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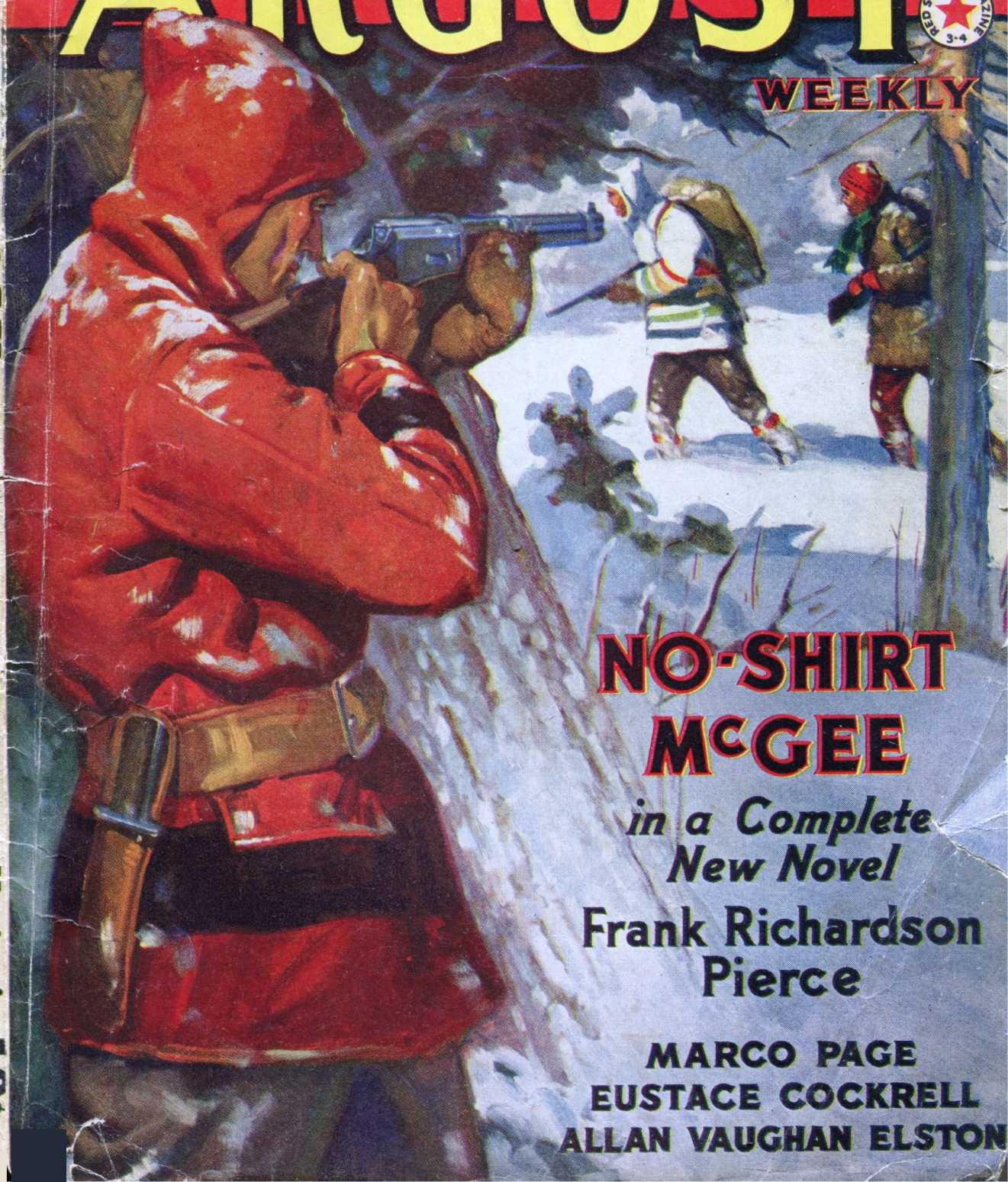

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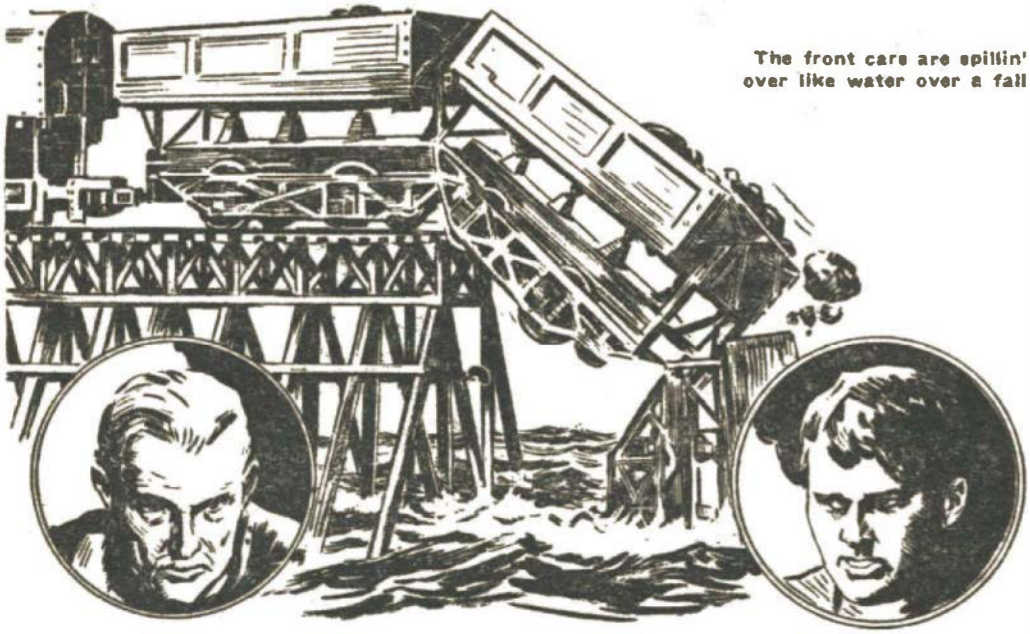


The front cars are spillin' over like water over a fall

McGee & Co.: Trouble-Shooters

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Rain-maker McGee," "Tin Money," etc.

From barroom brawls to battle with the elements No-Shirt McGee and Bulldozer Craig take on calamity in ten-ton deliveries. A complete short novel of hardrock men and high water

CHAPTER I

CREAMPUFF CRAIG

THE trouble was, me and Bulldozer had been hangin' around that hotel too long. It didn't bother me so much because the days when No-Shirt McGee was happiest dinin' on assorted iron nails is in the past; I'm old enough now to take a little luxury without wincin'. But with Bulldozer Craig it's different. At first he'd done a good job of enjoyin' hisself around the town nights and then stayin' in bed most of the day, but lately he'd gone stale.

For days he'd been mutterin' about goin' soft and how he wasn't fit to take care of himself any more. He claimed he'd turned so weak that he had trouble gettin' his feet over a door-sill. I didn't pay much attention to this because I've seen Bulldozer practically pick a tractor up and cart it around under one arm. But I could see he was worried.

Then one day when I was lookin' for him, the starter out in front of the hotel told me he'd gone down to Nellie's Hut. "It's a tough joint down on the waterfront," the starter says.

I take a cab down there and arrive just in time to hear an uproar like I haven't heard comin' from a barroom in ten years. Then, before I can get out of the cab, Bulldozer's stern parts the batwing doors of Nellie's Hut, and he lands

in the street. He looks like a couple of his own tractors has been walkin' over him. Me and the driver load him into the cab, and I see a reporter named O'Neill makin' notes.

On the way back to the hotel Bulldozer acts like he's goin' to break down and cry. It seems this Nellie's Hut is full of tough mugs, and Bulldozer has gone in there to find out what shape he's in. What he found out don't please him none.

"Civilized life is softenin' me up," he moans. "There was a time I could lick three men and not work up a sweat. Now I'm a creampuff. What I need is a job with hair, horns and claws on it to get me in shape." He says plenty more like that.

When we're gettin' out of the cab at the hotel, a bulb explodes and a camera man gets our pictures. This reporter O'Neill is on the spot, and starts askin' Bulldozer questions. Bulldozer is so sore at himself that he starts singin' his song again, about bein' soft and needin' a job with claws on it.

The next afternoon the paper comes out with the picture and a funny story by this O'Neill about Bulldozer needin' a tough job to get in shape. "I'm glad it come out," Bulldozer says after he reads the piece. "Maybe somebody's got a job that'll fix me up."

Five minutes later the telephone rings and the slickest voice I ever heard says, "I am Marta Latimer and my father, Jeff Latimer, recognized your picture in the paper with Creampuff Craig's. Dad wants to talk over old times with you. And there's a chance he can offer Mr. Craig something to help him get into shape again."

I'm feelin' fine at the prospect of chewin' the rag with an old friend until Marta gives his address, which is a hospital. Then I'm down in the mouth. "Get your hat and coat, Bulldozer," I say, "we're goin' callin'."

When we go into the hospital room I don't know which to look at first, Jeff Latimer propped up in bed, or his daughter. She's blond, has curves in the right places, plenty of courage in her face and a smile that'd make a totem pole bust out in a warm glow. "No-Shirt McGee!" Jeff yells at me. "You old billy goat. Marta, I want you to meet a good friend. The first time I saw the cuss, him and a squaw bad blacked up and won a cakewalk in Dawson. I helped him eat the cake."

"You damned crook," I yell back, "you mean you traded ten cents worth of jelly beans to the squaw for her half, then shook dice with me for my half and ended up eatin' the whole cake. And a fresh cake was somethin' to talk about in them days."

"I suppose this tame moose starin' at Marta is Bulldozer Craig?" Jeff says. "Shake hands, Bulldozer. You're the man I'm lookin' for."

"I accept the job if it's a tough one," Bulldozer says, shakin' hands with Jeff and lookin' at his daughter. That shows what a girl can do to an ordinarily cautious man.

MY OWN mind went back to the days when Jeff Latimer and Teabone Brown met on Chilkoot Pass. They was a great pair, always plannin' for the future. They even agreed their kids, if they ever married and had any, should marry each other. I don't suppose they figgered the kids might have somethin' to say about it.

After they struck it they went back home, had a double weddin' and the next thing I knew the Latimer-Brown Loggin' Company was gettin' out spruce for the gov'ment durin' the World War.

Jeff told me he'd lost his wife a few years ago, and that Teabone Brown had lost both his wife and his health and was now in California buildin' hisself up. Teabone had a son, Jerry, who was tryin' to keep things goin', but without much luck. I could almost hear Bulldozer moan when he learned there was a man in the case.

"Last Spring a log rolled on me," Jeff

says, "crushed bones and nerves, and I've been laid up ever since. Tanner-Clayton, a rival loggin' outfit, tossed a lawsuit at us, murdered our two key witnesses and won the suit. That started us on the skids. We mortgaged to the hilt to pay the judgment."

"Murdered your key witnesses?" I ask, amazed.

"Their bodies was found under a log-jam," Jeff explains. "It looked like they'd been drowned fishin'. Only they never fished, and neither man owned a rod such as was found on the jam."

"Where do I come in?" Bulldozer asks, lookin' at Marta.

"For several years the government has been tryin' to build a jetty at Lee Bay," Jeff answers. "Protected, the bay'll be handy for submarines and seaplanes, but there's bad water, and every contractor's gone broke so far. The government engineers are calling for bids again. We've locomotives and standard-gage track; plenty of flat cars; and all the granite we need on Bald Mountain. If we can build that jetty, we'll be out of the red. If we don't get the contract, or if we get it and fail, Tanner-Clayton will own the Latimer-Brown Loggin' Company, lock, stock and bar'l. Can you build a jetty?"

"If I can't," Bulldozer answers, "I can hire men who can." And he's still restin' his eyes on Marta Latimer.

"One thing you should know, Bulldozer, my daughter Marta will represent me in all deals. You won't mind that?" I could see Bulldozer wouldn't. "And Jerry Brown will be your assistant. You won't mind that?" I knowed Bulldozer would mind that, plenty.

"That'll be fine," Bulldozer agrees. "But I think I'll have a look at the jetty, your rollin' stock and Bald Mountain right away. Then maybe I'll know what it's all about."

We shake hands all around and depart. "Ain't Marta a honey?" Bulldozer asks as soon as we're outside. "A custom job, built to specifications."

"Now don't go fallin' in love again," I warn, "and gettin' your heart busted."

MARTA drives us down the next day and the ocean looks peaceful enough. There's a long finger of rock stickin' into the blue water. Already silt is pilin' up, but full protection for Lee Bay from northwesters is a long ways ahead. We find a lot of rusty rail sidin's, busted down machinery, tar-paper shacks and a first-rate house for the boss to live in.

It don't need no soothsayer to tell Lee Bay will develop into a lumber port once the jetty is completed. There's a fine stand of virgin timber behind it. We walk out on the jetty and there's plenty of warnin' of grief to come—trestle timbers smashed to matchwood and heavy steel rails tied in bow-knots. High seas had done that.

A native who'd seen several contractors come and go showed up and told us a few things. "When weather's bad," he says, "the sea'll wipe out trestle work as fast as you can build it. That costs money." He points to a drift tree four feet thick at the butt and a hundred and fifty long, layin' on busted rails. "The sea tossed that up there," he drawls, "and knocked a locomotive into the water."

Bulldozer sets down and does some tall thinkin'. "We'll have to fight the sea," he says. "Got to figger a way to beat it."

"And while you're fightin' it," I warn, "Tanner-Clayton will be hittin' you from behind."

"The jetty is supposed to end where you see them masts stickin' up," the native says. "Them's the *Sadie Lake's* masts. The wreck's slowly sinkin' in the sands."

We telephone the Tremont Loggin' Company and they send down a speeder. Tremont owns the loggin' road runnin' from the bay to their camp. Tanner-Clayton is after them, too, and they're friendly to Latimer-Brown.

"A gravity haul will help some," Bull-

dozer says, "but you'll have to have your equipment in fine shape or a trainload of stone may run away with you."

The boundary between Tremont and the Latimer-Brown timber land is Deep Gulch, spanned by an old bridge. We crawl across, get on good rails again, and inspect loggin' camps, rails, bridges, equipment and Bald Mountain.

"The setup is perfect," Bulldozer exclaims. "Run a short spur to Bald Mountain and we'll have enough stone for a hundred jetties."

We get a picture now of what Tanner-Clayton is up to. If they can get bold of Latimer-Brown timber and camps, then Tremont will be like takin' milk from a baby. Tanner-Clayton will own a timber empire and have a private port as soon as the jetty is built. And the gov'ment pays for buildin' the jetty.

"No-Shirt," Bulldozer says, "we've got a bunch of our tin money loafin' in the bank." He watches cables strung between two spar trees carry a fifteen-ton log nearly a quarter of a mile through the air, then continues: "Suppose we take that money and buy the best mill site on Lee Bay and get the jump on Tanner-Clayton?"

"Okay by me," I answer, "but you'll have to build the jetty to make the mill site worth anything."

"I ain't forgettin' that," he answers, "and before we buy any mill sites I want to see that jetty in a storm." He stirs his big form into action, his eyes still on the high lead rig swingin' logs through the air. "Let's go back down to the jetty and wait for a storm."

CHAPTER II

THREE MASKED MEN

WE HANG around the jetty a week, but the weather stays calm. Bulldozer reverts to childhood. He pushes tall sticks into the sand, supports 'em with clothesline guy-ropes anchored to rocks, then watches the waves wash around 'em. I keep the two of us supplied with food.

