow!" He reeled suddenly and sound died in his throat.

The *Tortuga* was rising and falling with a queer motion, though the line over her stern was now hanging slack. The swells were no longer swells; they had lost direction and the water rose in dark heaving mounds as if some great force strove to suck it upward. Driving rain squalls had thrown a loop of black entirely around the horizon. The sun shot fanlike through the swift-tumbling clouds, making the sea's circle a kaleidoscope of tossing blue, green and purple in a hundred changing shades.

Swinging through a rain veil a cable's length away, sail cracking in the sudden whirling gusts, was the *Yellowhammer*. Between them, rowing furiously, was a man in one of the *Yellowhammer's* boats. It was Mike.

Mike looked over his shoulder as he came nearer, saw Manuel, and abruptly feathered his oars. "You—" he burst out. "You fool! I saw you go in after that varmint — but I didn't see you come out. What you mean, leavin' the *Tortuga* that way?"

"*Dios mío!* She my boat—I do what I please!"

"You crazy loon, I helped build 'er! She's part mine! You might a lost 'er!"

"*Vamos!* Go back where you belong!"

"I'll break your—" Wind and sudden rain drowned his voice. The small boat upended violently and crashed down. Mike was thrown across the thwarts. A geysering wave tossed him again. The *Yellowhammer,* a moment ago so near, was blotted out entirely.

MANUEL caught up a mooring line and heaved it at Mike. Mike grabbed for it, not because he wanted to, but because he was in the water now and the capsized boat was beyond reach. And there was imminent danger of sharks.

Before the dark fins knifed toward him he was drawn quickly over the *Tortuga's* side. He stumbled across the unsteady deck, spewing brine and incoherent oaths, and whirled on Manuel with his jaw outthrust. "I—I didn't ask *you* to pull me in! I don't like the stinkin' sight o' you! Start the motor; take me back!"

Manuel flung the bunched line in his face. "I no ask you to come! Bah! You wanna cut de other cheek now?" He jabbed a trembling finger at his scar. "Go 'head, cut eet! Cut eet!"

Mike spat at him. Manuel's fist smashed through the rain. They rolled together over the tangle of ropes and crashed against the after house. The *Tortuga* shuddered, plunged, and the stinging rain suddenly became a Niagara of solid water that cascaded the length of the starboard rail.

Manuel heaved upward, stared. "She spout!" he screamed. "She spout all over!"

Mike spun to his feet, everything forgotten but the *Tortuga's* peril. "Take the wheel," he snapped, and threw himself down the hatch to start the motor.

It took them both, working in tight-lipped coördination, to shuttle the ketch back and forth in the zones of safety. The loop of black squalls circling the horizon had lifted, lifted high,

and it was now a monstrous snake of destruction with a writhing tail flung far over the Gulf. From it little spinning black lines dropped downward like dripping paint. The lines gained size as they dropped, became living five-hundred-foot columns of water as they touched the sea. Still they grew, and, swelling to the limits of the little hurricanes that bore them, bent and toppled like Gargantuan smokestacks dynamited by the gods. Waterspouts. Grand, awesome, and most terrible of all the Gulf's offerings.

Manuel counted nine of them within the area of his vision. When a way seemed clear to the open water beyond, the black tail curled and dropped a new spout in the *Tortuga's* path, churning acres of leaping swells into a slithering maelstrom. Manuel roared his contempt. He had forgotten the *Yellowhammer*. When he saw her she was a mile off the port quarter, her foremast gone and her mains'l still up and drawing.

Mike sighted her and cried out. Manuel twirled the wheel. A schooner is beyond control when there is canvas on her main and her foresails are carried away.

"He fool," cried Manuel. "He should no try sail in dees t'ing."

"He had to," Mike snapped. "Engine's no good." He spun down the hatch, stepped up the *Tortuga's* motor until the deck trembled, hurtled back, and groaned.

A heaving black curtain had overtaken the schooner. When it passed there was no sign of her.

"Dios mío!" they exclaimed together. "Dios mío!"

It took the *Tortuga* a long time to reach the spot, for she had to fight and dodge her way along for nearly double the actual distance. When she got there nothing was to be seen but a few pieces of splintered wreckage and a grim patrol of sharks.

For a half hour they cruised around the spot.

Neither spoke.

Thunder crashed in a requiem, rain poured in blinding torrents, stopped suddenly, and the evening sun sliced the heavens. The whole thing had come and gone in two brief hours. The Gulf quieted as if her outburst had never been, smiled her sweet smile of treachery and bathed her face in a million sunset colors.

Mike rubbed his jaw and swallowed. "Captain Vic, he—" Mike looked away, throat too tight for speech.

"He—he good man," Manuel said softly. "Ver' good man. Eet no right."

Mike shook his head and spoke savagely:

"That tub they gave him wasn't fit to go out."

"Gracias a Dios," Manuel breathed fervently. "I glad you come here. I very glad."

"There's Lucia," Mike said after awhile. "She—she's all alone now."

Manuel nodded.

"Lucia good girl."

Mike looked at him suddenly, almost pleading. "She—I—you think mebbe—"

"All men need good woman sometime. But—" Manuel stopped, went on uneasily. "You—you t'ink mebbe she no care if we git drunk together? Woman funny 'bout dat."

"Aw, she won't care. She'll look out after us."

"Bueno! We got shark fin now. Mebbe wind she blow fair." He took a deep breath and went to help Mike set the canvas.

By CORNELL WOOLRICH

Author of "Oft in the Silly Night," "Guns, Gentlemen," etc.

Death in the Yoshiwara

JACK HOLLINGER, U. S. N., up from Yokohama on a forty-eight-hour liberty junket, said, "Shoo!" He swung his arms wildly in a mosquito-swatting gesture. He was squatting cross-legged on the floor in a little paper-walled compartment of the House of Stolen Hours, which was situated in one of the more pungent alleys of the Yoshiwara, Tokyo's tenderloin. Before him were an array of thimble-sized saki cups. All of them were empty, but Hollinger hadn't worked up much of a glow over them. A warm spot that felt no bigger than a dime floated pleasantly but without any particular zest behind the waistband of his bell-bottomed white ducks.

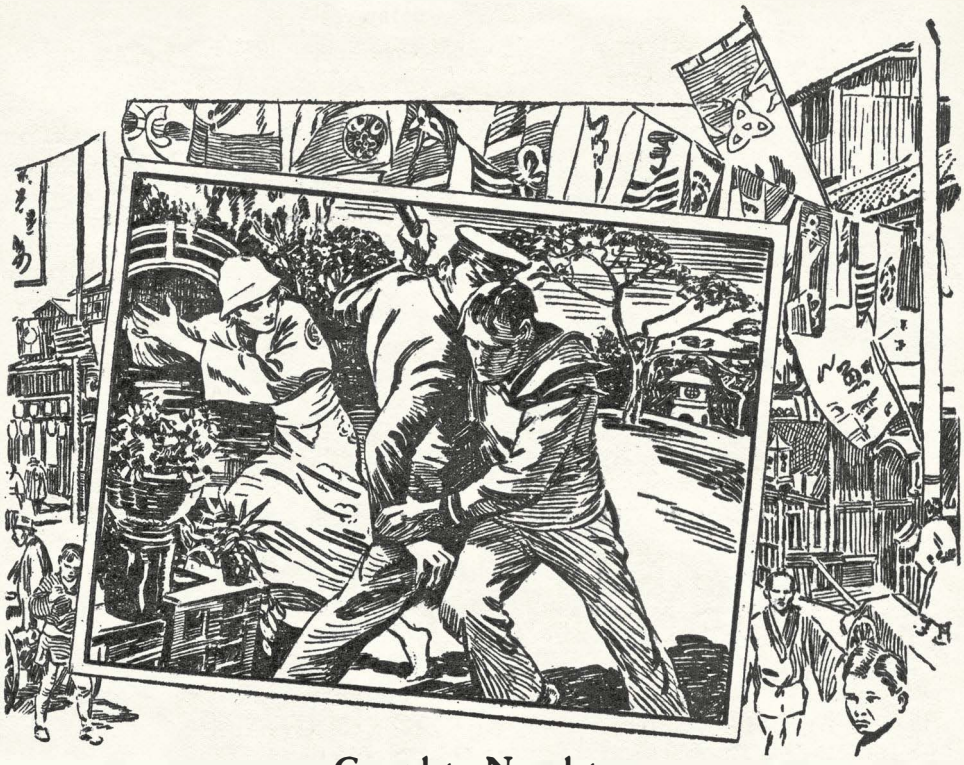
He tipped his Bob Davis cap down over one eye and wigwagged his arms some more.

"Outside," he said. "Party no good. Party plenty terrible." He made a face.

The geisha ceased her stylized posturing, bowed low and, edging back the paper slide, retreated through it. The geisha who had been kneeling, to twang shrill discords on her samisen let her hands fall from the strings. "Me, too?" she inquired. And giggled. Geishas, he had discovered, giggled at nearly everything.

"Yeah, you too," said the ungallant Hollinger. "Music very bad, *capish?* Send the girl back with some more saki. And try to find something bigger I can drink it out of!"

The slide eased back into place after her. Hollinger, left alone with his



Complete Novelet

saki-cups and the dancer's discarded outer kimono neatly rolled up in the corner—they seemed to wear layers of them—scowled at the paper walls. Presently he lit a cigarette and blew a thick blue smoke-spiral into the air. It hung there heavily as if it was too tired to move against the heavy staleness of the room's atmosphere. Hollinger frowned.

"Twenty-four hours shore-leave left and not a laugh on the horizon," he complained. "What a town! I shoulda stayed on the ol' battle-wagon and boned up on my course on how to be a detective. Wonder if I passed the exam I sent in from Manila?"

A Fight-Crazy Gob on Shore Leave Finds That Almost Anything May Turn Up in Tokyo's Honky-Tonk Alleys

The racket in the public rooms up front, where they had been playing billiards all evening, seemed to have grown louder. He could hear excited shouts, jabbering voices that topped the raucous blend of phonograph-music, clicking roulette-wheels, rattling dice-cups, and clinking beer-glasses. Somebody had started a fight, he guessed. Those Japs sure lost their heads easy. Still a good fight might take some of the boredom out of his bones. Maybe he'd just— Nix. He'd been warned to stay out of trouble this trip.

They were taking a long time with that saki. He picked up a little gong-mallet, and began to swing it against the round bronze disk dangling between two crosspieces. He liked the low sweet noise.

THERE was a sound of feet hurrying across the wooden flooring now, as though a lot of people were running from one place to another. But it remained a considerable distance away, at the front of the big sprawling establishment.

Something whisked by against the outside of the paper screen walling him in. Like the loose edges of somebody's clothes flirting past. The light was on his side, it was dark out there, so he couldn't see any shadow to go with it. Just that rustling sound and the hasty pat-pat of running feet accompanying it. Whoever it was, was in a big hurry—

The pat-pat went on past until it had nearly died out, then turned, started back again quicker than before. Then it stopped right opposite where he was. There was an instant's breathless pause. . . .

Then the slide whirred back and a blond girl stumbled in toward him, both arms stretched out in mute appeal for help. He was on his feet by the time she'd covered the short space between them. He got a blurred impression of what she looked like as she threw herself against him, and stood panting and trembling within the circle of his arms.

She was all in. Two or three flecks of red spattered the front of her gold evening gown—even her dress was out of place in a spot like this. She hadn't any shoes on, but you always had to leave your footgear at the door when you came in. Her blond hair made a tangled shimmer around her head and her attractive face was contorted with sheer panic. Her breathing was the quick, agonized panting of a hunted thing.

Hollinger looked down into her eyes —and whistled. He could tell by the contraction of the pupils that she'd been drugged. An opium pill, maybe, or morphine. He couldn't be sure whether it hadn't taken effect yet or she was just coming out of it.

Sound suddenly broke from her lips and she sobbed against his shoulder. "Say you're real. Tell me I'm not seeing things!" Her fingers pressed against his chest. "Hide me! Don't let them get me! They're after me but I didn't do it. . . . I *know* I didn't do it!"

He had squared off toward the opening in the slide, because the trampling of feet was coming this way now and he wanted to be ready.

She pulled at his blouse wrinkling it in her fingers. "No, don't fight them. Don't you see—that would be the worst thing you could do. It's not just people, it's the police—!"

Police? Hollinger swore. He took a quick step over and slammed the slide shut. He kept his hand on it tentatively, as though not sure of what he was going to do yet. He'd get the brig sure if he tangled with them, after the warning they'd been given on shipboard. But —this girl. Well, she was a girl, she was American, she was in a jam. He had to help her—he wasn't any heel.

"What're they after you for?" he asked. "What did you do?"

"They think I—murdered the man I came in with. I found him stabbed to death—just now—right in the room with me when I—I woke up. I know —it sounds silly. They'll never believe it." She gestured helplessly toward the crimson flecks on her bodice. "This blood all over me—and the dagger in my lap when they came in— Oh please, get me out of this awful place! I *know* I didn't do it. I know I *couldn't* have—"

He eyed her ruefully.

She seemed to sense what was passing in his mind. She smiled wanly.

"No," she said. "It wasn't anything like that. I'm not— The man was my fiancé. We were going to be married tomorrow. We were slumming. We stopped in here—"

HIS indecision didn't last long. There wasn't time. The oncoming shuffle of feet had stopped right next door. Hollinger grabbed up the geisha's discarded robe. "Get into that kimono quick. They'll be here in a second—maybe we can swing it." He jumped back to where he'd been sitting originally, collapsed cross-legged on the floor. When she'd wrapped the garment around her, he pulled her down beside him, snatched off his white cap, poked it inside-out and jammed it down over her telltale golden hair.

He pulled her against him. "Pardon me," he said with a tight grin. "It's our only chance. Keep your face turned over my shoulder. Don't let that dress show through the kimono."

"What'll I do if they talk Japanese to me?"

"I'll do the talking. You just giggle the way all these gals do." His arm tightened around. "Okay, lady. This is it. Here they are!"

The slide hissed back. Three bandy-legged little policemen stood squinting into the lantern-light at them. Behind them was a fourth little yellow man in plain clothes. And in back of him, huddled a group of customers, craning and goggling.

Hollinger put down one of the saki-cups, and wiped his mouth with his free hand. "Well," he said slowly, "where's the fire? What's the attraction? We're not giving any show in here." No one budged. "Scram!"

"You see gal?" the detective demanded. "You see yellow-hair gal run by here—'Merican gal like you?"

"Haven't you got eyes?" Hollinger growled. "This is the only gal in here—Mitsu-san. Go away, won't you?"

The plainclothesman snapped something in Japanese at the huddled figure. Hollinger's growl turned nasty. "Skip it!" The girl, quaking against him, managed to produce a high-pitched giggle. Hollinger warmed inside. A good girl that. Scared, sure. But nervy. A fine girl . . .

"Fool gal," the detective snapped contemptuously. His gaze rested on the saki-cups. He smiled drily, made a sign of wheels going around close to his head, bowed elaborately. "So sorry to disturb. Pliss overlook." The three policemen bowed likewise, like stooges.

"Sayonara," said Hollinger pointedly. "Goodbye."

The screen slammed shut again. Someone barked a curt order, and the trampling feet moved on. The crowd continued to stop every few yards, looking into the other cubicles.

"Don't move yet a while," Hollinger said out of the corner of his mouth, close to her ear. "Wait'll they get further away." Just as she was about to straighten up, he caught her quickly, held her fast. "Darn it, stay put!"

The screen eased back again, with less noise than before, and one of the geishas peered in. "I bring saki you order—" She glanced in slant-eyed surprise at the form nestled against him. "You find other girl?" She set the tray down on the floor. There was suspicion peering through the thick orange, green and purple make-up that masked her face.

"Yeah. I found new girl. I like better than girl I had before. So long." He jabbed his thumb at the screen.

The geisha backed out submissively, still peering curiously at the other girl.

The slide closed again. Hollinger let

his arms fall. "All right now." The girl straightened and her fingertips pressed tight against her mouth.

"Come on. We've got to step on it. I think she's on to us. She's going to give us away. He jumped to his feet, took a quick look out, then motioned to her to follow. She obeyed, holding herself very stiff and straight.

II

THE clamor at the front hadn't abated any. Through a gap in the partitions he caught a glimpse of two white-garbed internes bringing in a stretcher. There was no out that way.

The girl looked at him in terror. "We're trapped back here. We'll never be able to get through all these people. I'm sorry I ever got you into this."

"There's got to be a back way out." He threw an arm protectively about her. "Lean up against me, like you were dizzy. We're going out for a breath of air, if they ask us. Take little pigeon-toed steps like you were going to fall flat on your face any minute. Buckle your knees a little, you're too tall. Keep your head down—"

They wavered through the maze of paper-walled passageways, sometimes in darkness, sometimes in reflected lantern-light. The place was a labyrinth; all you had to do to make new walls was push a little. The only permanent structure was the four corner-posts and the topheavy tile roof.

They managed to side-step the police who were returning from the back, by detouring around one of the slides, and waiting until they'd gone by. A hurrying geisha or two, carrying refreshment-trays, brushed against them, apologized.

"Don't weaken," he kept whispering. "We'll make it yet." The stampeding suddenly started back again behind them. Evidently the geisha had voiced her suspicions. They went a little faster. The wavering gait became a run, the run became tearing, headlong flight. He slashed one more of the never-ending screens back into its socket, and they were looking out on a rear garden.

Apple-green and vermilion lanterns bobbed in the breeze; a little hump-backed bridge crossing a midget brook; dwarf fir-trees made showy splashes of deeper darkness. It all looked unreal and very pretty—all but the policeman posted there to see that no one left. He turned to face them. They'd come to a dead stop. The policeman was swinging a short, wicked-looking little club on a leather strap.

Hollinger said into her ear: "I'll handle him. Don't wait—just keep going across that bridge. There must be a way of getting through to the next street over. Be right with you—"

The cop said something that sounded like, *"Boydao, boydao!"* and motioned them back with his club.

"Take it!" Hollinger snapped at the girl and gave her a scooting shove that sent her up one side of the sharply-tilted bridge and down the other. She almost tumbled off into the water.

Hollinger and the Japanese policeman were locked and struggling, silent but for the crunching of their feet on the fine sand that surfaced the garden path. The sailor had a sort of awkward headlock on the Jap, left hand clamped across his mouth to keep him quiet. His right fist was pounding the bristle-haired skull, while the policeman's club was spattering him all over with dull, brutal thuds. The cop bit Hollinger's muffling hand. Hollinger threw his head back in the lantern-light, opened his mouth like the entrance to the Mammoth Caves—but did not yell.

The girl hovered there across the bridge, her hand held against lips once more, her body bent forward in the darkness. Hollinger knew that every minute counted. Lanterns were wavering nearer in the interior of the house, filtering through the paper like blurred, interlocked moons. Their flight had been discovered.

Hollinger sucked a deep breath into his toiling lungs, lifted the squirming cop up bodily off the ground and tossed him like a sack into the stream. The bulge of his chest and the sudden strain of his back and shoulder muscles split the tight middy from throat to waist. There was a petal-shaped splash and the little brown man swiveled there in the sanded hollow, half stunned by the impact, water coursing shallowly across his abdomen and cutting him in half.

Hollinger vaulted across to the girl with a single stretch of his long legs, caught at her as he went by, and pulled her after him. "I told you not to hang around— Come on, willya?" He glared at her fiercely. She was a fine girl, all right. Scared to death and sticking around that way anyhow. . . .

THEY found the mouth of an alley giving onto the rear of the garden behind a clump of dwarf firs that were streaked single-file along its narrow black length between the walls. Hollinger pushed the hobbling girl in front of him. They came out at the other end into the brazierlike brightness of one of the Yoshiwara streets.

It was strangely deserted; seemed so, at least, until Hollinger remembered that most of the usual crowd must have been drawn around to the front of the Stolen Hours by the hubbub. They ran down it to the end of the block, then turned a corner into another that was even more dismal. But this one was more normally crowded. Heads turned after them, kimonoed passersby stopped to stare. A zigzagging bicycle-rider tried to get out of their way, ran into them instead and was toppled over.

"If the alarm spreads before we can get out of this part of town, we're sunk," he panted. "They'll gang up on us. Faster, lady, faster—"

"I can't," she whimpered. "It's—it's this pavement—the ground's cutting my feet to pieces—" He was without shoes, too, but his soles were calloused from deck-scrubbing. He was two arms' length in front of her, hauling her after him by the combined span of his own arms and hers. Betraying flashes of gold peeped out from under the parachuting kimono, were blazing a trail of identification behind them.

She stumbled and bit her lips to keep from crying out. So he grabbed her up in both arms, plunged onward with her. The extra weight hardly slowed him at all. A paper streamer hanging downward across the lane got snared in some way by their passage, ripped off its wire and flared out behind his neck like a long loose muffler. The shopkeeper whose stall it had advertised came out sputtering, both arms raised high in denunciation.

"There's our dish!" he muttered, winded. A taxi had just dropped a couple of fares in front of a dance-hall ahead. Hollinger hailed it with a hoarse shout and it came slowly backward. Hollinger let the girl fall on the seat, ran along beside the cab for a minute as the driver went forward again, then hopped in after her.

"Drive like blazes," he panted. "Ginza—anywhere at all—only get us out of here. Fast, savvy?"

"I go like wind," the driver agreed cheerfully. He wore a kimono and a golf-cap.

The girl was all in; the sudden release of all the pent-up tension finished the last of her control. She just lay inertly, hiding her face with both her hands. He didn't speak to her or try to touch her. His head back against the cushion he pulled in eight long, shuddering breaths—slowly, tasting each one like a sip of icy wine. After that, he began to lick the ugly teeth-gashes on his hand.

A sudden diminution of the light around them—a change to the more dignified pearly glow of solitary street-lights—marked the end of the Yoshiwara.

At the end of a long five minutes, the girl pulled herself up. "I don't know how to thank you," she said weakly. "I mean"—she smiled just a little, wearily—"there just aren't any words."

"Who does things for thanks?" he said, spading his hand at her.

She said what she'd said before: "I didn't do it. I know I didn't do it! Why, I was going to marry Bob. I loved him—" She stopped suddenly, confused.

He looked at her sharply, but he didn't ask any questions. He started, though, to reach for her hand, then drew back.

THEY were coming into the long broad reaches of the Ginza now, Tokyo's Broadway. The lights brightened again, but with a difference: This was downtown, the show-part of town, modern, conventional, safe. Safe for those who weren't wanted for murder, anyway.

"I suppose I ought to give myself up to the police," she said, her eyes restless, like an animal in a trap. "The longer I keep running away, the more they'll think I did do it—I lost my head in that dreadful place—the knife on my lap and his blood on my dress, and that horrible manager yelling at me."

"Suppose you tell it to me first," he urged, gently. "I'm sticking with you, see? I didn't go through all that trouble just to have you put into jail. You say you didn't do it. All right—that's good enough for me. I don't know who you are—"

"Brainard," she said. "Evelyn Brainard. I'm from San Francisco."

He said something that should have been very funny, after what had gone on during the half hour, but she didn't laugh. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Brainard," said he, and blanketed one of her hands in the enormous expanse of his. Etiquette.

"If you give yourself up now, I won't have time to do anything for you. I'm due back on shipboard tomorrow noon, and we're pulling out for Chefoo right away after that. You'd just stay cooped up until the American consul gets good and ready to ask what they're going to do about you, and that might be a week—ten days. And then he probably wouldn't take as much personal interest in you as"—he faltered awkwardly—"as a fellow like me would, that has met you socially."

This time she managed a warm smile. "Socially? Well, that's one way to put it, I guess."

"I ought to be able to straighten it out for you between now and the time I go back," he said earnestly. "Look, I've answered four questionnaires already on how to be a detective. I only have one more to go before I'm finished the course. And I've passed three of 'em, I know for a fact."

They had reached the lower end of the Ginza already, were heading slowly back again.

"The first thing we've got to do is get you off the streets, otherwise

you'll be picked up in no time. Know anyone at all here you could hole up with?"

"Not a living soul. Bob Mallory was the only one. I just got off the *Empress* yesterday afternoon. I've a room at the Imperial—"

"No, you better not go back there. They're either there already looking for you or they will be any minute. What about this Mallory—where did he hang out?"

"I don't know, he wouldn't tell me. He gave me an evasive answer when I asked him. Somehow I got the idea he didn't want me to find out—"

He gave her another look. "It wouldn't be much help, even if you did know. It's probably the first place they'd look for you." They drove on in silence for a minute. Finally he said, "Look, don't be offended, but—I've had a room since yesterday. It's not much of a place—it's run by a crazy darn' Russian. But it would be somewhere for you to be safe in while I'm trying to see what I can do for you."

"You're swell."

HE GAVE the driver the address. It was a western-style building in one of the downtown reaches of the city, little better than a shack, really—clapboard under a corrugated tin roof. But at least it had wooden doors and walls. And windows with shades on them.

He said: "Wait in the cab a minute, I'll get the Russian out of the way. Just as well if no one sees you going up."

After he'd gone in, she caught sight of the driver slyly watching her in his rear-view mirror. She quickly lowered her head, but with the creepy feeling that he already knew she was white, even in the dimness of the vehicle's interior. Hollinger came back and helped her out. "Hurry up, I sent him out to the back on a stall—"

Going up the unpainted wooden stairs—the place had an upper story—she whispered: "The driver saw I wasn't Japanese. He may remember later, if he hears—"

He made a move to turn and go down again. The sound of the taxi driving off outside reached them, and it was too late to do anything about it.

"We'll have to take a chance," he said.

There was nothing Japanese about the room upstairs. Just a typical cheap lodging-house room, the same as you'd find the world over. An electric bulb under a tin shade. Flaked white-painted iron bedstead, wooden dresser.

She sat on the edge of the bed, wearily pulled off the white cap. Her golden hair came out and made her beautiful again. He drew up a chair, leaned toward her, arms akimbo, poised on his knees. He said, "What happened? Tell me the whole thing from the beginning. See if I can get the hang of it. Talk low."

III

I HADN'T seen him (she said) in three years. We were engaged before he left the States. He came out to work for one of the big oil companies here. I was to follow just as soon as he'd saved up enough money to send for me. Then, when he should have had enough laid aside, he started putting me off. Finally I got tired waiting, booked my own passage, came out without letting him know. I didn't tell him I was arriving until night before last when I sent him a cable from the ship. He met me yesterday at Yokohama.

He'd changed. He wasn't glad to see

me, I could tell that right away. He was afraid of something. Even down there on the pier, while he was helping me to pass through the customs-inspection, he kept glancing nervously at the crowd around us, as if he was being watched or something.

When we got here it was even worse. He didn't seem to want to tell me where he lived. He wouldn't talk about himself at all. I'd been sending my letters to the company-office, you see. . . . I couldn't make head or tail of it. This morning when I woke up there was a piece of white goods tied around the knob of my door—like a long streamer or scarf. When I happened to mention it to him later on, he turned the ghastliest white. But I couldn't make him talk about that, either.

(Hollinger explained: "White's the color of mourning in this country. It meant the same thing as crepe.")

I know that now (she went on). . . . I'll spare you all the little details. My love for him curled up, withered, died. I could feel that happening. You can't love a man that's frightened all the time. Anyway, I can't. Tonight we were sitting in one of the big modern restaurants on the Ginza. I happened to say: "Bob, this is deadly dull—can't you take me to one of the more exciting places?" He didn't seem to want to do that either—as though he were afraid to stray very far off the beaten path.

We argued about it a little—the girl who was waiting on us must have heard. Because not long after that he was called to the phone and as soon as his back was turned, this waitress came up to me. She hadn't been able to help overhearing, she said. If I wanted to see the real sights, I ought to get him to take me to the Yoshi. The House of Stolen Hours, she said, was a very agreeable place. Then Bob came back. And although he'd looked scared when he went to the phone, he was all right now. He said there'd been a mistake—no call for him at all.

It never occurred to me that there could be anything prearranged, sinister, about this sequence of events—that it might be a trick to get us in an out-of-the-way place where we couldn't easily get help.

Like a fool, I didn't tell Bob where I'd found out about the Yoshiwara. I let him think it was my own idea. I had a hard time talking him into taking me there, but finally he gave in.

We were shown into one of the little rooms and told just where to sit, to enjoy the entertainment—

(Hollinger interrupted: "There's something, right there. What difference would it have been *where* you sat, when you just unroll mats on the floor? Who told you?")

THE manager, I guess it was (she answered). He spread out one mat for me, pointed to it, and I sat down. Then he spread the one for Bob *opposite* mine, instead of alongside it. My back was to one partition, his to the other. They spread the tea things between us. Mine tasted bitter, but I thought maybe that was on account of drinking it without cream and sugar.

There was a lantern shining right in my face. My eyes felt small, like pinheads, and the lantern light dazzled them. I began to get terribly sleepy. I asked Bob to change places with me, so I'd have my back to the light. He sat where I'd been, and I moved over to his side.

Then—the—thing happened—a minute later. Even I saw a faint gleam of light, shining through the screen from the next compartment behind Bob's back—as though someone had opened a slide and gone in there. A big loom-

ing shadow hovered over him, like a genie let out of a bottle in the Arabian Nights. Know what I mean? Sort of cloud like, blurred, bigger than life-size. Then it vanished, and the screen went blank. I was already feeling so numb, with a ringing in my ears, I couldn't be sure I'd really seen it.

Bob never made a sound. I thought he was bending over to pick up his cup at first, but he never straightened up again. Just kept going lower and lower. I thought blearily, "What's he putting his head all the way down like that for, is he going to try to drink it without using his hands?" Then the cup smashed under his chin and he just stayed that way. And then I could see this ivory knob sticking out between his shoulder blades, like—like a handle to lift him by. And red ribbons swirling out all around it, ribbons that *ran!* And the last thing I saw was a slit—a two or three-inch gash in the paper screen behind him. My own head got too heavy to hold up and I just fell over sideways on the floor and passed out.

But I *know,* I know I was sitting on the opposite side of the room from him, I *know* I didn't touch him—

When I opened my eyes, I was still there in that horrible place, in the flickering lantern light, and he was dead there opposite me, so I knew I hadn't dreamed it. The dream was from then on, until I met you. A nightmare.

The slide was just closing, as though someone had been in there with me. I struggled up on one elbow. There was a weight on my hands, and I looked down to see what it was, and there was the knife! The blood-smeared blade was resting flat across the palm of one, the fingers of the other were folded tight around the ivory hilt. There was blood on the front of my dress, as though the knife had been wiped on it.

("That's the symbol of transferring the guilt of the crime to you," he told her.)

The slide was shoved back, as though they'd been timing me, waiting for me to come to before breaking in and confronting me. The manager came in alone first. He flew into a fury. The way he kept yelling at me—it was awful. I couldn't think or say anything at all. He pulled me up by one arm and kept bellowing into my face: "You kill! You kill in my house! You make me big disgrace—you make me lose face before customers!"

I tried to tell him that Bob had been stabbed through the paper screen from the next compartment, and when I pointed to where the gash had been—it was gone! The paper was perfectly whole.

He kept pointing to the blood on my dress, the knife at my feet, kept shaking me back and forth like a terrier. Finally he stamped out to call the police. That was my only chance. I got up and ran, I ran the other way, toward the back. I couldn't find my way out, I thought I'd go mad there in that place with fright and horror, but —I'd heard your voice when we first went in, saying "Here's looking at you, kids!" I knew there was an American somewhere under the same roof, if I could only find him—

IV

"THAT'S the story, Hollinger. And here I am, and here you are."

"Not on your life, lady," he grinned, getting up and shoving his chair back. "Here you are, maybe, but I'm on my way back there, to do a little housecleaning." He cupped his hands, blew into them, rubbed them together like a kid going to a circus.

"But they know you helped me get

away. They must be looking for *you* by this time. If I let you go back there again—"

"Sure they know. And sure they're looking for me. But that's the one place they're *not* looking for me. Don't you see that? I'm going back there and find out what happened to that slashed paper. The first lesson in that detective book said that when evidence either for or against a suspect disappears from the scene of the crime, look for collusion. First I thought that was some kind of a train smash-up, but one of the officers on the battle-wagon told me it means people getting together to put something over on somebody. You say you saw a slit in the paper. When you came to it was gone. The answer is there's a trick somewhere. Maybe the manager is in on it. Because I don't see how they could do that in his house without his knowing it.

"Now, I've got to locate the exact compartment you were in, and that's not going to be an easy job, the way those places are all alike."

"Wait," she said, "I think I can help you. It's not much of a thing to go by, but—Those lanterns in each cubicle—did you notice that they all have a character heavily inked in on them?"

"Yeah, I couldn't tell one from the other. They're laundry-tickets to me."

"I don't mean that. The one in our booth was finished in a hurry or something, the craftsman inked his brush too heavily. Anyway, a single drop of ink came to a head at the bottom of the character, with the slope of the lantern. It ran down a little way, left a blurred track ending in a dark blob. It was staring me in the face in the beginning, before I changed places, that's how I know. Here, give me a pencil—all right this burnt match-stick will do. It's very easy to remember, you don't need to know what it means. Two seagulls with bent wings, one above the other. Under them simply a pot-hook. Then this blot of dried ink hanging down from that like a pendulum. Look for that, and you'll have the cubicle we were in. I don't think they've bothered to remove the lantern, because they wouldn't expect a foreigner to notice a little thing like that."

"Neither would I," he said and nodded approvingly at her. He picked up a razor blade from the edge of the washstand, carefully sheathed it in a fragment of newspaper.

"What's that for?"

"To let myself in with. In some ways, paper houses are pretty handy. Lock yourself in here behind me, just to be on the safe side. I'll give you the high sign when I come back. Don't open up for anybody else at all."

She moved after him to the door. "You'll never make it in that uniform. It's all torn."

"I'll take care of that, borrow something from the Roosky downstairs. Try to get some sleep and get that dope out of your system."

The last thing she murmured through the crack of the door as he slid out into the hallway was, "Please be careful."

"Okay, lady," he said with a grin, saluting jauntily from the eyebrow.

THE Russian, behind the shelf that served for an accommodation desk, growled, "Eh, tzailor! Is no fight by back of house, why you tell me to go look?" He pointed to the split middy. "I tink you fight youself."

"Never been known to. Listen, I gotta go out and it's cold. Lend me a hat and coat."

"Sure, bott you leaf deposit. How I know you come back?"

"Here's your deposit, suspicious

guy." It felt funny to have something with a brim to it on his head, after two years. The bell-bottomed pants were a give-away, but he counted on the darkness to take care of that. He had to fasten the coat's top button over his bare neck, where civilians wore collars and ties.

A quarter of an hour later he was casually strolling past the front of the Stolen Hours again, hands in pockets, hat-brim tipped down to his nose. The place was shut up tight, whether by police order or at its owner's discretion he couldn't tell. Probably the latter, for no policeman had been left posted outside the premises. The Yoshi had quieted down. Lights still peered out up and down its byways, but the dance halls and pool-parlors had closed up shop for the night, and the only wayfarers in the streets now were homeward-bound drunks and an occasional pickpocket or lush-worker sidling past in the shadows.

He didn't try to get in the Stolen Hours from the front, but went around the block to the next street over, located the lane they'd escaped through and threaded his way along it. There was a bamboo wicket barring it at the inner end. He didn't bother with it — just climbed up over with a seaman's agility and dropped soundlessly down on the inside.

The lanterns were out and the garden was lifeless. The faint gurgle of the brook was the only sound there was. Hollinger stole over the bridge, a looming, top-heavy figure out of all proportion to its microscopic measurements; he was still without shoes, never having recovered his footgear after that first flight. He obliterated himself under the uptilted roof-projection that shadowed the rear of the house, with only the heels of his torn white socks showing in the gloom.

Only taut paper faced him. They didn't use locks or bolts apparently but hitched the frames up fast in some way on the inside. He took out the razor blade and made a neat hair-line gash down alongside the frame, then another close to the ground, making an L around the lower corner. He lifted it up like a tent-flap and ducked through. It crackled a little, but not much, fell stiffly into place again.

The house seemed deserted. Hollinger couldn't be sure whether or not the manager slept here after hours. The geishas and other employes probably didn't. He could hear bottled crickets chirping and clacking rhythmically somewhere ahead and didn't, unfortunately, realize that crickets are used as watchdogs in Japan. They stop chirping whenever a stranger enters the house. They did that now. The sound broke off short almost at the first tentative steps he took, and didn't resume.

HE WORKED his way forward feeling his way along the cool slippery wooden flooring with a prehensile toe-and-heel grip, shuffling the multiple deck of screens aside with a little upward hitch that kept them from clicking in their grooves. He waited until he was nearly midway through the house, as far as he could judge, before he lighted his first match. He guarded it carefully with the hollow of his hand, reduced the light to a pink glow. The place seemed deserted.

He tried six of the cubicles before he got the right place. There it was. Traces of Mallory's blood still showed black on the floor. The smeared ink-track on the lantern was just a confirmation. He lit the wick and the lantern bloomed out orange at him, like a newly risen sun.

The location of the blood smears told

him which of the four sides to case. The screen out in place at the moment was, as she had said, intact. He ran his fingers questioningly along its frame, to see if it felt sticky, damp, with newly-applied paste. It was dry and gave no signs of having been recently inserted. He could see, now, that the inserts weren't glued into the frame at all, they were caught between the lips of a long, continuous split in the bamboo and held fast by the pressure of the two halves of the wood closing over them again, helped out by an occasional little wooden nail or peg. They couldn't be put in in a hurry.

But they could be taken out in a hurry, couldn't they? He shoved it all the way back flush with the two lateral screens, and squinted into the socket it had receded into. There were two frame-edges visible, not just one. He caught at the second one, and it slid out empty, bare of paper! But there were tell tale little strips and slivers of white all up and down it where the paper had been hastily slashed away.

He just stood there and nodded grimly at it. "Unh-hunh," he said.

Probably the frame itself would be unslung tomorrow and sent out to have a new filler put in. Or destroyed. They hadn't had the opportunity tonight, with the place buzzing with police. He didn't think the rest of the staff had been in on it—just the manager and the murderer. The fact that the girl's last-minute change of position hadn't been revealed to them in time showed that. The geishas waiting on the couple would have tipped them off if they'd been accessories. They hadn't, and Mallory had been killed by mistake. But she'd only arrived the day before—why did they want her out of the way, not him? . . .

Hollinger pondered.

THERE was no audible warning. But his shifting of the slide had exposed the assassin's compartment beyond the one he was in, and the lantern-light, reaching wanly to the far screen of that threw up a faint gray blur overlapping his own shadow—a shadow with upraised arm ending in a sharp downward-projected point. Seeing that shadow saved his life.

The dagger came down behind him with no whisper of sound and he flung himself flat on the floor under it, rolled as he hit. It nailed down the loose overlapping width of the Russian's coat, bit through it into the plank, skewered it there. His assailant, thrown off balance, came floundering down on him.

They both had sense enough not to try for the knife, which was jammed in the floor halfway up to the hilt.

Hollinger couldn't have chosen a worse position if he'd spent a year beforehand working it out. He was flat on his stomach with what felt like the sacred mountain of Fujiyama on top of him. He couldn't use either arm effectively; and he was pinned down by eight inches of steel through a coat he couldn't work himself out of. He nearly broke his back trying to rear up high enough to swing his shoulders around and get his arms into play.

Apelike hands found his throat, closed in, got to work. Two or three backhand blows glanced harmlessly off a satiny jaw-line. Hollinger gave that up, brought his legs into play instead. He got a scissors-lock on the short thick neck of the Oriental, squeezed.

The throttling hands left his throat to try to pry his legs off. He let them be wrenched apart without much resistance; the hold had been just a stopgap—too passive to get him anywhere. They broke, jockeyed to get into better positions, blowing like fish on land.

Hollinger rolled over on his back, the razor-edged dagger cut its way free through his coat, remained bedded in the floor. He scrambled to his feet, staying low, resting his knuckles on the floor for a counter-balance till he was ready.

The Japanese had planted his feet wide apart like a croquet-wicket. He crouched low so that his chest was nearly touching the floor. The coppery, rippling muscles of his chest peered through the opening of his flimsy kimono.

Hollinger straightened, came up at him swinging. The right he sent in should have taken care of anyone. But it went wide, streaked upward into the air. The Jap cupped a slapping hand to his elbow, gripped the thumb of that hand at the same time. Hollinger felt himself leaving the floor like a rocket, twisting through the empty frame. He landed with a brutal thud in the compartment behind them, where Mallory had been killed. The fall left Hollinger squirming, half-paralyzed. The Japanese whirled to face him, stamped both feet in a new position, crouched again.

Jiu-jitsu. Hollinger knew he was sunk, unless he got a lucky break. He stumbled up again, weaved around warily, arching all over and with his ears humming. What good were dukes against a system of invisible weights and balances?

THE hands shot out at him again, open. His own dizziness saved him; he gave a lurch to one side, his reflexes still stunned. The Japanese wasn't quick enough in shifting position; his legs and shoulders swung, but for a second his flank was exposed. Hollinger didn't waste the opening. He sent in a quick short jab to the vital nerve-center under the ear. That rocked the Japanese for a second, held him long enough for Hollinger to wind up a real one. He sent home one of those once-in-a-lifetime blows. The yellow man's face came around just in time to get it between the eyes. The squat figure went over like a ninepin, and Hollinger stood swaying, his bleary eyes watchful, waiting for the other to come at him again but the Japanese was finished. He lay there gasping, threads of blood leaking from his ear, nose and mouth. His eyes stared stonily, without sight in them, at nothing.

Hollinger let out a groan and then let himself slide to the floor.

A couple of minutes went by. No one else came in. That was all to the good because Hollinger felt that one whack with a flexible fly-swatter would finish him off.

The Japanese began to groan after awhile, twitching his shoulders, arms, legs. But there was a board like stiffness about his middle that caught the sailor's eye. It had cost the Japanese the fight whatever it was. A wedge of white showed, in the kimono-opening, below the rising and falling coppery chest. Underclothing maybe. Whatever it was had kept the yellow man from pivoting out of the range of Hollinger's finishing blow.

The sailor bent over him, pulled the garment open. Paper. Layer after layer of stiff, board-like paper, rolled around him like a cuirass, extending from ribs to thighs. A sash held it in place.

Hollinger rolled him out of his queer cocoon by pushing him across the floor, like a man laying a carpet. The stuff was in two lengths, one under the other. The Japanese had evidently slashed the whole square out of the screen first, then quickly slit that into two strips to narrow it so that he could wind it around himself. The knife-gash itself showed up in the second

section, as it peeled free. The edges driven inward by the knife. Any cop worth his salt ought to be able to figure out what really happened with this to go by.

He riffled it out of the way. Then he flung himself down on the still stunned Japanese and gripped him by the throat. "Who was it?" he said in a low voice. "Who was in there? Who killed American fella?"

"No!" was the only answer he could get. "No!" Again and again.

"Better open up! This is waiting for you!" He showed a fist.

"No see! Man go in, come out again. I no know!"

"After what I just took off your hide? All right, here she comes!"

"Denguchi do! Denguchi do! I no do, he do! He get money for to do, he hired for to do—"

"Who hired him, you—?

The yellow man's eyes glazed. Then closed. The head rolled over heavily. Hollinger swore. He got up and quickly rolled the paper into a long staff, tucked it under his arm, took it out with him. Nothing more he could do here tonight.

The Russian was snoring in his lighted wall-niche when Hollinger got downtown again. Hollinger chased up the stairs past him, wangled the knob of his door triumphantly. "Hey, lady. Evelyn! It's me, open up and listen to the good news!"

V

THERE wasn't a sound from within. She must be in a pretty deep sleep, after what she'd been through earlier. He began to thump subduedly. "Miss Brainard," he said. "Lemme in, will ya?" Finally he went at the door in a way no sleeper could have ignored. He crouched down, looked through the keyhole. The light was still on inside, and he could make out the pear-shape of the key on the inside of the door.

Frightened now, he threw his shoulder against the door. The cheap lock tore off at the fourth onslaught. The Russian, roused, had come up meanwhile and was having epileptic fits at the damage to his premises.

The girl had vanished, with the key still locked from inside. A corner of the bedding trailed off onto the floor. One of the cheap net-curtains inside the window was torn partly off its rod, as though somebody had clutched at it despairingly. The window was all the way open. There was a tin extension-roof just below it, which sloped to within easy reach of the alley.

It wasn't the police. They would have come in by the door, gone out with her by the door. All he had to go on was a name—Denguchi.

"Didn't you hear anything? Didn't you hear her scream out up here?"

The Russian immediately turned professionally indignant. "Oh, so you got girl opstairs! For this is extra charge!"

"I haven't now!" gritted Hollinger, and the lodging-house keeper drew back hastily at sight of the grim lines in his face.

"I no hear. I tzleep. How I know you got somebody op here?"

Hollinger tested the disturbed bed with the back of his hand. It still showed faint traces of warmth. "She hasn't been gone very long—" he muttered. "But every minute I stand here—"

Where would they take her? What could they possibly want with her? Just to hold her as a hostage, shut her up about the first murder? He didn't think so. It was *she* they'd meant to get the first time, and not the man. Now they'd come back to correct the mistake. Then why hadn't they killed her right here,

why had they gone to the trouble of smuggling her out the window? The only answer he could find for that was that somebody had sent out after her. Somebody who hadn't come here had wanted to see it done, had wanted to gloat. Who could be that interested in killing a woman? Only another woman. There was another woman in this somewhere, he should have realized that from the beginning—

He had a sudden hunch where to go to look for her. He remembered Evelyn's remark in the taxi: "He didn't seem to want me to know where he lived."

He grabbed the Russian by the shoulder. "How do you find an address in a hurry, an address you don't know? I'm out of my depth now—"

"You osk inflammation-lady at telephone-exchange—"

Not so different from home after all. He started shoving the Russian downstairs ahead of him. "Do it for me, I can't talk the lingo! The name's Robert Mallory—and tell her to steer the police over there fast—"

The Russian came out in a moment and threw a "twenty-five" and a tongue-twisting street-name at him.

"I'm leaving," Hollinger called back. "Take care of that cylinder of paper upstairs for me!" He ran out into the streets saying the unpronounceable name over to himself out loud. If he dropped a syllable, it might cost Evelyn Brainard her life. He got a prowling cab just by luck. He kept on saying it over and over, even after he was in it.

"I hear," sighed the driver finally, "I catch."

MALLORY had done himself well. His place turned out to be a little bungalow on one of the better-class residential streets, with grounds around it, even a little garage behind it and a driveway for his car. There were no lights in front, but the garage told him his hunch had been right. The reflected square of a lighted rear-window showed up against it, ghostly-pale, thrown over from the house. Someone was in the back of the house. Mallory had died hours ago in the House of Stolen Hours, and if the police were here, they would have been in front of the place, not in back.

He didn't waste time on the front door, just hooded the Russian's coat over his head for padding, bucked one of the ground-floor window-panes head on. It shattered and he climbed in, nicking his hands a little. A scream sounded through the house, then broke off short as though a hand had been thrown over the mouth emitting it. He waded out of the velvety darkness of the room he was in toward a semi-lighted hallway, toppling over something fragile behind him.

He ran down the hallway toward the light at the back. As the room swung into his vision he saw the Brainard girl in there, writhing, clutching at her throat, a darker head peering from behind her blond one. Somebody was strangling her with a scarf, or trying to.

But nearer at hand there was a sense of lurking menace hidden behind the slightly-stirring bead curtains bunched over to one side of the entryway. The girl, half-throttled as she was, tried to warn him with a limply outflung hand in that direction.

He caught up a slim teakwood stand, rammed it head on into the stringy covert, at stomach level. It brought a knife slashing down out at him, as if by reflex action. It cut the air in two before him. He grabbed at the tan fist holding it, brought it all the way out, vised it against him. Then he sent a swift punch home about two feet above

it. The beaded strips lacerated his knuckles, but they must have lacerated the face behind them too, acting like cruel little brass-knuckles.

There was a yelp of agony and the man reeled out into the open, a short little demon in a candy-striped blazer. Hollinger twisted the knife out of his hand by shoulder pressure, gave him a second head blow that dropped him. Something white streaked by him, and when he looked over at her, the Brainard girl was alone, coughing as she struggled to unwind the strangling sash from her throat. She staggered toward him, fell into his arms with a jerky backward hitch of the elbows, like something worked on strings.

A door had banged closed upstairs somewhere.

The Japanese didn't know he was finished yet. He was starting to inch over toward where he had dropped the knife. Hollinger jumped in between, kicked it out of his reach once and for all, hauled him to his feet by the collar of his sweater, hauled off and dropped him with a remarkable final blow.

THE girl had collapsed into a chair, and was breathing with a pitiful burgeoning-out and sinking-in of her body at the waist. He found a water-tap in a western-style kitchen adjoining the room, filled the hollows of his hands, came back and wetted her throat with it. He did that three or four times until that awful breathing was nearly normal again.

"Attagirl," he said. "You're hard to kill—like me."

She managed a wan smile. "The only reason it wasn't all over with by the time you got here was that she had to get it out of her system first—rub it in that he'd been hers, not mine. She dragged me around on a Cook's Tour of the house, with a speech for every memento—"

"Who was she?"

Her gaze fell before his. "His wife," she said slowly, "poor thing. Legally married to him by the Shinto rites—"

He shook his head at her. "What a rat he was," he said. He turned. "She's still in here someplace—I heard her go upstairs."

She reached out, caught him by the arm. "No," she said with a peculiar look, "I don't think so. She—loved him very much, you see."

He didn't at all. A whiff of sandalwood incense crept down the stairs, floated in to them, as if to punctuate her cryptic remark.

The police-watch came trooping in on them at this point, with a great flourishing and waving of clubs, hemmed them in against the wall.

"Now you get here," Hollinger greeted them ungratefully.

"Hai!" said the cocky little detective, and pointed to the professional hatchet-man on the floor. Immediately two of the cops started whacking him with their clubs. Then they turned him over on his face, lashed his hands behind him with rope, and dragged him out by the feet—a nice Oriental touch.

They had, evidently, been playing steeplechase, picking up the traces Hollinger had been leaving all night long. They had the battered Stolen Hours proprietor, the furled wall-paper, the Russian, and the first taxi-driver, the one who must have gone back and betrayed the girl's hiding-place to Denguchi.

The detective, puffing out his chest like a pouter-pigeon, said to her, "So you do not kill this man. Why you not stay and say so, pliss? You put us to great trouble."

"We put *you* to great trouble?" Hollinger yelped.

"Iss grave misdemeanor. Run away from question iss not good. You must come and give explanation before magistrate."

"Why, you little pint-sized—!"

She quickly reached out and braked his twitching arm against his side. "Don't you ever get tired fighting?" she murmured.

"What fighting? I didn't have one good man-sized fight all night, only guys that bite you, grab your thumbs, and jump you from behind curtains!" he said aggrievedly.

"Where other woman?"

The sandalwood, like the troubled spirit of one departed, hovered in the air about them. They found her upstairs, behind the locked door, kneeling in death on a satin prayer-pillow before a framed photograph of the man Evelyn Brainard had come out to rob her of. A pinch of incense sent a thread of smoke curling up before it. Her god. Forward she toppled, as the ritual prescribed, to show she was not afraid of meeting death. Hands tucked under her, clasping the harikari knife.

She looked pathetic and lovely and small—incapable almost of the act of violence that had been necessary in order to die.

To have interfered, the sailor somehow felt, staring in from the doorway, would have been the worst sort of desecration. He looked at the weak mouth and chin pictured inside the frame. Too cowardly to hurt either one, he had hurt both, one unto death. A pair of love birds were twittering in a scarlet bamboo cage. A bottle of charcoal-ink, a writing brush, a long strip of paper with hastily-traced characters, lay behind her on the floor.

The detective picked it up, began to read.

"I, Yugiri-san, Mist of the Evening, most unworthy of wives, go now to keep my honored husband's house in the sky, having unwittingly twice failed to carry out my honored husband's wish—"

The girl had stayed downstairs. "Don't tell her, will you?" Hollinger said when the detective had finished translating the death-scroll for his benefit. "She doesn't have to know. Let her go on thinking the woman was the one tried to get rid of her, through jealousy. Don't tell her the man she came out to marry hired a murderer to get her out of his way, because he didn't have guts enough to tell her to her face. It's tough enough as it is."

The detective sucked in his breath politely. "This was — *fffs* — great crime, to make it seem another had done it."

"It was—*fffs*—great pain-in-the-neck while it lasted," the sailor agreed.

It was getting light in Tokyo when they left the police station, walking slowly side by side. They had their shoes at last, and that was almost the best thing of all.

"I guess," she said ruefully, linking her arm in his, "I pretty well messed-up your shore-leave for you."

"Naw," he assured her, "you made it. Absolutely! That reminds me, keep the night of November third open, will you?"

"November third? But that's six months away!"

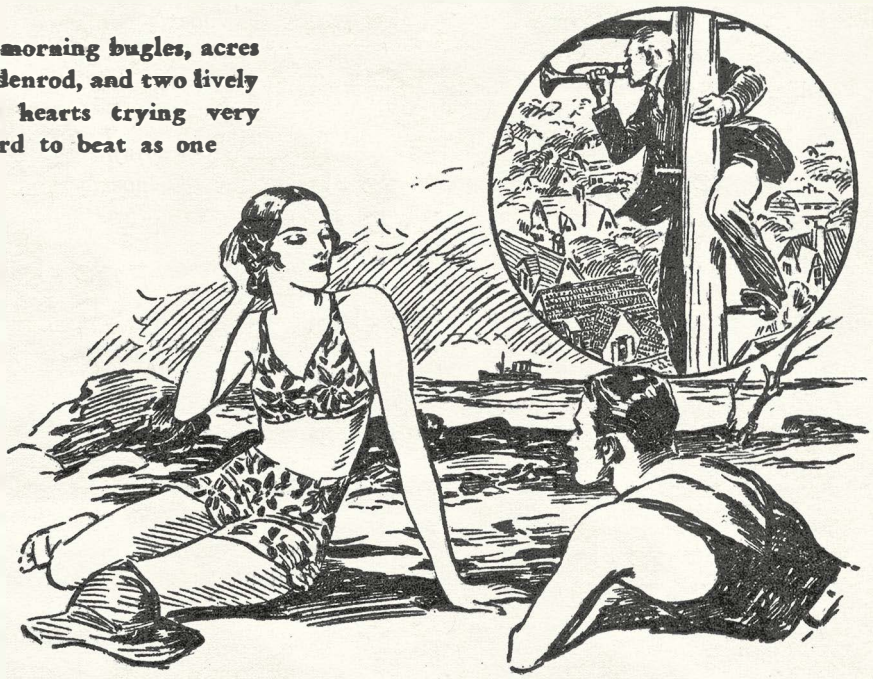
"I know, but that's when we get into Frisco Bay."

"I will," she said. "I'll keep November third for you. There isn't any night that I wouldn't keep for you—ever."

"Well, I'll borrow a minute from one night now," Hollinger said. He took her in his arms.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

Early-morning bugles, acres of goldenrod, and two lively young hearts trying very hard to beat as one



Three in the Family

By FRANK BUNCE
Author of "Too Big to Lick"

TERRY HARRIS twisted first one foot, then another free from the slight covering over them and slid them to the floor; noting meantime, as was natural with a young medical man still serious enough about his work to be always carrying it around with him, that his pulse beat was quicker, his nervous responses sharper than is normal to a man rising only to a green dawn. He traded pajamas for swimming trunks; he slipped on sandals and the best of three well-worn beach robes, brushed back his hair and otherwise tided himself with a care that his studies in psychology told him was unreasonable under the circumstances, that could only be explained away as a sudden manifestation of the decorative instinct in the male. Taken together, his abnormal eagerness to be up and about and his unusual concern for his appearance should have been of significance to a young medical man with an interest in psychology. Terry, however, postponed any definite conclusions about himself until, emerging into a morning as abruptly invigorating as a needle shower, he had jogged something more than a mile along a beach and upward to the crest of a kind of rock eyrie. There, finding himself apparently the only wakeful human in the visible universe, he felt a disappointment so poignant that he could not ignore its cause. He could attribute it only to that most severe of frustrations, the thwarting of the love impulse.

Terry scowled and kicked away a pebble or two with his bare toes, thus demonstrating that unreasonable rage behaviour can persist even in adults with carefully con-

ditioned reflexes. His circulation quickened and his body temperature rose perceptibly, confirming the fact that anger releases a measurable stream of stimulative elements into the blood stream. He walked morosely on around a pile of boulders, and almost stepped on a girl in a swimming suit.

The girl said "Ugh!" and rolled over with surprising suddenness. Terry recoiled, in instinctive fear behaviour, calming when he saw that she apparently intended to do nothing more violent than sit up and look at him. Evidently she was an exceptionally well-conditioned personality, since she showed no resentment, nor even very much surprise.

"I'm sorry," Terry said.

The girl considered him, propped up on one elbow, the tanned upper half of her made golden by the light of a thin slice of sun. She had long eyes of the greenish-bluish mixture and abundant hair of the yellowish-copperish shade. She also had some intangible, innate quality of seductiveness, quite distinct from the allure of her perfect form, which made Terry aware, as a psychologist, why he had thought of her almost continually ever since he had had a tantalizing, distant glimpse of her the morning before.

"I'm not so sure that *I* am. Sorry, I mean," she pronounced, after a frank appraisal of him. "It's one way of getting acquainted, I suppose, being, so to speak, underfoot like this. Won't you sit down?"

Terry sat down. "Until yesterday," he said, "I thought I was the only person in the world that liked swimming before dawn well enough to actually get out of bed for it."

"Oh, I'm crazy, too," she said. She stretched, and, without apology, yawned. "And besides, I've gotten into the habit of early rising from necessity. There's no sleeping around our diggings after reveille."

He was mystified. "Reveille?"

Her eyes deserted him to fix upon a long, low house, impressive enough in its way, but severe as a barracks, set close to the lake shore below them. "Look," she said.

TERRY looked. Then he stared. The figure of a man, in obscure miniature, had come out of the house. While they watched, he advanced with a purposeful, firm tread to a pole rising from the back yard. Up that he went, presumably by a series of spikes, to a narrow platform. There he perched and put some sort of instrument to his mouth. Two or three seconds afterward there came up to them the thin, high notes of a bugle. Before the sound had quite died out in their ears, he was clambering back down again with the unmistakable air, even across that distance, of a man who has done what he is persuaded is his duty and has immensely enjoyed the doing of it.

"You see now why I couldn't sleep very late even if I wanted to," the girl said.

"You don't mean to tell me the crazy old coot does that every morning?" Terry asked, with heat. The knight-errant instinct was stirring in him; with a little encouragement he would cheerfully have gone down and throttled the fellow.

"Yes," she said, without any change of expression, "My father—the crazy old coot —does that every morning."

"Oh," Terry said weakly. In a moment he rallied enough to inquire: "Then you're Jimmy Temple—General Temple's daughter?"

"Yes," she said. "And you?"

Terry gestured downward toward the purposeful military figure just vanishing into the house. "But why this bugle blowing? Every morning?" he asked. "It seems so—pointless."