The eighth day he gets tired of his kids' play and says, "Let's go up, buy the mill site and figger out a bid on the jetty."

When we get back to Seattle we find the mill-site owner is tickled to death to sell. He's sold it to every jetty contractor that's tackled the job. Then he buys it back for a song when the contractor goes broke. The turnover on the site has put five daughters through the university. And you know what it costs to put one girl through. We pay him sixty thousand, then go to the Latimer-Brown office.

There's a good lookin' cuss of twenty-three settin' at the desk talkin' to Marta. He's tall, weighs around a hundred and sixty pounds, has dark, curly hair and blue eyes. He's the spit and image of Teabone Brown when he was twenty-three. "I'm Jerry Brown," he says, shakin' hands. The way he shakes hands gets under my skin. It's like a drownin' man grabbin' a straw.

"Glad to know you, Jerry," I says, "but why so down in the mouth?"

"The bank that was to finance us in the jetty deal has withdrawn its support," he answers. "We're licked unless we can raise the money."

That shouldn't have surprised me. I'd seen that game worked enough times in minin' deals. But it showed me Tanner-Clayton had plenty of power and was tryin' to block other bidders. "Where do we go from here, Bulldozer?" I ask.

"Money's a curse," he answers. "It's made a creampuff out of me. I'm in favor of borrowin' all we can on our tin stock and mill site. We form the McGee Construction Company. We put up the money and Latimer-Brown puts up the equipment and supplies the timber and rock we need. We split the profits, if any, fifty-fifty."

"We hired you as a trouble-shooter," Marta protests, "and it's hardly fair for you to have to finance the proposition as well."

"It's a cold-blooded business deal," Bulldozer says. "You need to get out of

a jam, I need to toughen up. Don't argue."

It takes time to get the company organized, but while the lawyer is makin' out the papers, me and Bulldozer get bid blanks from the engineer and start our figgerin'. The idea is to put in a high enough bid to make money and cover unexpected costs, but low enough to beat out Tanner-Clayton.

Every night Marta takes Bulldozer somewhere. And once he comes home well drammed, singing like a lark and the hotel detective comes up and talks to us. "I've got a right to sing," Bulldozer argues. "I've met the swellest girl in the world. Listen officer, was you ever in love?"

"I'm married and have seven children," the dick answers, "and you ask me if I was ever in love. Now go easy, brother."

I know Marta ain't suddenly fell in love with Bulldozer. She's takin' him around to get a line on him under all conditions. She's already got a line on Jerry Brown. He's a weaklin'—no nerve. And she figgers I'm too old to be much good in a fight.

The day bids are to be submitted me and Bulldozer arrive at the office early. Jerry's there, slightly corned. "Listen, Bulldozer," he says, "you've got to quit taking my girl around or there'll be trouble."

That's no way to talk to Bulldozer. "Why you halfbaked—" Bulldozer starts for him. But I head him off.

"He's only a sappy kid, Bulldozer," I explain, "don't pay no attention to him."

"That's the way it's always been," Jerry says bitterly, "everybody thinks I'm a sappy kid. Nobody's ever given me a chance to tackle a tough job. I'm always shoved aside. If I ever had a chance—"

HE BREAKS off, his face dead white, and slowly he shoves his hands into the air. Three masked men are comin' through the doorway, and the leader's got his gun on my wishbone. I've looked into gun barrels before, but never one held as steady as that.

"Open that safe, Brown," the leader orders.

"Tell him to go to hell," Bulldozer rasps, "and make 'em blow it." But the leader's a massive cuss and Jerry starts to reach for the safe dial, when Bulldozer grabs him by the throat. "Make 'em blow it," he snarls.

As the leader rushes in to gun-whip him, Bulldozer whirls and knocks the gun aside. It goes off with a bang that leaves my ears ringin' like I had a hangover. It's my signal to move in and keep 'em off'n Bulldozer's back. A noble idear, but a fist knocks me across the room before I can strike a blow. Lights dance, there's a mighty roarin' in my head, then blackness. I think some birds sang, too.

When I open my eyes again, Jerry's tied up, Bulldozer's dead to the world and papers are scattered from hell to breakfast. "They made me open the safe," Jerry moans, "then slugged me in the stomach and on the jaw."

Bulldozer gets up and shakes his head like a mad bull. "Couldn't lick three men," he groans, "even with help. I'm about as tough as a graveyard stew." Which is milktoast in case you don't know. Suddenly he begins pawin' around the papers. "The bid. That's what they was after."

Pretty soon he finds the bid all safe and sound. We check over and find nothin' missin'. It's a mystery all right. We wash up in a hurry and take the bid to the gov'ment engineer's office. There're a dozen men hangin' 'round and Bulldozer asks Jerry, "Is Pete Clayton amongst 'em? I had a hunch he was the leader. I tried to leave my trade mark on his face just before another clipped me on the head with a gun butt," he explains to me.

"There was blood on his mask," Jerry answers. "But I never got a look at his face. Clayton isn't here."

There's a hush comes over the group when a clerk says he'll open the bids. Ours is on top. "McGee Construction Company," he says, "six hundred thousand dollars."

Me and Bulldozer almost faint. It's been raised a hundred thousand on us. "They opened our bid, raised the price, sealed it and left it," Bulldozer mutters. "That means Tanner-Clayton can put one at at five hundred and fifty thousand and get the job."

Hall Granite Company put's one in fifty thousand above ours, then the clerk says, "Tanner-Clayton Company, seven hundred thousand."

We leave the office in a daze. The bid is hiked a hundred thousand and still we're low. It don't make sense. We go back to the office and tell Marta everything that happened except about Jerry turnin' yellow.

"I can't for the life of me see why anyone should risk the pen to give us an extra hundred thousand, unless— I've got it," she says. "Pete Clayton is confident he can make us go broke on the job. He'll then take over our unfinished contract. And with that in mind, he changed our bid to give himself an extra hundred thousand."

Before Bulldozer answers he picks up the telephone and calls Clayton's office. "Oh, Mr. Clayton is out?" he repeats. "Where can I get him? It is important. Oh, that's too bad. I'll call later." When Bulldozer hangs up he's grinnin' like a cat that's just et a bird. "That was Clayton who raided the office all right," he says. "He's over at the dentist's office, gettin' some front teeth pulled. He claims to have run into a truck and knocked his teeth lose against his steerin' wheel. The steerin' wheel was my fist, I'll betcha."

WHILE the four of us are talkin' the door opens and a big, redheaded cuss comes into the room. He's as polite as a count rushin' an heiress until he sees Bulldozer then he roars, "So I caught up with you." He throws his hat down on the floor and the two of 'em start sluggin'. Me and Jerry pull off the redhead and Marta drags Bulldozer away.

"Gentlemen, please . . ." Marta pleads.

"You must be runnin' for senator or somethin', lady," the redhead says. "First time I ever heard Bulldozer called a gentleman."

"Just who are you to drop in on us like a bomb?" Marta asks.

"He ain't no bomb, Marta," Bulldozer says. "He's a ladyfinger firecracker."

"I'm Torchy O'Leary, the best damn man that ever went before the face of a stone. Hardrock is my line and I hear you just got the jetty contract." The redhead's voice fills the room.

"I hate to admit he's good at anything," Bulldozer says, "but Torchy O'Leary is the best hardrock man I've ever known. I suppose the worst bums have some good in 'em."

"I can do anything with powder," Torchy announces. "I can blow the leg off'n your chair and not powder-mark your socks."

"Bulldozer Craig is general manager," Marta informs him, "Mr. No-Shirt McGee is pinch-hitter."

Torchy snorts in disgust as he looks at me. "Listen you old goat, don't give me no orders. That goes for you, too, Bulldozer. Just point out the mountain and say 'bust it up' and leave the rest to me," he says. Then just as I'm gettin' mad, he grins and I like the cuss.

"What size do you break 'em into?" Bulldozer asks.

"Forty-five percent must be six tons or bigger," he answers. "Thirty-five percent must be from one to six tons, and the rest can run from twenty-five pounds to a ton each."

"Go down to our lawyer," Bulldozer says, "and get your contract drawed up." He turns to Jerry who's been an outsider as usual. "The Deep Gulch bridge isn't strong enough to hold up heavy equipment. Take a bridge crew, build a new one, and renew the rails connecting our steel with the Tremont Logging Company's rails."

Jerry's mouth pops open. It's the first time he's ever been given a responsible job. And he wasn't expecting Bulldozer to give him a chance to prove his worth.

He's as tickled as a kid with a new top and the look he flashes at Marta tells plenty. And Marta smiles at Bulldozer and there's plenty of gratitude in it.

I meet Jerry out in the hall a few minutes later. He's had time to think things over. "I get it," he said, his eyes narrowin'. "He figures I'll fail. He wants to show me up."

"If you think that's his game, son," I answer, "I'd do somethin' about it."

Bulldozer's head is still achin' late that afternoon so he heads for the hotel, leavin' me with Marta. "It's been a full day," she says. "Bulldozer knocked Clayton's teeth loose; we landed a job at a price a hundred thousand higher than we bid; Bulldozer in a harsh manner started Jerry bridge-building and a strange person named Torchy O'Leary asked for the quarry job and got it. Let's go up and tell dad about it. It'll help him get well."

JEFF LATIMER is all smiles as Marta tells what's happened. "But I don't think I'm going to care for Bulldozer Craig," she concludes. "He gave Jerry a tough job to humiliate him. And I don't like people who humiliate others."

"I've an idea you've found a man who won't yes you," Jeff says. I can tell he's feelin' fine over that, too. When we leave he seems dead certain he's found a man who'll not only build the jetty, but build it on time. Personally I ain't quite so happy. I keep thinkin' of the penalty we're goin' to pay if we don't finish it on time.

A few days later we take a trip to Bald Mountain to see how things are gettin' along. "Hello, coyote-bait," Torchy yells at me. "I suppose you've come up here to show me how to handle powder. Let's see you handle this." And he tosses me a stick. I sweat blood, but I catch it and toss it back. By golly, that cuss is tough.

He's got a portable generator supplying juice to electric drills. The toughest men I've ever seen are swarmin' over the rock. "Come up here in a couple of weeks," Torchy says, "and watch some rock move."

Me and Buldozer ride to Deep Gulch and find Jerry's got a bridge crew at work. We cross the bridge and follow the Tremont road down to Lee Bay. They're hittin' the ball, too. They've got crews ballastin' the roadbed. A crew Bulldozer's sent down is drivin' piles for a new section of trestle that'll extend the jetty. I look at the Pacific. It's smilin' and peaceful in the sunshine, but it ain't foolin' us none.

Rome wasn't built in a day and it takes time to get things rollin'. We clean and repair the big house on Lee Bay, turn the parlor into an office and move in; then get the old sidin's in shape. Several days later we get a call from Bald Mountain spur. "Come up here," Torchy says, "and watch the rock move."

As we roll up to the Deep Gulch bridge, Jerry comes out grinnin' like a kid that's passed his examinations. "The bridge is done," he says. The shine in his eyes kinda gets me. I'm half expectin' Bulldozer to toss him a word of praise. He done a good job. But the big cuss takes it in stride. "Okay," is all he says. "Send your crew to the jetty, and come along with us."

"All right," Jerry growls. He's mad clean through, and I see Marta givin' Bulldozer a hard look. I get the idear she's spent most of her young life boostin' Jerry along.

Everything is ready at Bald Mountain. "Hang onto Bulldozer's hand, Miss Latimer," Torchy bellows down at us. "He's liable to wander into trouble."

Bulldozer grits his teeth. "Some time I'm goin' to take that fresh cuss apart," he growls.

We all get behind a shoulder of granite and Torchy slams down the lever of a firin' machine. The mountain shudders and Torchy fires the second string of shots. The whole side of the mountain tumbles out and ten ton rocks roll clean down to the spur track. Before the smoke has drifted clear a locomotive shunts a

string of flat cars to the sidin'. A portable derrick commences loadin' stone.

As we're gettin' on the speeder to go back to Lee Bay, Torchy yells, "The first trainload goes down tomorrow mornin'. Maybe I'd better come along with it and show Bulldozer how to build a jetty."

"You come down there," Bulldozer says wrathfully, "and I'll break you in two." Bulldozer admires the redheaded cuss; even likes him, but Torchy sure can get under his hide.

We're all hangin' around the office the followin' afternoon, wonderin' why the train load of stone don't arrive, when the telephone rings. Bulldozer answers it. "What! Listen, Torchy, if you're kiddin' I'll run you off'n the job. Oh, you ain't. Well ain't that double-barreled hell! We'll be up right away."

"Bulldozer," Marta asks in a scared voice. "What has happened?"

"The Deep Gulch bridge caved in," Bulldozer answers. "The stone train's wrecked."

I can see she's sick, but she flashes a understandin' glance at Jerry Brown. We roar up there on a speeder, and there ain't a word spoken on the way. The bridge is a crumpled mess of timbers, busted cars and ten-ton rocks. The train came down with the locomotive pusbin' the flat cars, so it didn't wreck.

"Who built that bridge?" Torchy jeers.

"I did," Bulldozer snaps. Marta gives him a grateful look.

"No you didn't," Jerry cuts in with a show of spirit. "I built it." Torchy don't say a word for a minute, then he wants to know if he'll lay off his crew.

"Let the rock pile up," Bulldozer orders, "we'll use it fast enough when we get things rolling." He slides down the bank to the wreckage and we follow.

"Poor Jerry," Marta says to me. "Because he's the only male heir to the Latimer-Brown interests, rival outfits have been sniping away at him since he was seventeen. Poor fellow, he's never won a battle. And nothing he's done has ever stood up."

"Come down here, Jerry," Bulldozer orders. He's under a mass of rock and timber. "Your bridge was all right. Somebody put jacks against the bottoms of your uprights and forced them off'n their bases. Naturally everything collapsed under weight. It looks as if Pete Clayton had won the first round. But try and prove it."

When he crawls out he sends Jerry down to keep the jetty pile-driver and trestle construction crews workin' and takes over the wrecked bridge hisself. He gives me a list of stuff he's goin' to need and tells me to light out for Seattle and get it.

"Stop in at Tremont's camp one," he yells at me as I start, "tell 'em to send up a wrecker. I plan to repair the bridge, then let the locomotive pull the cars across with a cable, one at a time. We'll reinforce the piers later. The thing to do right now is keep rock movin'."

CHAPTER III

GIVE US ROCK

AN HOUR after I arrive in Seattle a knock comes on my hotel door and when I open it there's a human moose smilin' and shovin' out his hand. "I'm Pete Clayton," he says. "And this is Abner Tanner, my pardner." Clayton's got a short neck and sorrel hair. His nose is flat and I see he's wearin' store teeth in front. He's got scarred fists as big as hams hangin' from his coat sleeves.

Tanner looks like somethin' dug up from a grave and given the breath of life. His thin face is the color of old cheese. He's got unblinkin' blue eyes set in bony sockets and his flarin' nostrils tremble when he breathes. I invite 'em in and Tanner starts talkin' when they set down.

"There's a Chinese saying, Mr. McGee," he says, "'When monkeys fight they scatter dirt, when tigers fight, one is hurt.' You are mixing in a tiger fight. I'm here to buy your interest in the McGee Construction Company."

"Me and Bulldozer don't run out on our pardners when the goin' gets tough," I tell him. "We ain't been hurt yet, but we can take it when it comes. So far the bridge builders are the ones that profited. You, Clayton, had to have a bridge built in your mouth and we're buildin' one down at Deep Gulch."