"Look," she said again, and gestured toward a nearer house, half smothered in trees; the house Terry had just left. From this a second man was coming out; not merely purposefully, but with fury and, one guessed, sound. He was in pajamas. The legs of them were tucked into unlaced boots and he brandished garden tools. Arrived at a strip of garden gleaming golden through the trees, he set heatedly to work, breaking off occasionally to wave a denunciatory tool or a fist in the direction of the general's house.

"Now ask me who that crazy old coot is," she invited.

"It isn't necessary," Terry said. "I know. He's my father."

"Oh," said the girl. She showed shock. "Then you're the Terrible Terry that used to kick and bite me before they packed you off East nine or ten years ago?"

"To have my reflexes conditioned—to be civilized by my maiden aunts. Yes," Terry said. "And you, of course, are the Jumpin' Jimmy that used to kick and bite back?"

She nodded soberly. "It's too bad," she said.

"Too bad?" He stared at her.

"Too bad you had to turn out to be that one, of all persons, just when I was beginning to think I might get seriously interested in you."

Terry took a deep breath. He was suddenly realizing that it was becoming very important to him that she should get interested in him and stay that way.

"Couldn't we let bygones be bygones and forget all about those blows and kicks?" he suggested. "After all, they about cancel each other. It seems to me that you did about as much biting and kicking as I."

"Perhaps," she agreed. "Only, you're forgetting the war between our houses."

"War?" he said.

"War on my father's part, at least. Yours won't admit he's guilty of anything but passive resistance, or at the most mild sanctions. Though it seems to me, as an absolutely unprejudiced observer, that his cultivation of goldenrod, when he knows quite well how subject my father is to hayfever, constitutes just as much an act of war as my father's habit of blowing reveille every morning at six."

"LET'S get this straight," Terry urged. "As I understand it, from your slightly involved explanation, your father blows a bugle every morning early with the intention of annoying my father, who, being a staunch pacifist, hates bugles and everything else connected with war?" She nodded. "While my father," Terry went on, "being a staunch pacifist and unable to retaliate with measures of a military nature, applies mild sanctions. He plants goldenrod."

"Mild is hardly the word for it," she qualified. "You should see Grumps—my father—when his hayfever really gets under way. And hear him."

"This," Terry declared, with fervor, "is one of the most childish things I ever heard of. How long has it been going on—and why—and who started it?"

"It began shortly after you went away, about seven or eight years ago, and it has kept up ever since. It seems to have grown out of some argument that arose when your father and mine were recalling their experiences in the Spanish-American war. Your father, you know, had charge of a medical unit, and mine was chief of staff, or something, and each had a very low opinion of the other's branch of service. Asking who started it is like asking which came first, the chicken or the egg—it's been so long ago that no one remembers." She rolled over and looked at him disconcertingly like someone about to say farewell forever. "It's too bad," she repeated. "Yesterday morning when you were yearning at me from across that great gulf of distance, I started to imagine things. You've changed a lot; I didn't know who you were. I thought you might be someone from one of the resorts."

"Don't renounce me with such finality," Terry pleaded, with desperation. "No romantic attachment is ever what it should be unless it has some obstacle to surmount; preferably a coolness between the lovers' houses. Look at Romeo and Juliet—"

"Yes, but see what happened to them," she murmured.

He ignored that. "Our situation is far from hopeless. I'm a psychologist in an amateur way; I know all about people and what makes them tick. I have no doubt I'll be able to reconcile your father and mine."

She looked dubious. "How?" she said.

"Well—" Terry pondered. "Look here—

all that ails these fathers of ours is that they're civilized. They're victims of their own artificially conditioned reflexes. If they were cavemen they'd have fought out their differences on the spot and been the best of friends immediately afterward. But as it was, they probably bowed stiffly out of each other's presence, retreated to their own homes, and nursed a grudge that has endured for years. Now the thing for us to do is, instead of trying to smooth things over, try to aggravate the situation; bring the quarrel to a head, as it were, even bring them to blows. Nothing clears the air like a good rousing fight."

She was thoughtful for a few moments. Then decisively she stood up.

"Let's swim a little," she suggested. She took three quick, lithe steps toward the edge of the eyrie and went over into space. Terry took two steps in the same direction and then recoiled in horror. The black face of the water was perhaps fifty or sixty feet below, but it looked a thousand. Then he saw her slim, arched body shatter the water's surface into a million green and yellow bits. Clamping his jaws tightly together, Terry went after. He struck flatly and stunningly, a hapless victim of an ill-considered urge to male dominance; a wave washed him in to shore, where he lay rigid, clutching his outraged abdomen.

She swam in and sat down by him. "Something you ate?" she inquired pleasantly.

TERRY said nothing. He resented her tone, which showed an entire lack of sympathy; he thought her witticism in execrable taste. He wished his reflexes had not been so admirably conditioned, so that he might have kicked or bitten her.

"I've been thinking over what you were saying just before you muffed that dive," she went on maddeningly. "And I've come to the conclusion it won't work."

"Why not?" he asked, his voice appreciably deeper than usual.

"Because your dad won't fight," she said.

Terry left off doctoring his abdomen and sat up suddenly. "What's that?" he said.

"Your dad won't fight. He's a pacifist, and of course violence would be contrary to his principles. Or at least that would be his story."

"What do you mean," Terry asked, very evenly, "by saying that would be his story?"

Her eyes widened at him. "Oh, I've studied psychology, too. And everybody with any understanding of it at all knows that people who pretend to be against things like fighting and drinking and so on are just using that as a defense mechanism to cover up some organic inferiority that makes fighting and drinking and so on impossible for them."

Terry's shoulder muscles crawled.

"I'm aware of that," he said coldly, with admirable restraint. "But it's also true, you know, that people suffering from organic inferiority often try to cover it up by pretending to be roaring lions—fearless fighters, iron chancellors, Nietzian supermen. Take for instance your father," said the smarting Terry. "He talks a great deal about militarism, but what, actually, has he ever done besides warm chairs at General Headquarters here and there? And as for man-to-man fighting, what's his ring record? I mean, who did he ever lick?"

She stood up, her chin high, her eyes chill. "I won't stay here and listen to my father being attacked. Particularly, when he is not present to defend himself."

She went away. Terry made noises in his throat. He kicked up sand. Then, with a taut jawline, he climbed back up to the top of the eyrie and dived off. This time he split the water cleanly, and he went home to breakfast feeling a little more cheerful.

The rest of that day was dull, even though his father had some people in to make it pleasant for him. He retired early from a listless game of bridge, but he was long in getting to sleep. Consequently the distant din that struck upon his ears next morning startled him awake abruptly and painfully as a stroking alarm. He sprang up and hurried to a window. In the dawn light, he had a glimpse, above some inter-

vening tree tops, of a man perched on a narrow platform, blowing a bugle; and beside him, of another figure, unmistakably that of a girl, enthusiastically beating at a drum.

The rage impulse took Terry in its grip. He threw on clothes and went out into the yard just in time to meet his father coming around the house laden with garden tools.

"Permit me," Terry said. He took a spade and a hoe away from his astonished parent and went with him to a plot of goldenrod bordering one of the rear walks. He set to work with vigor, making the dirt fly so sincerely that anyone watching from a distance could have no doubt he was putting his whole heart into the job.

Fifteen minutes later, at just the time his back and shoulder muscles were beginning to complain, an idea came to him. He dropped the shovel abruptly, with relief.

"Dad," he said, "we're going about this in the wrong way."

Dr. Harris glanced up interrogatively at his son from under bushy eyebrows that looked like anything but those of a pacifist. He had expected, it was plain, opposition or perhaps ridicule from Terry; there was still a light of suspicion in his eyes, which had a chilled-steel glitter very improper to a pacifist, too.

"This is a machine age," Terry explained. "And yet we're using antedeluvian hand-tool methods. Why"—he embraced with a sweep of his arm all the curving walks going away from them—"can't we employ modern methods and border the whole works with goldenrod. It would be a lot more effective."

"It's been fairly effective, as it is," his father objected, but he was tempted.

"They've gone to using a drum, too," Terry urged.

Dr. Harris' breath came outward in an indignant snort. "A drum, eh? I thought it was thunder, or my imagination." His face darkened; he strode into the house, and shortly Terry heard him barking words into a telephone. By mid-morning a panting tractor with plows hitched on behind it was maneuvering along the walks; and next day, early, aroused by a fresh assault upon their eardrums from next door, Terry and his parent were able to sow enormous areas of freshly turned and harrowed ground.

THE seed came on thriftily. In ten days the grounds were brightly striped with goldenrod and the air satisfactorily heavy with its odor and laden with the pollen that causes such exquisite agony to that horde of suffering humanity susceptible to it. With such a coup to his credit, Dr. Harris was able to rest on his oars—or his toes. Mornings after that, he lay blissfully in bed; and when from next door the drum and bugle sounded raucously, he could even smile. He who has his opponent reeling and groggy can afford to smile.

Terry could smile, too, grimly, but he could not stay in bed. He took to early-morning swims again, assuring himself positively that he went swimming only to swim and with no intention whatsoever of running into Jimmy. To prove it to himself, he avoided the rock eyrie, the first morning, going out from the beach behind his own home. The next morning he went out from the base of the eyrie, and refused to admit that he felt anything but relief when he saw nothing of anyone else. The third morning he climbed to the top of the cliff, and in prowling around it, narrowly missed walking on Jimmy again.

He stepped over her, with dignity. He was proceeding, still with dignity, to the edge of the cliff, when her voice stopped him.

"Mild sanctions!" she said witheringly.

Terry turned on her, but she was not looking at him. Her eyes were fixed dreamily upon some point in the heavens, and under the circumstances he could think of nothing to say. It is difficult to say anything to someone who seems unaware of your existence.

"A small patch of goldenrod was bad enough," she went on, still looking at the sky. "It kept dad sneezing and snarling

about one half the time, which should have been satisfactory even to his enemy. But now that he is assailed from three directions, he has scarcely a minute's peace, night or day. Mild isn't the word for it. Or sanctions, either."

Terry found voice. "It seems to me that you and your father have only yourselves to blame," he said reasonably. "It was your own campaign of frightfulness that made it necessary for us to change our tactics. It isn't pleasant, either, you know, to have a drum discharged into your ear every morning at six. To say nothing of that bugle."

He turned away from her, feeling that he had done rather well for himself. She got up and followed.

"You're forgetting something," she said. "And that is, that strong-arm measures invite reprisals. Like this."

She pushed him over the cliff.

Terry turned end for end three times and sidewise one time and a half. He struck the water well sprawled out, and swallowed a great deal of it before his feet clawed bottom. He crawled up onto the beach aching from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes; but with a mighty purpose goading him, he clambered on to the crest of the eyrie. There, however, he met frustration. Jimmy had gone home.

"DAD," Terry said after breakfast, while he and his father were having coffee and cigars, "I think we ought to plant some more goldenrod."

His father's ferocious eyebrows lifted. "Eh?"

"If I remember rightly, you own a couple of lots just on the other side of General Temple's place. They're unoccupied, and it has occured to me that we could have them plowed up and seeded down solid. That way," Terry elucidated, "anyone situated between this place and that would have the scent of goldenrod in his nostrils all the time, not merely when the wind blows from any one of three directions."

Dr. Harris' eyes began to glow. "That's an idea," he said, and rising, strode off toward a telephone.

Late that evening Terry was giving loving attention to the business of smoothing over a field of rich earth which had just been turned and sowed when Jimmy approached him.

"More sanctions?" she questioned, looking across him to some point on the horizon.

She was slim and very appealing in a peasant blouse and denim trousers that were supported by an ornate metal belt, but Terry recalled his fall from the cliff that morning and stayed grim. "No, reprisals," he snapped.

"You're forgetting," she said, "That reprisals invite reprisals," and walked away.

He understood what she meant when, at some vague time after he had gone to bed, he was startled awake by the violent beating of a drum, triumphing over the feebler, shrill notes of a bugle. He sprang up; it was still dark. He switched on a light and looked at his watch. The hands pointed to three minutes past four.

On the other side of the house a door slammed violently. Bedroom slippers swished, and his father strode in, his eyebrows more ferocious looking than ever.

"Am I correct in thinking I heard a drum and bugle, or was it just my imagination?" he inquired, with the extreme formality that, in some men, is the hush before a storm of wrath.

"It was a drum. And a bugle," Terry assured him.

"Thank you. And am I right in assuming it's now only a little after four o'clock in the morning?"

"Five minutes past," Terry said.

"Thank you," said his father very formally, and went away.

Terry turned off the light and tried to sleep again. He failed, and presently rose to dress drearily. He found his father in the kitchen just commencing the exploration of the ice box. Terry assisted, and in due time they breakfasted, still under lights, on milk, cold meats, and an apple pie.

"For one morning this isn't so bad," Terry philosophized, out of a glum silence. "Though I imagine that if it were continued long enough, it could be rather irritating."

"It won't be continued," said Dr. Harris positively. "Not unless the general and his tomboy daughter do it from jail. I've called the police chief down in the village and ordered their arrest, on the grounds that they are a public nuisance."

"Oh," Terry said dubiously. A girl who would push you off a cliff and beat a drum under your window, so to speak, at four in the morning rated rough treatment, of course; yet the thought of her in jail left him aghast. "Isn't that a bit harsh?" he asked.

His father's eyebrows glowered down. He stared at Terry until Terry felt an inclination to squirm; the result, he supposed, of some survival of the fear instinct for the old man of the tribe. "Are you, by any chance, in love with this girl, Jimmy?" Dr. Harris asked portentously, at length.

Terry finished off a drumstick and took a drink of milk. "There is no one on earth I abominate more," he answered then, evenly and deliberately.

"That doesn't answer my question. I asked you if you were in love with her?" Dr. Harris insisted; and Terry looked at him with increased respect. His father, he was realizing, seemed to know something of psychology, too.

THEY had risen from the table and were adjourning to the library for cigars and a possible cat nap when the front door bell pealed imperiously. Dr. Harris went to answer it, and Terry tagged curiously. They opened to a large-shouldered man conspicuous chiefly for the star that glittered on the lapel of his rusty coat.

"I'm the police chief," he said, and unrolled a strip of legal paper with a conscious flourish. "I've got a warrant to bring you two in, charged with being a public noosance."

"You've made a mistake, officer," Dr. Harris said. He offered a cigar, which his caller took doubtfully. "It's my neighbor, General Temple, and his daughter whom you want. The general has been blowing a bugle in my ear at six o'clock every morning for years, and lately his daughter has taken to beating a drum, too. This morning they did it at four. It's time it was stopped."

The police chief glanced again at the strip of paper in his hands. "Nope," he said, with assurance. "This ain't for General Temple, and it ain't for beating no drum. It's for Doctor John Harris, Sr., and Dr. John Harris, Jr., and it's for planting goldenrod, which is described as a public noosance. It's signed"—the man squinted down at the document"—General Bates Temple and daughter Luella; Jimmy in parenthesees."

"They've beaten us to it," Terry said. Dr. Harris purpled and could say nothing. The police chief said, "Come along, now," and nudged them down the steps into a waiting flivver. He got into the rear seat with them; a lank man in front spat over the side and encouraged the car to start. Dr. Harris' rumbles of protest were drowned by the flivver's energetic voice; became audible again only when the car swerved to a stop before a sprawling frame jail tenuously hitched to the sprawling village town hall.

"It's my dooty," the police chief retorted phlegmatically to his protests, handing him out. He wrestled with the jail's grilled door. "I'll have to put you in with some other noosances," he said, with a slight show of decent embarrassment at this paucity of accommodation. "We only got one jail. It's the folks you made the complaint agin and that made the complaint agin you. It's General Temple and his daughter."

"General Temple!" Dr. Harris exclaimed with amazement, and a moment later he was staring at the thickish, grizzled man who stood up from an opposite side of the jail. "General Temple," he said, with some satisfaction.

"Doctor Harris," said General Temple, with equal satisfaction. They were un-

doubtedly glad to see each other; or at least, each was glad to see the other in jail.

Jimmy got up from an iron bunk and advanced to Terry. "This is indeed a surprise," she said.

"I doubt it," Terry returned sourly. "It seems to me I saw your name affixed to the document that is responsible for our being here."

"Reprisals invite reprisals," she said. "And misery loves company. It's so nice of you to drop in on us this way."

Terry declined to answer that; Dr. Harris and General Temple had only hard stares for each other, and the conversation languished. Time passed, but slowly. They began to be restless. Then they began to be irritable and feel trapped. Dr. Harris halloed for the police chief.

"How long do we have to stay here?" he inquired, when that official appeared.

THE police chief spat reflectively. "Looks like that's about up to you folks," he said. "You're the sole complainants agin General Temple and his daughter, they're sole complainants agin you. If you'd all agree to withdraw charges, looks like we wouldn't have no reason to hold you."

General Temple's voice boomed. "I'll withdraw nothing! I never start a fight unless I'm prepared to finish it!"

"That makes two of us," rumbled Dr. Harris, giving him back glare for glare.

"Make it three," said Jimmy, from a rear wall bunk.

"Four," put in Terry, opposite her.

"You'll be right uncomf'table here next winter. Cain't keep the place heated good, someway," the police chief said and went away.

"Some people," said Jimmy, from out of a silence, "can be just plain jackasses for stubbornness. Not mentioning any names."

"So I've noticed," Terry said.

She brightened perceptibly. A good fight, to anyone with red blood in his or her veins, always is preferable to thumb-twiddling. "Do I understand that you refer to me or to my father?" she asked, rising.

Terry rose and brightened also. He too found thumb-twiddling dull. "I've not mentioned any names, but since you insist, you may consider yourself included," he said. "In addition, it's my candid opinion that you're extremely bad-tempered, pugnacious, vindictive—"

She came close to him. Her eyes were alight, but inscrutable. It was impossible to tell from them whether she wanted to kiss him or kill him, or both.

"Yes. And what else?" she said softly, with her face uplifted to his.

Terry's hands, independently of his will, went out to her shoulders. He shook her lightly, a storm of emotions beyond analysis, rising in him.

"—and wholly adorable," he finished, to his awn amazement; and to his own amazement, kissed her. Or she kissed him. He was never sure quite which.

It was a moment before he remembered they were not alone. Jimmy seemed to recall the same thing at the same time, and they pulled apart, glancing guiltily toward the other end of the room where their two fathers were. And what they saw astounded them.

Dr. Harris was beaming. General Temple beamed. Actually, while Terry and Jimmy watched, stupefied, he grasped Dr. Harris' hand and wrung it with every indication of sincere enthusiasm.

"You were right. Absolutely right!" he ejaculated.

"Mere psychology," Dr. Harris murmured deprecatingly. "Played upon by a given set of environmental factors they were bound to react so. I claim no credit as a prophet."

"DO I understand," Terry said, when he could speak, "that you two approve of our—well—of our attachment for each other?"

The general advanced to take Terry's hand in his. He pumped it. "Not only do we approve of it—we engineered it, my boy! After all, you know, it's what you might call a natural, so far as love affairs

go, and ever since you were children your father and I have hoped for some such outcome."

"But your quarrel—blowing that bugle, planting goldenrod—" Jimmy objected, in bewilderment.

"We did, unfortunately, have a falling out," her father explained. "And perhaps we did conduct ourselves rather childishly for a while. But I don't think we ever bore any genuine ill will toward each other. I fancy you enjoyed planting that goldenrod as much as I enjoyed blowing that bugle. Eh, Harris?"

"More, perhaps," Terry's father said. "And I imagine your hayfever actually annoyed you as little as that bugle annoyed me. It gave us something to think about besides our livers."

"But then," said Jimmy, "why did you keep it up so long?"

"Force of habit, I suppose," the general answered. "Here a couple of weeks or so ago, however, when I heard Terry would be home for the summer, with his medical education tucked into his pocket along with a guaranteed twenty-two-carat practice he will take over in the fall, I decided it was time for us to stop our squabbling and give you and him a fair chance at each other. But Harris thought differently."

"Psychology," Terry's father explained. "It's human to value lightly anything that comes without effort. My idea was that you two would appreciate each other more if we threw a few obstacles in your way. So I told the general to go ahead with his bugling as if he meant it, and I'd keep on cultivating my goldenrod. I must say though, Temple, that I didn't expect you to add a drum to your orchestra and start performing in the middle of the night. You almost had me mad again."

"That was my idea, that campaign of increased frightfulness. Or Terry's idea, rather, with me as executor," Jimmy explained, while Terry goggled. "It was based on psychological principles, too. I didn't know about the peace pact you two had made, and I was trying to bring matters to a head; get you so furious you'd have at each other with fists or stones and feel better afterward. Nothing clears the air like a good rousing fight."

"Hum," the general said, nonplussed, and glanced at Dr. Harris, who also said "Hum-m," and for want of anything more to say began rattling loudly for the police chief.

"And then," Jimmy concluded, "I wanted to stir up Terry a bit, too. It is a well-known psychological fact that the rage instinct is closely allied with the love impulse, and sometimes it takes the one to bring out the other." Her eyes sparkled up into Terry's. "Isn't that right, dear?" she asked.

"I don't know," Terry said ruefully. "I don't believe I know anything about psychology. And perhaps it's just as well. Three psychologists—in one family—are enough!"

London Skies Are Falling Down

By GARNETT RADCLIFFE

LONDON fogs are mysterious enough without weird red lights like demon's eyes playing through the murk and roving spotlight-like over Piccadilly and the Strand. At least so thought Flight-Lieutenant Bill Garstin and the American newspaperwoman, Moira Hepstow, on the night they met. Only Garstin suspected that the creeping red eye might be a Moxon bomb-dropping beamless spotlight, an aviation device once submitted to, and turned down by, the British air forces. If it has been perfected now and is to be directed against London . . . well, Bill Garstin doesn't quite like to think about that.

Besides he has other puzzles to engage him. For instance, the mystery of the death, apparently from heart disease, of Nicholas Vetch—a fatality which Moira, who has come to London to take over Vetch's job, insists was plain and cold-blooded murder. No one knew as much about Vetch as Vetch about the Reitzenists, a band of semi-Fascist fanatics under the leadership of one Colonel Reitzen. English officialdom considers the Reitzenist movement a collection of harmless crackpots, but Moira insists they are really dangerous. According to her it is the Reitzenists who have killed Vetch, and who are behind the concerted effort to hamper in every possible way England's Air Expansion Plan.

At Moira's boarding house, Garstin saves the life of one Herr Diehl who, frightened of the fog, had gone to bed with a gas-mask on. When the air-feed line fouled some way, he would have died had not Bill intervened. In Diehl's clothes, hanging over the back of a chair, Bill spots the Golden-Goose emblem of the Reitzenist movement.

MOIRA HEPSTOW has tried in vain to interest Inspector Clarke in her theories about Vetch's death. Failing that, apparently she has entered into negotiations with one Peterhoff, an expatriate Russian who professes to have ferreted out Reitzenist secrets.

Peterhoff is killed at a disreputable inn.

The Handcuff Inn had a corner on London's disreputables

This story began in the Argosy for January 15

The only witness to the killing, a petty offender named Connolly, insists that it was perpetrated by a group of Reitzenists in Royal Air Force uniforms—a convenient disguise which would permit the Reitzenists publicly to carry arms.

It is later discovered that Peterhoff went to the inn in answer to a note from Moira Hepstow, and when the girl disappears Clarke is convinced that she is mixed up in the killing.

Outside the inn, the body of a man dressed in R.A.F. uniform is found, and he too apparently has died from a heart attack.

THESE are the main facts but there are many questions which Clarke and Bill Garstin try to answer, at least to their own satisfaction. Is the death of flight-student Jackson, who seemingly went to sleep at the controls, the work of those seeking to hamper the air-expansion program? How do the wealthy Sir Nicholas Janssen and the beauteous onetime war spy, Madame Salvini, fit into the puzzle? And is the young man frequently seen with them in public an R.A.F. deserter named Ridgeway? And if this *were* true what, exactly, would be its significance? Is Madame Salvini, incidentally, a member of the Reitzenist party?

Trying to solve some of these riddles, Bill Garstin goes back to Moira's boarding house and learns that she left it, on the night of Peterhoff's death, in answer to a phone call in a feminine voice. Looking out of the window he observes Herr Diehl staring up at the sky with a pair of high-powered glasses similar to those used by the R.A.F. anti-aircraft gunners.

Diehl comes hurriedly into the house and retires to his room, and Bill Garstin pictures him closing his windows and putting on the gas-mask as he gets into bed. . . .

CHAPTER IX

THE HANDCUFF INN

BILL GARSTIN left Marsefield House in a thoughtful frame of mind. His visit had not been altogether a failure. Although he had had no news of Moira Hepstow, what he had seen of Mr. Diehl had served to intensify his suspicions that something extraordinary was in the air.

That dancing red light, Diehl's weird behavior, the mounting casualties among the R.A.F. pilots, the inexplicable disappearances of Moira and Peterhoff—those things considered conjointly seemed to indicate some sinister conspiracy rolling toward London like a thunder-charged cloud.

He went into the first telephone booth he came to and dialed N.O. 700. That was the number of the headquarters of the London Aerial Defence Force. They'd laugh at him for an alarmist, but he couldn't help that.

A sergeant answered the call. Garstin gave his name and asked for Captain Chepstow the adjutant. He knew Chepstow, a good scout, but not what you'd call a brilliantly imaginative person.

He heard Chepstow speaking. "Hello, Bill! What's up?"

"I want to report that a machine passed over London about ten minutes ago. If you know who it was it's okay. If you don't I think you ought to warn South Coast Defenses to send up patrols."

"My dear old bird, we can't send up patrols on your unsupported assertion. We've had no word of a plane crossing London. Did you see it yourself?"

"I saw the tail-light and I heard the engine," Bill said mendaciously. "It may be the machine that used a Moxon spotlight on the night of the fog. If it is it's a foreigner."

"Rats! That red light wasn't a Moxon spotlight. What are you rattled about?"

"More than you know, my lad. Look here, if you'll pass my message to South Coast Defenses, I'll take the responsibility."

"I'll pass it on if you insist, but they won't do anything."

"Probably not. Still, there's no harm in telling them. It may make them keep a sharper look-out."

"Oh, rats!" Chepstow laughed. "You are an Aunt Nellie! Do you think there's a bleeding war on?"

"I know there is," Bill snapped and rang off. No man likes to be accused of being an alarmist. Especially when he is not quite certain if the accusation is justified or not.

ALARMIST or no, he meant to go on to the Handcuff Inn. An idea had come to him. In the dickey of his antediluvian Morris there was a raincoat and

a cloth cap that had both seen better days. He reversed up a quiet street and effected a quick change. Attired thus he would be less conspicuous and would have a better chance of passing himself off as an aircraftsman in mufti which was what he intended doing.

According to R.A.F. Intelligence, Fitter-Corporal Ridgeway had been seduced from his duty in the Handcuff Inn. And it had occurred to Bill Garstin that it might be an interesting experiment to see if he could induce anyone to try the same game with him.

Avoiding the main entrance he made his way up the dark alley at the side of the inn. One of the latticed windows he passed was that through which Bud Connolly had jumped. The body of the unknown Reitzenist in Air Force uniform had sprawled on the pavement exactly where he now stood.

The memory of that huddled form with its ratlike face was not comforting in that dark, infinitely sinister alley. The R.A.F. officer passed the spot quickly. Then he saw a glimmer of light ahead. It came through a door with upper panels of dark green glass on which the words *Tap-Room* were stenciled in faint white lettering. Surely, Bill Garstin thought to himself, the most retiring tap-room entrance in London.

He went in and was confronted by a row of backs two-deep. About twenty men were crowded at a short counter, putting down beer as fast as three perspiring barmaids could hand the glasses. It was almost closing time and trade was brisk.

The Royal Air Force officer pushed into the crowd. He had quickly selected the group he considered most interesting to stand next to. It comprised two very young soldiers in walking-out uniform, a middle-aged man in overalls, and a short, dark man who seemed to be playing host.

As Bill reached the counter the soldiers were taking their leave despite protests from the civilian. They were grinning. Bill heard what one of them, a cheeky snub-nosed lad, said to the civilian.

"Many thanks for the grog, but there's nothing doing the way you want. We're King's men, we are. We'll meet you again though any evening you like with pleasure. Hot air and free beer suits us fine."

They marched off, laughing and flicking their legs with their swagger-canes. The civilian looked malevolent. Bill Garstin rapped loudly on the counter with a florin.

"Half of mild, miss, please. Hope it's good. The muck they throw you at the canteen isn't fit to poison a dog. Bleedin' Air Force! Rotten beer, rotten pay, rotten food— I'd like to put a match to it, I would!"

HE SWALLOWED the beer defiantly and glared round as if inviting contradiction. Both the civilian and the man in overalls were watching him. The latter spoke.

"Where you stationed, mate?"

Bill Garstin thought of a station in the North where he had recently done a "refresher" course with a Co-operation Squadron.

"Timpsley. Know the hole?"

"I've 'eard of it. I'm a civilian mechanic attached R.A.F. for ground-duties. How are your officers?"

"Pack of stuck-up young pups," Garstin growled. "D'you know what 'appened the other day? There was a Hawker Hector I'd been rigging. Soon as I'd finished up comes a silly little squirt of a flying officer, an' 'e started finding fault. I got fed up, see? I don' let no officer treat me like a dog. 'Look 'ere,' I sez. 'Who are you? D'you think you can come the 'eavy over me?' I sez. An' then—"

The civilian and the mechanic listened attentively to the vinous anecdote. "Ten days C.B. I got for that. Just for telling a little pipsqueak of an officer where he got off. Officers! I know 'ow to fix officers! D'you know what a pal of mine did?"

"I think I can guess."