I almost bust out laughin' at that crack. I caught Clayton off'n his guard, so I make the most of it. "We know it was you who busted into the office and hiked up our bid. And you know it was Bulldozer's fist that knocked your upper teeth loose. When a fight gets goin' that strong, nobody can back out until they get damned well licked."

"And that's what you're going to get," he says.

I take the whole business as a compliment to Bulldozer. Is it possible the combination of Bulldozer and Torchy has Tanner-Clayton worried?

It takes me several days to get the things Bulldozer needs and when I head toward the coast there are storm warnin's flyin' from the weather station. I drive for miles over a concrete road built through a fir forest and the roar of the gale through the tree tops is like surf hittin' the beach, only steadier.

As I break through the forest surroundin' Lee Bay I can see the sea is breakin' over Shipwreck Shoal. Spray goes clean over the masts of the old wreck; and closer in, the sea is smashin' away at the new trestle work.

I hike out on the trestle to have a look at things. Jerry's worried and uncertain. He's wishin' Bulldozer was around and sometimes when he looks at the force of the sea, a scared look comes over his face. He's got two forces inside of him, one tryin' to make him stay and fight, the other tellin' him to run.

He must've read my thoughts because suddenly he snarls, "Some of these days I hope to find myself in a place where there's no escape—where I can't turn and run."

A big sea drenches the pile-driver and I'm wonderin' if he hadn't better send for a locomotive to pull it off before the storm gets so bad they can't send out a locomotive. While I'm still thinkin' about it I hear a speeder's flanges scrapin' the rails. It's Bulldozer. His clothes are dirty, his eyes bloodshot and his face is covered with stubble.

"I got to worryin' about the trestle," he says, "and came down for a look. We've got to get a load of rock down here pronto. Keep that driver workin' as long as it's safe, Jerry. But don't wait too long and lose it. The decision is yours."

"How about running a cable out to it and dragging it across the same way you've been taking stone-cars over the weak trestle?" Jerry asks.

"Fine." Bulldozer says. "And they told me you didn't have brains."

We all went back to the office and Bulldozer telephones Torchy O'Leary. "Get a trainload down here as soon as you can," he orders. "I think the Deep Gulch bridge will stand up now. Hit it easy, though. I'll be up there."

"Better stay here and get some sleep," I advise.

"I'll get it at the bridge," he says, and away he goes on the speeder.

THE storm gets worse every hour. At ten o'clock that night it's roarin' so we hardly hear the train of stone as it comes out of the timber. The train almost crawls. The air's full of drivin' rain, but I can see Bulldozer settin' on the first car of stone. It comes up easy, couples onto a flat-car with a power shovel, then inches out onto the trestle.

You don't dump ten-ton rocks off'n a car by pryin' with a crowbar. It's a shovel job and that's where Bulldozer shines. The train comes to a stop on that swayin', sea-drenched trestle and Bulldozer gets the shovel goin'. It's almost as wide as a flat-car. And one slip would send it into the boilin' surf.

Bulldozer grins cheerfully, but the rest of us are thrilled and chilled as the shovel crawls along, stops, tips a rock

into the sea, then moves on to the next. Every few minutes the train moves out, so most of the rock can be dumped at the weakest point.

Bulldozer comes into the office, swills down a lot of hot coffee and grabs the telephone. "We've got to have more rock," he says. "If we can save that section, we can save the rest." He fumes awhile, then hangs up.

"Line's dead! Jerry, tell 'em to warm up a speeder. I've got to light out for Bald Mountain and build a fire under Torchy. We've gotta have rock."

Five minutes later he's speedin' into the forest with the throttle wide open. I go to bed all tuckered out. At daybreak screamin' flanges wake me up. The house is rockin' under the gale, and there's another trainload of stone rumblin' onto the jetty. I dress and run out. Torchy O'Leary, dead on his feet, comes reelin' toward the house. "Where's Bulldozer?" he demands. "He was supposed to tell me what he needed."

"The telephone line was dead," I answer, "and he lit out last night on a speeder."

"He never got there," Torchy snaps. "Somethin's wrong." He whirls on Jerry. "Man that power shovel, Jerry, and empty them cars. As soon as they're empty send 'em back for another load."

I can see Jerry go white at the prospect of runnin' the shovel, but I don't wait to see what happens. Me and Torchy pile onto a speeder and start back up the road. He looks to the right and I look to the left for signs of Bulldozer's remains, or his speeder. We go all the way to Deep Gulch and don't find a thing.

"Speeders don't vanish into thin air," Torchy says. "We've got to go back."

We crawl along this time, and we stop at each bridge and look into the water. At the Trout Creek bridge I spot a film of oil on a pool of dead water. "There's the speeder, upside down in that pool," I yell.

We get down on our hands and knees and make sure Bulldozer ain't underneath, then walk downstream to a log-jam. Water sucks through a tangle of logs, and many of 'em have snags waitin' to catch and hold a man. A man stunned by a fall wouldn't have a chance. Just the same we look between the logs, then move on downstream, searchin' the smaller jams, pools and shallows.

"Hell," Torchy says, "his body must be under the first jam. We'll get the Tremont outfit to send a cherry picker up here and move the logs." A cherry picker is a derrick mounted on a flat-car, designed to pick up logs along the right of way and load 'em.

The bridge ain't on a curve so I look around to see why the speeder jumped the track. Pretty soon I find a pole somebody's tossed into the thick brush. It's covered with crankcase grease on one side.

"The rats," Torchy snarls. "They stuck that pole between the rails and when the speeder hit the pole it rode along it a few feet and spilled into the pool."

"It's murder," I growl. "The last time Latimer-Brown men was killed, it was made to look like a fishin' accident. And now they try to make Bulldozer's murder look like an accident."

"You stay here," Torchy says, "I'll have Tremont send up the cherry picker."

It takes a couple of hours for 'em to reach Trout Creek, but when they do I stand below the jam, ready to jump in if Old Bulldozer's remains come floatin' past.

They clean out the jam to the last log, and nothin' happens. And all the while the storm is ragin', but I don't give a damn if the trestle and jetty go out or not. Old Bulldozer is gone.

I'm ice all over.

"We can't break up every log-jam in the stream, No-Shirt," Torchy says sadly, "so you might as well give it up. Bulldozer is on his last trail. Tough, too. He never did get the wife and the home he used to dream about. I'll miss him and the fights we had."

I CAN'T bring myself to leave the spot, but pretty soon Torchy drops his big hand on my shoulder and says, "No-Shirt, we've got a jetty to build."

"The hell with it," I answer. It's funny what you think about at a time like this. I'm thinkin' Bulldozer never licked his three men and got hisself into shape again. It makes me uneasy and I have the feelin' Bulldozer must be uneasy in his grave, wherever it is.

Torchy kinda forces me along and pretty soon I'm on a speeder and he's drivin' me down to the jetty. I look at the flat-cars, wonderin' if they've been unloaded. They haven't. Jerry didn't have the nerve to handle the power shovel. A hundred feet of trestle is tilted over and the sea is poundin' it to pieces.

Marta comes out of the office on the run. 'Any news of Bulldozer?" she asks anxiously. Then she looks at my face and her eyes kinda mist up a little. "I'm so sorry," she says gently. Then, "No trace?"

"None at all," Torchy says.

I walk into the office and step up to Jerry Brown. "You rat," I snarl, "a good man died tryin' to help you out of a jam. And you let him down."

He takes it for a minute or two, then says, "If it wasn't for your age, McGee, I'd—"

"Oh no you wouldn't," I cut in. "You're just tryin' to save your face in your own mind. Well, you may be foolin' yourself, but the rest of us are wise to you."

I don't sleep much that night. The next mornin' the storm's gone down some. Torchy looks things over and shakes his head. "We can't dump the rock where it'll do the most good now," he growls, "and we can't keep the equipment tied up. Might as well dump it where we can." He runs the shovel onto the flat-car, then sends for Jerry Brown.

Jerry shows up, lookin' sullen and uneasy. He's taken a big snort of whisky to brace hisself up. He knows every man on the job is lookin' at him, and he knows what they're thinkin'. "Make up your mind, Brown," Torchy says, "run that shovel or else take a good beatin'."

For a second I thought Jerry was goin' to make somethin' out of it, but he only shrugs his shoulders and climbs onto the shovel. After all, he should take the risk instead of some man workin' for wages. Though we could prob'ly find plenty of men willin' to take a chance amongst bulldozers and shovel men. They're a tough lot.

TORCHY highballs the engineer and the train crawls slowly over the trestle. Spray drenches the rock and the shovel cab, but Jerry just scowls. Torchy signals the engineer to stop, and stand by, ready to haul off the train.

Jerry's handled the shovel plenty of times on good, solid earth. He knows what to do and how to do it. Now if he can just imagine he's still on hard ground he'll get away with it. He takes the first rock, then the second and third. They're all big boys. He crawls slowly ahead and onto the next car.

It's piled high with stuff runnin' from twenty-five to a thousand pounds. Jerry goes through with it fast. He's gettin' madder and madder, I can see that. He didn't mind Bulldozer tellin' him what to do, but he resents Torchy. He ain't got sense enough to know Torchy's tryin' to keep things movin', with the hope the winter storms will be delayed long enough to finish the bad stretch.

He's still mad when he reaches the fifth car. He starts liftin' the rock and the shovel almost quits on him. "Can't you get out rocks of the right size, O'Leary?" he snarls. "This goes over ten tons and you know it."

"Too much for you, eh?" Torchy sneers.

Jerry gets another hold on it, and turns on the power. It kinda resists, and he gives it full power. I can see he's mad. I'm just about to let out a yell of warnin' when somethin' gives. It's the shovel. And with power wide open, the least little give speeds up the engine. It has a flyin' start when the rock holds its ground.

That shovel tips over before Jerry can shut off. He leaps clear of the cab and lands flat on his stomach in the roarin' sea. The shovel hits a split second later and disappears.

Torchy yanks off his boots and dives in. I get a rope and throw down. Torchy grabs Jerry first, gets a good grip on him, then takes the line.

"I can't take you up here," I yell down, "the surf will smash you again't the trestle." Torchy nods that he understands and I commence to work my way back over the cars. When I reach the locomotive the engineer commences to back up slow. He can watch the two men in the water and judge the speed. It takes some sweet throttle work on his part.

We find a calm spot behind the old jetty, run down and pull the two out of the water. Jerry's pretty groggy from landin' flat on the water, but he's all right except bein' sick at the stomach.

"Yank the cars off'n the trestle," Torchy tells the engineer, "and get a wrecker from Tremont Logging Company. Maybe we can get some chains wrapped around the shovel bucket and haul the wreck to the surface." Torchy's voice is kinda weary, like a man who's wonderin' what's goin' to happen next.

We know Pete Clayton was behind wreckin' the Deep Gulch Bridge and spillin' Bulldozer and the speeder into the creek, but this latest trouble comes because one of the men in our own outfit lost his head. "While they're gettin' the shovel out," Torchy says, "I'm goin' to take some of my men and search every jam and pool in Trout Creek from the bridge to the sea. And then I'm goin' to search the beach."

"I'll go with you," I tell him.

"No," he says, "you stay here. Maybe you can keep some crazy thing from happenin'. I'm expectin' most anything now."

Jerry just stands there, starin' and not sayin' a word. I look at his eyes and suddenly I know he's a heap sorer at hisself than we are.

CHAPTER IV

OPEN THROTTLE FOR DISASTER

NOTHIN' happens. The Tremont wrecker gets the shovel out of the water and drops it on a sidin' to be repaired. Jerry goes around without lookin' me in the eyes. Marta drives up to Seattle to see her father. I've a hunch she can't breathe the same air as Jerry.

Torchy O'Leary comes back in three days. They've searched the creek and blowed up several big jams without findin' a trace of Bulldozer's remains.

There follows a long stretch of good weather. Jerry goes back to buildin' his trestle again. We train a couple of husky lads to handle the shovel on the rock train and everybody keeps drivin' away.

It's a great day when Jerry's trestle reaches the bad area. Torchy has been holdin' up the heavier rock at the quarry for this very place. The light stuff he's been dumpin' wherever it was needed.

As a yard locomotive pulls the pile-driver off'n the trestle, we have a little get-together—Marta, Jerry, Torchy and me. It's nearly a mile from the shore to the old wreck where the present jetty is to end. The first stretch is jetty put in by the old contractors. Next there's a short section we've built. After that there's a stretch of trestle, then another short section we've built. It's supposed to tame Shipwreck Shoal. After that comes another section of trestle. It's at the end of this we'll have our worst trouble.

If we can get a thousand yard area filled in before the first big storm, we can continue the job to the shipwreck, and do it in almost any kind of weather unless it is a bad blow. And that shouldn't wreck our trestle, just slow us up.

"You see, Marta," Jerry explains. "If we can build the tough parts of the jetty now, the government won't be too hard on us."

"I understand," Marta answers, "but I'm not going to think it is in the bag until the work is done. Pete Clayton has been too quiet to suit me."

When Torchy goes up to the quarry for the load of big stone, me and Jerry go along with him. We ain't takin' chances of anything happening to that train on the way back. We stop at each bridge and examine the piers to make sure there's been no dirty work at the crossroads.

Me and Jerry and Torchy ride on the front car. The locomotive is sometimes visible and sometimes is around a curve. It whistles every little while to let the wild animals know we're comin' I guess, because there ain't no automobile roads crossin' it until we get almost to the jetty.

"Here's the last bridge," Torchy says as it comes into sight. We get ready to drop off, but the train moves faster if anything.

"What the hell?" Torchy says. By that time we've hit the bridge and are rumblin' across it. "If that bridge had been weakened we'd be checkin' in on Saint Peter about now."

I stand up to give the engineer a dirty look, and he ain't in his cab. Then I catch a glimpse of him swingin' a spanner wrench. Our car shoots around a curve and I can't see a thing. "There's something wrong back there," I yell at Torchy.

We commence to scramble over the rocks. It is slow work because the cars are swayin' back and forth and it's hard to hang on and some of the rocks are so wide they hang over a little on both sides.

We roar into a short, straight stretch and can see the locomotive again. The engineer tumbles backward out of the cab, and he's as limp as a rag. Somebody's knocked him cold. The firemen's already gone and I can see two backs turned toward us.

"One of 'em belongs to Pete Clayton," I yell at Torchy. Then we shoot around a turn. I feel the train move faster. They've got the throttle wide open.

"Clayton's opened the throttle and jumped," Torchy bellows. "Pick yourself a soft spot," he advises.

I take a look and decide to stick with the train. There're logs, boulders and stumps on both sides of the roadbed and if I jump I'll bust up my legs and maybe my head. And us McGees can't stand too many blows on the head.

Torchy commences to race for that locomotive and I'm right behind him. Maybe the whole works will spill over the end of the trestle and into the sea. Maybe only part of 'em will go. But it's a cinch the nearer we are to the locomotive the better the chance we've got.

My car rolls as it goes around a sharp turn. You can hear the wheel flanges screamin' against the rails two miles off. A small slab of rock skids off and drives two feet into a clay bank. It stays there, stickin' out like a shelf.

The roar is tremendous. It's like thunder, with all them heavily loaded wheels turnin' 'round faster'n they was ever intended to turn.

We flash around a curve and shoot across the narrow highway. Two cars are standin' there. One's partly in the ditch and I can see the white-faced driver. He's just missed pilin' into the train. A minute later we're racin' across the switches and passin' a long rusty sidin' that marks the yard at the jetty. Marta's standin' in the middle of her backyard, starin'.

I catch a glimpse and that's all as I'm too busy tryin' to get over a twelve-ton rock and reach the locomotive. Then the water goes flashin' by the corner of my eye and I can feel the trestle swayin' under me. The cars jerk and take up the slack as Torchy gets into the locomotive cab and closes the throttle. He gives her the air and brakes commence to scream and grind.

He eases up and gives the air another yank. There're goin' to be some flat wheels on that train. I reach the locomotive and get a good hand hold. I'm ready to jump if I have to.

UP AHEAD I hear a mighty crash. The front cars are goin' over the end of the trestle, spillin' like water over a falls. The sea is boilin'. Seven cars

remain. Then six, then five. The air goes on again and two more go over. I get set. It looks a long ways down to the water and I never was much of a diver. Another car goes over and the next hangs up.

"Wow! What a close shave," Jerry Brown mutters.

"Uncouple, No-Shirt," Torchy yelled. "Then pile on."

I uncouple and Torchy waits just long enough for me to join him. We don't even take a look at the damage, but run back as fast as the roadbed will let us. At that it looks as if we're goin' to jump the track a couple of times. We find the engineer in a heap by the track.

I feel him over carefully to see if I can find any broken bones. Not findin' any, we lift him to the tender and lay him on the water tank. We move on a couple of hundred yards and find the firemen settin' on a log. He's dazed, but he'll do anything we tell him. As soon as he's aboard, Torchy crowds on the steam until we get to Tremont's main camp. They've got a little hospital there.

In about an hour the engineer's head has cleared and he can talk. "I stopped so you could inspect the bridge," he says, "and the fireman got out, climbed a bank and looked ahead to get the brakeman's signal. Three men must have been waiting in the brush at that point. I imagine they climbed onto the tender as soon as we started. Both the fireman and I were lookin' ahead. He looked back just as the locomotive crossed the bridge and said, 'Where did you boys come from? And what's the gag?'

"I look, and there're three masked lads. Each has a stone in the toe of a sock. One of 'em hits the fireman before he can raise his hands.

"As he goes down, two of 'em toss him off'n the locomotive," the engineer continues. "I grabbed a big spanner and went after 'em. I got a medium-sized cuss and was reachin' out for the big one, when the little one swung his sock about his head a couple of times and let go. It struck me on top of the head, just as I ducked. It left me groggy. Then the big cuss moves in and I don't remember a thing until I woke up here."

"You didn't get a glimpse of their faces?" Torchy asks.

"No, they wore masks made out of small towels or big handkerchiefs," the engineer answers. "Even their ears were covered up."

Torchy swore. "I hate a bonehead," he growled. "And that's what I am. I should've knowed they might jump the engine crew when the rest of the train was out of sight."

"You can't be expected to think of everything," I told him.

"It's about time we was winnin' a fight," Torchy growls. "First they wreck the Deep Gulch Bridge. Next Bulldozer is dumped into the creek. And now they've put most of our equipment into the sea."

"We'll get a diver," I suggest.

"Diver—hell," he explodes. "That equipment ain't worth bringin' up. There was twelve-ton stones fallin' on most of it. We won't be able to build trestle over the spot; we'll have to construct a shoo-fly around it. No-Shirt, I ain't got the heart to break the news to Marta Latimer, but you're as good as busted right now. If you spend another dollar you'll be throwin' good money after bad, because the storms will wipe out everything you do."

"It looks that way, but to repeat a remark you made when I was feelin' low about Bulldozer: 'We've got a jetty to build.' "

"I get you," Torchy says, "you either want to clean up big or go broke. You're no penny-ante contractor. That's all right with me. I've saved up a little money and if Jerry here wants to sell his stock, I'll buy it." We both look at Jerry Brown.

Jerry shakes his head. "I stand to win or lose more'n any of you. I am hanging onto my stock," he says.

I feel kinda sorry for Jerry right then. If he don't answer real quick, he's sunk.

CHAPTER V

ON QUEER STREET

WE GO back to the jetty on a speeder. I'm thinkin' maybe the financial loss will be money well spent if it makes somethin' out of Jerry Brown. At least he didn't unload his stock when Torchy offered to buy some of it. No, I ain't kickin' about goin' broke again. I've been busted before. But no matter how Jerry turns out it won't be worth the loss of old Bulldozer.

The tide's out when we reach the end of the trestle. We can see rock, busted cars and wheels down in the clear water. One of the cars is above the surface. The rock spread itself around in a big pile.

"This'll be the widest spot on the whole jetty," Torchy says kinda grim like. "I hope it don't get into the newspapers. The bankers may get worried about the money they loaned you, No-Shirt, and that'd be tough."

"What had I better do tomorrow?" Jerry asks.

"Start drivin' trestle around the big rock pile," Torchy answers. "And hope bad weather holds off. Put on three crews and drive 'em. I'll keep gettin' the rock out, and you, No-Shirt, had better make a deal for more flat-cars. Try some of the loggin' outfits that've gone busted. You might pick up somethin' cheap."

When we get to Marta's home, she's got a hot feed waitin' for us. Somethin' tells me she's had to keep it warm in the oven too long, but just the same it hits the spot. "Want to drive me up to Seattle tomorrow?" I ask. "I'm goin' shoppin' for flat-cars."

"Yes, of course," the girl answers. "I do hope this doesn't get into the newspapers. Dad'll read about it then."

"Tell him some reporter let his imagination get away from him," I advise.

She smiles. "The most imaginative reporter couldn't describe the roar of that rock train as it ran through the forest. It must have been going sixty miles an hour when it crossed the road. Sparks were flying from the brake-shoes and it seemed to leap down the trestle and into the sea. I'll never forget it."

None of the rest of us will for that matter. The rest of the evenin' incidents kept poppin' into our minds. When I get up the next day Jerry Brown is already on the job. He starts a crew onto the trestle.

Me and Marta don't say much on the way to Seattle. I know she's pretty sick over the setbacks, but she's too game to squawk about it. She drops me off at the hotel about one o'clock and goes on to the hospital. I buy a noon edition of the afternoon paper, set down in my room and look at the headlines. There's one that says the police are makin' war on gamblers.

That headline has been used twice a year for fifty years that I know of. Another headline says there's been a big battle in China. I look over it, knowin' the Japs will claim ten thousand Chinese was killed while they lost five hundred, and that the Chinese will claim twelve thousand Japs was killed and they lost eight hundred. I'm about to toss the paper aside when I notice another. It reads:

MADMAN WHIPS FIVE

Subdued After Struggle

Breaking away from four policemen and a traveling guard sent to escort him to the state insane hospital, a madman beat them and would have escaped early yesterday, but for the assistance of bystanders. The maniac, a physical giant, insists that he doesn't want to wear a shirt. Again and again he muttered, "no shirt."

There was some more to the article, but I hardly remember what it is. The mention of the words, no shirt, makes me feel funny in the stomach for some reason. There's a small line sayin' his picture is on page 5.

I turn to page 5 and my blood runs cold. The man looks like Bulldozer Craig. Then suddenly I say, "My God! It is Bulldozer." His face is thin, and he looks as if he'd been through hell, but it's Bull-

dozer. For some reason I feel like blubberin'.

While I'm still tryin' to get a hold of myself the telephone rings and a voice says, "Mr. McGee, this is Mr. Renfro at the bank. May I see you sometime before three o'clock?"

"I'm mighty sorry, Mr. Renfro, I've got something pretty important to tend to. It just came up."

"Really, Mr. McGee," he says gently, but there is plenty of edge in his voice, "nothing is as important as what I have in mind. Say, two-thirty o'clock, shall we?"

"Ten o'clock tomorrow mornin', Mr. Renfro," I insist.

"I shall expect you at two-thirty," he says, and hangs up.

"The hell with you," I growl into the dead phone. I grab my hat, go out and rent a for-hire car. This is goin' to cost me plenty, but it can't be helped.

"Take me to the state hospital," I tell the driver. "Yes, I know it isn't in the city. And that it's a long ways off, but get me there quicker'n hell can skin a liver. Here's part of your money in advance."

"It's all of it," he says.

TWO hours and three state highway patrolman later I'm standin' in the medical superintendent's office at the state hospital. "He's John Doe on the records," I tell him, "but his real name is Bulldozer Craig. The poor devil kept calling No-Shirt. That's my nickname and everybody thought that he was complainin' about wearin' a shirt. That's what gets under my hide—him tryin' to reach me, and nobody understandin' him."

"We'll see what can be done."

In a few minutes the attendant in charge of Bulldozer's ward comes for me. He takes me down a little hall, unlocks a door and tells me to go in. There's sixty or seventy mental cases movin' around the ward, or settin' on heavy benches just starin' at nothin'. I look into one man's eyes. They're vacant.

Several patients are pullin' some kind of heavy floor polishers. They're blocks of wood, covered with pieces of blanket. One or two men pull on a rope fastened to the handle. Another steers the thing with the handle. Their feet shuffle drearily.

I see a man squattin' on his haunches and whenever a fly goes past he grabs it out of the air and drops it down on the floor. He looks at me and says, "Hold on, game warden, I ain't shootin' ducks out of season."

"Okay," I answer. "But don't get more'n the limit or I'll take you in." The man is happy, at that. So're most of 'em, queer as it may seem.

The attendant stops before a cell-like room and opens the door. Bulldozer is settin' on the edge of a bed. They've got his hands in a heavy leather muff. A belt keeps him from strikin' out with the muff. "He's a violent case," the attendant says. "We have to restrain him from hurting himself or others."

I take a deep breath and say, "Hello, Bulldozer, old-timer. How are you?"

He looks at me a long time and I feel sick. He don't know me. "No no no no shirt," he says. He stutters and the words come out as if it was hard for him to make his brain telegraph 'em to his lips.

"I'm No-Shirt," I tell him. "You remember me, No-Shirt McGee. I'm your pardner."

His eyes are vacant. He mutters "No no no no shirt." I set down and try and talk to him. It don't do no good. I mention tractors, bulldozers, the tin mine, old friends and it don't do no good.

"I saw a man who licked you the other day. His name is Torchy O'Leary," I tell him. "He says he can lick you any day in the week."

The attendant says, "I'm afraid it won't do any good, Mr. McGee. He is in a fog."

I step closer. There's a scar on his head—an ugly one, like you see on wounds that healed themselves without any attention. "Isn't there anything I can do?" I yell. My voice is strained. I don't recognize it.

"Not at present," the attendant says.

"What's the history of the case?" I ask him. "He was thrown from a speeder and landed maybe on his head in a pool, or on a log or rock. That's all we know."

"We know little more," the attendant said. "He was found on a highway in bad shape. His clothing was covered with devil's club thorns and carried bits of clay, black swamp muck, red soil, loam and . . . well, he had covered a lot of country. There was no way of telling what he had eaten."

"It's been weeks," I tell him. "I'd say he was thirty pounds under weight. Now what had I better do?"

"If you can arrange for his care in a private hospital," the man suggested, "special attention could be given his case and recovery possibly hastened."

"You think he'll get well soon?" I ask.

"I'm not a doctor, Mr. McGee, so I can't speak with authority, but I've been in this work a long time. Some patients improve rapidly, others remain the same," he answers.

I leave the hospital determined to get old Bulldozer back on his feet again as soon as possible and to hell with the cost. By nine o'clock that night I've made a deal to have him transferred. I turn in, but don't sleep much. At eleven o'clock there comes a call from Marta. She's just heard about Bulldozer. I tell her what's been done and ask her to drop around and see Bulldozer as he should be in the private hospital late the followin' afternoon.

THE next mornin' I remember the ten o'clock date with the banker. At eight-thirty there's a knock on my door and Pete Clayton is standin' there. I'm ready to murder him, but now ain't the time nor place.

I get a hold on myself and say, "Come in, Clayton. A lot of water has run under the bridge since I last saw you. You heard about Bulldozer Craig, of course. Chances are you knowed it was him they'd picked up, but didn't send word to me . . ."

He looks in the bathroom to make sure I haven't anybody cached there listenin' in. Then he comes back. "You've run into a lot of hard luck, McGee," he says roughly.

"You manufactured it," I answer. "It's been a dirty fight. Don't deny you haven't been back of it. I've been on the frontier too long not to read the signs when I see 'em. Sure, I haven't a thing on you, can't prove you wrecked the Deep Gulch bridge, nearly murdered Bulldozer and wrecked a trainload of stone. I can't prove it, but I know you're back of it."

"Through talkin'?" he asks.

"Yeah," I answer.

"I'd have given you fifty thousand dollars for your interest when I was here before," he says. "I know the bank is crowdin' you. That wreck scared 'em, and they want to get out from in under. I know you've put up every share of stock you own to carry on the work. And I know it's goin' to take time and money to straighten out Craig. Here's a check for ten thousand dollars. I'll get the whole works in a few months, but I'm in a hurry to carry out certain plans. It's worth ten thousand to get a toehold right now."

"No dice," I answer.

"Huh?" he sneers. "And you're supposed to be loyal to Craig. You won't make sure of his gettin' proper care because it means a sacrifice—"

"Shut up, Clayton," I tell him. "Bulldozer can have everything I've got if it'll help. But if he gets his senses back and finds out I've sold out to you, he'll never forgive me. I'm stringin' with Jerry Brown, Marta Latimer and—Bulldozer Craig."

"Your bullheadedness, McGee, is going to cost both of us money," he says. And when he leaves the room he's fightin' mad.

Well, he's got nothin' on me. He's big, powerfully built and young, and he could murder me in a rough and tumble fight, but he'll never know how near I come to lightin' into him. In fact I'm scared stiff when I think about it.

I put on my best bib and tucker and head for the bank. Mr. Renfro greets me with a icy stare when I show up. It's ex-

actly ten o'clock. "I am afraid you are too late, Mr. McGee," he says, "the appointment was yesterday afternoon."

"I'm sorry," I says, "but I couldn't get here until now. But if I'm too late, I'm too late." So with that I turn around and start for the door.

"Just a moment," he says, "I wish to serve certain papers on you." He acts like he's holdin' the whip hand. "Yesterday we would have given you time to put up additional collateral—"

"Now you get this," I snort, knowin' tears never moved a banker, "you've got a vault full of bum local improvement bonds and whatnot. You won't cash in on 'em for years, if ever. My security for the loan is somethin' you can go out and sell for a hundred and twenty cents on the dollar. Now if you want to do that, hop to it, but you'll have a sweet damage suit on your hands. Why don't you come out in the open and admit Pete Clayton is puttin' the pressure on?"

SOMETIMES when us McGees get mad, we raise our voices. But this ain't one of 'em. If you insult a man in a low tone of voice he'll sometimes take it and profit by the insult. Where if you proclaim it to the world, his pride's hurt and he hits back.

Mr. Renfro gets red, but that's all. He thinks I'm a curly wolf, snarlin' back, with plenty of dust in the poke to back up my words. He don't know I'm a cornered coyote.

"We'll have some other little accidents," I conclude, "and lose a few dollars worth of equipment before the job's done. But whenever you get worried call me in and I'll pay you off in full. All I need is twenty-four hours' notice. And one more thing, the McGee Construction Company will probably have a bigger balance with you a year from now than Tanner-Clayton."