Bill gave a wary glance round and dropped his voice to a whisper. "He fixed the magneto of a Fairey plane so she'd cut out when you advanced the spark. It worked like a treat too. When the pilot tried to take off he couldn't rev the engine

up the way she'd take the air and he hit the fence at the bottom of the drome. Gaw, you never saw such a mess! The machine was bust to blazes an' the pilot got a broken leg. My pal did laugh. 'That'll teach the so-and-sos to talk to me about not salutin'!' he said."

That story went down well. The civilian ordered a round of drinks, winking at the barmaid as he did so. Bill Garstin pretended not to notice that she poured a double shot of whiskey into his beer. He had a well-founded belief in his own capacity to drink any quantity and yet retain perfect command of his head and nerves.

He downed that one, and the mechanic promptly ordered more. The party was becoming convivial and confidential. Bill had to endure the mechanic's foul breath while he whispered a tale of successful sabotage at an R.A.F. factory with the details of which he seemed suspiciously well acquainted.

Closing time was called. Most of the customers made a more or less steady departure, but several lingered even when the lights were half-lowered. The civilian whispered to Bill to remain. There was a downstairs room, he explained, where "friends of the house" could drink till the cows came home.

A NARROW door Bill Garstin had not seen before had mysteriously been opened in a corner of the barroom which, like most of the rooms in the Handcuff Inn, was low and dark, with paneled walls. On the further side of the door there was a flight of deep steps built in the thickness of the wall. They led into a vaultlike chamber with a curved brick-roof, a place where it was easy to imagine cloaked conspirators of the Middle Ages plotting treason by the light of guttering candles.

There were a dozen or so people seated about at rough wooden tables. They were of a different type from the people he had seen in the public bar. Most of the men looked as if they might be artists or students. They ran to beards, cadaverous faces, dirty fingernails and smoldering eyes. Two of the girls looked as if they were in the last stages of phthisis. An older woman, who wore deep black and had a long intellectual face with teeth like a horse's, was plainly wrong in her head. She sat by herself with her eyes fixed on the floor taking no notice of anything or anyone.

They looked unbalanced weaklings, dangerous only as tools in the hands of stronger, craftier men. Three or four of the men were wearing high-necked blue jerseys above dirty gray flannels, the uniform of the Reitzenists. Absinthe and vodka seemed to be the most popular drinks. With their pale, sneering faces and general air of unwashed superiority, they reminded Bill Garstin of so many diseased parrots.

He felt himself being eyed with disfavor and suspicion. As they sat down, a tall, emaciated man came over to their table. He had side-whiskers and the pupils of his eyes were mere pinpricks. He spoke excitedly to the civilian in what might have been Russian, staring suspiciously at Bill Garstin as he did so.

The civilian's answer seemed to satisfy him. He sat down beside the Royal Air Force officer. Then he addressed him in English, and his voice was that of a cultured foreigner.

"My friend tells me you are in the British Air Force and that you don't like the conditions," he began without preamble. "May I inquire your name?"

"Rogers. Leading-Aircraftsman Rogers," Bill told him. "You're right about my not likin' the Air Force. It's a cheesy show."

"Then why did you enlist?"

"It was that or starve. I got in easy under the Expansion Scheme. But I don't like it. I'm a Communist, that's what I am. I don' hold with all this rearming business. You wouldn't catch me fightin' for England."

The three men were watching him intently. Their eyes met and the civilian gave an imperceptible nod. Then the thin man with the side-whiskers spoke again.

"To be a Communist is as bad as being a Fascist. Tell me, Comrade Rogers, do you find Communism profitable?"

Bill glared at him suspiciously. "Not a Government spy, are you?"

"No, I assure you not."

"Then don't go pouring absinthe in my beer when you think I don't see. Whisky's what I like. You were asking was Communism profitable? Well, I tell you straight it is not. A measly few bob a month for showing round leaflets. An' it's risky too! Do you know what 'appened—Pardon me!"

The hiccup had been well simulated. Not one of the three watchful listeners seemed to have noticed that what had really made him break off in his speech had been a gasp of astonishment.

HE'D just seen Moira Hepstow! Sitting at a table with another girl and two men. Looking entirely at her ease. A cigarette between her lips, her elbows on the table and her chin resting on her interlaced fingers.

Paler than when he'd seen her in the fog. Shadows under her eyes. She'd changed her style of dressing. Sandals, a low-cut frock and huge black beads. She looked more like a dancer in a Bohemian café than the young lady of fashion he remembered.

Then Inspector Clarke had been right after all! She *was* a Reitzenist. She *had* betrayed Peterhoff to the death-squad. Now it would be his turn. She was looking straight at him across the smoke-filled, badly lighted room.

The thoughts that take so long to write had passed like a flash of lightning. The R.A.F. officer took a deep draught of beer and continued his story without a change of voice. But his body was taut as a tiger's about to spring. Every second he expected the girl to jump to her feet and expose him as a Royal Air Force officer.

"D'you know what 'appened to a pal of mine?" he went on. "He was an A.E.S. enlistment man same as me. An' he was a Communist too. In fact the Communists had planted him in the Air Force—if you get me?"

The thin man with the side-whiskers smiled slightly. "I understand you, Comrade Rogers. Possibly you too were—er, planted?"

"Never mind if I was or not. I was saying what happened to this friend of mine. He got sent to a squadron up in Scotland somewhere, an' he started doing what he'd been told to do, see? Giving out pamphlets and so forth, see? But it seems he picked the wrong crowd. They were proper R.A.F. chaps up there, not A.E.S. enlistments. An' do you know what they did to him?"

"What?"

"They got him in a hangar one night an' they started up a Nine Ack an' revved up the engine till she was full out. Then a couple of aircraftsmen got hold of him, one holding his wrists an' one holding his ankles, an' they swung him to and fro about four times—squealing like a trapped rabbit he was—an' they let go, an' he went sailing straight into the prop. An' if you want to know what 'appened to him, you just chuck an egg at an electric fan. Like that it was. Gawd! If you'd seen the inside of that hangar! An, then they reported that Aircraftsman Woods—that was the name he'd enlisted under—had been sucked into the prop by the wind!"

That story, having actually happened in his own experience, had been easy to relate. The side-whiskered man laughed softly.

"Your friend deserved what he got. He was a fool. First for being a Communist, and secondly for not being more discreet. He should have joined the Reitzenist Movement. He'd have had better pay and more security. Our agents in the R.A.F. are never found out. They're doing good work quietly and without suspicion."

Bill gaped at him in pretended astonishment. "I thought the Reitzenists were a lot of batty windbags! Don't tell me they've got agents in the R.A.F.?"

"I do tell you. Thanks to the hurried recruiting under the A.E.S. we've been able to plant a good many. Up to date their efforts have not been altogether without success. As a reader of the papers you must have noticed how the death-roll among pilots has gone up."

"Of course I have. Up at Timpsley we

had six fatal crashes in a week. But you're not going to kid me—?"

"That all those crashes were pre-arranged by Reitzenist agents, you were going to say! No. But very likely four of them were. And without the slightest risk or trouble to the men who engineered them. They hadn't even to tamper with an engine or cross a control wire. What they did could have been done equally well by a child of seven."

BILL GARSTIN was so intensely interested he had almost forgotten the presence of Moira. He felt himself on the verge of learning the secret by which the Reitzenists were wrecking the Accelerated Expansion Scheme.

He pretended disbelief.

"Go on! I'm not a kid. How could you make a machine crash unless you'd done something to the engine or the rigging? 'Tisn't possible!"

The side-whiskered man laughed. "Have it your own way, Comrade Rogers. I tell you it is—that it's been done frequently in the past and is going to be done a great deal more frequently in the near future. Isn't that right, boys?"

The civilian and the mechanic both nodded. The latter spoke with a sort of savage glee.

"In two months there won't be a bloody R.A.F. pilot will dare to take up a plane. They'll be too windy."

"Tell us how it's done," Bill said. "Is it a death-ray?"

"A ray!" the thin Reitzenist scoffed. "My good simpleton, do you think it would be possible to use a death-ray, even if there was such a thing, on an Air Force aerodrome without being detected! No, it is not a death-ray. If you want to know what it is, you must leave the Communists and become a Reitzenist. Then one day, if you are deemed sufficiently trustworthy, you may be admitted into our most closely guarded secret. Take my advice and join."

Bill Garstin pretended to consider. "I wouldn't mind," he said. "You say it's safe and well paid. That would suit me all right. 'Sides, I don't hold with wars an' armaments an' all that. I've got my principles same as everyone else."

"We all have," the mechanic grinned.

"If I did join what do I get?"

"In the event of your engineering a crash causing a pilot's death you would get two thousand pounds and a free passage to any part of the world you liked."

"Cripes! Two thousand quid!"

"And when Reitzenism has overthrown both Capitalism and Communism you might be offered a high post."

"That's what the Communists said, but they don't seem to be getting nowhere."

"They're not. Reitzenism on the other hand is moving steadily to its goal. My friend, the world is on the eve of vast events. Although the capitalists don't realize it, their present vaunted civilization has been undermined. Any day now—"

Bill Garstin was not listening. He was looking across the room to where a woman had just entered. It was Mother Goose, and she was staring at him as if trying to recollect where she had seen him before.

CHAPTER X

IN QUEST

TO BE caught unarmed in that nest of fanatics would be unpleasant to say the least of it. He hoped most sincerely that Mother Goose would fail to recognize him. Apparently, Moira Hepstow had failed to do so. She was still laughing and chatting with her Reitzenist friends and paying no attention to him.

Would he be equally lucky in the case of Mother Goose? For Garstin the next few moments were filled with suspense. But he had iron nerves and continued to pretend to listen to the tall thin Reitzenist while he felt rather than saw the old woman approaching the table.

Mother Goose's approach resembled that of an African witch-doctor trying to smell out his victim. He saw her pause near the table where Moira sat. The girl paid no attention to her presence. She went on with what she was saying to one of the men at the table, but her eyes met Garstin's across the room.

His heart leaped. There was recognition and comradeship in that glance. Warning too. He felt she was trying to tell him that she knew him, and he must get away as quickly as he could.

Did they suspect her too? He saw Mother Goose shoot one of her sidelong glances at the girl. There seemed to Garstin to be mockery in the glance. It was as if the old woman had said, "We'll deal with you later, my dear. Your time is not yet."

Moira seemed utterly unconscious of all this. To Garstin's relief the old woman turned her back upon that table. Now she was looking full at himself. Suddenly her eyes flamed, and she pointed dramatically with her hand.

"That man is a police spy! He was with Clarke. Don't let him out of this alive."

To become a stunt pilot in the R.A.F. you must be able to think and act with more than ordinary quickness. And now Bill Garstin moved like quicksilver.

There was a crash as the heavy table at which he sat summersaulted over, pinning the civilian and the thin Reitzenist beneath its fall. At the same instant the airman pivoted round and swung his right at the jaw of the mechanic.

It was a frightful blow, a blow made dynamic by contempt and anger. The mechanic went backward as if slung from a catapult. He crashed against a wall and fell like a wet sack.

Everyone in the room was shouting. A young man in a blue jersey had drawn a revolver. Someone else shouted something and knocked it from his hand.

"The door!" Mother Goose screamed. "Don't let him get away!"

She was too late. Garstin was already at the door which had been bolted on the inside. He tugged at the bolt. Someone seized his arms and tried to drag them behind his back. Another man dodged in front of him and swung viciously at his face.

HE WAS off his balance, reeling back. Instead of trying to recover his balance, he dropped into a sitting position on the floor, gripped the ankles of the man who had caught his arms and jerked them upward, at the same instant flinging his body backward against the other's shins. The Reitzenist went down with fearful force. In a flash Garstin was on his feet and making for the door like a charging bull.

Sheer weight carried him through the scramble. Blows showered on his head and shoulders, but his tanklike rush took him to the door. Again he wrestled with the bolt. As he did so, someone as agile as a monkey leaped on his shoulders and clawed at his face.

He felt the sharp-nailed fingers gouging at his eyes. Behind him the room was a pandemonium of noise and confusion. Suddenly the bolt clicked and the door flew open.

He staggered through blinded by those gouging fingers. He reached up and seized his assailant's arms. With a supreme effort he swung him bodily over his head. For a fraction of a second he glimpsed a terror-struck, bearded face.

It was no time for niceties. With a grunt of rage he slung the Reitzenist against the stone wall like a weasel. He went limp. Garstin swung round and catapulted his inanimate form at a wave of rushing figures, and as he did so he saw a spurt of flame and heard a report.

They meant murder. The bullet had sung within an inch of his ear. He cleared the flight of steep steps in two strides. The door at the top barred his way. If it was locked . . .

He seized the handle. Two shots thundered from behind. The panel just above his head splintered. He wrenched, something gave with a crack and the door flew open. He hurled himself through into the now darkened tap-room.

Flash, flash, bang, bang! Some madman of a Reitzenist was blazing away indiscriminately. A swift glance showed Garstin his pursuers surging up the steps. The space was narrow, and they were jamming themselves in their eagerness.

A row of brandy bottles on a shelf offered themselves as convenient ammuni-

tion. He grabbed a couple and let fly. The heavy bottles whizzed from his hand like shells, and like shells they burst and splintered on the heads of the pack below.

Curses and howls of rage. The R.A.F. officer discharged another salvo of bottles, then he leaped the counter and made for the the street exit. It was locked on the inside, but the key was there. He turned it and darted through into the dark mews.

In another moment he was in the comparative safety of Tirle Street. Beyond a few scratches and bruises he had suffered no personal injury. But he was extremely angry, as a man who has been shot at and narrowly missed commonly is.

AS HE paused uncertainly a shadow appeared at his side. He swung round. His fist dropped as he recognized Mr. Quigley's cracked voice.

"Steady, Captain," whispered the little man who was commonly regarded as the Yard's astutest spotter. "You met me in company of Inspector Clarke this afternoon. Poor old Clarke! They've done in Bud Connolly now. Leastways, he's been found dead of heart failure in his cell.

"And you suspect murder?" Bill asked.

"Clarke doesn't. I do. But how about yourself, Captain? You look as if you'd been sort of shaken up."

"Shaken up!" the Royal Air Force officer growled. "I've been all but murdered. You police fellows ought to raid the Handcuff Inn with the least possible delay. I'll tell you what happened this evening—"

He gave a brief resumé of the evening's events. Mr. Quigley scratched his chin for a few moments in cogitating silence.

"I'll put it up to the inspector and see what he says," he said at last. "You'd best send in a report too. But the trouble is it's only your unsupported testimony against the lot of them. In the meantime look after yourself, Captain. If those fellows could get at Bud locked up in the strongest prison in London they could get at anyone."

Bill put the question that was worrying him most of all.

"Do you think that fellow was speaking the truth when he said the Reitzenists had engineered those crashes?"

"I don't know what to think," Mr. Quigley said. "It seems impossible, but then how did they get Vetch and Bud? Well, I'll say goodnight now, captain. It's not healthy for you and me to be hanging about here."

In his quarters at the Surrings station Bill Garstin found a chit from the adjutant telling him that he'd been detailed as a member of the Court of Inquiry into the cause of the crash of Acting Pilot Officer Jackson.

THE Court of Inquiry had been fixed for twelve the following day. At a quarter to that hour he landed in a Sopwith Junior on the Anton drome, having done the hop from Surrings in four minutes.

Earlier in the day he had been instructing the pupils of his own flight at Surrings. Flying instruction is never a very joyful business for the instructor, but that morning he had found his duty even more loathsome than usual.

For one thing there were painful marks on his face he had to explain away by the invention of a minor road-smash the previous evening. That didn't matter, but the throbbing bruises wouldn't allow him to forget what he fain would have done. They were tangible, unpleasant evidence that what had happened in the Handcuff Inn had not been only some evil dream.

What concerned him most was the memory of what that lowering mechanic had said:

"In two months there won't be a bloody R.A.F. pilot will dare to take up a plane. They'll all be too scared."

There had been no crash that morning. If anything the general flying had been above the average. And when at a quarter to twelve he sideslipped gracefully into the Anton drome, Bill Garstin was feeling more his usual cheery self. He left the Sopwith Junior near a hangar and walked to the control tower where he reported to the officer of the day.

"Flight Lieutenant Garstin flying Sop-

with Number KL 7841 from Surrings. I've come over for Jackson's Court of Inquiry."

The young flying-officer nodded.

"They're assembling now. You'll find them behind Number Four hangar looking at the wreckage. What's happened to—?"

"Bumped a telegraph pole," Bill said hurriedly. "Have they any idea what caused Jackson's crash?"

"Oh, the usual. Frozen controls. It was a proper blow-up. He hit the tarmac nose first and the tanks exploded. Poor old Jacky can't have known much about it."

Bill left the control tower and made his way to the rear of Number Four hangar. A group of Royal Air Force officers and mechanics were standing round a charred heap of broken struts, wires and blackened fabric piled on top of an engine partially buried in the turf. Tony Wilcox was there. The holder of the "Order of the Bang" was standing a little apart from the others, his bandaged hands in the side-pockets of his tunic and a bored expression on his face. Worldly concerns had ceased to interest Tony.

He grinned at Bill. "Drunk and fighting again?"

"That's about the truth," Bill said. "At least, it wasn't the Reitzenists' fault if I wasn't drunk. They supplied the fighting too."

"D'you mean you'd a scrap with Reitzenists?" Tony asked enviously.

"I do. It was at the Handcuff Inn. I pretended to be an A.E.S-enlistment rigger, and some of them tried to put the grease under me. I'll tell you all about it later. There's one thing though I'd like to mention before the Court begins. That is that the Reitzenist I talked to swore that they're responsible for the increasing number of R.A.F. crashes."

"He was pulling your leg, old boy. I know some Reitzenists may have got into the R.A.F. as A.E.S. enlistments and sabotaged a few machines, but not enough to amount to anything serious. The great majority of the crashes are due to the inexperience of the pilots and the intensified training. This crash for instance was pure accident."

"Are you certain?"

"My dear chap, of course I'm certain. So will you be when you've heard the evidence. If you're dubious, come and look at the doings."

THEY had been speaking in low voices while two flight sergeants pulled the wreckage about for the benefit of the Court. Bill Garstin and Tony Wilcox joined them. Bending over the still warm pile they proceeded to make a careful examination.

What those two pilots didn't know about the works of an aeroplane was not worth knowing. Had there been any filing of control wires or tinkering with the ignition done, one or the other of them must have spotted it. But there was nothing. As far as the wreck would allow him to judge, Bill Garstin felt certain the plane had not been sabotaged before leaving the ground.

When everything had been thoroughly probed and examined, the Court adjourned to a nearby lecture-room to hear the witnesses. Tony Wilcox was the first witness called. And of all the officers present Bill Garstin was the only one who knew that they were questioning a man under sentence of death.

Tony gave his evidence. He was satisfied the Gipsy Moth had been in perfect flying order when Jackson took her up. He himself had flown her a few minutes before with another pupil. She had been functioning beautifully.

No, Jackson had said nothing about not feeling well. He'd seemed perfectly fit and eager to go up. As his instructor he, Tony, considered him a promising young pilot.

Then what, asked the Squadron Leader who was President of the Court, did he consider had caused the crash?

Tony's eyes met Bill Garstin's for a second. Then he answered in a slow, deliberate voice.

"Jackson must have fainted in the air. The way the machine stalled before she began to spin looked as if he'd let go

everything. As far as I could judge he didn't make the slightest effort to pull her out. In fact, it looked as if he'd gone to sleep."

"Frozen controls?" another member suggested.

Tony shook his head.

"With frozen controls they always yank the stick back and hold it like grim death. Nothing will make them let go. It's like the grip of a drowning man. In Jackson's case there was no evidence of frozen controls. As I said he just let go everything and sat still."

The President glanced at his bandaged hands.

"I understand you were the first to reach the crash. When you tried to pull him out, did you observe any signs of life?"

"No, sir. He was quite motionless, upside down in the cockpit, held there by the safety belt. That's another proof he'd fainted. If there'd been anything the matter with the plane he couldn't right, he'd have undone his belt and jumped for it. He was wearing a seat-parachute and had had ground instruction in its use."

TONY left the Court. The next witness was the R.A.F. doctor attached to the station. He stated that death had been due to multiple injuries and shock.

The squadron leader put a question. "You examined the body before it was taken out of the wreckage?"

"Yes, sir."

"The previous witness has suggested he became unconscious in the air before he crashed. Would you agree with that?"

"It's difficult to express an opinion. The fire left very little for me to examine. But in my experience a pilot who faints in the air or loses consciousness from vertigo always wakes up before the plane hits the ground. It's as if his subconscious mind remained alert to his peril and woke him up in time. That's why a "blot-out" such as is frequent in high-speed flying rarely has serious consequences. The pilot usually wakes up in time to save himself."

"Then you don't believe he fainted?"

"No, but I should say that it was unusual. Of course, he may have been suffering from unsuspected cardiac weakness. . . ."

"In other words he had a heart attack in the air?" Bill Garstin put in.

"Yes."

"In fact, he may have died of heart failure before the plane crashed at all?"

"That's possible. But it's not what one would expect in the case of a young man who had recently passed a stiff medical examination."

"Exactly," Bill Garstin agreed.

He tapped the table with his fingers. He was ticking off names. Nicholas Vetch, the unknown Reitzenist in Air Force uniform, Bud Connolly, Acting Pilot-Officer Jackson . . . All had died of heart failure. Or had they all been diabolically murdered?

The doctor was dismissed. Before calling the next witness the President addressed the Court.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "we've got to get to the bottom of this if we can. There have been far too many crashes of late and it's causing a shortage of pilots. People are beginning to say there must be something radically wrong either with the machines or the methods of instruction. Has anyone any comment to make?"

Bill Garstin could have made a comment, but he refrained. This was not the place to voice his suspicions. Another officer, however, spoke up.

"What about sabotage by the civilian ground staff? Under the A.E.S. we're getting all sorts in the R. A. F. For all we know some of them may be foreign agents paid to hinder the R.A.F. expansion. When the machines were looked after by regular R.A.F. aircraftsmen we didn't have all these crashes."

He was a very young officer, and he voiced indignantly what was being whispered in a hundred Royal Air Force messes. Bill Garstin said, "Hear, hear!" in a loud voice. The Squadron Leader frowned at them both.

"These sabotage rumors are all nonsense. Every crash is carefully investi-

gated, and in no case has sabotage been even suspected. In this case Flight Lieutenant Wilcox's evidence has exonerated the ground-staff completely."

THE examination went on. The rigger and mechanic responsible for the ground-care of the plane were called. Both were A.E.S.-enlistment men. And despite what the President had said, Bill Garstin eyed them both with suspicion.

Of the two it was the rigger of whom he felt most doubtful. The mechanic was a brawny fellow from the Clyde with a strong Scottish accent, not a type one would associate with treason and subtle murder. But the rigger was a different proposition.

He was a tall man with a cultured voice, shifty eyes and a nervous smile. An educated, unscrupulous-looking person of a type far removed from that of the regular personnel of the Royal Air Force. He faced the Court with a mixture of bravado and impudence. He was far less nervous than the mechanic had been. It seemed to Bill Garstin, watching closely, that his manner was that of a man who knows he has "got away with" something and is feeling conceited and boastful in consequence.

He shot a question that drew a disapproving frown from the President.

"Are you interested in the Reitzenist Movement by any chance?"

The rigger jumped as if a shot had been fired. Fear succeeded the astonishment on his face as he stared at Garstin. "I-I've heard of them."

"And you're a Reitzenist yourself?"

The rigger's mouth opened. He seemed uncertain what to answer. But then he was saved by the President.

"What on earth does it matter if he's a Reitzenist or not? March him out, Sergeant. We can't waste time discussing people's political opinions. Bring on the next witness."

A police sergeant was the last witness to be called. He had been watching the flying from a road that ran behind the drome, whence he had had an uninterrupted view of the crash. And, second to Tony Wilcox, he had been the first helper to reach the spot.

"Could you see the pilot?" the President asked.

"I could, sir. Just a glimpse through the smoke. He was quite dead."

"When the plane was spinning down did you see any movement?"

"No, sir. He didn't make any movement that I could see. But there was a gentleman in a car that had pulled up on the road close to where I was who'd a pair of binoculars. He was watching the whole time. He could tell you better than I can."

"Do you know who he is if we want to call him?"

"I don't, sir. I dare say we could find him for you though. He was in a big brown Daimler and there was a lady with him. I think there was another gentleman at the back, but I couldn't be certain about that. After the plane crashed they must have driven off at once. For the sake of the lady, I suppose. At least—"

Sergeant Murphy checked himself and coughed. He had been on the verge of saying something indiscreet. And he had probably imagined what he thought he saw.

It had been directly after the crash. He had just begun to run toward the mass of wreckage. What he'd seen of the occupants of the big Daimler had been the merest glimpse, an optical snapshot taken at a moment of horror and stress.

So he *must* have imagined what he saw! A lady laughing and clapping her hands as if she were applauding. The gentleman with the binoculars turning a grinning, inflamed face as if expecting congratulations. No, he wouldn't mention that to the Court. What he must have mistaken for laughter were their expressions of horror and dismay.

The President looked round the Court.

"Does anyone think it worth while having the witness with the binoculars traced and questioned?"

"I do," Bill Garstin said.

"Does any other member?"

Nobody spoke. By a majority vote it was decided the witness need not be called, and the Court was declared closed. There was only one verdict possible in the circumstances. After a brief discussion it was put on record that Acting Pilot-Officer Jackson's death had been due to his having fainted while in the air.

CHAPTER XI

ODDS AND ENDS

INSPECTOR CLARKE stood in the mortuary attached to Durward Jail looking down at all that remained of Bud Connolly. Death, which is popularly supposed to act as a beautifier, had not acted thus in the case of the huge thug. Unlovely in life, his round close-cropped head and shapeless features now looked grotesque against the clean white pillow.

The inspector was not alone. Behind him stood the prison doctor, the governor, two warders and the trusty man who had been the first to find Bud dead. The governor in particular looked worried. It is very unusual for a prisoner to die without medical attention while in custody, and when it does happen, strict investigations have to be made.

Heart failure? The inspector took off his bowler hat and scratched the side of his head irritably. It was absurd to imagine death could have been due to any other cause. Just as absurd as what that American Miss Hepstow had hinted about the death of Nicholas Vetch. Inspector Clarke jammed his derby savagely back into position. Behind him Major Green, the prison governor, had begun to speak.

"Well, inspector, it's very unfortunate about this poor fellow, but I don't think there can be any suspicion of neglect on the part of the prison authorities. At roll call after dinner yesterday he was apparently in perfect health. When the parade was dismissed he went back to his cell and was found there dead at half-past five when Jones brought his supper. According to the doctor's report he had been dead about two hours. It's curious he didn't summon assistance by ringing for a warder as he could have done, but I presume the attack was too sudden. Isn't that what you say, doctor?"

"I do," the medico nodded. "He probably collapsed and died in a few seconds. Didn't have time to realize himself what was happening."

Inspector Clarke looked at him. It had struck him the doctor sounded almost *too* certain.

"You sounded his heart when he was admitted?"

"I gave him the usual routine examination."

"You didn't notice anything funny about his heart?"

"No. Of course my examination was only a cursory one. I daresay a specialist examining him very carefully *would* have noticed something amiss. It doesn't follow though. Sometimes even a pronounced heart weakness is difficult to detect."

"Just so," said Inspector Clarke.

His eyes passed to the face of Jones the trusty who had found Bud. Jones was a dark-haired man with an excitable manner. Evidently he had been shaken by what had happened for he would hardly look at the dead man's face.

"How was he lying when you found him?" the inspector asked.

Jones gave a slight shudder. "He was lying on his back on the floor," he said in a refined voice. "'What's the matter, Bud?' I said. He didn't answer, so I went in and looked at him. Then I saw he was dead. It—it gave me a turn."

"Must have," the inspector said sympathetically. "By the way, what are you in for?"

"My principles," was the surprising reply.

"Indeed! And what colored shirt did your principles make you wear? Or was it a blue jersey?"

"It was a blue jersey," the governor put it. "Unfortunately for himself Jones got led astray by some foolish people called Reitzenists. However, I think that now he sees the error of his ways. When we let you out you're going to behave sensibly, eh, Jones?"

"I shall do my best, sir," the prisoner said coldly.

Again Inspector Clarke removed his derby and scratched his head. But the irritation he sought to appease was not in his scalp; it was in his brain. Jones was a Reitzenist. Jones had been attending Bud Connolly in his cell.

HIS uneasiness was too great to be kept to himself. Later when he was alone with the prison governor in the latter's office he did something he had never done before in the whole of his official career—made an accusation he could not prove.

"I'm not happy about Bud's death, sir. We put him in here to keep him out of the way of the Reitzenists; he was attended by a Reitzenist and he's dead. I don't like it."

The governor stared at him. "That's an extraordinary thing to say, Inspector. Are you suggesting that Jones was responsible for Connolly's death?"

"I'm suggesting it's a very queer coincidence. May I ask if it was by his own request Jones was looking after that particular cell?"

"As a matter of fact I believe it was. He had been doing duty in Block B. A couple of days ago he asked to be transferred to the detention block and the request was granted."

"He made his request *after* Connolly had been admitted?"

"What if he did?" the governor asked sharply. "There was no suspicion of foul play about the way Connolly died. What are you driving at? That Jones gave him some mysterious poison?"

"It's been done before," the inspector said doggedly. "I've come to the conclusion that these Reitzenists are extremely dangerous and clever people. I suppose that as a trusty Jones is allowed to see visitors?"

"He is, but—"

"Wouldn't it have been possible for one of his visitors to pass him something to give Connolly? I'd like to know who did visit him recently."