My legs don't cave in on me until I get back to the hotel, then they're like putty. I dang near have a cold chill. It's the biggest bluff I ever run. Whenever the telephone rings I nearly jump out of my skin; I'm sure it's Renfro lettin' me know he's callin'. And me with my pants down.

The next day Marta calls me up and wants to know when I'll be goin' back to the job. "Any time you say," I tell her.

"Suppose I pick you up tomorrow morning. We'll pay a visit to Bulldozer and drive down in the afternoon?" she says.

"Fine!" I tell her.

"Look at the stock market report," she says just before hangin' up. "Tanner-Clayton is up a dollar a share."

Well, I open the paper to the little column listin' local stocks and sure enough it's gone up. Evidently the smart money lads figger it's a cinch we'll go busted and Tanner-Clayton will take over everything. Late that afternoon a rumor gets around the gov'ment's goin' to cancel our contract.

When Marta picks me up the next mornin' she stops in front of a stock broker's office. "Run in and get the latest quotation on Tanner-Clayton," she says, "while I drive around the block."

A brisk young feller is just chalkin' up a new figger when I reach the board. The stock's jumped another dollar. That has a greater effect on me than Pete Clayton's big talk, and Renfro's threats to close us out. It suggests somethin' is goin' on behind the scenes that we don't know nothin' about.

When I tell Marta, she's serious, too. But neither of us talks about it, because we don't want to worry each other. She drives out to the private hospital where they're keepin' Bulldozer. We both go in and pretty soon they bring him down to the reception room.

He ain't wearin' the big leather muffs, but I notice two burly attendants are with him—one on each side, ready to grab his arms in case he gets rough. "Rest up, Bulldozer," I say, "and then come back to the job. You're lookin' fine."

He looks at me in that blank way and says, "No no no no shirt." And that's all he says. I hear Marta turn quick, and leave the room. I follow her out. She

breaks down and cries all over my shoulder. It's pretty tough on both of us to see old Bulldozer actin' as if his address would be on Queer Street for a long time to come.

CHAPTER VI

STORM SIGNALS FLYING

JERRY BROWN is burnin' the midnight oil when we arrive at the jetty. We can hear the bangin' of the pile-driver hammer and see the ghostly forms of men movin' around in the floodlights. It don't seem real.

Jerry sees our headlights and comes off the trestle on a speeder to meet us. "Any grief in Seattle?" he asks.

We tell him about Bulldozer. He's glad he's alive, but looks pretty glum when he hears he is on Queer Street. It's evident he'd hoped Bulldozer would pull hisself together and get us out of the jam.

"And what's the grief down here," we ask, "if any?"

"Torchy O'Leary left this mornin' suddenly," he answers. "Word came that his hardrock crew had quit their jobs. Most of them have worked under him for years, but Clayton planted troublemakers in the crew and convinced the boys we were going broke and they wouldn't get their pay. I've never known any one who can throw as many punches as Pete Clayton."

"Dad warned us, remember?" Marta said. "He said we can expect a little of everything."

"Well, I'm goin' to bed," I tell 'em. If I didn't have somethin' new to worry about every night I wouldn't sleep well.

The next mornin', when I go out onto the trestle and look at the crew, I can see a difference. They're afraid a sudden storm may come up and catch 'em out there. Every man amongst 'em feels he's playin' tag with the undertaker. Those big swells come rollin' in, lick at the trestle, and move on. But at high tide a real big one could sweep over the whole works and carry off any man who wasn't pretty well lashed.

They're workin' with one eye and watchin' the sea with the other and it's cuttin' down their efficiency.

"If they was wise," one of 'em said, meanin' the McGee Construction Company, "they'd make the best possible deal with the government and knock off for a year. Sure, they'd go broke, but at least us men would be sure of our pay as long as we work. As it is now, if a storm comes along and wipes out the trestle, we'll be holdin' the sack. Anybody can see they can't finish before the big storms. Anybody knows no trestle will stand up again' a northwester."

He's talkin to me and my mind goes back to the day when I mentioned somethin' along the same line to Bulldozer. He just grinned and said, "I've got that figgered out, too, if worse comes to worse and we have to work this winter."

A week passes before we hear anything from Torchy O'Leary, then a train load of stone comes rumblin' out of the timber and rolls onto the trestle. It crawls around the shoo-fly built around the heap of stone and equipment that marks the spot of the wreck, then inches its way onto the trestle. A shovel crew commences dumpin' the rock into the sea.

Jerry Brown comes into the room. He's dog tired and he flops into a chair near the stove. Marta is settin' at her desk, writin' out pay checks on a bank account that's vanishin' like sand in a wind storm. There's a pot of hot coffee on the stove and it smells good. A cook is fryin' somethin' out in the kitchen.

"We're dumping stone again, Marta," Jerry says. "If bad weather holds off and we keep two jumps ahead of it we may convince the government we are entitled to a little something on account. Have you figured how much the wrecks have cost us?"

"Repairing the Deep Gulch bridge," Marta answered, "plus the value of the rock and equipment that went off the end of the trestle runs the loss up to about sixty thousand dollars. And that doesn't approach the real loss—the delay in time,

the value of Bulldozer's services and his personal damage."

"No," I agree, "it don't. Bulldozer had it all figgered out to beat the sea one way or another."

"If we were sure we could beat the game," Jerry says, "I know a way of collecting that loss—and then some."

"How?" Me and Marta both ask.

"Sell Tanner-Clayton stock short," he answers. "It's goin' to drop plenty as soon as the smart money lads believe we are going to make the grade. The high price is based solely on the market's conviction that we will fail and that Tanner-Clayton will take over Latimer-Brown and then force the Tremont Logging company to sell out on their own terms."

"But where in the devil are we goin' to raise the money?" I ask.

"That is what I want to know," Marta chimes in. "Any loose change we have is needed to keep the jetty job going."

"I sure wish old Bulldozer was back on the job," I moan. "He had some kind of a short cut or somethin' in mind."

WE GO ahead, week after week, gettin' touches of nasty weather, but pushin' the trestle toward the old wreck. I chase up to Seattle to see Bulldozer whenever I get the chance, but I can't see any mental change. He's still tryin' to say something to No-Shirt. Physically he's his old self. They've given him the right kind of grub and he's filled out. He likes to work, so they let him dig around in the back yard, buildin' a rockery.

When we get another stretch of bad weather I decide to spend two or three days with Bulldozer. "Just what is the trouble now, Doc?" I ask. "Does he need a head operation, or—what?"

"It is difficult to explain, Mr. McGee. We'll take a Forest Service telephone line, for example. Grounding of the wire hampers communication, lessens the effectiveness. All the physical properties for normal operation are there, but a foreign element intrudes and we have partial and sometimes complete failure."

"Have you cleared up Bulldozer's grounded wires?" I ask.

"X-ray photographs show the clot on the brain, caused when his head struck a rock or something, has dissolved," the doctor answers. "But we can't seem to arouse him. He is like a man in deep slumber—I might say a drugged man. We can't awaken him. We may never awaken him. I feel I should be frank with you."

"I suppose you think I'm crazy. Bulldozer has always been a man of action. Fightin' nature, fightin' other men," I explain. "Do you suppose if he was tossed into a fight of some kind, he'd snap out of it? Or am I nuts?"

"Not at all," the doctor says, "sometimes a little thing will straighten a man out and start him on the right track again—a familiar face, or situation; a critical problem in which he must make a sudden effort to save his life, or—"

"Doc," I interrupt, "lemme take Bulldozer down on the job. Is he violent any more?"

"Not since his head pains ceased," he answers. "If you'll remember, during the violent period he was constantly putting his hands to his head, as if it were about to burst. When his hands were in restraint, he would rub his head against the leather muff and groan. That is over with, definitely. I think you might take him, accompanied, of course, by two guards. They would remain in the background, but would be available, instantly, should something go wrong."

"By golly, let's try it," I insist.

Ridin' with Bulldozer down to the jetty is like ridin' with a stranger. Even worse because strangers will talk and try to get acquainted. They'll meet you half way. Bulldozer says nothin' and mighty little of that.

Even Marta don't interest him, and he'd fell for her like a ton o' brick the first time he laid eyes on her. She might have been one of them clothes horses in a department-store window. When we get there we transfer to a speeder and go out front to the end of the trestle.

It's the first time I've been out there since the trestle's got so long. You can see the green waves leapin' at you. They go smoothly under the trestle, makin' a suckin' and gurglin' sound as they eddy around the piles. I look back to shore and see smoke comin' from the bunkhouse and shops and I suddenly realize they're on safe, solid ground, while I'm on a few timbers stuck in the ground. It makes a man feel lonely and . . . well, kinda afraid inside. I feel like the odds was all again' me. And that's the truth, too.

I take Bulldozer to the shovel that's movin' over a string of cars dumpin' rock into the sea. I'm holdin' my breath as I watch him. The man handles the shovel kinda awkward and not with the sureness Bulldozer always shows when he gets hold of anything with tractors under it. I'm expectin', yes prayin', he'll get up there and take over the shovel.

BUT nothin' happens. The shovel don't interest Bulldozer. He just stares at the sea, like it's somethin' he's seen before somewheres, but he can't just remember when or where. He looks at the stubs of masts stickin' up out of the wreck and scratches his head. He seems to be thinkin'. "What do you make of it, Bulldozer?" I ask. It seems like there's a faint light burnin' in his eyes.

"No no no no shirt," he mutters. "I—I . . ." Then the light fades from his eyes and when he looks at the sea again the wreck don't mean nothin'.

I stay on the job twelve hours a day and I keep Bulldozer with me. Sometimes we're at the quarry; sometimes on the train, and a lot of time on the jetty. If anything develops that's liable to stir up his interest, I want him to be around. Early in the second week we let him wander about to suit himself. That means me and the guards trail him.

He goes down to the jetty a lot, and sometimes the train has to stop and let him get aboard to keep from knockin' him off'n the trestle. That wreck means somethin' to him.

In the midst of all this the gov'ment engineer comes down, talks to the inspectors on the job, then goes into a huddle with me, Jerry and Marta. He don't say so, but we know pressure is bein' put on him to order the contract forfeited.

"I don't see a chance in the world of your completing the contract," he says finally. "We are into the stormy season now and the sea will take out trestle as fast as you build it."

"Then we'll keep on building it," Jerry says. It's surprisin' spirit for him to show and I see Marta give him a quick look. She's pleased. "Give us time and we'll pull out of the hole."

The engineer shakes his head and says, "I like you people personally. You saw disaster ahead of you and you didn't hunt cover as so many would have done—saved what you could from the wreckage. You kept on driving ahead. With Craig on the job to take advantage of the shortcuts, I'm not sure but what you would have finished the contract and made a little money. But . . ."

"The weather has given us a break," Jerry says, "maybe it will continue to do so. Perhaps we'll have a mild winter and—"

"I'd like to believe that," the engineer interrupts, "but weather statistics show otherwise."

"And you engineers are hell for statistics," Jerry growls. "I'm not complaining. If you didn't go into them you would meet with no end of grief. Will you do this, if you can do so in fairness to yourself, will you proceed with the foreclosure measures in a leisurely manner?"

"I'll think about that," the engineer says, and there is a twinkle in his eyes. "I'll want to consider all angles before I initiate canceling contract measures. It would never do to jump at a conclusion."

We breathe easier after he's gone. Maybe good weather will hold out. Twenty-four hours after he leaves, the weather-bureau boys telephone that Alaska is sendin' down a man-sized storm.

Jerry goes down to the bunkhouse and

posts a notice to get all loose equipment off'n the jetty and trestle. When that's done, the notice explains, they can knock off for three or four days.

The way they got that equipment to a safe place, then changed into their best clothes would open your eyes. In almost no time their cars was roarin' over the highway to the nearest big towns. I couldn't blame 'em. When a man flirts with death all day long he's entitled to let down his hair when he has time to hisself. Them tough babies would raise hell and put a block under it before they got back.

"I only hope Torchy's hardrock men don't join them," Marta says, "because the two outfits are liable to stage a free-for-all."

WE SETTLE down around the stove when the storm hits. The wind rocks the house and rain rattles so hard against the windows I think it's hail at first. None of us say much as the boom of the surf on the jetty gets louder and louder. We know we're goin' to lose some trestle before it's over with.

Bulldozer stares at the window and says nothin'. "Bulldozer," Jerry says, hopin' to arouse him, "if you'd just tell us how you intended to build jetty during bad weather, we could sell Tanner-Clayton stock short and make some pin money."

Bulldozer looks at him, blank at first, then interested.

"Pin money?" Bulldozer says. "What's pin money?"

Marta almost jumps out of her skin. It's the first intelligent question he's asked in weeks. The wind screamin' and moanin' around the house, the roar of the storm and the danger we can feel in the very air seems to do somethin' to the big cuss.

"Pin money," Marta says, and for a moment she can't seem to straighten her thoughts out enough to answer, "is small change. If you had five dollars, the nickels would be pin money."

"Pin money!" Bulldozer says it over and over again. Then he mutters "no no no no shirt," and goes back into a daze. When he's like that the words he wants to use won't come and he just stutters.

"Bulldozer," Marta says sharply, "do you realize if this storm wipes out our trestle, we won't even have pin money?"

She says it three or four times, then a faint light comes into his eyes. "We'll go broke, Bulldozer. Lose our shirts. Understand? We'll lose our shirts."

Jerry and me lean forward, studyin' his face. We think we see a change, but we're afraid to say anything about it, each thinkin' our opinion is caused by hope.

"No no no no shirt," he says, "sky sky line. I . . . I . . . can't wake up. I . . . I . . ." Then he drops his head into his arms and sobs.

Marta drops to her knees beside him and pulls his head to her shoulder. She talks in a low, soothin' tone, tryin' to calm him. The guards come in from the next room, standin' there, ready to give us help if it's needed.

I'm all choked up inside. It's as if Bulldozer has knowed his condition right along and has tried his damnedest to break free and he never can quite get away. And when you remember he never quit in a fight, it makes you hurt all the worse because you know the terrible odds he must have faced all this time.

Maybe if Marta and Bulldozer had been in love with each other a long time she could have helped him break loose. As it was she just calmed him. But I'm here to tell you it was all mighty eerie, with a big man tryin' to cross the border of insanity, and the storm screamin' around the house, the rattle of rain, the boom of surf and them two guards standin' like shadows in the background.

After awhile the guards say, "Come on, Bulldozer, let's turn in. We're all tired."

Bulldozer gets up like a child and follows 'em into the wing that's been their quarters since they came. The rest of us turn in and sleep fitfully.

Then, sometime in the small hours, one of the guards yells, "Everybody up. Bulldozer's gone."

CHAPTER VII

OUT FRONT TO THE RESCUE

I DRESS in record time and hurry into the wing. "How'd Bulldozer get away?" I ask one of the guards.

"Search me," he answers. "He's slept sound every night, and even when he turned over in his sleep we woke up instantly. We're trained to wake up when a patient is restless. Maybe it was the storm that muffled his movements. I never heard a thing. I woke up just now, checked and he was gone."

We break out some five-cell flashlights, which same are young searchlights on a black, stormy night. We get into oilskins and sou'westers and step outside.

Right off'n the bat I spot Bulldozer's bootprint in the mud. It's on a little rise of ground where there's no chance of water drainin' into it, yet it's half filled with water. That means he's been gone some time.

"What do you make of it?" Marta asks.

"He's headed for the jetty," I answer. "Do you know, I think he's had the jetty on his mind right along. He seemed almost his old self when he was out there once. There was more light in his eyes. Now maybe this storm made some kind of a dent on his subconscious mind and he thinks he'd better do somethin' about the jetty."

"It's all pretty deep to me," Marta answers, "but I've read of people who were subconsciously guided in an emergency. I know this much, the storm has had its effect on me. I can't explain just what it does to me, but I feel different."

A squall staggers us and a deluge of rain falls on our shoulders and bent backs. I move slow, pickin' up his tracks here and there. They lead onto the jetty, and they don't come back. Me, Marta and Jerry huddle together behind a buildin'.

"If he's out there," Jerry says, "he's a goner. The wind will blow a man right off of the trestle. And if the wind didn't get a man, the sea would. Spray's going clear over it. There's a dozen rails in the scrap dump that the sea twisted into pretzels."

"I'm goin' out," I tell him. "If I can't walk I can crawl. And one thing's sure—the wind can't blow out a flashlight. I've got sharp calks in my boots. I can dig in and hang on."

"No, you can't," Jerry argues. "Besides, you might slip on the ties and fall between 'em." I can see by the reflection of my light his face is pale when it should've been ruddy. Marta is watchin' him. She knows he's arrived at another crossroads and she's wonderin' if he's goin' to take the wrong turn again.

There's another angle that comes to me. The storm will wear a man down from the effort of pushin' into it. Then when he weakens and relaxes for a minute, it'll get him.

"We'd better take the speeder," I tell him. "It won't fall between the ties, and it can take the brunt while we save our stren'th."

"No-Shirt, we haven't a chance," he yells at me.

"Me and the guards will go," I tell him. The guards are still prowlin' around, but I know they'll go along when the time comes.

"The speeder will blow off. That happened two years ago. Three men were lost," Jerry warns me. "I've been going over the old records."

There're several short lengths of railroad iron. I pile 'em up on the speeder's footboards and lash 'em with wire. I lash a tarp over the motor cowl to keep water from getting in. If the spark plugs get wet, we're stuck. There's a good headlight on the speeder and I turn it on. I take several coils of rope along, then I yell at the guards.

While they're comin' I talk like a Dutch uncle to Jerry. "You once said you wished you'd find yourself in a spot where you'd have to fight or go under. It's out there on the trestle. You might be surprised at the stuff you've got in you if you gave it a chance to develop."

He starts for the speeder, but his legs are like lead. He stops. "I wish somebody would knock me in the head and toss me aboard," he snarls. It's queer what a man needs inside of him tom ake him do certain things.

"Nobody's goin' to crook a little finger to get you on," I tell him. The guards come, and I start, leavin' him standin' there. We've gone a hundred feet when I hear him comin', his calks bitin' into the wet ties. He lands on the back of the speeder and I don't even look around.

I CRAWL along, lookin' for Bulldozer. He may be crawlin' back for all we know. We pass clear of the protectin' bluffs and onto the jetty. Waves are pilin' up, and spray's goin' across it in solid sheets. I lick my lips and taste the salt. It gets into my eyes and stings 'em. The torrents of rain wash away the salt taste. Ahead we can hear a deeper boom and the groan of timbers under a heavy strain. Somethin' cracks like the report of a gun and I turn the flashlight onto the sea below. A pile is driftin' away.

"Get ready to jump, boys," I tell 'em, "if you feel the world droppin' away under your tails."

Jerry Brown starts to get off—play safe—then he changes his mind. He's makin' hisself go through with it. Maybe it's imagination, but it seems as if the trestle sags when we pass over the weak spot. I wonder if the rails will be spannin' a gap when we come back, or will be gone altogether.

Near the end of the trestle I suddenly jam on the brake. One rail's gone, and the other is saggin' on a stringer. I can't tell whether the rail's holdin' up the stringer, or the stringer supportin' the rail. The crests of big waves are just lickin' the stringer as they pass. In the bright light I can see the feathery water fallin' back from the crest of each wave. A few rods beyond, they break.

I move the speeder light up and down, pickin' out the wrecked part of the trestle and tryin' to see what's beyond. Jerry's eyes are better'n mine. "Hey!" he yells. "Give me that!"

He takes hold of the light and shifts it. The longer finger stabs through the darkness and seems to tremble. We can see the rain slantin' through it.

"There's somebody," Jerry says, "sprawled out on the track."

"It's Bulldozer!" I yell.

The wind whips the words out of my mouth, the next wave breaks again' the trestle and all we can see is spray ahead. It blots out everything and leaves the salt water spillin' from the trestle in cascades. Bulldozer is still there. But the wave shifted his body some. "It looks like he fell down, Jerry," I said.

"We've got to get him," Jerry says. "I don't know how, but we've got to. There comes another of those hellish waves."

We can see a white line comin' out of the night. It smothers everything and thunders on.

"What's the tide doin'?" I ask Jerry.

"It's getting higher," he answers. He's pale and his face is wet from spray and rain. He's fightin' a battle inside of him as he looks through the night at Bulldozer. Another wave comes and he yells out, like he was in pain. He gazes intently at the water spillin' between the ties. Bulldozer's shifted again.

"The next one will take him," he yells. His voice ain't natural. There's a wild note in it. He looks at the sea, waits for another wave to go by, then he starts crawlin' along that saggin' rail.

He stops when he sees he can't make it, wraps arms and legs around the rail and let's the foaming crest of a passin' wave pluck at him. The instant it's gone, he continues the scramble. He makes it across just as the next wave hits. When the spray's out of the air we can see he's reached Bulldozer and is lashin' him to the rail.

Fifteen minutes pass before there's any more movement. Two green waves sweep over them. They break just before they hit our section of the trestle and we get a deluge of spray and water. Bulldozer is

movin' about, crawlin' toward us on his hands and knees. He ain't savin' hisself, he's just doin' as he's told. And Jerry's tellin' him to wrap his arms and legs around that stringer and rail and inch his way across.

We hold our breath when a wave breaks a hundred feet off. It smashes over all of us and when I look, Jerry's all that's left. He's yellin' somethin', then I see he's holdin' a line snubbed around a rail and Bulldozer's danglin' from the end of it. The big cuss gets a hand on the rail and that's all he needs. He hauls his body, with the extra weight of water, to the stringer and keeps on crawlin'. Me and one of the guards pull him to safety. The other guard gives Jerry a hand.

"It was a damned good thing you had a rope on Bulldozer," I said, "or he'd have been a goner."

"I lashed him before we started," he answers. "I keep slack in the line until I saw a wave coming, then I snubbed the line and hung on."

"You've got plenty of head, son, and plenty of nerve," I tell him. He stares at me, and doggoned it's only then he realizes what he's done. In a real showdown, the man inside of him took command. And that man was all wool and a yard wide.

"I've hit my pace," Jerry mutters. And he's talkin' to hisself. In this moment there's no room for outsiders. Then the next second I can see he's scared that he won't be able to keep it up.

We're just pilin' onto the speeder when one of the guards roars a warnin'. Day's beginnin' to break now and we can see a wave comin'. It's so big it seems painted again' the slate gray sky. There's a broad band of tumblin' breakin' white. Then she hits.

A THOUSAND fingers tear at me. The water roars and pounds in my ears. My hands are clutchin' the rail, but the rest of me is flappin' around like a dish towel in a wind. My whole body's bein' pounded again' the trestle. I hold my breath until it seems my lungs must bust and my eyes pop out of their sockets. Then the wave's gone on.

We're all together, but the speeder's off the track. Only them rails on the foot boards kept it anchored. I whirl suddenly on Bulldozer. He's been through a lot of excitement and danger. He's fought the sea and he's alive. He's marchin' along like the rest of us. Danger has made us more alert mentally, and I figger he's the same way. So I take a long chance that I hope will keep him marchin'.

"Bulldozer, we're lost! Tell us what to do." I commence to run around in circles, like I was in a panic. You can't do much runnin' on a trestle. "You've got to save us, Bulldozer."

"What the hell's the matter here?" he says thickly.

"The speeder's off'n the track," I moan. "We'll all be washed off the trestle."

"Get her on the track, you fools," he roars. He grabs a hold and starts heavin'. The rest of us join in. With them rails on the footboard it makes it doubly hard, but there ain't time to take 'em off.

I look at a guard. "He's out of it," he says in my ear. "It is a type of hysteria, but he's shook it off."

Bulldozer gets the motor goin', and we move toward land. The motor splutters a lot and sometimes the speeder almost stops, then it catches again and we limp along. There's a lone figure standin' in the rain as we rumble onto a sidin'. Marta's seen the last of it—the wave that moved the speeder off'n the track, the fight to get it back on again. And she's got an idear of what prob'ly happened in the darkness. The first man she looks at is Jerry. Then she looks at Bulldozer.

I jump off'n the speeder and join her. "Get into the house quick, yank the calendar off'n the wall and hide the newspapers. I don't want Bulldozer to know how many weeks he's missed. I've got a theory on what happened to him tonight. It's somethin' about the jetty bein' on his mind all the time, but I'll tell you about it later."

She streaks it into the house. And when

we come in there're no papers around. Bulldozer drops into a chair. "Damned cold for this time of the year," he says. "How can we build a jetty if they toss storms at us the tailend of summer?"

"Just a little hard luck," I tell him. "Let's turn in and get some sleep. We'll have damage to repair and plenty of night work when the blow is over."

Bulldozer turns in, but I don't. I'm too excited and uncertain over the future. Will he be his old self when he wakes up, or will he slip back during his sleep? Maybe I should go in right now, wake him up, and make him explain why he played with a toy jetty months ago, and what his plan is to beat the storms. If he slips back he'll forget it. But I decide to let him sleep. Marta and the others go around on their tiptoes and the hours drag.

About three o'clock Bulldozer comes into the kitchen and asks for a cup of coffee. While Marta is getting it, he turns on the radio and the first thing we hear is, "What a punt! McAdams standing on his own goal-line kicked that ball eighty yards . . ."

"What the hell!" Bulldozer roars. "They don't play football in late summer. Hey, No-Shirt. Did I go on a bat! Wait, I'm gettin' it now. I was ridin' the speeder through the night, and it struck somethin' just as I was crossin' a bridge. I remember goin' through the air, then a roar—"

He jumps to the window and looks at the trestle. "That's been pushed way out. It's taken weeks, months to do that. It's—No-Shirt, come clean. What happened?"

So I come clean and tell him everything. He keeps noddin' his head. "I must've been close to snappin' out of it several times," he says, "I thought I was kinda dreamin'. I kept tryin' to say No-Shirt, but couldn't seem to get it out. And I was worried about the jetty. Somethin' was wrong and we couldn't seem to build it. I kept thinkin' we'd lose everything and Clayton would clean up."

"And that was on your mind last night," I explain, "and you snuck out there to see what you could do to save the jetty. The roarin' storm and the sense of responsibility stirred you. It's a wonder you wasn't killed. You must've had a bad fall because there's a cut on your forehead and when we first saw you you was lyin' between the rails."

"Let's go out and have a look at things," he says, "then tell me how we're gettin' along with the gov'ment and that bum, Torchy O'Leary."

CHAPTER VIII

TIGER FIGHT

THE storm is easin' up and we ride out on the speeder and look at the damnedest mess you ever saw. The sea has made free with our trestle and track and some of them steel rails look like a Vassar daisy chain.

"Tomorrow Pete Clayton's stock makes another jump," Jerry says. "If we could be sure we'll pull out of this we could clean up big by selling the stock short."

"Then hop to it," Bulldozer says. "It's in the bag—I think. We'll hock our shirts and when it's all over we'll be in the money or else walk off'n the job naked from the waist up. Now here's my plan." He talks like a Dutch uncle to us for ten minutes, with much pointin' at the water and the jetty.

"You always was a gambler," I say, shakin' my head.

"By golly, I'm going to gamble on his gamble," Jerry says.

After he'd gone Bulldozer turns to me. "What in thunder happened to him? The last thing I knowed he was as yellow as a new borned chicken and didn't have no get up and get."

"And that wasn't all," I think to myself, "you figgered he was all that stood between you and Marta Latimer." But aloud I say, "You started makin' him over and the job was finished last night when he shinned across that stringer and rail and took care of you. That's when he found hisself."

All of us get into Marta's car that afternoon and drive to Seattle. The next

mornin' I hock what stocks and bonds I've got left and turn the money over to Jerry. In the meantime him and Marta's done the same.

While we'd been drivin' to Seattle a newspaper photographer had been drivin' to the jetty to get pictures of the wrecked trestle. There was a story with 'em in the paper tellin' about the storm's might. And what that done to Clayton's stock would surprise you.

It jumped three dollars because the smart boys figgered we was all through. Then it was Jerry moves in and sells it short. I liked to died laughin' when I learn Clayton's the lad who bought. You get the situation, don't you? Jerry's sold stock he ain't got on hand to deliver. He's got to buy it and turn it over to Clayton. Now if Clayton and all the small fry that's in with him hang onto their stock, it's goin' to be hard to find.

Brother Renfro at the bank has saved a few honest dollars and he's bought Clayton stock on the side. It looks mighty good to him. Before we go back we drop in on Jeff Latimer.

The old boy breaks into a smile. "Things are better at last, Marta," he says. "I can tell looking at you. Oh, you always smiled when you came here, but that was the trouble—you smiled too much. Are you goin' to lick 'em now?"

"To a frazzle," Marta answers.

THE day after we get back to the jetty, the gov'ment engineer shows up. With him are Tanner and Clayton. Renfro gets out of his car a few minutes later. Maybe he figgered it would look too raw if he come with 'em.

Bulldozer is all for destroyin' Pete Clayton, but I calm him down. Clayton studies Bulldozer curiously as we join the party. He can see the big cuss is hisself again, and he's got plenty of respect for Bulldozer's cleverness in his own line.

"The Tanner-Clayton people claim you have abandoned the work," the engineer tells us, "and have offered to continue at the price you bid. We are here to survey the situation. And there will be no unpleasantness, of course. I understand there is bitterness between you."

"Well, you might call it a funny taste," Bulldozer says, "but it ain't bitter yet. Pete Clayton ain't got the full dose jammed down his throat."

"Take it easy," I warn Bulldozer.

"It appears," the engineer said, "you have abandoned the work." He waves his hand towards the deserted trestle. "If that is true, I shall have to take action immediately."

"We haven't," I tell him. "We expect to work all winter long. We have—er—perfected a new and cheaper way of buildin' the jetty."

The engineer perks up, but he also looks doubtful, too. "Let's me and you take a walk," Bulldozer says.

They walk down the jetty a ways, with Bulldozer waxin' eloquent and the engineer shakin' his head. Fin'ly Bulldozer stops dead in his tracks. "I tell you we can handle ten-ton stones that way."

"And I say you can't," the engineer says.

"Now, listen," Bulldozer argues. And I notice he's studyin' Clayton out of the corner of his eye. "Give me a chance to prove it. Have you got a bath tub in your house?"

"Of course I have," the engineer snorts.

"Fine. I'll prove it in your own bath tub," Bulldozer promises. "And if I do, will you give us a month to prove it down here? If we don't, then we'll walk off under your terms and won't squawk."

"Very well," the engineer agrees.

"How about callin' at your house next Friday night at nine o'clock?" Bulldozer suggests. "I'll have everything with me. It won't take long."

"Very well then," the engineer says, "Friday night, nine o'clock at my home."

"I can't pack a ten-ton granite slab in my pocket," Bulldozer says as they join us, "so naturally it'll have to be done on a small scale."