The governor sighed and rang a bell. To the clerk who answered his call he gave instructions. After an interval of five minutes during which Inspector Clarke sat staring at his hat and wondering if he was making a fool of himself, a warder in uniform appeared with the visitor's register in his hands.

The governor made a weary gesture.

"Inspector Clarke wishes to know who visited Jones, Number Seventy-three, recently."

The warder consulted the register.

"It was a man called Hathaway," he said at last. "He came Thursday afternoon between three and four. That's the visiting hour."

The name Hathaway conveyed nothing to Clarke, but if his theory was right the visitor would certainly have given a false name. "Can you describe him?"

"Well, what I remember of him was he was rather a funny-looking customer. Very short—a dwarf you might almost say—and he'd something wrong with his right foot."

The inspector suppressed an exclamation of satisfaction. The description exactly fitted the porter at the Handcuff Inn. His suspicions deepened almost to certainty.

HE DISREGARDED the governor's irritable sighs and went on with his inquisition. "Were you in the room all the time when this man Hathaway talked to Jones?"

"Yes."

"Would it have been possible for Hathaway to have passed anything to Jones without your seeing him?"

The warder shook his head decidedly. "Quite impossible. They were standing with a table between them. I wasn't more than ten feet away watching them all the time. If anything had been passed over the table I'd have seen it."

"So there you are!" said the governor triumphantly.

The inspector disregarded the governor and went on. "Can you remember what they said to one another?"

"Not all of it. Some of it was in a for-

eign language I couldn't understand."

"Is that allowed?"

"Well, there's no rule against it I ever heard."

"There is no rule," the governor said heavily. "Prisoners and their visitors can converse in any tongue they like. Now, inspector, as I'm rather busy this morning—"

"One last question, sir. Of the English part of the conversation can you remember anything?"

The warder permitted himself a grin. It was obvious he too was getting tired of what he regarded as a pointless cross-examination. "They were arguing which of them was the best at playing shove-halfpenny. Hathaway said he was and Jones said he didn't even know the right way to hit the coin. Quite worked up about it they were."

The governor laughed loudly. "Which does not sound as if they were planning a murder! And now, Inspector, you really must excuse a very busy man. The autopsy on Connolly's body is to be carried out this afternoon. I'll send a copy of the report to the Yard as usual. Shove-halfpenny! That was really rather good!"

Which was not the adjective Inspector Clarke had in his mind.

HE LEFT the prison an angry and puzzled man. By the main entrance, drawn up against the curb, there was a shabby two-seater, the driver of which he recognized as Flight Lieutenant Garstin. After the Court of Inquiry, Bill had changed into civilian clothes and driven up to town for the express purpose of seeing the inspector.

Before leaving Anton he had had a word with Tony. The holder of the "Order of the Bang" had had another communication from the Air Council. Reading it, Bill Garstin had felt as if he had watched death take another leap toward his friend.

The letter, like the previous one, had been in Air Commodore Huskisson's handwriting, had been headed, *"Strictly Confidential. Burn this."*

DEAR WILCOX,

The Admiralty have been approached and have consented to place the battle-cruiser *Viper* at our disposal. She is a twelve-thousand ton battle-cruiser of the "Z" class with an eight-inch armored deck which should provide an effective test for the Slocum Aerial Torpedo.

As arrangements stand at present the *Viper* will be towed to the selected spot in the North Sea by *H. M. S. Renegade* accompanied by the Aircraft-Carrier *Warrior*. You and the test-observers will be accommodated on the latter. Her run is sufficient for a Hawksley Bullfinch to take off fully loaded without using the quick-release gear. This should obviate any risk of accident.

If I hear no further from you on the matter I will conclude that you are prepared to carry on with the test, and will complete the final arrangements with the Admiralty.

Yours sincerely,
W. Huskisson, Air Commodore

Bill Garstin had returned the letter without comment. What was there to say? He knew that Tony would no more retract his offer than he himself would have done had he been the candidate chosen for the "Order of the Bang."

Instead of vainly urging Tony to change his mind, he had made a proposition of a different sort. It concerned that high-flying, mysterious plane fitted with the Moxon Beamless spotlight he suspected of taking nightly trips over London. The plane for which Mr. Diehl had watched with his night-glasses.

Would Tony be game to do a bit of unofficial night-patrolling to see if they could catch the trespasser? Tony Wilcox's cold eyes had glinted at the idea. He was craving distraction and excitement of any sort.

What was more, he had the very bird for the job. She was caged in one of the experimental hangars at Anton. A Cartwheel Fury, a new machine of the fighting class sent to Anton for testing. Cruising speed two hundred and ninety, top speed as yet unknown. Silent as a moth, handy as a hawk, with two Russell guns in the observer's cockpit and a twin-barreled Moxon firing through the prop, she was the

deadliest fighting machine the R.A.F. designers had yet produced.

Tony had taken Bill to view her in the experimental hangar where only test-pilots were allowed to enter. She was beautiful with her windswept lines and diminutive prop. A silver arrow that could whizz through the clouds almost as fast as sound.

With Tony with his magical hands on the controls and the Moxon purring twin sprays of death through the prop. That would show those Reitzenist jokers—!

BUT of all that there must be no word to Inspector Clarke. It was hush-hush stuff concerning the Royal Air Force only. Shoving those secrets as it were into the hinterland of his mind, Bill Garstin greeted the inspector with his usual cheery grin.

"Hullo! They told me at the Yard I might find you here. How's things?"

"What you might call foggy at the present," the inspector said. "If Bud Connolly wasn't murdered I'll eat my hat."

"Murdered! In prison?"

"I'm afraid so. There was a Reitzenist prisoner in charge of his cell. But how he managed to do Bud in without leaving the smallest trace beats me hollow. It seems impossible."

"If they can get at pilots in mid-air, getting at a man in prison shouldn't present much difficulty."

"Get at pilots in mid-air! You're joking."

"Never less so, inspector. I've just been attending a Court of Inquiry on a pilot who crashed yesterday, and the whole business reeks of fish from beginning to end. But before I tell you about that I'll tell you what happened at the Handcuff Inn last night. What about getting into the car? I'll drive you back to the Yard and tell you as we go along."

The inspector looked at his watch. "I'm not going back to the Yard at once. I thought of going to Astorial House to have a word with someone in R.A.F. Intelligence about Fitter-Corporal Ridgeway."

"To warn them about Sir Nathaniel Jenssen?"

"If they'll listen to me."

"I doubt it. He's a big noise at Astorial House and they'll probably laugh at you. Well, I'll take you along there, and as I go I'll tell you about the happenings at the Handcuff Inn. Inspector, that's an unholy spot."

"Don't tell me," Inspector Clarke said feelingly. "Anyway, what happened to you?"

Bill Garstin told him as the little two-seater moved jerkily along in the wake of an enormous pantechnicon. It was the traffic-peak hour, and the vehicles in the streets were jammed and jostling like cattle being driven along lanes. And while he told his story to the inspector Bill Garstin reflected as he had reflected several times during the last few days on what would happen in London in the event of a sudden panic causing people to try to stampede to the country.

"Well, that's what happened," he concluded. "What do you make of it?"

"I should say you'd a mighty narrow escape, Mr. Garstin. Anyway, it proves one thing we suspected—the Reitzenists are trying to wreck the R.A.F. Accelerated Expansion Scheme. But I can't credit what that fellow said about their being the cause of the mounting casualties among pilots. That sounds like hot air to me. Just a bit of boasting to impress you."

"Yet you believe they could murder Connolly in a prison cell? To say nothing of Nicholas Vetch when he was alone in his car!"

The inspector shifted uneasily. "I'll give you Connolly," he said at last. "Vetch I'm not decided about. We've only Miss Hepstow's word for that, and she's a Reitzenist herself."

Bill Garstin would have liked to retort, "She's nothing of the sort. She's the most dangerous enemy the Reitzenists have got," but that would have been hardly politic. Then the inspector went on:

"We've found out one thing."

"What?"

"About that Russian called Peterhoff. He was a bad lot, an Anarchist who joined the Reitzenist Party pretty soon after they were formed. It looks as if he had been playing a double game. Selling information about the Reitzenists to Vetch, and then very likely selling Vetch to the Reitzenists. At least, I fancy it was something of that sort."

Bill digested this information. The conclusion he came to was that perhaps Moira *had* decoyed Peterhoff into the hands of the Reitzenist death-squad after all. If he had been instrumental in causing Vetch's murder, she'd of had no scruples.

CHAPTER XII

NO SMILING MATTER

A FEW minutes later they were at Astorial House. It towered above Aldwych Circus like a cliff, the one genuine skyscraper London could boast.

Not a small proportion of the four hundred million pounds voted by Parliament for the Royal Air Force Scheme "D" had been devoted to enlarging and improving the headquarters of the R.A.F. The Air Ministry had decided it must be worthy of what was to be the greatest air-service in the world. If towering dimensions and imposing structure counted for anything, they had certainly succeeded.

Flight-Lieutenant Garstin was as familiar with the old hush-hush factory as with his own quarters. He ran his car into the parking-place reserved for visitors to Astorial House and turned to the inspector. "Like me to come with you? I know most of the birds in Intelligence. Besides, I can bear out your story in some respects."

Inspector Clarke accepted his offer. "I'd be glad if you would, Lieutenant Garstin. As a celebrated pilot, they might listen to you."

"Don't bet on that," Bill laughed. "It's the civilian contractors who make the big noise in the R.A.F. nowadays."

They passed together through the big lighted entrance through which men and women like streams of ants were hurrying all day. Since the inception of Scheme "D," Astorial House had been working overtime. Though it was now late in the evening the vast entrance lobby was as packed and busy as a tube-station. A few sky-blue uniforms were to be seen, but the majority of those who hurried about this hollow-echoing place with its vaulted roof and tiers of galleries were in ordinary civilian dress.

A striking chinchilla coat caught Inspector Clarke's eye. Its wearer—a woman who walked as gracefully as a deer—was hurrying toward one of the lift entrances. As she stepped into the lift he caught a glimpse of her face. He muttered something under his breath and nudged Garstin's arm.

"See who that was?"

"Who?"

"Madame Salvini. Strolling about Astorial House as if she owned the place!"

In a passing uniformed messenger he recognized an ex-policeman of his acquaintance. He beckoned furiously and the man hurried up.

"Evenin', Mr. Clarke. D'you want to be shown anywhere?"

"Did you see that woman in the chinchilla coat?"

"Yes, Mr. Clarke. She's Madame Sal—Sal-something."

"Sal volatile!" the inspector growled. "Is she allowed in here?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Clarke. She's got a pass. She's a friend of Sir Nathaniel Janssen. He's got offices in the new civilian contractor's block. What we call Millionaire's Row."

"Can you beat it?" the inspector growled when they were in a lift being whisked upward to Room 73 which was the headquarters of R.A.F. Intelligence. "I'd rather see a cobra free in Astorial House than that woman. It wouldn't be half as dangerous."

ROOM 73 was at the end of a long carpetless corridor on the eleventh floor. Group-Captain Summerton was the name of the official who lived there. Be-

fore transferring to Intelligence he had been in the Experimental Branch and was an old friend of Bill Garstin's.

After a short delay at an Enquiry Office where they had to give their names and state their business they were admitted into the room that was the Intelligence Holy of Holies, the shrine of hush-hush. It was a small room furnished like a library in a country house, rather than an office. There were comfortable leather armchairs and sporting prints hung upon the walls where convention would have placed maps.

When they entered, Group-Captain Summerton was standing with his back to the open fireplace. He was short and dapper with a gray, pointed beard and heavily pouched eyes. Once he had been a noted ace. A crash in a burning plane, however, had left him a physical wreck largely held together by wires and silver plates, and his flying days were over for ever.

He was one of the few people in the world who knew about the "Order of the Bang." His first cryptic greeting to Bill Garstin was:

"Hullo, Garstin! Congratulations on not being chosen."

"I'd rather it had been myself than Tony Wilcox," Bill said truthfully. "This is Inspector Clarke of Scotland Yard, sir. He wants to tell you something about Fitter-Corporal Ridgeway."

"Ridgeway? Ah, yes, the fellow who deserted from Anton. Sit down, inspector, and have a cigarette. Before I talk to the inspector, Garstin, what do you mean by putting the wind up South Coast Defenses last night?"

"Was my message reported to you?"

"It was. South Coast Defenses are very annoyed. They say there was no foreign machine flying over London."

"Did they send up a patrol to see?"

"They did not. They rely on their listening apparatus to warn them of approaching aircraft. All reports from other sources are ignored. You shouldn't have sent that message. Now, inspector, let's hear your news."

"One of our spotters saw Ridgeway yesterday, sir."

"Good! Where was he?"

"Leaving the Grand Claxton in company of Sir Nathaniel Janssen and Madame Salvini."

He had expected that that would be a bombshell and he was right. Summerton's eyebrows shot up. Cigarette half raised to his mouth, he stared at the inspector.

"Did I hear you say Sir Nathaniel Janssen?"

"You did, sir. I questioned Sir Nathaniel himself about it last night. Madame Salvini was present also. She put me off by a yarn that the man they were with was her sweetheart. Some unknown she had met in Nice called Gilchrist."

"That was rubbish," Summerton said. "She's Janssen's lady friend. He wouldn't stand for a rival in that quarter."

"Exactly what I thought, sir. But her story is a difficult one to disprove. Personally, I'm convinced it was Ridgeway. The man who recognized him is one of our best spotters, a man called Quigley. I've never known him make a mistake."

Group Captain Summerton nodded. "I know Quigley myself. He did good work for Intelligence during the war. If he says it was Ridgeway, it was."

"He also told me that Madame Salvini worked in London as a spy during the war," Inspector Clarke went on.

Summerton shook his head.

"That's never been proved. She was *suspected* of doing espionage work, which is another thing. But about Sir Nathaniel. It's deuced awkward. The fact is we—I'm speaking for the Air Ministry—simply can't afford to offend him. He holds too many important contracts under Scheme D."

HE SMOKED thoughtfully for a few moments and then went on. "If he did induce Ridgeway to desert from the R.A.F. and is now sheltering him, it can only be for one purpose. Ridgeway was a very highly skilled mechanic; Sir Nathaniel must have bought him as it were for one of his own factories. A shabby

trick, but not uncommon. Skilled engineers are scarce and these civilian fellows can offer higher wages than the Air Ministry."

Inspector Clarke coughed. "May I speak openly, sir?"

"That's what I like people to do."

"Well, what I think, and I believe Mr. Garstin agrees with me, is that there's something much graver behind this Ridgeway business than you imagine. It looks to me like a bit of the Reitzenist push to stop the Royal Air Force being expanded. You know what I'm referring to, sir?"

"I do. But surely you're not suggesting Sir Nathaniel Janssen is a Reitzenist? Hang it, he's a well-known industrial magnate and a member of the Air Ministry."

"I know all that," Clarke said stubbornly. "And against it you must reckon that he's a foreigner by birth and that his greatest friend is Madame Salvini. She *is* a Reitzenist. At least she wears the badge. I saw it myself last night."

"I thought Scotland Yard smiled at the Reitzenists!"

"We used to, sir. Just lately though we've begun to change our opinion. We've had to."

The inspector's answer was interrupted by the ringing of the bell of the speaking-tube on Group Captain Summerton's desk. The R.A.F. Intelligence officer unhooked the instrument and put it to his ear. They saw his expression change.

"Yes, certainly. Come along at once." He straightened up and looked at the other two men.

"Talk of the devil! It's Sir Nathaniel Janssen. He's coming along now."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Trends in Trolleys

AS AMERICAN transportation has marched on, borne by luxurious aircraft, streamlined trains and zephyr-like conveyances of combustion, the lowly streetcar has been left far in the ruck. It has trundled along its uneventful tracks, gauche and antiquated, rumbling, clanging, and cursed. Its crews, staunch argonauts in shiny blue, have stood on the swaying decks of their prosaic ships in rain and shine; in the cold sleet they have wrestled with an unseated trolley or plunged ahead into black, gangster-fraught night to throw a switch. Unsung heroes of the urban world, they have gone up and down, down and up, while the rest of the world passed them by with a jeer and an imprecation.

But now it seems that a new day has dawned for the trolley. It is with a glow of pleasure that one hears that Yonkers streetcars have been equipped with a novel sort of air-conditioning. When the weather grows cold, the passengers open their windows and the cold air blows on a hot-air gadget that makes the air hot. Sounds a trifle mad but quite a lot of fun.

While this could scarcely be called an epochal change for the poor trolley, it does look as if, at last, Science was at work. In New York there is even a streamlined trolley. But it is hiding in a car barn and is supposed to be a secret. It's been out for a trial run or two, emitting all sorts of shrill hoots and clangings and frightening the town's one remaining horse, who probably doesn't like to think that not so many years ago his forebears used to pull an old-style model. But so it goes. Oh, *tempora.* Oh, *mores.* Oh, trolley cars.

—*Ralph Mitchell Benton*

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

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

·BEST MAN at WEDDINGS·

In early days, when a man wanted a wife, he stole one from a neigh-boring village, taking a raiding party for the job. The man who most dis-tinguished himself in the fight with the bride's household, occupied a place of honor at the nuptial feast.

·HAVOC·

This word was once a specific military command to disperse and pillage.

·ANZACS·

World War soldiers from the Antipodes received this famous nickname from their telegraphic code address A·N·Z·A·C (Austral-ian-New Zealand Army Corps.)

·DRUM MAJOR·

Originally this man was not a band-leader, but an officer of the King's household, styled "Drum-Major-General of England", without whose permission no one except King's troops could beat a drum.

Casual stretched one hand out. They didn't know if he was pleading for mercy or what

A Chance for Casual

By HENRY F. CHURCH

Author of "Governor's Escort," "Tobacco Jamboree," etc.

A Romance of the West

THEY called him Berg Barnot, and never questioned his moniker. At a rough guess he was twenty-four, and there were just that many notches on the grips of his Army six-guns—twelve to a gun—and these may, or may not, have stood each for a human life. Concerning this the males of Salvation Flats, California, were not interested. In those rousing days of the gold rush coastward, they had learned the wisdom of minding their own business, but, with the ladies—real and breveted—it was a different story.

Maggie McGuire, who kept the hotel, said he was a broth of a lad, and not good for the girls, what with the six-feet-four of him, and his black hair, and his gray eyes, to say nothing of his blarney, the spalpeen!

Kate Cotton, who ran the emporium of pleasure known as The Spade Flush. avowed that he was a piker, tight as a Scot, and as sly as a cat to deal with, and Kate was no mean judge of mankind.

What the respectable women thought—such as Mrs. Gravin, the wife of the general store keeper, and widow Cline, who conducted the laundry—was not of record, but, since they seldom acknowledged his gallant greetings, it perhaps wasn't complimentary.

However, of this category, there was Karith Gravin, just turned nineteen, thought that he would make exactly the proper husband she earnestly hoped for.

In a blue gingham frock, which fit her slender figure perfectly, and complemented her blue eyes and ash-blond hair, she stood behind her father's counter and watched Barnot, as he stood on the opposite side of the street, talking with a red-whiskered giant.

It was a morning in Spring, with a mock-

ing bird warbling cheerily in a nearby cottonwood, and she wished that her ideal would quit such unsavory company and come over for his daily supply of cheroots, and the pleasant chat that went with the transaction.

The red one was known as Towles, and how he lived was a mystery. However, he paid cash and her father rated him as a good customer, and therefore an honest man, which latter rating was far from the truth, as time was to show.

Karith took out the box of cheroots when she saw that Towles was moving off, but, on sudden impulse, Berg Barnot moved along with him, and the two went down the dusty street. Thus it happened that she was not in the mood to receive the cheery greeting of Casual MacIntyre, when that be-freckled and tow-headed young man eased his lanky form down from his paint-pony, and came in.

"HOW about it, beautiful?" asked the new-comer, his white teeth flashing genially at her and his eyes looking her over with careful appreciation.

"How about what?" countered the maiden disdainfully.

"About marrying me. Today's Thursday, ain't it? Don't I always propose to you on Thursday?"

"Oh, make an end of it, Mac," she said crossly, and went to the side window, so that she could watch Berg Barnot swagger down the street with a lazy grace that entranced her.

"Okay," said Casual. "Gimme, then, the things on this list and I'll pick 'em up later. I suppose you've heard the news?"

"There's never any news in the Flats," she said listlessly, and turned with a sigh, as the subject of her thoughts disappeared around a distant corner.

"Maybe not, but the northbound stage was held up, this morning, just below here, and the driver was killed."

"Oh!" she gasped. "Not Chick Garnet?"

"Knowing Chick is a sort of cousin, I wouldn't have put it *that* casual," he told her. "Nope, it was a substitute, named Black. Chick's sick."

"Oh," she said in relief, and returned to her brooding. It was puzzling, she thought, why Barnot hadn't come in for his daily supply of cheroots.

"Yeah," the drawling voice was telling her, "it was sudden-like, too. There was Blackie and me, sitting in the driver's seat, and laughing at a joke he had just told, and there was my paint-pony trotting peacefully along, tied to the rear spring, when the four of 'em rode out of a gully and let Blackie have it. He never knew what hit him, Blackie didn't, and, before I could take more than two of 'em on the wing, they beaned me, and stuck up the guard and the passengers. Then they made off with the mail pouch and the dust chest. It was right pretty teamwork."

"Mac, you're funning!" she exclaimed, all attention now. "Surely you're funning! Trouble never came to the Flats, even at the peak of the rush. It can't be possible!"

He was warmed with her sudden change of attitude when she realized that he had been party to this misadventure. He was also glad to see her display civic pride in something other than the town's most recent acquisition, to wit, Berg Barnot. "Well," he told her, "trouble's here now, all right, with bells on, only it's walking on two legs instead of four since I hamstrung it."

Studying the whimsical face with its camouflage of freckles, and its bashful grin, she wished that its owner had been cast in a more heroic mold—more like Berg Barnot, for instance. You never could tell how to take Mac, since nothing seemed really to rile him. That, she supposed, was why he had come by the name of Casual.

Five years before, when the rush was at its height, he had come into her father's store with the broken shaft of an Indian arrow protruding from his shoulder, but mildly pleased that, as the youngest of the wagon-bosses on the long bull-train trek from Kansas Post, he had brought in his charge with a minimum of casualties.

As a round-eyed girl of fourteen she had heard him joke with the curious on-lookers, while drunken old Doctor Snood had ex-

tracted the barb by sheer strength, and the aid of blacksmith's pinchers. Immediately she had listed him as her number one hero.

She also remembered that, on her seventeenth birthday—which had come on a Thursday—he had proposed to her, in the presence of her parents, and, when she had fled in pink confusion, expecting him to later plead his cause in private, he hadn't shown up for a full month. Romantically, she had pictured him mooning away in the seclusion of the hills, but when she learned that he had simply been hunting over in the Indian country, she was furious. Since then his proposals had come every Thursday, delivered in a casual manner, and accompanied by his weekly grub list. Such methods didn't click with her idea of romance.

THESE last thoughts revived Karith's general impatience toward Casual, but, remembering that he had mentioned being hurt, she asked, politely, if it amounted to much.

"Aw, that?" Casual said with a shrug, and took off his flat-crowned hat to show an unbandaged welt across the back of his head. As he turned to better show his souvenir of the fracas, she saw, for the first time, that the back of his checkered shirt was stiff with dried blood. "I reckon," he told her, "since I've done my duty by you, and ordered my groceries, I'll go down and sober up Doc, and get that crease dressed. The darn thing's giving me a sort of headache."

"Listen, Mac!" she urged him. "Come on back in the house and let Mom and me fix that up. I'll get someone to fetch Doc. You may die!"

He chuckled, turned to follow her, and fell with a thud, face downward.

Karith screamed, and her mother came hurriedly and helped her to drag him back to the living quarters. Two days later, when he came to, he was occupying Karith's own room, which fact caused him considerable embarrassment.

"Gosh, I must have been a lot of trouble!" he apologized to the anxious girl and her parents. "If you ladies will shove off, while I put on my clothes, I'll pull my freight. I guess my pardner, old Bushy Joe, out at the digging, is plumb starved what with me holding up the groceries!"

Old Man Gravin said gruffly, "Not with no fractured skull you ain't pulling out. You had a narrow squeak, son. Doc wasn't figuring on you sauntering back to your senses for a couple days yet."

"Lemme see," mused Casual. "The last I remember was the four of 'em came out the gulch and got us. I think I got two of 'em, just to keep things even."

"Then you don't remember proposing to me?" demanded Karith with a show of spirit.

"No, ma'am. That was just force of habit, I reckon. Did I really get those hombres I thought I got?"

"No," said Gravin. "There was plenty of blood around, but the only ones got was by Berg Barnot. When he heard the news he went out single-handed, and took two of 'em in a running fight. Both Mex, from the looks of 'em."

Casual frowned. "Those were greasers I thought *I* eased off!"

"He's really wonderful!" enthused Karith, and, in sudden disappointment, Casual realized that she was speaking of Barnot. "He was in the store only this morning, and, do you know, Mac, he's got twenty-six notches on his guns? He borrowed a file to put on the new ones, and I counted them!"

After solemn reconsideration, based on an examination while reasonably sober, Doctor Snood decided that his patient had suffered only a slight concussion, and that his skull was too thick to crack; so, five days from the time he had come into the Gravin home, Casual mounted his pony and went back to his claim. His head still ached dismally, but he was thinking clearly and mapping his plans.

BUSHY JOE, short, and dour, and as hairy as a bear, helped his partner down from the horse. "Humph," he grunt-

ed, "the last I seen of you, you was hiking a free ride offen the stage, along with Blackie, to get grub, and now Blackie's dead, so I hear, and I ain't seen no groceries either. Did *you* kill him? How come you got your haid hurt? Where's the groceries, anyhow?"

"No, I didn't kill him. I got creased. One of the boys is packing out the grub for us later. I really want you to eat, Bushy, and I wasn't taking any chances."

"What you mean chances?"

"Aw, I didn't bother to tell the Gravins, but somebody took a crack at me through Karith's bedroom window, the other night, and the knife stuck in the head of the bed."

"Take your time," said Bushy Joe patiently. "It's only spring, and if I get the details in time for a Christmas present, I'll be satisfied. What was you doing in her bedroom, Casual?"

"You've got an unclean mind, Bushy. I told you I was creased, when they got Blackie. I've been putting up with the Gravins—I mean, they've been putting up with me—and, in the interim, Karith turned her room over to me. I've been unconscious."

"In other words you've been normal. Who you reckon heaved that knife?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be back here yet, but maybe it was the same galoot what took a crack at me about fifteen minutes ago, as I came through Seldom Pass."

"Don't tell me you're a marked man!" drawled the bushy one.

"Anyhow, my hat's marked," assured Casual and doffed it to show the proof.

"You ain't told what happened to the misguided soul what marked it. Are you coming around to that?"

"Aw, he fell down out of a tree, when I pulled on him. He didn't move any more, so I didn't bother about him."

"Some of these days," growled Bushy in disgust, "you're plumb going to talk yourself to death!" Then, being an inquisitive old cuss, he took down his rifle from the wall, and went off in the direction of Seldom Pass.

The assailant that Casual had done for turned out to be a stranger. There was a money belt about his waist bulging with dust, but his hands were too rough for those of a gambler, and not rough enough for those of a miner, so Bushy decided that he was just a plain bad-man. Lifting the fat belt for burial expenses, he went back to the shack for a shovel. Later he found that his services weren't needed as the body had disappeared.

A WEEK later Casual rode over to the Flats to pay his respects to Karith. Berg Barnot was leaning over the counter, conversing softly with that young lady, and seemed not pleased to be interrupted. After he had been introduced to Casual he became quite affable.

"Oh, yes," he said with a pleasant smile, "you're the lad who was with Black when he was shot down. Too bad you didn't get them."

"Aw, but I had *you,*" answered Casual, turning on his ingenuous grin. "I'm really obliged to know you avenged us so *pronto.*"

With becoming modesty Barnot said nothing, but the obvious gesture, as he ran his long fingers over the new notches on his gun grips, was not lost on Casual. Neither was it lost on Karith, but it affected her differently. "Look, Mac!" she exclaimed in admiration, and made the modest one produce the gun from his right-hand holster. "That one's for the man who took a crack at you in Seldom Pass. It's sure good to have a man like Berg in town!"

"Shucks," said Casual, "it just seems a man can't have any secrets to himself in these here parts. I could have sworn that nobody but Bushy Joe and me knew anything about that."

"But, you see," she hastened to explain, "Berg was worried about you, and followed you out. When that fellow fired, Berg saw you gallop off unhurt, so he just stalked him and they shot it out. Then he brought in the body over his saddle, and the men buried it alongside the other two Berg killed. They've made him

marshal since you were in the last time."

"Aw, I thought we already had a sort of marshal."

"Not since Tuesday night. Somebody stabbed him in the back."

Casual said, naïvely, "How many notches did you say you had on 'em irons, mister?"

Barnot fixed him with a cold gray eye. "I didn't say," he drawled, and, tipping his hat gallantly to the admiring girl, took his departure.

"IT'S sure funny," said Casual, "how, after living here peacefully for five years, all of a sudden folks get the idea to bump me off. Three times in less than two weeks. Of course I understand how that first try was along the lines of necessity, but I fail to figure the last two."

"Why, revenge, no doubt," replied the girl, intent on watching her hero swagger off. "That's what Berg thinks."

Casual chuckled. "Revenge for what? It seems I only *thought* I knocked off those hombres he's got carved into his gun handles. Why pick on *me?* More likely somebody's just plain worried that maybe I saw too much that morning." Then, changing the subject, he asked, "How long have you known this *caballero,* Karith?"

"About a month."

"It's Thursday," said Casual, "and my usual motion to save you from spinsterhood is before the house."

Ignoring the business before the house, she said, wistfully, "I wish you'd like him, Mac."

Casual took his sturdy forty-four from its worn holster and meditated upon it. "Of course," he addressed the weapon, "if all you need is notches to put me in good standing with the lady, I could dig up a few, but, shucks, I paid a dollar-fifty a caliber for you, and I sure hate to mark you up just for a little false glory."

Karith became angry. "Listen, Casual MacIntyre!" she flared. "You're down-right ornery about Berg. He's no four-flusher, and his guns prove it. Since you're so smart, perhaps you know that he was once an officer in the army?"

"Why didn't he stay there?"

"That's his business! There was some misunderstanding and he resigned."

"My, but that must have put the army in its place."

"Oh, you're impossible!" she said and flounced out of the store, but, at the door of the living quarters, she turned to give him a parting shot. "Like him, or not, he's a gentleman, and he's asked me to marry him, so there!"

"I was afraid of that," said Casual, and went out to look for Barnot. There were several things he wanted to ask him.

He found the new marshal down at The Spade Flush, talking to the red-bearded Towles. As Casual came in Barnot turned and said politely, "You know Mister Towles, do you not, Mister MacIntyre?"

Casual scratched his ear. "Mister MacIntyre—*Mister* MacIntyre. Why, that must be *me!* Shucks, I've been called Casual so long by my friends, I didn't recognize my own maiden name."

"Well, h'ya, Casual?" said the red giant.

Casual didn't like his sneering tone, and he didn't like his unkempt beard. Extending his frank survey further, he decided he liked no part of the fellow. "I said my *friends,*" he drawled, and went to the bar to buy himself a drink.

Barnot came over, and said in a cold voice. "I resent that, MacIntyre. Towles is my friend."

"Aw, go steal yourself a corpse," growled Casual.

"Pay him no attention, Berg," laughed Towles. "The poor galoot's mad on you for stealing his gal, I reckon."

Casual set down his glass. "I'd like to hear that all over," he said quietly, "because I'd sure hate to shoot your ears off, and then find out I had misunderstood you."

"You ain't misunderstood me, and you ain't going to shoot my ears off," growled the red one.

TWO seconds later he was convinced that he had spoken too hastily, and the lobes of his big ears were dripping

blood where Casual's rapidly thrown slugs had nicked them. Since the urbane Mister MacIntyre's gun was out and cocked, and already warmed up, the big fellow thought it better not to draw. Vowing vengeance upon his wary adversary, he took himself out of there, to the accompaniment of guffaws from the other customers, who were unanimous in the opinion that they had just seen some keen shooting.

Barnot said, "He asked for it, MacIntyre, otherwise I'd feel duty bound to put you under arrest. Come into the back room. I want to talk to you privately."

"Roll your dice right here at the bar, fellow," Casual told him. "There ain't any dark chapters in my life." He had come there to question Barnot; not to be questioned. He was also mildly pleased with his performance, and he wasn't seeking an anti-climax.

"Have it your own way," the marshal told him, and went out with as much dignity as he could muster under the muted jeers of the onlookers.

Casual went home by a round-about route, and nothing happened. When he got there he was surprised to find Barnot waiting for him.

"I hurried after you," said the visitor. "We're getting nowhere with this up-stage business. Apparently, you don't like me, and perhaps I'm to blame. I came out here to square things, if possible."

"Go on, I've been known to listen."

"Well, I'm a federal agent, sent out here to clean up a certain gang of hold-up men. The three you killed—two at the scene of the stage robbery, and one in Seldom Pass—belonged to that gang."

"I thought *you* killed 'em, mister. You've got 'em duly recorded."

Barnot laughed at that. "I'm really sorry that I had to do such a trick," he explained, "but it was part of my plan to get in solid with this town, and win its confidence. I'm a comparative stranger, of course."

"Deal on," said Casual, grinning. "You've at least got initiative."

"You see, the late marshal was mixed up with them, and what happened to him was intended for me."

"I'm not more than a mile behind you, but I'm beginning to pick up your dust."

"If that's an expression of doubt, I'm again sorry. I got the goods on him, and erred in springing it too soon. He promised to turn state's evidence if I gave him a break, but I knew I couldn't trust him, and that he had already passed on the word for them to get me. I had long suspected this fellow, Towles, as really being Red Hogan, from Kansas, under whom the gang was supposed to be operating, so I sent a forged note to Towles, over the signature of the marshal, stating that he, the marshal, would arrange for me to meet him at a certain spot and a certain time, and asking Towles to keep the rendezvous instead, and knife me in the back."

"Maybe I'm just plain dumb, after all, but turn the crank."

"Then I arranged with the marshal to meet me at the appointed time and place, where Towles was to show up. If Towles attacked him, believing it was me, I would know that Towles was my meat. Naturally, I intended to take the two of them before Towles could kill him, but I got mixed up on my time and got there a little too late."

"Which was tough on the marshal, but good politics for you. But the main point, I figure, is that Towles killed him?"

"The evidence so points, but I've got to find that out. Towles, under questioning, produced a perfect alibi. He claimed he was drunk, and in jail, over at Dutchman's Luck, that night, and the deputy there confirmed it."

"Me, now, I'd find out if the *deputy* was there," commented Casual, "but go on, you interest me strangely."

"I'm checking on that. In the meanwhile I've hinted to Towles that I, as the new marshal, am ready to play along, and I've got him to the point of believing it. What I want to ask of you is your coöperation, by not killing him, as you nearly did today, until I can complete my case against him, and include the rest of them."

"MISTER," said Casual, "there were four of 'em hombres, who took the stage, and three of 'em have been already included and concluded, only I ain't had time to register 'em. This hyena, Towles, wasn't among that four, or else I'm color-blind."

"Naturally not. He's the brains of the gang, not the muscle."

"Mister, out here we don't generally ask for a showdown, until a man declares his hand. You got any kind of an official paper to back up yours?"

"Surely," replied Barnot with a smile, and gave an impressive-looking card to his inquisitor.

"Do tell!" marveled Casual. "So, you're Joseph Bates, huh, operating out of Kansas Post? Okay, fellow. I got to admit you're a versatile hombre."

Barnot caught the veiled significance of that last remark, and grinned. "Let's get straight on that, too, Casual," he said frankly. "When the right woman comes along it's every man for himself. I'm sorry if I got over into your territory, but, if it will make you feel more kindly toward me, I've asked Karith to marry me. That should convince you that my intentions are honorable."

"So she told me, with gestures. Well, hop to it, ole timer, but if she doesn't give you any more encouragement than she's ladled out to me, you're still a long way from the altar. But don't let that keep you, if you've got other calls to make. Me, I ought to be helping old Bushy Joe, right now."

The visitor seemed suddenly interested. "What's the balance of his name?" he asked.

Casual looked guileless. "Heck, I wouldn't know. I've only had him for a pardner about a year."

That night, at supper, he asked Bushy if he had ever known a man by the name of Joe Bates, over at Kansas Post.

"Sure," mumbled Bushy, his mouth full of corn-pone. "I had him buried just last year. I was coroner over there, wasn't I?"

"So I've heard tell, until you tagged the wrong politician with manslaughter, and had to lope over here and sorta hide out."

Bushy said testily, "I didn't name the wrong man, as I've told you nigh on a hundred times, if you'd been listening. He was Pretty John Higgins, the marshal's son, and he shot Bates in the back, so I had to call it something, didn't I? What you asking that for?"

"Nothing. I was only remembering names. Gimme another hunk of pone, and tell me the yarn all over again. You've got such a gift for description, Bushy."

The following Thursday Casual went to the Flats for supplies. Karith saw to it that he should notice the ring on the engagement finger of her left hand, so he didn't trouble to propose.

"When's it coming off?" he asked.

"You mean my marriage to Berg?"

"Naw, the ring. I've been toting one for some time, now—a real sparkler, I picked up on my last trip out. I wouldn't want it to be said you wore two engagement rings on the same hand."

Karith became sweetly grave. "Mac," she said, and placed her slender hand on his arm, "if Berg hadn't come along I might have come around to saying yes, to your silly proposal, but I love him a lot—I really think I do—and he's so entirely different from the rest of the men around here. You can't blame me for wanting to look around first, to see if I couldn't better myself. Look at Mom, stuck down here in a dusty town for the rest of her days, and *she* came from Saint Louis!"

"Sure, I see your side of it, honey, but I just can't see Berg, that's all."

"But he's splendid, really, Mac!"

"Maybe I ought to have been born a girl, so I could appreciate him. You've known him a little more than a month, and you've known me for five years. You wouldn't be taking any chances with me."

"I'd be taking a chance on living the rest of my life in a shack, while you mooned around for gold which, perhaps, wasn't there. That's not my idea of a future!"

"Shucks, we've had each other wrong all along, it seems. Do you think I'd have

wasted five years around here, if it wasn't for *you?* Shucks no, lady! The Wells-Fargo people have been after me two years to manage a route for 'em, and I've been staying on, thinking that you like this dump, and hoping. Now that's something for the book, ain't it?"

It was practically an oration for Casual and Karith was appropriately affected. Her lips trembled as she said:

"I'm sorry, Mac, honestly. Next to Berg, and my folks, I like you the best in the world, even if you aren't pretty."

"That last crack sure lets me down," he sighed. "Only this morning I was thinking that if I grew a mustache, I'd look less like a guinea-fowl. and be real striking."

THEY laughed together over that, and Casual went down the street, to where Kate Cotton's place pushed its brazen false front up beyond the flanking buildings.

Kate, her hard, rouged face minus its usual smirk, leaned in the open doorway and puffed violently on a cigarette.

"H'ya, Katie," Casual greeted, "who put a burr under your saddle?"

"Aw, I'm fed-up," she retorted. "That new marshal, the ornery pole-cat, wants an extra drag. We used to pay the old one off with free drinks, and a reasonable percentage of the take, but, on top of that, this new pipsqueak's got his eyes set on two of my best-looking dancehall girls. Wants 'em to amuse himself, and that red gorilla he chums with, Saturdays included, when we can't take care of the paying customers!"

Casual shook his head and spoke with a twinkle.

"As a matter of fact, Katie, he ought to close this pest house, and call it a day, but cheer-up, ole gal, maybe he'll leave that to the *next* marshal."

She became keenly interested. "Leaving?" she asked eagerly.

"I wouldn't be surprised. If he's in there now, let's see if we can't start him on his way."

"Both of 'em are in there. That's why I came out to get a breath of fresh air. Be careful, Casual, they're mean hombres!"

"Shucks," said Casual, "they're both big *I* men, but I'm right good on dotting. Listen, Katie. I want you to do just one thing. I'm going in to get a drink, and, in about two-three minutes, I want you to saunter in and stand behind Barnot, and, when you see me watching him closely, you say, casual-like, 'H'ya, Higgins?' Remember, now, just casual-like, same as you were addressing an ole friend. Savvy?"

Kate nodded.

"It don't make sense, but I'll follow your lead."

Casual went in and stood at the bar, where he could watch Barnot and Towles, who were hanging around the faro layout, seemingly interested in the game. Neither had seemed to note his presence, but, in the fly-specked mirror, he could see Barnot nudge Towles with his elbow, so he knew that he was spotted.

He ordered a drink from a bartender he had never seen before, and set it, untouched, before him. To those about him he seemed to be brooding over his glass, moving it around on the damp surface of the bar with his left hand, while his right fumbled with his belt. Concealed by the bulk of his body, his long fingers were already twined around the sturdy grip of his gun, an alert forefinger curved just beyond the trigger.

Kate Cotton came in, and he gave her a nod in the mirror and turned a waiting ear in her direction.

"H'ya, Higgins?" he heard her voice boom, and the new marshal reached for his gun and whirled, his face tense and wary.

"Hold just that pose, Mister Higgins," drawled Casual, and indicated the marshal with the barrel of his weapon. "Ain't you got any shame, using the credentials of Joe Bates, the federal agent you shot in the back?"

Whether the marshal had any shame or not, was never developed, but assuredly he had an ally back of the bar. The new bartender aimed a vicious swing at Casual's

head with a bottle, which missed and splintered on his right shoulder.

Casual's shoulder-blade cracked under the impact and his gun thudded to the floor. White with pain, and defenseless, he stood there facing the infuriated marshal. His right hand hung limp, and a trickle of blood began to run down over his fingers. Those about him noted, and commented on it afterward, that his left hand was extended as if in greeting, or, perhaps, it was an unconscious gesture of pleading, but those who knew Casual best, refuted the latter.

ALL this time the marshal had his helpless enemy covered. Finally, when he could control his rage sufficiently to speak, he said, in a voice weighted with evil intent, "Some folks are too smart to live!" He cocked his gun with an adept sweep of his thumb, and continued, "I'm giving you just three seconds to say your prayers, MacIntyre, and then I'm going to drill you right between the eyes!"

He was beginning to count when the red-bearded Towles interrupted, and Casual, through a haze of pain, could see that the lobes of his huge ears were still sore from the nicking. "Wait," said Towles gruffly, "I've got even a *better* idea than you drilling him!"

"And what's that?" asked Higgins, without turning.

"*Me* drilling *you!*" growled the red giant, and shot the marshal twice through the back.

Higgins died with his handsome face rammed in a spittoon, and the horrified crowd let him lay. All were too busy reaching ceilingward, at the moment, to ponder on the departed marshal.

Towles addressed himself to Casual, over his leveled gun. "Sorry, ole timer, to slop over in your affair," he apologized, "but I came a long way to find the rattler what got my best friend, Joe Bates, in the back! I'll be pulling out now, if the rest of you gents'll just keep your grub-hooks elevated. All I'm asking is a fair start."

Gathering up the benotched guns of the late marshal and shoving them into his belt, while he covered the crowd, the red-head backed out of the place, and, a moment later, was astride Casual's paint-pony and fairly burning up the trail for other parts.

When the sound of the pounding hooves had died out, the crowd repaired outside to gaze at the disappearing cloud of dust. "Well, he's welcome to the nag," said Casual, breaking the silence, "I was going to trade him in, anyhow."

Ten minutes later he told Karith, "Well, I'm back, and this time it's a busted shoulder. I don't suppose you've heard the news?"

Then he noticed that she had been crying. "I've heard everything," she answered simply.

He told her, "I'm awful sorry it had to turn out this way, but, maybe, after awhile—"

She came from behind the counter and helped him to a seat. "I knew you'd be coming to me," she said, in a flat, listless voice, "so I've already sent for Doc Snood." Then, suddenly, she was kneeling beside him, with her face buried against his throbbing shoulder, and her arms entwined about his neck. "Oh, Mac, my dear, my *dear!*" she sobbed. "Suppose he had really *killed* you!"

"I'd rather suppose something more cheerful," Casual told her, as he sat there dizzy with pain and happiness. "But what's bothering me most—now that I come to think of it—is, maybe, some of the boys might have got me wrong in those last few seconds. Honest, I wasn't sticking out my good left paw to ask any favor off Higgins, I was just getting ready to shake hands with ole Saint Pete."

"Oh, you idiot!" she whimpered, and held him tighter.

They heard the uncertain feet of the doctor stagger up the porch steps, so she kissed Casual and stood up. "I've been such a fool!" she told him, contritely, "but—but it's still Thursday, Mac!"

Carson crowded canvas, painfully aware of what lay ahead

Carson of Venus

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

CARSON, with his mate Duare, on their wanderings over the planet Venus, arrive finally at the kingdom of Korva where war is raging between the loyal partisans of Kord and the hordes of the dictator Mephis. Sole city not to surrender to Mephis is Sanara where Carson and Duare take refuge. Sanara is governed by Muso, the nephew of the rightful *jong*, or ruler, when Kord is held prisoner by Mephis and his Zani Party.

Carson, whose flying ship is the only one ever seen on Venus, serves Muso well until Muso sends him on a secret mission to Amlot, the capital, held by Mephis and the Zanis. Carson is to deliver a message to Spehon, described by Muso as one of his own men who has achieved a high place in the Zani council.

Arriving in Amlot, Carson is befriended by Zerka, a mysterious woman whose place in the scheme of things Carson cannot determine. Sensing that she is not being entirely frank with him, Carson poses as one Vodo, a prince of the distant Vodoro. Zerka offers to help him and gives him a ring as a pledge of her good faith.

SUSPICIOUS of Muso, Carson reads the message entrusted to him and discovers that Muso plans to betray Sanara, and has ordered Spehon to kill Carson the moment he presents the message. Carson would have fled Amlot then and there had he not received a hint that Duare's father, Mintep, may be held a prisoner by the Zanis.

Before he can act, however, he discovers that Muso's message has been stolen. Expecting arrest and execution momentarily, he is surprised when nothing happens and decides to risk his neck further and join the Zanis that he may discover whether the imprisoned *jong* "from a far country" is indeed Mintep.

Sponsored by Mantar, a friend of Zerka's, Carson joins the Zani guard and is eventually made acting-warden of the very prison where Mintep may be incarcerated.

Kord, the rightful *jong* of Korva, is killed when he refuses to abdicate in favor of Mephis. And still Carson has not located Mintep. His situation is made more perilous when among his prisoners turns up Horjan, the brother of the farmer who had introduced Carson into Amlot. Although Horjan, terrified for his own skin, promises not to betray Carson, Carson isn't too certain that Horjan is to be trusted; and his plight becomes more acute when the sergeant, or *kordogan,* under

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him learns to dislike him because of his leniency toward the prisoners in his care.

THE last straw is laid upon the camel's back when Carson is sent to arrest the scholar and suspected traitor Narvon. In Narvon's house he glimpses Zerka but says nothing. Narvon, in the presence of Mephis and Spehon, is tortured to learn who his accomplices are. Carson tenses, wondering if Narvon will break. If Zerka is betrayed, then so is he.

At last Narvon can stand no more of the rack.

"I will speak!" he screams. "My accomplice was Z—"

Carson starts forward. But for the moment he is safe. Narvon dies before he can speak Zerka's name. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

HUNTED

I WENT fishing; I caught some fish; but I couldn't forget how Narvon died. I shall never forget it. Nor could I forget his dying words. Coupled with what I had seen in his house, I knew the name that had died in his throat. I wondered if any of the Zanis there had guessed what I *knew*. Not only did I fish, but I did some reconnoitering and a great deal of thinking. I wondered what to do about Zerka. Should I risk Mintep's life to warn her, with considerable likelihood that I might be arrested with her? Really, there was but one answer. I must warn her, for she had befriended me.

I sailed around close to the prison, for there were certain things I must know about the outside of the place. I knew all that was necessary about the inside. After satisfying myself on the points I had been in doubt about, I came ashore. At my quarters in the barracks I found an order relieving me from duty at the prison. Probably Torko, the prison-governor, had found me too soft-hearted. At least I hoped that was it. Or *was* there something else, something far more sinister behind it? I felt a net closing about me, enmeshing me tighter and tighter, holding me helpless.

As I sat there in my quarters with this unpleasant thought for company, a guardsman came and announced that the commandant wished me to report to him at once. This, thought I, is the end. I am about to be arrested. For a panicky moment I contemplated flight; then I calmed down, knowing how futile such an attempt would be, and so I went to the commandant's office and reported.

"A dozen prisoners have been brought from the front at Sanara," he said. "I am detailing twelve officers to question them. We can get more out of them if they are questioned separately. Be very kind to the man you question. Give him wine and food. Tell him what a pleasant life a soldier may have serving with the armies of the Zanis, but get all the information you can out of him. When they have all been questioned, we shall turn them over to some private soldiers to entertain for a few days; then we shall send two of them back to the front and let them escape to tell about the fine treatment they received in Amlot. That will mean many desertions. The other ten will be shot."

THE Zanis were full of cute little tricks like that. . . . I got my man and took him to my quarters. I plied him with food, wine, and questions. I wanted to know about Sanara on my own account, but I didn't dare let him know how much I knew about the city and conditions there. I had to draw him out without him suspecting me. It chanced that he was a young officer—a nice chap, well connected. He knew everyone and all the gossip of the court and the important families.

There were certain questions that it would be quite natural for any Zani to ask. Those relative to the defenses of the city and other military matters he answered glibly—so glibly that I knew he was lying, and I admired him for it.

When I asked him about Muso, he talked freely. It was evident that he didn't like Muso.

"He's turned his woman out," he volunteered. "Her name is Illana. She is a fine

woman. Everyone is very much incensed over it, but what can anyone do? He is *jong*. The woman he has selected in Illana's place does not want to take it. It is common talk that she loathes Muso; but he is *jong*, and if he orders her to come, she will have to come, because she has no man. He was killed here in Amlot. Muso sent him here on a dangerous mission. Everyone believes that he sent him to his death purposely."

I felt myself turning cold. The next question on my lips withered in my dry mouth. I made two attempts before I could utter an intelligible sound. "Who was this man?" I asked.

"He was the man who used to fly over your lines and drop bombs on you," he replied. "His name was Carson of Venus —odd name."

I had asked my last question of that man. I took him out and turned him over to the soldiers who were to entertain the prisoners; then I hastened toward the quay. It was already dark, and the street I chose was not well lighted. That was the very reason I chose it. I had almost reached the quay, when I ran into a detachment of the Zani Guard in command of an officer. The latter hailed me from the opposite side of the street; then he crossed toward me, leaving his men.

"I thought I recognized you," he said. It was Mantar. "I have an order for your arrest. They are scouring the city for you."

"I have been in my quarters. Why didn't they look there?"

"Torko said you had gone fishing."

"Why am I being arrested?" I asked.

"They think you are a Sanaran spy. A prisoner named Horjan informed on you. He said he found you hiding in his house just the day before you applied for a commission in the guard."

"But Zerka?" I asked. "Won't they suspect her? It was she who sponsored me."

"I had thought of that," he said.

"Well, what are you going to do with me?" I asked.

"I wish you would tell me the truth," he said. "I am your friend; and if what Zerka and I have suspected for long is true, I will help you."

I recalled that Zerka had told me I could trust this man implicitly. I was lost anyway. They had enough against me to torture and murder me. Here was a straw. I clutched it.

"I am Carson of Venus," I said. "I came here with a message for Spehon from Muso. It was stolen from me."

"Where were you going when I stopped you?" he asked.

"I was going back to Sanara, where my friends and my heart are," I told him.

"Can you get there?"

"I think I can."

"Then go. It is fortunate for you that none of my detail knew Vodo by sight. Good luck!"

HE TURNED and crossed the street, and I went on toward the quay. I heard him say to his *kardogan:* "He says that Vodo is in his quarters at the barracks. We shall go there."

I reached the quay without further incident, and found the boat I had used for fishing earlier in the day. It was small, with a single sail, scarcely more than a canoe.

As I put off, I heard the sound of running feet along the quay; and then I saw men approaching.

A voice cried, "Stop! Come back here!" but I set my sail and got under way; then I heard the staccato *br-r-r* of r-rays, and a voice crying:

"Come back, Vodo! You can't get away."

For reply I drew my own pistol and fired back at them. I knew that that would disconcert their aim and give me a better chance to escape with my life. Long after I could no longer see them, they stood there firing out into the night.

I thought of Mintep, Duare's father, and prisoner of Mephis, with regret, but there was something far more precious at stake than his life or that of any man. I cursed Muso for his duplicity, and

prayed that I might reach Sanara in time. If I did not, I could at least kill him; and that I promised to do.

Presently I heard the sound of a launch behind me, and knew that I was pursued. Inside the harbor the breeze was light and fitful. If I couldn't reach the open sea ahead of my pursuers, I should have to depend upon eluding them in the darkness. In this I might be successful, or I might not. I couldn't hope to outdistance a launch even with a good wind, and my only hope was to escape detection until I was able to discern from the sound of the launch in which direction they were searching for me.

I felt that they would naturally assume that I would head northeast up the coast in the direction of Sanara, whereas my real destination lay southwest—the little island where I had grounded my airship. Nor was I mistaken, for presently I heard the sound of the launch receding to my left; and I knew that it was making for the open sea by way of the easterly side of the harbor's mouth.

With a sigh of relief, I kept to my course; and presently rounded the headland at the west side of the harbor and turned into the open sea. The offshore breeze was no better than that which I had had in the harbor, but I continued to hug the shore because I had one last duty to perform in Amlot before I continued on my way.

I owed much to Zerka, and I could not leave without warning her of the danger which threatened her. I knew where her palace was situated on the shore, with its gardens running down to the water line. It would delay me no more than a few minutes to stop there and warn her. I felt that I could do no less. The conditions were ideal—low tide and an offshore wind.

Silently and smoothly my light craft skimmed the surface of the water, the faint luminosity of the Amtorian night revealing the shoreline as a black mass dotted with occasional lights that shone from the windows of the palaces of the rich and powerful. Even in the semi-darkness, I had no difficulty in locating Zerka's palace.

I ran in as close as I could on the tack I was holding; then dropped my sail and paddled for the shore. Beaching my craft, I drew it well up toward the sea wall, where only a very high tide could have reached it; then I made my way up to the palace.

CHAPTER XV

WARNING IN THE NIGHT

I KNEW that I was risking my life for if Zerka were under suspicion, as I feared she was, she would doubtless be watched closely. There might be spies in the palace grounds, or even in the palace itself. For all I knew, Zerka might already be under arrest, for Narvon's dying confession was not cut off quickly enough to hide from me the identity of the accomplice he had almost named. Of course, I had already been suspicious of the truth. I did not think that the Zanis were, and so there was a possibility that they had not connected Zerka's name with the one that the dying man had almost spoken.

I went directly to the great doors that opened onto the terrace overlooking the gardens and the sea. On Amtor there are no doorbells, nor do people knock on doors —they whistle. Each individual has his own distinctive notes, sometimes simple, sometimes elaborate. At entrance doorways there are speaking tubes into which one whistles, and it was with some perturbation that I now whistled into the mouthpiece of the tube at the great doors of the *toganja's* palace.

I waited for several minutes. I heard no sound within the building. The silence was ominous. I was, nevertheless, about to repeat my whistle when the door swung partly open, and Zerka stepped out into the terrace. Without a word, she took my hand and hurried me down into the garden where trees and shrubbery cast black shadows. There was a bench there, and she drew me down on it.

"Are you mad?" she whispered. "They were just here looking for you. The doors on the avenue had scarcely closed behind them when I heard your whistle. How did you get here? If you can get away again, you must leave at once. There are probably spies among my servants. Oh, why did you come?"

"I came to warn you."

"Warn me? Of what?"

"I saw Narvon tortured," I said.

I felt her stiffen. "And—?"

"Mephis was trying to wring the names of his accomplices from him."

"Did—did he speak?" she asked breathlessly.

"He said, 'the toganja'; and died with the beginning of a name on his lips. I do not know definitely that Mephis suspected, for he did not see what I saw in Narvon's house; but I feared that he might suspect. So I came to take you with me."

She pressed my hand. "You are a good friend," she said. "I believed from the first that you would be; and I was sure of it when you prevented that *kardogan* from searching the back room of Narvon's house; now I knew how good a friend you are, Carson of Venus."

THAT name on her lips startled me. "How did you know?" I stammered. "When did you find out?" I stared at her open-mouthed.

"The morning after we dined first together on the day you entered Amlot."

"But how?"

Her laugh was soft. "We are all suspicious in Amlot—suspicious of everyone. We are always searching for new friends, expecting new enemies. The instant I saw you in that restaurant I knew that you were not of Amlot, probably not of Korva; but if you were of Korva, the chances were excellent that you were a spy from Sanara. I had to find out. Oh, how many times I have laughed when I recalled your stories of Vodaro. Why, you didn't know the first thing about that country."

"But how did you find out who I was?"

"I sent an emissary to your room in the travelers' house to search your belongings while you slept. He brought me Muso's message to Spehon."

"Oh, so that is why it never turned up against me," I exclaimed. "It has had me worried ever since it disappeared."

"I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't. You have no idea how careful we have to be."

"You were very careless in going to Narvon's house," I said.

"We hadn't the slightest reason to believe that Narvon was suspected. Now that I know how loyal you are, I don't mind telling you that we are planning a counter-revolution that will overthrow the Zanis and restore Kord to the throne."

"That can never be done," I said.

"Why?" She gripped my arm.

"Kord is dead."

There was a long silence while Zerka tried to take it in. She shivered. "You are sure?" she asked.

"I saw Mephis kill him." I told her the story briefly. She shook her head. "There is so much less to fight for now," she said. "Muso might easily be as bad as Mephis."

"Muso is a traitor to his own country," I said. "That message I brought you proves it clearly. I wish that I had it now to take back to Sanara with me. The army would rise against him; and with Kord dead, the people would rally around the man they love and make him *jong*."

"Who is that?" she asked.

"Taman," I said. "My friend. The one who brought me to Sanara."

"Taman? But Taman is dead."

"Taman dead? How do you know?" My heart sank at the thought. Duare and I now would have no powerful friend in Sanara. Would I be better off at Muso's hands in Sanara than here?

"We heard some time ago from a captured Sanaran officer that Muso had sent him to Amlot on a dangerous mission and that he had never returned to Sanara. It was a foregone conclusion that he must be dead."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "He returned safely to Sanara before I left there; and

unless he has been killed since I came to Amlot, he is still alive."

"You shall have the message," she said. "I kept it. But how do you expect to escape from Amlot and get back through the Zani lines in safety?"

"Do you forget that Carson of Venus is the *mistal* that flies over Zani troops and drops bombs on them?" I asked.

"But the thing you fly in? You haven't that here?"

"It is not far away. I am praying that nothing has happened to it. That was the chance I had to take."

"You are so lucky in everything that I am sure you will find it just as you left it. And, speaking of luck, how in the world did you ever get out of the city, with the entire Zani Guard looking for you? They are turning the city inside out, I am told."