That evenin' he telephones several contractors and gets a couple of floatin' pile-

drivers lined up. While he's waitin' for different parties I notice he keeps lookin' at Jerry Brown and Marta Latimer. But I feel sorry for the big guy. The weeks he could have been on the job sparkin' her he was out of his head. I know Marta got to thinkin' he was pretty special. If he lands her now he's sure got to move fast. But then, Bulldozer always was a fast mover.

The last man he calls is Torchy O'Leary. I can hear Torchy's boomin' voice. "Hell, have you snapped out of it? That's bad news. And besides that I'm out a lot of sympathy I wasted on you. Why couldn't you have stayed normal—a mental case."

"Listen you squaw's nightmare, meet me in Seattle Friday evenin' at eight o'clock and I'll buy you a drink," Bulldozer says. "Huh? Never mind what's up. Just meet me there. Huh? Sure, I know you should stay on the job. You've got that kind of a organization. The minute your back is turned things go to pieces."

Bulldozer hangs up, grinnin'. "That last crack got under his hide. He says he'll be there."

"I'm going up tomorrow," Jerry says. "I'm going to circulate rumors that new methods of handling rock will permit the McGee Construction Company to work in the worst weather. And watch Tanner-Clayton stock take a nose-dive."

FRIDAY evenin' at eight o'clock Torchy O'Leary comes into the room and Bulldozer breaks out a bottle of whisky. He sets up four water glasses and fills each half full of liquor. "Here's to the destruction of our enemies," he says.

"Just a minute," I yelp. "I can't take all this straight." I make a dive for the bathroom faucet and Jerry is at my heels. I put plenty of water in my glass. Jerry pours out half of his and adds plenty of water.

"And you call yourself a sourdough, No-Shirt," Bulldozer sneers. "There's some excuse for Jerry, though a real logger never spoils good whisky with water."

They toss off their liquor neat. I cough on mine and tears come into my eyes. It's very distressin', because Bulldozer's watchin' me.

"How about a chaser, Torchy, or can't you hardrock men take it?" Bulldozer asks.

"We can take it better'n any one-horse tractor man," Torchy says. So they chase down the first drink with a half a glass of straight whisky.

Torchy brings the palms of his hands together with a mighty report. "Hah!" he exclaims. "That's put me in fightin' trim. Let's find a war somewheres. And if we can't find one, let's go out and chase a cop. Say, how about Nellie's Hut? You was throwed out of there and that's a blot on your escutcheon."

"What's a blot on my escutcheon? It ain't anything that good soap and water and a wire brush won't wash off, is it?" Bulldozer asks.

"I think it's something them old knights used to pack around with 'em, and if it got a blot on it, they fought," Torchy says. "I wish I'd lived in them days. I'd have stormed your castle and stole your women."

"Nobody ever stole a Craig's women," Bulldozer snorts. Then he remembers. "I've got to see that gov'ment engineer at nine o'clock and you're coming along, Jerry, you're drivin' the car."

"If it's safe for me to drive," Jerry says.

"What?" Torchy and Bulldozer yell in unison. "Do you mean to say that little snort you took makes you a drunken driver. Baaaah! Let's go."

Jerry and Bulldozer set on the front seat. Me and Torchy get in the back. "Now kinda hunch down so you won't be noticed," Bulldozer orders. "Mrs. Astorbilt might be in Seattle and I don't want to be seen with the likes of you."

All of a sudden I get the idear there's purpose in everything Bulldozer's done, 'specially invitin' Torchy to go along. We drive along Sand Point Way, which is the naval air-station road, then he tells Jerry

to turn into Windermere. It's a new district on the lake. There's a bunch of new homes scattered around, and also a lot of cut-over land growed up with alders and brush.

We swing along a half dark road and all of a sudden a big car cuts in ahead of us. Jerry has to jam on the brakes sudden to keep from crashin'.

"Get down, you buzzards," Bulldozer says to me and Torchy. "Unless my guardian angel's two-timin' on me, Pete Clayton's walked into somethin'."

Six men spill out of the car and there ain't a runt in the lot. I feel in my pocket for somethin' solid to hit with, and there ain't nothin'. So I take off my shoe, which is a old sailor trick.

"Come out of there, Craig," a heavy voice orders, "and take your beatin'. And you, too, Brown."

Before Jerry has a chance to argue, two thugs jerk open the door and yank him to the pavement. Bulldozer is right after him, and me and Torchy break our necks to follow.

THEM bums ain't surprised to see me comin' out of the back seat, but Torchy's somebody they ain't expectin'. For a minute they act as hurt as a farmer's daughter who's been deceived by a drummer.

"You take the cripple," Pete Clayton says, noddin' toward me. With one shoe on and the other off it makes me limp.

A tall cuss comes at me, and I take a swipe at his face with my shoe and nearly shift his nose off'n its base. He howls and I swing again. I miss him and the shoe flies out of my hand, so I start in with my fists. It's Tanner. He's come along to see his thugs beat up Bulldozer, maybe murder him, and he's walked into a free-for all.

I swing from the knees and connect on the jaw. His knees sag, then he lets me have a wallop in the stomach that it'll take more'n a teaspoonful of soda in a cup of warm water to settle.

He tangles and I yank off his mask, just to make sure it's Tanner. He tries to gouge out an eye, but I run the heel of my shoe—the shoe with a foot in it—down his shin bone and he moans like he was bleedin' internally.

I bust out laughin' and he wipes the laugh off'n my face with a little honest work with his knee. I find all this very annoyin' because I can't see the main event. Me and Tanner fightin' is like monkeys scatterin' dirt as the Chinese say. The tiger fight is goin' on thirty feet away.

I'm gettin' winded and my arms are heavy as lead. I put everything into four punches. The first and third miss, the second and fourth connect and Tanner goes down. He drags me down with him, but I land on top, twist around and look for Bulldozer. I don't see him, because Jerry Brown and a tame ape are indulgin' in a sluggin' match. Neither of 'em's got any science.

This is Jerry's first fight and I'm wonderin' how he'll stand up to it. His instincts will have to tell him what to do. But if he's inherited any of his old man's fight there'll be no stoppin' him.

I see a fist explode again' his eye. It knocks him flatter'n a flounder. He gets right up off'n the ground and tears into the thug. *Bang!* He gets it again. When he gets up this time the thug gets discouraged. Jerry steps inside the next blow —provin' he's learnin' the hard way—and down they go. From the howls of pain comin' from the bushes I know there's a lot of dirty work goin' on.

Right beyond them Torchy O'Leary and the biggest man in the lot are playin' a little game of their own. And it ain't ping pong. I can't see much except Torchy's broad back movin' slowly to the right, then to the left. He reminds me of a surgeon performin' an operation. And from the other cuss' howls Torchy is shreddin' his ribs.

After awhile he breaks loose and goes for a walk. He runs into alders and tumbles over brush, but anything seems better than where he's been. And all the

time he's mutterin' to hisself and moanin'. Torchy drags his knees under him and manages to get onto his feet. He stumbles toward Bulldozer who's fightin' three men.

"Keep away," Bulldozer roars, "this is a private fight." He's got two men down and is just measurin' Pete Clayton. *Smack!* He cracks Clayton square in the mouth. The big bull moose goes down so hard his head bounces. Bulldozer lands on him like a ton of brick. Clayton sets his teeth into Bulldozer's thumb.

Bulldozer groans mightily, but when he's in pain he thinks fastest. He crooked up his thumb and yanks out Clayton's gold bridge.

"I've got me a nugget charm," he pants. Then he smashes his fist again' Clayton's jaw and gets up to his feet in time to face the other two.

The three of 'em go down, one of 'em puttin' the boot to Bulldozer's ribs. "Let me at 'em!" Torchy yells.

I rap Tanner on the head with my shoe and then grab Torchy. "Keep out of it or you'll break Bulldozer's heart."

Out of the mess on the ground squirms Bulldozer. He's got a head in each hand, clutchin' 'em by the hair. He smashes 'em together once, then looks over the scene.

"I guess that's all took care of," he says. "Clayton, I knowed we'd have a hard time catchin' you dead to rights, so I told the engineer in a loud tone of voice the time I'd meet him, figgerin' you'd jump me. Well, I was right."

We get into the car and drive on to the engineer's house. He opens the door and Bulldozer says, "Get your women and children out of sight."

"You look like you'd been run through a meat-grinder, all of you," the engineer says. "I'll take your word on the success of your plan, Craig. But you've got just ten days to prove it is sound."

"That's fair enough," Bulldozer says. "Come on, boys, let's go back to the hotel and toss off a few snorts of corn."

"If you don't mind, Bulldozer," Jerry says, "I'll excuse myself. What with the whisky I drank, and the punches I absorbed before I beat my man, I'm so dizzy, I'm liable to—"

"Bunk!" Bulldozer snorts. "Tonight you passed the tests and become a thirty-third degree he-man. All you've got to do is to cultivate a little hair on your chest. And the best way to make hair grow is to put lots of whisky underneath."

"But Bulldozer, I've got spots now."

"We'll take care of that," Bulldozer promises. "You're a blood brother and you've got to learn to drink these one-bottle sissies under the table. We're goin' to make a two-bottle man out of him, ain't we, Torchy?"

"Amen, brother!" Torchy booms.

I'm feelin' the weight of my years, and sneak out of my room when nobody's lookin'. Jerry looks like he'd fell into the hands of the Philistines.

The next mornin' when I show up in the lobby, the manager gives me a sour look. "We had to call the patrol wagon at five o'clock," is all he says.

CHAPTER IX

HAIL THE HIGH-LEAD

I DROP around to the skookum house to get my pardners out of pawn. Bulldozer and Torchy look fit as fiddles, but Jerry's eyelids are twitchin' and he looks like a stretcher case. I'm all for gettin' 'em out of town, but Jerry's finer instincts rise to the surface.

"Let's look at the price of Tanner-Clayton stock," he says.

I've got a mouse on my left eye as a result of last night's brawl. The others are much worse. None of us is fit to look at a stock broker's board so Jerry uses the telephone.

"Buy! Buy!" I hear him yell. "And cover our short sales. Then hold off until we test out Bulldozer's crazy scheme. If it works Tanner-Clayton will go still lower. We may want to buy more, then." He comes back in high glee. "Bulldozer you sure put the skids under Tanner-Clayton. You evidently impressed the en-

gineer with your plan. Anyway the timid fellows got wind of the fact and commenced to unload. That started the stampede."

"Just a minute," Bulldozer says. "I ain't got too many brains. You sold short at the high prices and are now makin' delivery at the low price. Does that commence to cover what Clayton's cost us?"

"Yes, and thirty-five or forty thousand dollars besides," he answers.

Bulldozer can hardly wait until we arrive at the jetty. He charters a small tugboat and cruises along the shore of Lee Bay. Fin'ly he spots what he's lookin' for—a couple of fir trees that stand nearly two hundred feet high. He goes back to the jetty, picks up a tractor, cables, saws, wedges, hammers and the like, and steams back. When the tide goes out the tug strands and Bulldozer runs the tractor down a couple of gangplanks to the beach, then drives it into the forest.

He spends a couple of hours sizin' up them firs, then with me helpin' out he makes a undercut on one and starts sawin'. When the tree hits the big lug stands there with his eyes shut.

"You done a perfect job," I answer. We drop the second tree without damage, cut off the top and the branches, then hook a cable onto it. We snake it out of the woods to the beach, then go back and bring out the other. The next day we finish the trimmin' job, get the logs into the water and tow 'em to the jetty. There's a couple of tugs anchored in the bay with pile-drivers they've towed in. The water's flat for a change and Bulldozer boards one of the tugs and cruises around off'n the old wreck. Every once in awhile he drops a buoy. The tugs tow the drivers out to the buoys and commence to drive clusters of piles.

Bulldozer's got another gang settin' up shear logs made of young firs, on the end of the jetty and on the wreck. While this is goin' on a bunch of the boys come down from the Latimer-Brown loggin' camp with a small trainload of high-lead equipment. Bulldozer's got a small motor boat and he keeps runnin' 'round in circles.

Several times a day Marta telephones the weather bureau to find out if a storm's comin'. The whole gang works a thirty-six hour stretch, gets eight hours' rest then goes at it again.

There must be a couple of hundred people on the jetty the day Bulldozer has one of them big spar trees towed to the wreck. It's a hundred and eighty-five feet long, and he's got the guy-wire rings, blocks and guy wires on the small end. They get the big end again' the wreck, run lines through the shear legs blocks and then start heavin' away with a tugboat. Slowly the big end slides down the hull of the wreck to the bottom.

While the spar tree is still at an angle, other tugs pick up the guy wires, carry 'em to the clusters of piles and make 'em secure, leavin' plenty of slack. A loud cheer goes up from the crowd when the spar tree is finally standin' upright. Bulldozer don't lose no time, but rushes in a pile-driver to drive a cluster of piles around the spar tree to keep the lower end from slippin' away through the sand.

When they've finished, that tree is just as secure as if it was rooted in the forest. The tugs are puffin' around, takin' up the slack in the guy wires and makin' the setup ship-shape. The tree will settle in the sand, but that won't make any difference as long as they keep takin' up the slack in the wires.

Bulldozer puts on his spurs, climbs the tree and checks up on the ring and blocks, then he gets the heavy wire ropes rove through and a tug takes the runnin' ends to the jetty. The next day it starts blowin' a little, but it don't stop the work on the jetty end. They get that spar tree up without much trouble and a couple of days later they've got a skyline rig in operation—the same kind of a rig they use for handlin' logs in the big timber.

A COUPLE of days before the test is to be made a strange face shows up in camp. Jerry points him out to me. "That's Flannel-mouth Jim Snead, Pete

Clayton's last card," he says. "He knows how to beat the law if it can be beaten. And he's here to swing into action if Bulldozer's scheme fails. There will be writs, injunctions and demands for specific performance and whatnot. Keep an eye out."

And that's just what I do. Sooner or later I see Flannel-mouth corner Torchy O'Leary. I drift over that way without bein' noticed. Snead's got a smooth line of talk. His voice is pleasin' and he don't waste words. "Suppose Craig's high-lead rig isn't successful," he suggests, "then what will happen?"

"Cancel the contract," Torchy says shortly.

"Will the rig carry a ten-ton stone that distance? It is nearly a half mile between the spar poles."

"Bulldozer says it will."

"But fifteen-ton stones would cause too much sag, wouldn't they?"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this. A fifteen-ton stone would be so heavy and sag the line so much that it would strike the ground midway between the spar poles," Flannel-mouth explains.

"Sure," Torchy admits.

"What do you want to deliver fifteen-ton stones for the test, Mr. O'Leary?"

"Are you offerin' me a bribe?"

"No. No, I'm hiring you to assist me in carrying out an experiment in the interests of science, shall we say?"

"Okay, I'll work for you for a day. What'll you pay?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Come again," Torchy says bluntly.

"A thousand dollars, payable when the cars arrive on the jetty with the stone."

"If you ain't on hand with it you'll be surprised how fast them cars will go back to the quarry," Torchy says.

THERE'S quite a gatherin' on the big day. Gov'ment engineers swarm around the jetty; there's a rumor Tanner, Clayton and a bunch of his men are in the woods watchin' things through binoculars; and the Tremont crowd comes down and stands around bitin' their finger nails. If Clayton pulls the fat out of the fire, they're sunk. Marta is a nervous wreck.

Then the locomotive pushes five cars of rock out of the timber and spots 'em on the end of the trestle.

"Them rocks weigh fifteen ton if they weigh an ounce," Bulldozer mutters. I see Flannel-mouth slip Torchy a wad of money.