"I was stopped by a detachment of the guard on my way to the quay. Fortunately for me, it was commanded by Mantar. He is a good friend, thanks to you."

"He is one of us," she said.

"I suspected you both almost from the first, notwithstanding your *'Maltu* Mephises' and your Zani salutes."

"I was so sure of you that I was a little freer than usual. Somehow, I knew you were all right—you just couldn't have been a Zani at heart."

"We shouldn't be sitting here talking," I told her. "Go get Muso's message and a few of your belongings, and we'll be on our way to Sanara."

She shook her head. "I wish that I might," she said, "but I have a duty to perform before I leave Amlot."

"There is nothing more important than saving your life," I insisted.

"THERE is something more important to me than my life," she replied. "I am going to tell you what it is and why I must stay and what I am going to do—something that I have shared with only Mantar before. Mantar and my man were the closest of friends. They were officers in the same regiment of the *Jong's* guard. When Mephis formed the Zani Party during the last disastrous war, my man was one of his bitterest foes. It was in the last battle of the war that my man was supposed to have been killed. His body was never found. But he was not killed in battle.

"A private soldier, who had been closely attached to Mantar, saw my man die; and he told Mantar the story of his end. He was tortured and murdered by a band of Zanis under direction of Mephis. When I learned this, I swore to kill Mephis; but I wished to wait until my act would be of service to my country. We are preparing for a sudden stroke at Zani power. When our forces are ready, the violent death of Mephis would throw the Zanis into at least temporary demoralization. I must be here to see that he dies violently at the proper time."

"But suppose you are suspected now and arrested? You can't carry out your plan then."

"If I am arrested, I shall still carry out my plan to kill Mephis," she said. I shall certainly be taken before him for questioning and probably for torture; then I shall kill him. You must go now. I'll fetch Muso's message. Just a moment," and she was gone.

I felt a wave of melancholy surge through me as I sat there waiting for her to return. I knew that I should never see her again, for she was going to certain death, even if she succeeded in destroying Mephis. She was so beautiful and fine—a loyal, courageous friend—it was tragic that she must die.

Presently she came back with Muso's message. "Here it is," she said. "I hope it puts Taman on the throne. I wish that I might live to see that day.

Then she, too, knew that she would not! I think I loathed Mephis more that instant than I ever had before—which is saying something no superlative can express.

"I am coming back, Zerka," I said. "Perhaps I can aid you in the overthrow of the Zanis. A few bombs at the psychological moment might help your cause. Or

maybe you will have changed your mind and decided to come away with me. Now listen carefully. Southwest of Amlot is a flat-topped mountain."

"Yes," she said, "it is called Borsan."

"Two rivers join just this side of it, and in the fork of the rivers there is a farm. It belongs to a man named Lodas."

"I know him well," she said. "He is one of us—a loyal soul."

"When I come back I shall circle over the farm of Lodas," I explained. "If I see a smoke-fire lighted in one of his fields, I shall know that I am to land for a message from you—or, better still, for you, I hope. If I see no smoke, I shall fly on to Amlot and circle the city. That will throw the city into a turmoil, I am sure. You will hear of it and see me. If you are alive, you will make one smoke-fire on your beach, here. If you would like to have me bomb the palace and the barracks, you will light two smoke-fires. If I see no smoke-fire, I shall know that you are dead; and then I shall bomb hell out of the Zanis."

"What is *hell?*" she asked.

"That is something peculiar to Earthmen," I laughed. "And now I must be going. Goodbye, Zerka." I touched her hand with my lips.

"Goodbye, Carson of Venus," she said "I hope that you do come back and bomb hell out of the Zanis."

CHAPTER XVI

DANGER IN SANARA

AS I put out to sea from the beach in front of the palace of the Toganja Zerka, my mind was filled with an indescribable tumult of emotions. My beloved Duare was in grave danger in Sanara—the greatest of which was that she might be forced to die by her own hand, which I knew she would do rather than accept Muso. And in Amlot I was leaving behind a good friend who was in equal danger; and in the prison of death lay Duare's father. If ever a man's mind was beset by apprehension of dire import, mine was.

Standing out from shore, I caught a brisker breeze, which finally veered into the northeast and drove me along at a spanking pace. As the wind rose, so did the seas, until I began to have doubt whether my frail craft could weather them. It was an almost following wind, and constantly I was expecting to be engulfed by the growing seas that pursued me.

The lightness of my boat, however, kept me just out of danger from that cause; but there was always the possibility of striking a submerged rock or a reef in this sea of which I knew nothing. I was compelled to stay too close to land for safety, lest I pass my little island without recognizing it. But at last I saw it; and without much difficulty made the little cove.

The fear that assailed me now centered in the safety of my ship. Would I find it where I had left it? What if some stray fishermen had discovered it? I thought of a dozen reasons why it might be missing or destroyed as I drew my canoe safely out of the water and hastened across the island toward the spot where I had fastened the *anotar* down. At last I saw it dimly through the night, and then I was beside it. The reaction and the relief left me weak for a moment, as I realized that the ship had not been harmed.

Casting off the ropes and throwing them into the rear cockpit, I taxied out into the open meadow that formed the greater part of the island. A moment later I was in the air and heading straight for Sanara.

I saw lights in Lodas' cottage as I sped overhead, and a moment later the lights of Amlot shone on my right. After that I saw no sign of life until the campfires of the Zani army flickered below me; and then, ahead, I could see the glow of the lights of Sanara. My Duare was there! In a few minutes I should be holding her in my arms again.

I tried to open the throttle wider, only to find that it was open as far as it would go—I had been running the engine at maximum all the way from Amlot without realizing it; but I had made good time. I had left the Zani barracks and started for

the quay about the twentieth hour, it was now approaching only the twenty-sixth hour. In six Amtorian hours, which are equivalent to four Earth hours, I had made my escape from Amlot, sailed about ten miles along the coast, and flown to Sanara. That little gale had helped me on my way, and my light craft had practically flown the distance.

I APPROACHED Sanara without lights and at a high altitude; then I spiraled down from directly above the landing field that I had previously used. I knew every bump and depression in it, so many times had I used it. With my noiseless motor, I came in as quietly as a falling leaf; and taxied to the hangar that Muso had built for me. The field was deserted; and the hour being late and few people on the streets in this district, I believe that no one saw my ship or saw me land. That was as I wished it, for I wanted to see Duare and Taman before I talked with anyone else.

I kept on my flying helmet to hide my ugly brushlike Zani haircut, and hoped that no one would notice my Zani trappings. I set out on foot in the direction of Taman's palace. As I approached it, I saw Muso's palace across the avenue brilliant with a thousand lights. Many gorgeously trapped *gantors* were waiting patiently along both sides of the avenue. Strains of music floated out into the night from inside the palace. I could hear the murmur of many voices. Muso was entertaining.

One of the sentries in front of Taman's palace stepped up to me as I stopped at the entrance.

"What do *you* want?" he demanded.

I suppose that putting a man in front of a door anywhere in the universe must do something to him. The responsibility implicit in such an assignment seems to remove all need for good manners.

"I want to go in," I said. "I am Carson of Venus."

The fellow stepped back as though he had seen a ghost, as I imagine he thought he had, for a moment. "Carson of Venus!" he exclaimed. "We thought you were dead. Muso issued a proclamation of mourning for you. You must be dead."

"I am not, and I want to go in and see my wife and Taman."

"They are not there," he said.

"Where are they?"

"Across the street." He looked a bit uncomfortable as he said it, or was it my imagination?

"Then I'll go over there," I said.

"I do not think Muso will be glad to see you," the sentry muttered; but he made no attempt to detain me.

At Muso's palace I again was stopped by a sentry. He wouldn't believe that I was Carson of Venus, and was going to have me carted off to jail. But I finally prevailed on him, by means of a small bribe, to call an officer. The one who came I had known quite well and liked. I had taken him up in my ship a number of times, and we were good friends. When he recognized me, he looked mighty uncomfortable. I laid a hand on his arm, reassuringly.

"Please don't be embarrassed," I begged. "I have heard. Am I in time?"

"Thank the good fates, you are," he replied. "It was to be announced at the twenty-seventh hour this night. It is almost that now."

"And I may go in?" I asked. I intended to anyway, even if I had to kill someone doing it.

"I would be the last man to stop you," he said.

"Thanks," I said, and ran up the broad stairway beyond the ornate portals.

I COULD see down the center corridor to the great throne-room. It was packed with Sanaran aristocracy. I knew that whatever was taking place in the palace was taking place there; so I hurried along the corridor toward the doorway. Over the heads of the assembly I could see Muso standing on a dais beside the throne. He was speaking.

"A *jong*," he was saying, "must take

his woman before the eyes of all men; so that all may know whom to honor as their *vadjong*. Being without a woman, I have chosen to honor one whose man gave his life in the service of Korva and myself. It is the highest award of merit that I can confer upon his memory."

I was elbowing my way roughly through the crowd to the accompaniment of scowls and muttered imprecations. Finally an officer seized me by the shoulders and swung me around facing him. When he saw who I was, his eyes went wide; and then a wry smile twisted his lips as he let me go and gave me a push forward.

As I came in full view of the dais, I saw Duare sitting on a low bench, her eyes staring straight ahead, that noble little head of hers unbowed. A strapping warrior of the *jong's* guard sat on either side of her. That, I could see, was the only reason she was there.

"And now," said Muso, "lives there any man who says I may not take Duare, *Janjong* of Vepaja, to be my queen?"

"There does," I said in a loud voice, stepping forward. Duare looked quickly down at me; then, before the warriors could prevent it, she had leaped to the floor and flung herself into my arms.

Muso stood there with his mouth open, his arms hanging limply at his side. He seemed to have collapsed like a pin-pricked balloon. He faced a situation with which it seemed impossible for him to cope—a problem without a solution. Finally he forced a sickly smile.

"I thought you were dead," he said. "This is indeed a happy moment."

I looked at him and made no reply. The silence in the room was deathlike. It must have lasted for a full minute, which is a very long time under such circumstances; then someone started for the doorway, and like a funeral procession the guests passed out. I felt a hand on my arm, and turned to see whose it was. It was Taman's. Jahara, his mate, was at his side. She looked both frightened and pleased.

"Come," he said, "you had better get out of here."

As we reached the doorway, I turned and looked back. Muso was still standing there beside his throne like one in a trance.

WE LEFT the *jong's* palace and crossed directly to Taman's, nor did any of us breathe freely until we were seated in Jahara's boudoir.

"You will have to leave Sanara at once," said Taman. "Tonight, if possible."

"I don't want to leave Sanara," I said. "At last Duare and I have found a place where we might live in peace and happiness. I shall not let one man drive me out."

"But you cannot fight the *jong*," he said; "and until Kord is restored, Muso is *jong*."

"I think I can," I said, "and I think I can create a new *jong*. Kord is dead."

"Kord dead? How do you know?"

"I saw Mephis kill him," and then I told them the story of the assassination of the Jong of Korva.

"And the new *jong?*" asked Jahara. "Who is he to be?"

"Taman," I said.

Taman shook his head. "That cannot be. I owe allegiance to Muso, if Kord be dead."

"Even if he were proved to be a traitor to his people?" I asked.

"No, not in that event, of course; but Muso is no traitor to the people of Korva."

"How many high officers of the army and officials of the government would feel as you do?" I asked.

"All but a few who owe everything to Muso," he replied.

"How many of them can you gather here tonight?" I asked.

"Twenty to thirty of the most important ones," he said.

"Will you do it? I ask you to trust me. It will be for the best good of Korva—the country that I wish to make my own."

He summoned several aides and gave instructions; then Taman, Jahara, and Duare settled down to listen to the story of my adventures in Amlot while we waited the coming of the invited guests. I did not

tell Duare that I had found her father a prisoner in a Zani prison until after we were alone together the next morning after the guests had left. She was very brave about it, and was confident that I would rescue him eventually.

At last the great men commenced to arrive. There were generals and councilors of state and great nobles of the realm, the flower of Korvan aristocracy that had escaped the Zani massacres. We met in the large audience chamber and were seated at a great table that had been brought into the room for the occasion. Taman was seated at the head of the table; I, being without nobility or rank, sat at the lower end. When all were seated, Taman rose.

"You all know Carson of Venus and what he has done for Sanara," he said. "He has asked me to call you together at this late hour because a national emergency exists. I trust him, and I feel that we should listen to him. Are you all agreed?"

Thirty heads nodded gravely; then Taman turned to me. "You may speak, Carson of Venus," he said; "but you must have proof of what you have insinuated to me, for though you are my friend, my first duty is to my *jong*. Do not forget that. Proceed."

"Let me put a hypothetical question to you gentlemen before I lay my information before you," I commenced. "If it were proved beyond doubt that your *jong* had sought to conspire with the enemy to cause the defeat of the forces holding Sanara and turn the city over to the Zanis at a price, would you feel that you were relieved of your oaths of allegiance to him and be warranted in replacing him with one of royal blood in whom you had the utmost confidence?"

Many a face was clouded by a resentful scowl. "You are suggesting a grievous charge," said a great general.

"I am asking you a hypothetical question," I replied. "I have made no charge. Do you care to answer?"

"There is no question as to what I should do," said the general, "if such an emergency confronted me. I should be the first to turn against any *jong* who did such a hideous thing as that, but that is something that no *jong* of Korva would do."

"And you other gentlemen?" I asked.

Without exception they all concurred in the sentiments of the general.

"Then I may tell you that such an emergency exists," I said. "I shall perhaps shock you by what I am about to say, but I must have your assurance that you will hear me through and consider impartially the evidence I have to offer."

"You have our pledge, Carson of Venus," said Taman.

"Muso, swearing me to secrecy, sent me to Amlot with a message for Spehon, Mephis' chief lieutenant. He chose me for two reasons. One was that he thought I could not read Amtorian, and therefore could not know what was in the message; and the other you had proof of in his palace this night—he wanted my woman. But I *can* read Amtorian; and after I got to Amlot, I read Muso's message to Spehon. In it he offered to open the gates of Sanara to Zani troops in return for the throne of Korva, and he agreed to accept Mephis as his advisor and to reward the Zanis. He also suggested that it would be best if Carson of Venus were destroyed in Amlot."

"This is preposterous!" cried a great noble. "The man must be mad to make such charges. They are prompted by jealousy, because Muso desires his woman."

"They cannot be true!" exclaimed another.

"Taman," cried a third, "I demand this man's arrest."

"You are not keeping your promise to me," I reminded them. "Is this what I am to expect of Korvan nobility? And do you think I am such a fool as to make charges of this kind without evidence to substantiate them? What would I have to gain? I would be signing my own death warrant. I may be doing so anyway; but I am doing it for the only country on Amtor that I can call my own, the one country in which my princess and I feel that we

have a chance to live happily among friends."

"Go on," said the great general. "I apologize for my confrères."

"Where are your proofs?" asked Taman.

"HERE," I said, and drew Muso's message from my pocket pouch. "Here, in his own handwriting, Muso convicts himself." I handed the envelope to Taman. He opened it and read it through carefully to himself; then he passed it to the man to his right. It passed around the table, each man reading it carefully. It left them silent and sober-faced. Even after the last man had read it and passed it back to Taman, they sat in silence. It was the great general who spoke first.

"I do not doubt the integrity of this man or his belief in the duplicity of Muso," he said. "It is sufficient to shake the confidence of each of us. In addition, he knows that Muso sought his life. I cannot blame him for anything he may think; I should think as he does, were I he. But he is not a Korvan by birth. There is not bred in him the reverence and loyalty to our *jongs* that is part of every fiber of our beings. For him, this document is sufficient proof.

"As I have said, it would be for me, were I he; but I am not. I am a Korvan noble, the first general of the *jong's* armies; and so I must give Muso the benefit of every doubt. Perhaps this message was a ruse to lure the Zani troops from some part of the line, that Muso might order an attack upon that weakened part. It would have been excellent strategy. Now I suggest that we prove conclusively whether such was his intent, or whether he did intend to open the gates to the enemy."

"How may that be done?" asked Taman.

"We shall try to arrange to have the enemy shoot three blue rockets into the air before the main gates of Sanara on three successive nights; then wait and see what Muso does."

"But how can we get the enemy to cooperate?" asked another.

"I shall commission Carson of Venus to drop a message behind their lines, telling them that I should like to hold a parley with them and asking them, if they are agreeable to the suggestion, to shoot the blue rockets."

"An excellent suggestion," said Taman.

"But," I objected, "seeing me returned alive, Muso may be suspicious; for he definitely asked Spehon to have me destroyed."

"Write a report," said the general, "stating that after you delivered the message you became fearful and escaped."

"That would certainly arouse Muso's suspicions," said Taman.

"I might tell him the truth." I suggested, "and that is that the very night I arrived in Amlot the message was stolen from me. The very fact that I remained there so long should convince Muso that I had no suspicion of what the note contained."

"I think your idea is the best one," said the general; "but why did you stay so long in Amlot—if you could have escaped?"

"I had several reasons," I replied. "I suspected that Mintep, Jong of Vepaja and father of my princess, was a prisoner there. I also wanted to gather what information I could for the Sanaran high command. Lastly, I had to establish myself before I could safely make an effort to escape. I became an officer in the Zani guard and was, for a while, acting governor of the *Gap kum Rov.*"

"And you procured much information?" asked a noble.

"Much." I nodded. "I have learned that a counter-revolution is about to be launched, the promulgators of which hoped to restore Kord to his throne."

"You say 'hoped'," commented a noble. "Have they now given up the idea?"

"Kord is dead," I said.

I might as well have thrown a bomb at them. They leaped to their feet almost as one man. "Kord dead?" It was the same stunned reaction that I had seen before.

"But," cried one, "we have heard that rumor often before, but it has never been substantiated."

"I saw him die," I told them; then I had to go over that harrowing episode.

AT LAST they prepared to go; but before they did I asked a final question. "And now, gentlemen," I said, "just who is going to protect my princess and me from Muso? If I am not mistaken, I stand a good chance of being assassinated the first time I go on the streets."

"He is right," said the general.

"He should certainly be protected, General Varo," Taman agreed.

"Well," said Varo, "I know of no safer place for them than where they are now, under the protection of the man who is next in line for the throné of Korva."

There was a subdued cheer at that, but I was not surprised. Taman was the most popular man in Sanara. He sat for a moment with his head bowed, and then he looked at Varo. His face showed traces of mental strain; his manner was tinged with embarrassment.

"I wish that I might agree with you in that," he said; "but, unfortunately, I cannot. As a matter of fact, I believe that my palace would be the least safe place for Carson of Venus and the Janjong of Vepaja. During the past ten days three attempts have been made upon my life—twice by poison, once by dagger."

The disclosure so shocked the assembled nobles that for a moment there was deep silence. Then Varo spoke:

"Were the scoundrels apprehended?" he asked. "Do you know who they were?"

"Yes," replied Taman, "but they were only the instruments of another."

"And you know who that is?" asked a noble.

"I can only surmise," replied Taman. "Unfortunately my retainers killed all three before I had an opportunity to question them."

"Perhaps I had better remain here, then," I said, "as additional protection for the next *jong* of Korva."

"No," said Taman. "I appreciate your generosity; but I am well protected by my own people, and there are more important things for you to do."

"You may come to my palace," said Varo. "I swear no one shall take you from there, even if I have to protect you with the entire army of Sanara."

I shook my head. "Muso will unquestionably send for me," I said. "Should you refuse to give me up, his suspicions would be aroused; and our entire plan might come to nothing. I think I have a solution of the problem."

"What is it?" asked Taman.

"Let Varo prepare his message to the enemy at once. At the same time I shall write my report to Muso. Get two officers to volunteer for extra hazardous duty. I shall want them to accompany me. As soon as Varo's message is ready, Varo can order me out on special duty. I shall take my princess and the two officers with me, drop the message behind the enemy lines, and remain away until you shall have had time to determine Muso's guilt or assure yourselves of his innocence. When I return to Sanara, liberate one balloon if it is unsafe for me to land; liberate two if I am to return another day for further advice; liberate three if I may come down safely. In the event that I cannot land in safety, I shall land the two officers the night that I get the message; and I must have your assurance now that I shall be permitted to take off again unharmed."

"The plan is excellent," said Taman. "Please put it in writing so that there will be no misunderstanding of the signals."

"May I ask why you wish to have two of our officers accompany you?" asked Varo.

"One of them will have to go with me into Amlot while I attempt to liberate the Jong of Vepaja from the *Gap kum Rov;* the other will remain with my princess and the ship while I am away in Amlot."

"I shall have no difficulty in obtaining volunteers," said Varo. "Now, if we are to get away, we must get to work."

CHAPTER XVII

RETURN TO AMLOT

AN HOUR before dawn we left Taman's palace—Duare, the two officers who had volunteered to accompany

us, and I. On Duare's account, I felt nervous and uneasy for we had to leave the palace in full view of the guards before Muso's palace directly across the avenue; and while Varo's guard gave us some feeling of greater security, it certainly made us extremely conspicuous. There were ten military *gantors* loaded with soldiers, constituting what to me had taken on the proportions of a pageant. And I can tell you that I breathed a sigh of relief when I had my party aboard the ship and was taxiing out for the take-off. As we soared above the walls of Sanara and out across open country, I was happier than I had been for many days. Once again I was free, and Duare was with me.

I had put Ulan and Legan, the two officers, in the cabin. Duare sat beside me, and there was a basket of small bombs in each cockpit. The ship was more heavily laden than it had ever before been, but that had seemed to make no appreciable difference in the take-off, nor could I see that she handled differently in flight. We had determined in Havatoo while designing her that she would easily lift a load of fifteen hundred pounds; so I had had little doubt that she would have no trouble with the approximately thousand-pound load that she was now carrying.

I flew slowly toward the enemy camp, killing time until daylight. Ulan and Legan were thrilled beyond words for this was their first flight. Duare and I were just content to be together again, holding hands like a couple of kids.

I had hurriedly contrived a tiny parachute before leaving Taman's palace. It consisted of a square of very light fabric woven from the web of a small cousin of the *targo,* a giant spider that inhabits the mile-high trees that grow in many parts of Amtor; the fabric is so sheer as to be almost invisible, yet it is quite strong. To the four corners of this square piece I had tied strings, and to the ends of these strings I had attached the leather envelope which bore Varo's message to the enemy.

Dawn was just breaking as we flew over the Zani camp. An alert sentry must have sighted us, for I distinctly heard a shout and almost immediately men came running from the shelters which lined the streets of the camp.

They stood in the road and gesticulated, and several raised their guns and fired at us.

I continued to circle above them, well out of range of R-rays, until it was full daylight. Then, estimating the velocity of the wind, I flew a little way beyond the windward side of the camp and tossed the message overboard. The parachute opened immediately and floated gracefully down toward the camp. I could see thousands of men standing with upturned faces, watching it. They must have thought that it was some new engine of destruction, for when it came close to the ground near the center of the camp, they scattered like sheep. I continued to circle until I saw one brave soul advance and pick the message up. Then I dipped a wing and flew away.

THE trip to the island was uneventful. I circled Lodas' house for quite some time, but no smoke signal was lighted; then I dropped over to the island and landed. The country, except in the vicinity of the cities, is strangely deserted in every part of Amtor that I have visited. Between Sanara and the farm of Lodas we had not seen a sign of human life except that in the camp of the Zanis. Few farmers have the temerity that Lodas displayed in locating a farm so far from civilization, and open constantly to the danger of attack by some of the fearsome creatures which roam the plains and forests of Venus.

It was, however, the very fact that few men traversed these interurban wildernesses that had rendered my little island so safe a place to hide the *anotar* as well as the little boat that had brought me from Amlot and which I hoped would bear me back again now.

I saw my boat lying where I had dragged it; and now I had only to wait for darkness and the proper moment to launch my attempt to rescue Mintep. I told Legan

that he was to remain with Duare should she need protection, and I made her promise to take to the air if any danger threatened them.

Duare was by now an efficient pilot. I had taken her with me on many of my flights over the enemy lines, and had had her practice landings and take-offs on the surface of a dry lake I had discovered some fifty miles west of Sanara. She was quite competent to land anywhere that conditions were reasonably favorable, as I had taught her well.

But it was the hardest thing I ever did to consider separating from her again. But it had to be. . . .

I drew a rough map of Amlot for her, marking the location of the palace and the barracks and told her that if I had not returned to the island by dawn she and Legan were to fly along the coast toward Amlot, keeping a close lookout for my boat; and if they did not see me, they were to fly over the city and drop bombs on the palace and the barracks until they saw me put out into the harbor. I was sure they would be able to identify me from the air because of my flying helmet.

It had taken me about three Amtorian hours to sail from Amlot to the island. Allowing eight hours for the round trip, including the time it might take to get into the *Gap Kum Rov* and take Mintep out, I estimated that I should leave the island about the twenty-ninth hour in order to get back by dawn. In the event that Ulan and I did not return, Duare was to take Legan back to Sanara; and if three balloons were sent up, indicating that it was safe to land, she should do so; for I felt that she would be safer there than anywhere else. If the signal were a discouraging one, she might try to reach Vepaja; but that would be almost suicidal, since she could not approach anywhere near Kooaad, her city, in the ship; and the dangers she would encounter on the ground were far too numerous and terrible to render it at all likely that she would survive.

"Do not even think of anything so terrible," she begged. "If you do not return, it will make no difference where I go, for I shall not survive you long. I do not care to live unless I have you, Carson."

ULAN and Legan were on the ground inspecting the boat; so I took her in my arms and kissed her, and told her that I would come back. "For no one but your father would I go to Amlot and risk your life as well as my own," I said. "For no other reason would I ever consider leaving you."

"I wish you did not have to go, Carson. What a strange retribution it would be if, for the sake of the throne I gave up for you, I should lose you. It would not be just retribution, though—it would be wicked."

"You'll not lose me, dear," I assured her, "unless your father takes you away from me. Or unless I die. And that is a chance I have taken and must take again."

"He can't do that now. Even though he is my father and my *jong,* I should disobey him if he sought to."

"I'm afraid he's going to be—well, disagreeable about the matter," I suggested. "You know how shocked you were at the very thought of even talking to me. When I told you I loved you, you wanted to knife me; and you really felt that I deserved death. How do you suppose he's going to feel about it when he finds that you are irrevocably mine? He'll want to kill me."

"When are you going to tell him?" she asked.

"After I get him here on the island. I'm afraid he'd upset the boat if I told him at sea."

She shook her head dubiously. "I don't know," she said. "I can't imagine how he'll take it. He is a very proud *jong,* steeped in the traditions of a royal family that extends back into prehistoric times; and he does not know you as I do. . . . Do you know, Carson, he may even kill me. You have no conception of the taboos and interdictions that dictate the attitude of all toward the sacred person of the

daughter of a *jong*. There is nothing in your life with which I may compare it. There is nothing that you so reverence and hold so sacred."

"Yes there is, Duare," I said.

"What?" she demanded.

"You."

"Fool!" she said, laughing. "But you're a dear fool, and I know that you believe what you said."

The day drew to a close and the night wore on. Ulan and Legan amused themselves by fishing; and we built a fire and cooked what they caught, enjoying an unexpectedly excellent meal. I cut a slender sapling about twenty feet long and stowed it in the boat. As the twenty-ninth hour approached, I kissed Duare goodbye. She clung to me for a long time. I know she thought it was the last time she should ever see me.

With all my heart I hoped not and it was with difficulty that I overcame a desire to stay with her.

Then Ulan and I embarked. A good breeze was blowing and we skimmed away into the darkness, bound for Amlot.

Did you ever reach into an inside pocket time after time to assure and reassure yourself that you had not forgotten the theater tickets that you knew were there? Well, that's the way I kept feeling in my pocket pouch for the duplicate master keys to the cells of the prison of death I had had made just before I left Amlot. For without that key not even an act of God could have gotten Mintep's cell unlocked without Torko's aid; and somehow I couldn't see Torko co-operating.

WE ROUNDED the headland and drew into the harbor of Amlot just before the third hour. Running before the wind, we approached the little island of horror where loomed the *Gap kum Rov*. As we came closer to shore I lowered the sail, lest its white expanse be seen by some watchful Zani eye, and paddled quietly in beneath those frowning walls where death and injustice ruled.

Feeling my way cautiously along the cold, damp stones, I came at last to the opening of the chute through which the ashes of burned men are discharged into the bay. Ulan and I spoke no word, as all the way from the island I had been coaching on what he was to do; so that it would be unnecessary for us to speak in other than an emergency.

Once more I felt for the key; then as Ulan held the boat in position beneath the mouth of the chute, I carefully inserted the pole I had prepared and pushed it up its full length, letting the lower end rest on the bottom of the boat. This done, I proceeded to climb the pole into the chute. Disturbed by the pole and my body brushing the sides of the chute, the ashes of a thousand dead men drifted gently down upon me. And even then I reflected that ashes—or graves—were always multiplied by a dictator.

When I reached the top of the pole, I raised one hand directly over my head. To my vast relief, it came in contact with the trap door just a few inches above me. I pushed up, and raised it far enough so that I could grasp the sill with my fingers; then remained quiet, listening. Only the moans and groans of the prisoners came to my ears. There was no alarm.

So far, none had heard me. Pulling myself up, I raised the door with my head and shoulders until I could fall forward with the upper half of my body on the floor of the furnace room. A moment later I stood erect.

A few steps brought me to the dimly lighted corridor. I knew exactly where Mintep's cell lay, and walked directly to it. Whatever I was to do must be done quickly and silently. Pressing my face to the bars, I looked in. I thought I saw a figure in the far corner, a figure huddled on the floor. I inserted the key in the lock and turned it. The door swung in. I crossed and kneeled beside the figure, listening. By his breathing, I knew that the man slept. I shook him lightly by the shoulder, and as he stirred I quickly cautioned him to silence.

"Are you Mintep?" I asked, fearful that

he might have been taken to his death and another placed in his cell since I had located it. I had not served in this prison without having learned how quickly changes might come, how unexpectedly one man might be done away with to make place for another. I held my breath waiting for his reply.

At last he spoke. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Never mind that," I snapped irritably. "Are you Mintep?"

"Yes," he said.

"Come with me quietly. Duare is waiting for you."

THAT was enough. He came to his feet and followed me stealthily to the furnace room, though I could see that he staggered a little from weakness. It was no small job getting him down that pole. He was too weak to climb down himself; so I had practically to carry him. But at last we were in the boat.

So far, so good!

I lowered the pole into the water and pushed off. We paddled all the way to the mouth of the harbor, as otherwise we would have to tack back and forth several times to have made it; and I was afraid the sail might attract attention from the shore. Had it, a launch must certainly have overhauled us before we could get out into the open sea. But at last we turned the headland, and Ulan hoisted the sail.

Then it was that I thought to do a very foolish thing. Once I had stopped and seen Zerka while I was escaping from Amlot. It had seemed very simple and quite safe. Conditions of tide and wind were again favorable. Why not do it again? I might obtain information that would be of value to my friends at Sanara. I told Ulan and Mintep what I intended doing. It was not for them to question my judgment; so they concurred. It was the first time that we had dared speak, so fearful had we been of discovery, knowing, as we did, how the sound of voices carries over water.

"Who are you?" asked Mintep.

"Do you recall the prison officer who sang a song to you?" I asked.

"But he was a Zani," said Mintep.

"Only posing as a Zani to find you," I told him.

"But who are you?" he insisted.

"For some time I was a guest-prisoner in your palace at Kooaad," I said. "I am the stranger called Carson."

"Carson!" he exclaimed. "When Kamlot returned to Kooaad, he told me of all that you had done to serve my daughter, Duare. And now you say she is safe and waiting for me?"

"Yes. In two or three hours you shall see her."

"And you have done all this for me?" he asked.

"For Duare," I said, simply.

He made no comment on the correction, and we sailed on in silence again until we came opposite the palace of Zerka. Then I turned the boat's nose in toward shore. Alas, what stupid things one does! The palace was lighted much as I had last seen it—all seemed quiet and peaceful. I hoped Zerka would be alone. I wanted only a few swift words with her.

"Stay in the boat," I told Ulan, "and be ready to push off on an instant's notice." I walked up the garden to the great doors that open onto the terrace. I paused and listened, but I could hear nothing; then I whistled—and waited. I did not have to wait long. I heard the sound of men running, but the sounds did not come from the house—they came from the garden behind me. I wheeled, and in the light from the palace windows I saw a dozen Zani guardsmen running toward me.

"Shove off, Ulan!" I cried at the top of my voice. "Shove off, and take Mintep to Duare! I command it!" Then they were upon me.

At the sound of my voice the great doors swung open, and I saw more Zani uniforms in the great hall of the palace of the Toganja Zerka. They dragged me in, and when I was recognized a sullen murmur filled the room.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Passage to Nantua

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "A Swap for Stonewall Jackson," "Close But No Cigar," etc.

A Tale of South Seas Justice

THE native proa with the lone Kanaka in its stern looked beautiful to Hawk Jennifer. High in bow and stern so as to resemble—vaguely—the crescent shape of the silver moon in the cool night sky which blanketed the tiny island, it rode the incoming swell dextrously, its stout body lying down between the long outriggers while the savage little black man with the paddle guided it in to the beach.

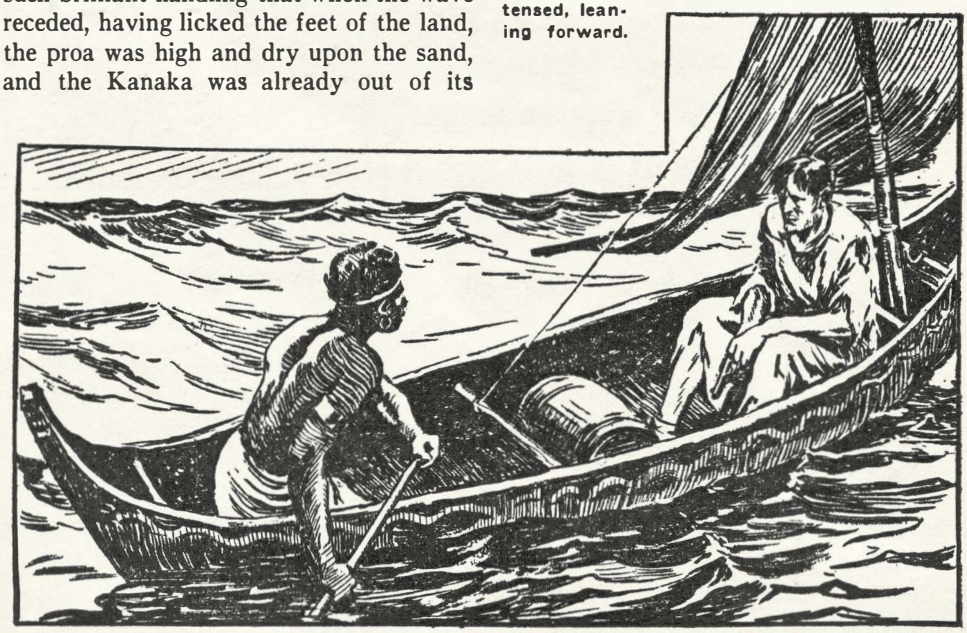
Jennifer watched in fierce elation. The Kanaka did not see him. It was dark and the moon was thin, but even so Jennifer would never have trusted the darkness to conceal him. He hid behind the bushes back from the beach a bit where the coral ridges lifted themselves up out of the sea.

He saw the little savage bring that canoe in on the crest of a roaring comber with such brilliant handling that when the wave receded, having licked the feet of the land, the proa was high and dry upon the sand, and the Kanaka was already out of its maw and tugging at the bow to keep the craft away from the white fingers of the surf.

Jennifer did not move. He could not have moved, had he wanted to. The elation of the moment numbed him. For the first time in nine days, there was another living soul upon the island beside himself. Nine days he had spent alone here. A habitat that tore at the mind after awhile and tried to twist it crazily at the roots. White sand, coral, the merciless, adamant sun, the mad, screaming goony birds, the muttering waves on the shore, white and blue and green by intervals with the foam fantailing across the crests as the trades picked it up from the sea. . . . Yes, beautiful at first. And then monotonous: grim monotony of sight and sound. Enough to drive a man crazy.

Nine days alone with a cask of water and a lot of noisy birds had gotten Jen-

Jennifer tensed, leaning forward.



nifer. But then, he considered himself lucky to be alive at all. The schooner *Malapi* was sunk at the bottom of the lagoon beyond the point of land, driven in there upon the razor-edged coral of the point by the storm a week before. Three dead men lay down on the ocean floor with the *Malapi,* Thompson, Bilkes, and Captain Peacock, who'd owned the ship. And Jennifer had been the only one to make shore.

The cask of water was upon the beach next day after the sinking. It had lasted. Jennifer had treated it gently. There was still a good deal of water left. But there had been no food on the isle, only the bitter *hapa* berries on the scrubby bushes. And the irony of the thing lay in the fact that although Jennifer lounged on a desert in a wilderness of sea, remote from all life and comfort, the port to which the *Malapi* had been bound was Nantua, a scant hundred miles northeast.

A mere hundred watery miles, which is no distance in the reaches of the southern seas, was all that separated him from life. . . .

. . . So the Kanaka and his proa were welcome. Jennifer felt a desire to embrace the little savage and hug the canoe. He would have liked to use the last shot in his revolver in a noisy celebration of his deliverance.

But these were the Solomons. And you couldn't be sure whether you'd picked a naive copra worker for a mate, or a Fiji headhunter or cannibal. Nantua was civilization. There Jennifer knew he would have been safe, for there the line of British authority meted out justice swiftly and sternly, and all the natives feared the High Commission.

But this was a mere atoll, away from justice, and he had to play safe. Very safe.

THE Kanaka, having beached the boat, proceeded to light a small fire which soon blazed cheerfully. Jennifer watched the little man sharply, aware of the razor-edged axe which the savage carried. He moved closer to see the native more sharply.

A silent, wiry little man with an inscrutable face and eyes which flickered like a reef in the sunlight a few fathoms down.

Jennifer shivered. You couldn't take a chance with a guy like that. He decided to wait. He could not sleep this night. He would have to wait and watch.

From the proa, the Kanaka began to take supplies for his supper. Jennifer could hardly contain himself. He saw rice and sweet yams, coconuts and some biscuit. His mouth watered. But he still held back. He had everything to lose now if he were careless. He kept his nerve.

Of course, with the single bullet in his revolver, he could have shot the black man, dined royally, and become the owner of the proa. But that plan had its bad points. It was not that Hawk Jennifer was averse to murder. Indeed, his present predicament was the result of the fact that he had fled from a dead man in Borano, to the west. The dead man he himself had killed. A man named Frank who was a comparative stranger but who made the mistake of cursing Jennifer when they were both drunk. It was not the first time he had killed a man; the deed left him with no regrets, other than those which arose from the fact that he had not hidden the body too well and that he had had to flee before they unearthed the corpse.

The pity was that, in fleeing, he had had little money. And the little he had had was aboard the *Malapi* five fathoms deep.

But killing the savage little Kanaka meant that Jennifer would have to navigate the passage to Nantua alone. It was understood, naturally, that he would board that proa for Nantua and no place else. The revolver with its lone bullet assured him that. But Jennifer was no navigator and he knew it. With a compass, he might have managed. The distance was slight, the Solomons broad and visible, the weather good.

Without one, he could not take the chance. No, he needed this little man for the passage to Nantua, needed him to follow the instinct which in-islanders have, which allows them, like the birds, to find their ways across eight hundred miles of

open water from port to port. So the Kanaka was to live.

He watched the little man eat, and soon he forgot that he was hungry. The food, he realized suddenly, would only satiate him, make him less sharp. In the morning, he would eat a biscuit or two and control his appetite. But he had to stay awake. He had had plenty of sleep in his stay on the isle. Sleep was all there had been to do, except for vain searching for passing ships (there had been none) and the waste of five bullets on flying gulls and goony birds. He had fired at them for food. He had killed one out of the five, a tough old gull whom, when he had his prize, Jennifer could not eat raw. He had no matches for a fire and he was not hungry enough yet to eat the bird. So it had rotted in the sun.

Jennifer wiped his mouth, remembering. He thought that now he *could* eat the bird, beak and all! Fire or no fire!

But he waited, feeling safer within his own hard patience, and he watched the Kanaka greedily and sharply. After eating, the little savage stored his foods back in the belly of the proa once more and pulled a brown tarpaulin over them. Then the native returned to the fire.

Jennifer stiffened.

The Kanaka was pulling something from around his neck. He lifted it over his head. A pouch. And in this region, a pouch meant pearls!

Quite true. There *were* pearls. Hundreds of them tumbled out of the pouch in the Kanaka's hand, rolling like rice cubes into his other hand. From where he crouched, Jennifer could not see them well, could make out only the sizes of the larger ones. He almost whistled in consternation. A king's ransom in a head-hunter's hand!

And then Jennifer noticed the golden ring on the black man's left hand. It was a big one and it glistened in the reflection of the fire's glow, its golden tint flaming orange from the saffron flames. In the center of the ring was a pearl. A huge black pearl. Jennifer stared at it in awe, knew quickly it was unique, knew he could recognize that black pearl again wherever he saw it. . . .

HAWK JENNIFER forgot he had ever been hungry. The sight of the pearls and that ring filled him up. He not only had a passage to Nantua, but he had a fortune waiting for him there when he cashed in the pearls. The ring he would keep. With the pearls, he'd buy passage for the States by way of Hilo in a copra ship.

As the night wore on, the Kanaka curled up by the dying fire and slept, his little body looking like a small bundle upon the sands. And Jennifer, considering the small lifeless form, began to wonder at it all, a native halting overnight at such an atoll, laden with supplies and pearls. The pearls? Probably gotten by forbidden diving in the lagoon at Nantua. Or some other port. And now the beggar had his wind up and was making a run for his cannibal home before the colonial police reached him and confiscated the pearls.

But how on earth had the Kanaka ever come by that ring?

The dawn was young and slatey when the Kanaka awoke to the jolt of a foot in his rump. He was on his feet in an instant and his lithe hands went for the axe but Jennifer snapped: "None of that, eight-ball, or I'll put a slug through your skull! You savvy English?"

The Kanaka, over his first fright, stared at Jennifer in disbelief. He muttered, "I savvy, fella mahster," in pidgin English, and dropped his hands to his sides. He kept staring. Jennifer was a sight to see. His beard had sprouted and left his face unkempt and brutal, and his ducks and shirt were in tatters, dirtied and wrinkled beyond belief. His face had fallen in from lack of food, and his eyes, red-veined and bright, were sharply slitted upon the black man.

"Shipwreck," said Jennifer. He waved a hand. "Here nine days. Now you come. You take fella mahster home. Nantua." He waved northeast.

The Kanaka shook his head, his face unperturbed. "I no go Nantua," he said.

"Terena go west to Puchoo. There my people."

"Puchoo?" Jennifer echoed in mild horror. "That's the cannibal country!"

"My people," said Terena quietly. "I go there. I take you."

"Yeah?" said Jennifer. "Well, get this through your woolly bonnet, Johnny boy. You're taking me to Nantua. White-man's town. You're taking me there in this freighter of your'n and you're going to do it in two days flat of I'll kill you. And keep your hands off that axe!"

"No Nantua," said the black man. " 'Fraid of Nantua."

"You oughta be," said Jennifer, "with them pearls." He smiled as Terena started. "Sure, I saw them. Forbidden diving, eh? Well, they won't catch you. All you have to do is put me anywhere around Nantua and you can leave. But I'm getting a passage to Nantua, and you're gonna be the skipper."

The Kanaka knew then that he was marked for death, just as Jennifer knew it. And when they floated the proa and started off in the smoky seas, and Jennifer took away the black man's axe, Terena became quietly calm. He hoisted the sail and guided the craft through the seas without shipping a drop of water.

Jennifer sat in the bow, facing the Kanaka with the gun.

Once the Kanaka tried to shift the course west under a pretense of tacking. But Jennifer was no fool. He waved the gun, cursed harshly, and they headed northeast again. The wind was moderate. They logged about three miles an hour. The trade stayed with them, pushing them along. And the Kanaka never said a word.

At night, Jennifer could barely see his companion and it bothered him. The moon was turning new and there was little light. But he could barely make out the little bulk and he watched it with the fascination of a snake. The Kanaka was resigned. He sat there guiding the proa and never spoke.

When the second day dawned, Jennifer was physically tired but his eyes did not droop. He drank water but he did not touch food. As long as he stayed hungry, he knew he would stay awake. It was a tough game to play but it meant his life. The Kanaka knew it. He ate heartily of the biscuits and yams. And Jennifer's mouth watered for the food. But he held out.

TOWARD dusk of the second day, they raised the smoky headlands of Nantua. The island rose out of the seas like a misty whaleback.

Jennifer waited until night had fallen completely and the hulk of land had grown huge as they neared it. And then he turned to stare at the Kanaka.

The Kanaka must have felt the impending clash through the darkness. Certainly he could not see Jennifer's eyes. But he put the paddle in the boat and sat with his hands folded in his lap.

The stoic element of the thing nearly turned Jennifer's nerve. But he couldn't see the Kanaka's eyes. So his nerve held. He raised the pistol and muttered, "So long Johnny boy," and he shot the black man through the heart.

When the Kanaka slumped down, Jennifer crawled back to him and ripped the pearl pouch from around his neck. He pulled the black pearl ring from the finger brutally, then placed it on his own hand. He searched the black man thoroughly, found nothing more, then dumped the body overboard. The splash wet him a little, and the floating body quickly receded and was gone in the darkness. . . .

Jennifer tossed the revolver overboard then and picked up the paddle. He could see the twinkling lights of Nantua in the distance, and he guided the craft home.

In two hours, he rode a comber into the beach, nearly swamped the proa, made land safely and staggered out of the canoe like a wretched skeleton.

He saw men on the beach who ran to his proa with interest but he couldn't be bothered with them now. He had pearls, he was rich, and here was a port of white men where big ships came from the States, from Honolulu. Behind him lay privation

and hardship and two dead men, and ahead a leisurely escape with lots of money.

But he was starved. And he needed clothes. But first he had to eat.

When he slithered into the café, the proprietor looked astonished. Jennifer blurted out the story of the wreck of the *Malapi,* told a fine tale of how he had come on from the atoll in a proa which had washed ashore. He ordered food and drink and he got it.

But he did not finish it.

He was half-way through the meal, having paid for it with several of the little seed pearls in the pouch which he had yanked from Terena's throat, when he became aware of two men standing beside him. He turned slowly, saw them in the uniforms of the colonial police. One had a mustache, and a long red face. A white man. The other was a native.

"Your name?" said the white officer, putting a hand on Jennifer's right arm.

"Jennifer," was the dazed reply. "Peter —Jennifer—"

The white man laughed politely. "So you didn't have the nerve to make a go of it, eh, Jennifer? You did a good job on this end. We'd never have caught up with you. We figured you were heading for the cannibal region in Puchoo. We thought you'd gone."

Jennifer stared. "What are you talking about?"

"But you didn't have the nerve to do it—or perhaps you got lost? That's a long bit of navigation from here. You did a nice job of smashing the beach boats so that we couldn't follow you. We thought maybe a native had done the job, using an axe on the boats that way. Well, you had your dashed nerve coming back *here* to Nantua! By Jove, you did! You're under arrest."

"Arrest?" Jennifer shouted. "Arrest? For what?"

"For murder," said the white officer. "And don't look so dashed surprised either. You didn't expect old Jake Watrous to survive that axe in his head, did you? Captain Watrous was a tough old pearler, my dear chap, but his skull wasn't iron!"

"I—never heard—" Jennifer said, gritting his teeth, "of Jake Watrous in all my life! I've never been to Nantua before—"

"Well, of all the dashed nerve," said the officer. "You killed Watrous, stole his pearls, and then you have the nerve to deny the whole thing. Next you'll be saying some bally cannibal did it and you lost the blighter at sea bringing him back to justice." He roared with laughter. "And you, wearing Watrous' famous black pearl ring on your own hand! In all the world, Jennifer, there's no other ring quite like that one. It'll hang you as sure as you're alive right now!"

And Jennifer, remembering the Kanaka's silent resignation in the proa, fancied he could see the little black man smiling at him from hell and reminding him how dear the short passage to Nantua had cost him.

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

IN THE issue of January 1st, slightly mad with good cheer, we allowed the Poetry Dept. space on these pages to publish what seemed, at the time, some passable jingles wishing well to our authors. It has required three issues of sober reflection for us to realize that we were victimized by thoughts of the solar system and the festal season. In our dreamy gracious condition we would have wished anyone well, and we would have lent space—yards of it—to the Fire Dept., or the Street Cleaning Dept., as readily as we did to the Poetry Dept. Today, filled with a sane and sober style, we shudder whenever any pair of light-headed nouns or adjectives seem bent to mate and unite in rhyme. For, after all, mating and rhyming are diseases of the Spring; to get through the Winter a man needs something more substantial than a couplet, he needs his long underwear, a level head, and good solid prose.

Hereafter we shall keep these metric feet upon the ground. But we can't help it if other people keep straying into the bright green clouds of rhyme. And, since our own public is the transgressor, we can't deny it the space which is dedicated to its communications. So, without more ado, we pass on, just as it came out of the mailbag:

ODE TO ARG FROM ITS READERS

You have wished your wishes to the writers all,
Your scriveners both great and small;
Now list to the readers of this mighty nation
Who have taken no part in the conversation.
For these mute, inglorious Miltons do I speak
In praise of Argo (printed every week.)
I forward, for instance, a loud hosannah
On behalf of the folk of Louisiana;
And felicitations true to thee
From the readers in sunny Tennessee.
Cheers from New York's teeming cities
Swell the chorus of these poor ditties
And echo from even the remoter
Stretches of North and South Dakota.
West and East the same refrain
From Reno (Nev.) to Portland (Maine)
And from the pride of Illinois (Chicago)
"A toast to our boast—Mr. Argo."
We Philippines of tropic nights resplendent
Still love you though we're independent;
From Rhode Island's Providence to Connecticut's Greenwich,
The folks all read Argosy along with their spinach;
But where it really is a mania
Is in them hills of Pennsylvania.
The moment that the public lamps yer
Ye're a sell-out in New Hampshire
And the Green Mountain Boys of old Vermont
All the newsstands for Argosy haunt.

Ohio, Alaska,
Hawaii, Nebraska,
Grab for their copies as soon as they're out;
Delaware, New Mexico,
Kansas and the State of Mo.,
Add their note to the flattering shout.

We know an old lady in North Car'lina
Who writes to say there's nothing finer;
A gent both loud and firm of mouth
Who hails from Carolina (South)
Swears by heck that he is gonna
Praise you clear to Arizona,
While a dashing commuter weekly connects us

With the praises that ring from deepest Texas.
We could, if we would, give the floor
To boosters from Wisc., from Col. and Ore.
Nor need you ever fish again
For compliments from Michigan.
To the huzzahs and bravos and whooplas hark
That emanate from Minn. to Miss. and Ark.;
A Montana "Yippee!" and a Jawjah rebel yell
Mean: "Okay, Argo, you done right well."
The dusty cowboy daily homing
Grabs for you in Old Wyoming;
And you're far from just a joke, la!
In the depths of dear old Okla.
With mere words, you can't take a pass
At the fervent affection of the people of Mass.;

Idaho and N. J.
Utah also Io-way
Toss their Stetsons in the air;
Maryland and Alabama,
West Virginia, Indiama—
Yea, praises come from everywhere.

Readers boost your favor forrader
From D. C. to sunny Florida,
From Washington's far frozen reaches
To California's star-kissed beaches.
Mountain-folk of old Virginia
Read 'most every word that's in ya,
And native sons are very lucky
If the Colonels in Kentucky
Don't grab every copy off the stands
As soon as they can get one in their hands.
And many 'mongst their friends do numbria
In the District of Columbria
And so your public, all ubiquitous,
Says, "Argosy, you gotta stick wit' us."
O'er seas of print may the good bark sail,
Its editors keep out of jail,
Its writers their brain-babies nourish—
In other words, may your pixies flourish!

WE CANNOT help but brood a moment upon the significance of the above. A people roused to the ode as a form of expression is a people indeed. As far as we know, the authors (who modestly wished to remain anonymous) did not compose their poem as the delegates of some hastily assembled convention of ARGOSY readers, but acted entirely independently. We think the most amazing feature of their work is its complimentary tone; and, next most amazing, that they have included all forty-eight states, not to mention the Philippines, Hawaii and Alaska. ARGOSY, from the bottom of its 144 pages, thanks its reader-rhymsters.

AND now for a bit of mail that is not in verse. We are grateful to

JESSY M. SULLIVAN

for a well-merited rebuke. We apologize to the Cherokee Nation and will pass on the blame to the Sioux or the Nez Percé. And, if the Sioux and the Nez Percé want none of it, we will keep it. So anyone who wishes to re-read John K. Butler's *Sierra Gold* will please read "Argonotes" instead of "Cherokees" wherever the tribe occurs. We wuz there in '49 and we done it.

Here's the letter:

I have been reading the ARGOSY for a good many years. Back in 1909 my High School teacher took it away from me in school and after that whenever I gave a wrong answer to anything he would say "I suppose you read that in ARGOSY."

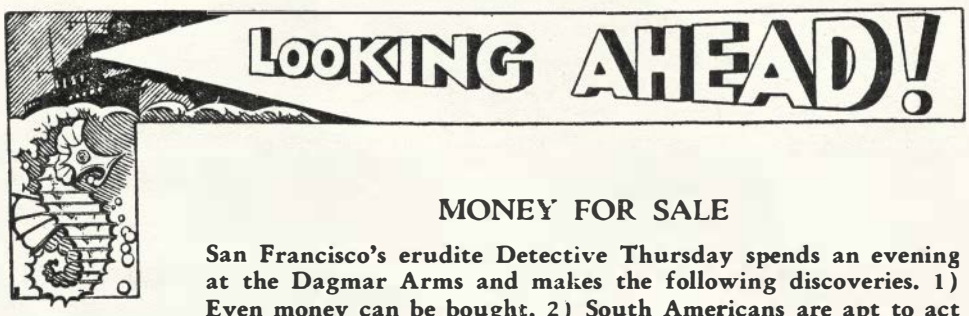
I have always found your magazine enjoyable and most entertaining. Some of the stories I don't care so much about but I realize that no magazine can be made up entirely of stories just to suit me as other people must be pleased too. But it has suited me well enough that I have kept reading it all these years. Perhaps I am a little late but I want to add my word of appreciation of that wonderful story *Annapolis Ahoy*. It was grand.

Now that I have said the good things I wanted to say I want to pan one of your stories a little. I don't usually bother about mistakes that authors make but when one writes about historical things I think he should know what he is writing about. In the Nov. 20th issue of ARGOSY there was a story by John K. Butler called *Sierra Gold*. It was a very interesting story and I enjoyed it very much until the author told about a family who had been killed by the Cherokees on the Overland Trail to California in 1849. Anybody who knows history

knows that the Cherokees were moved to the Indian territory, now the State of Oklahoma long before 1849. The Overland Trail did not go through their country and they had been a peaceful tribe for years before they were moved West and by 1849 they had farms and schools and a Government of their own and were too busy with their own affairs to bother other people. All the fighting they did after that was to do their part in every war this country has fought since then. You see I am a Cherokee myself and know something of the history of the tribe. Mr. Butler should look into history a little instead of using the name of the first tribe that comes into his mind as he probably did in this case. Well, that is off my mind and I still like ARGOSY and hope Mr. Butler writes another good story soon.

Richmond Hill, L. I.,
New York

WE will use our remaining space to quote from a letter we have just received from Frank Richardson Pierce. It concerns his No-Shirt McGee fable, *Neptune's Poke*, which will be found on page 24 of this issue. Writing of the ice caissons that No-Shirt and his partner sink into the Bering Sea, Mr. Pierce says: "This astonishing method was used up North last winter. I got the yarn in Nome. The man took out a fortune, but he said there was more where it came from. He didn't get it all and he swore he wouldn't go back for it. He said he's used up all his luck." This leaves a nice opening for anyone who wants to go prospecting.



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L. G. BLOCHMAN

THE SINGING CATS OF SIAM

In quest of ivory apes Dave McNally went to the toy kingdom of the tiny folk. But the only ape he found in Siam was a Chinese gorilla, recently of Mott Street. And at the frowning Temple of Shiva, McNally realized why the Siamese are so fond of gangster pictures. A complete novelet by

RICHARD WORMSER

TWO AND TWO IS FOUR

. . . when a man and a boy count bullets in a cabin outside the Hudson Bay post—but add an Indian with a grudge, a pretty schoolteacher, a thieving trader, and a wolf that bit his own tail—and the answer comes out inevitably three. A short story by

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DON'T get the idea that it takes a lot of time and hard work for you to get smashing strength and powerful muscular development! And don't fool yourself into thinking that you need dumbbells, stretchers or any other such contraptions.

Both of these ideas are all bunk—and I have PROVED it. All I need is *7 days* to prove what I can do for you! And I don't need any apparatus either. In fact, I have no sympathy with apparatus at all—don't believe in it. It is artificial—and it may strain your heart or other vital organs for life!

NATURAL Methods Are All I Need

On this page you will see an actual photo of how I look today. This picture has not been changed in any way. No muscles have been "painted on." This photograph is the camera's honest proof of what I have done for MY body. I myself am ready to prove what my secret of *Dynamic Tension* can do for yours!

To look at me now you wouldn't recognize me as the same man I used to be. Then I was a physical wreck, a 97-pound weakling—flat-chested, spindly legs, arms like pipe stems.

I was worried—and I had a right to be. I decided to study myself, to do something about my body. Then I made a discovery. I found a new way to build myself up. A way that was simple, natural, quick and sure! "*Dynamic Tension*" is what I called it. I put this secret to work. And in a short time I had the kind of body you see here—the body which has twice won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

This Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away

This valuable cup stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base. I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

This Secret Has Helped Thousands

Thousands of other fellows now know this secret, too—and know from their own personal experience what *Dynamic Tension* has done for them. When they turned to me for advice, they were just as frail and puny as I once was. Now they are life-sized examples of what a man *can* and *ought* to be—with mighty energy, tireless endurance, and muscles that stand out like bridge-cables all over their bodies.

I have written an interesting booklet, filled with pictures, which tells my story—and theirs. I would like to send you a copy of it entirely free.

Let Me Send You My FREE BOOK

I'd like you to know what *Dynamic Tension* has done for me—what it has done for others—and what it can do for you! This little coupon will bring you my free book which tells all about it. There is no cost or obligation of any kind—and no one will call upon you.

I just want to put into your hands proof that I can do for you what I have done for so many thousands of others: give you broad powerful shoulders, biceps that bulge with smashing strength, a chest which stands out solid and muscular, and an evenly-developed body that will make others look like dwarfs next to you.

Will you gamble a stamp to win a body like mine? Then mail this coupon TODAY. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 121, 115 East 23rd St., New York.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 121
115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *Dynamic Tension* will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

FREE BOOK

Gamble a stamp today. Mail coupon for free copy of my new book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It shows you from actual photos how I have developed my pupils to my own perfectly balanced proportions. Where shall I send your copy? Write your name and address plainly on the coupon. Mail it today to me personally.