Bulldozer's men slip a trick sling around the biggest boulder and take up the slack. It's silent, then I hear a voice say, "The span's too great, that rock will be dragging on the ground before it reaches the middle. When he let's go, the sudden release of fifteen tons will make those cables whip. I'm going to stand back —the spar pole may snap in two."

Bulldozer takes over the controls of a big loggin' donkey. He opens the throttle a bit and the cables and guy wires tighten under the strain. He lifts the rock from the car and it swings over the water.

The donkey turns over slowly and the rock commences to move over the water. We can hear the heavy blocks creakin' under the strain. The span line supportin' the load commences to sag lower and lower. The rock dips into the water and the crowd groans. Torchy shifts his wad of snoose to the other side of his lip. Then he spits. Bulldozer opens the throttle wider and the perpendicular line holdin' the rock knifes steadily through the water.

"It'll drag any moment now," Flannel-mouth says in a low voice. "It's got to. I had an engineer figure out what a fifteen ton log would do on that length of span. He said it would hit the ground."

We wait, holdin' our breaths. The rock is in the exact center and it hasn't stranded yet. Pretty soon it appears near the other spar tree. Bulldozer holds it a few seconds so everybody can see it, then he pulls a lever and it disappears.

When the cables are slack, he pulls another lever which winds in a line that's followed the rock. It trips the hooks on the rock and pretty soon they come out

of the water. There's a cheer that you can hear clean back to the mill site me and Bulldozer bought and mortgaged.

The gov'ment engineers are all smiles and Jerry starts pumpin' my hand, and Torchy's slappin' Bulldozer on the back and Marta's kissin' all of us.

Bulldozer don't let up until every stone is dumped, then we climb onto the train and ride back to the camp. Flannel-mouth comes stormin' up. He's licked, but he thinks he can start a fight between Bulldozer and Torchy and maybe bust things wide open.

"Craig," he yells hoarsely, "O'Leary sold you out. He loaded fifteen ton stones on that train because I paid him to."

"Yeah, he told me about it," Bulldozer says cheerfully. "You played him for a sucker. You asked your engineer if a fifteen ton log, supported by a span of this length, would drag, didn't you?"

"Yes, and he told me it would. blast him," Flannel-mouth roared. "He's incompetent and I'll get his job."

"If you had come clean and told him it was a fifteen-ton rock instead of a log," Bulldozer said, "he would have told you when the line sagged and submerged the rock, the strain on the line would then be reduced from fifteen tons to around nine tons because of the water it displaced."

ME and Bulldozer is settin' in the parlor, listenin' to the fire crackle and lookin' through the window at the jetty, the spar trees and the masts of the old wreck. Slowly Jerry and Marta walk into the picture.

I look at Bulldozer and say, "It seems like you're lucky fightin', but unlucky in love. And Marta is a sweet girl."

"Yeah," Bulldozer says, "but I saw the handwritin' on the wall as soon as I got my bearin's. She's been in love with Jerry a long time and had never lost faith that he had the stuff in him, so I figgered I'd pay for some of my past sins by lendin' a hand."

"And that just about winds us up here," I tell him.

"Yeah, after we get the jetty finished, then do you know what?"

"What?"

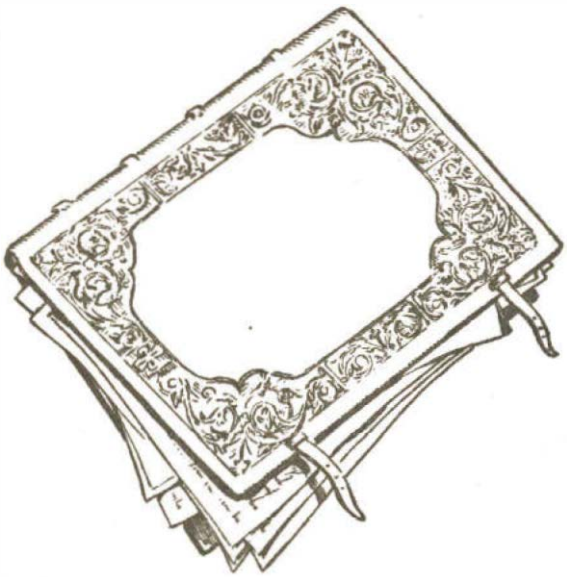
"I'd like to see if we couldn't raise that old wreck, put it in condition and use it to haul lumber in," Bulldozer answers.

He lights a cigarette and relaxes. "But there's nothin' ahead right now except Torchy is goin' to throw us a thousand-dollar party with the money he got from Flannel-mouth. Until then, brother, I'm goin' to do nothin' but sleep and eat."

He gulps in sudden surprise and almost swallows the cigarette, then he reaches for his hat and coat. "There's one thing I ain't done yet, No-Shirt."

"What is it?" I ask.

"I've got to go up to Nellie's Hut in Seattle and toss out three tough guys singlehanded," he says, "In Nellie's eyes there's still a blot on my escutcheon."



Fast and Loose

By

MARCO PAGE

Not since Mr. and Mrs. Thin Man have two such engaging and hilarious characters romped into popular acclaim. Here are Joel and Garda Sloane in their latest adventure, neck-deep in Shakespeare manuscripts and California mayhem. Start now this great story by the man who wrote the prize-winning, "Fast Company."

JOEL and Garda Sloane are nearly at the end of their financial rope when Christopher Oates, the cheerfully wool-witted chain-store tycoon, offers Joel a life-saving commission. Joel is a young and spasmodically successful rare-book dealer who, since solving a series of murders resulting from the theft of priceless volumes, fancies himself as a brilliant and invincible criminologist. His only other vice is Garda.

Oates engages Joel as an agent in the purchase of the only existent Shakespeare manuscript in the world—two tattered pages covered with an almost indecipherable scrawl, and as valuable as the Hope diamond. The owner of the manuscript, a California millionaire, named Nicholas Torrent, is forced to sell his treasure because of financial pressure.

Oates is firm in his decision that Garda shall not accompany Joel and him to the Coast. "When you're around," he announces petulantly, "Joel can't keep his mind on his work."

BUT when they arrive in California, they discover that Garda is waiting to receive them. Oates takes them to a hotel and commands Garda to stay there while he and Joel drive to the Torrent home in Santa Barbara to close the deal.

Garda refuses flatly to be out of things; she discovers that Henry Durant, who also is determined to buy the Torrent manuscript, is in the hotel, and strikes up an acquaintance with him. When she has supersaturated him with dry Martinis, she triumphantly delivers him to a sanitarium where he will be confined for at least two weeks.

Meanwhile, Joel receives a visit from Joe Hilliard, Great Western insurance trouble-shooter, who is relieved to learn that Joel will be at the Torrents' to keep an eye on the manuscript, which is underwritten by his company. He tells Joel that Torrent's son, Gerald is a pampered young no-good known to have run up a huge gambling debt to Lucky Nolan, gambling king of the coast. In the past Gerald has not been above lifting a stray volume or two from his father's collection, secretly disposing of them through George Clifford, a crooked book-dealer.

Grateful for Garda's success in getting rid of Durant, Oates consents to take her along to the Torrents' palatial home, which

This story began in last week's Argosy

Garda observes disdainfully is a half-size smaller than the Grand Central Station. Also present for the weekend are Vincent Charlton, Torrent's business manager; his son, Phil, who is engaged to Torrent's daughter Christina; and, much to Torrent's disgust, George Clifford, whom Gerald has invited.

There is an atmosphere of tension at the dinner table, disturbing even to the ordinarily light-hearted Garda and Joel. It is not lightened particularly by Charlton's meaningful insistence upon discussing Joel's past cases and book-thefts in general.

After dinner, Clifford, visibly alarmed, demands to have a talk with Gerald. "Right away," he adds, threateningly. . . .

CHAPTER VI

A BOOK BY ITS COVER

IN THE library Charlton pulled chairs up to the desk for Joel, Oates and himself while Nicholas Torrent seated himself behind the desk. "Shall I open the safe, Vincent?" he asked Charlton. "Will you want the manuscript now?"

"I don't think so," said Charlton. "We can have our discussion of price and terms before an examination of the manuscript."

"My looking at it is only a formality," Joel assured him. "I think I know every penstroke and every mark on the paper from memory."

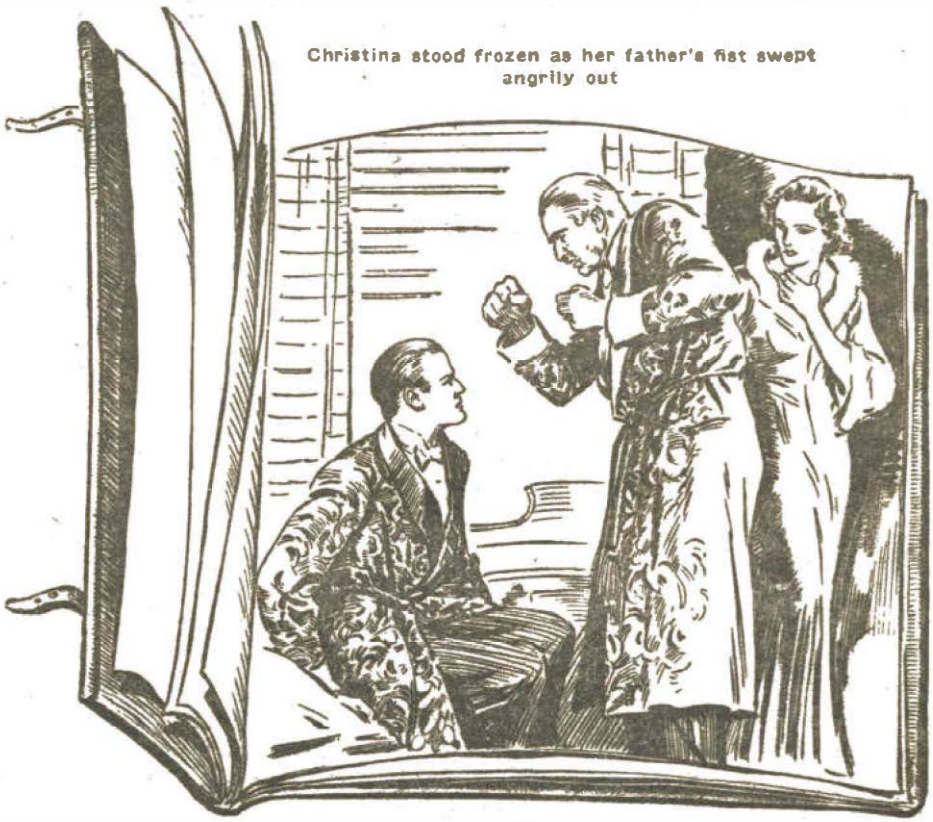
Torrent said, "Really, Mr. Sloane?"

"I had an excellent photographic facsimile in my office in New York," said Joel. "I studied it very carefully before Mr. Oates and I came out here."

He looked at the old-fashioned wall safe which was apparently the only strongbox in the room. "Surely, Mr. Torrent," said Joel, "you don't keep anything as valuable as that manuscript in such an old-fashioned safe?"

"The insurance company makes me keep it in a vault," said Torrent, "but they allowed me to take it out for this weekend." He turned to Charlton, "This is the first time we've had it out in quite a few years—isn't that so, Vincent?"

"Just about four years now," said



Christina stood frozen as her father's fist swept angrily out

Charlton. "The last time was when we loaned it to the city library for exhibition."

Joel turned to Oates. "You see, Oates, unless you have an underground vault constructed, you'll get precious little pleasure out of owning such a valuable piece of paper."

"If I owned it," said Oates recklessly, "I'd live down in the vault with it."

"Suppose we all have a drink," suggested Vincent Charlton, "and then we can talk business at our leisure."

"A very sound idea," said Joel.

IT WAS nearly midnight when Joel said goodnight to Oates and went down the hall to his own room. Garda was in bed but not asleep and she sat up at Joel's entrance.

"Now don't tell me what you've been doing," said Joel, "let me guess. The bed light is on, you've got a book in your hand—let me see now—from the evidence available, I deduce that you've been reading in bed."

"Wrong," said Garda promptly. "I just wanted you to think I'd been reading in bed. Actually for your information, there's a man in the closet. A nice man who doesn't snore."

"I never snore," said Joel calmly. "I sometimes breathe heavily which the uninitiated ear mistakes for snoring. Don't you want to know what happened downstairs?" he asked a little hurt.

"No," said Garda. "What happened?"

"Well," said Joel, "we might have to give them Manhattan island and twenty-four dollars worth of Indians, but I think we'll make a deal."

"Good for you," said Garda.

When Joel sat down on the bed, she put her arms around him. "Mother is very proud of her boy tonight," she said.

Joel bent over to take off his shoes. "You know," he said, "this is one of the screwiest households I've ever set foot in."

"Screwier than ours?" asked Garda.

"By far," said Joel. "What do you make of George Clifford, honey?"

"He didn't seem very comfortable through dinner."

"I'll say not," said Joel. "After you girls left the table, Charlton was needling him pretty openly about handling stolen books. Then while we were in the library trading away like mad, Clifford and Gerald Torrent were in a huddle out on the terrace. Gerald was peeping in from time to time."

"Oh, Grandpa," said Garda, "what big eyes you have. Don't you ever miss anything?"

"Eagle-eyed Sloane they used to call me," said Joel proudly. "As I reconstruct the situation, Gerald has been swiping books from his father's library and feeding them out into the wide world through good offices of George Clifford."

"Aren't you going to do anything about it?" asked Garda.

"Certainly not," answered Joel, righteously adding, "It's none of my business."

Garda sank back on the pillows, faint with surprise. In a shocked, weak voice she said, "Water—I think I'm going to faint."

Joel grinned. "First aid coming up."

JOEL was sound asleep, but he was awakened by the sound of someone rapping at the door and a voice calling: "Mr. Sloane! Mr. Sloane!" He sat up in bed and switched on the bed light, calling out: "Just a moment, please."

As he got out of bed to go to the door, Garda woke up. "What is it?" she murmured sleepily.

"We've got company," said Joel and went to the door. Opening it, he faced Christina Torrent. "Hello," he said politely. "Come in."

Christina said, "Oh, Mr. Sloane, will you come down to the library please, right away?"

"At this hour?" said Joel. "I've got a book to read."

"Something's happened to Mr. Charlton," said Christina. "I heard a noise, a heavy crash and then went downstairs. I found him lying on the floor unconscious."

Joel had a robe and slippers on by this time, and followed her quickly down to the library. Vincent Charlton was lying on the floor, the wreckage of a large vase near his head. Bending over him were Nicholas Torrent and his wife. Joel stepped quickly to their side and was met with an angry stare from Mrs. Torrent, who turned to her daughter and said:

"Really, Christina, I don't see the necessity of rousing the household at this hour."

"But, Mother," protested Christina, "Mr. Charlton may be dead."

As if to refute this, Charlton groaned.

"Apparently he's not," said Joel; and, disregarding his hostess' enmity, he got to his knees and assisted Torrent in raising the stricken man to a chair.

The safe door stood open, he noticed, and in that corner of the room, there were signs of a terrific struggle.

Charleston had his eyes open now and Torrent was holding a drink to his lips. Charlton drank part of it and then leaned back weakly and murmured, "Oh, my head!"

Garda was standing in the doorway looking on anxiously as was Wilkes, the librarian. Gerald Torrent also stepped into the library at this time. He was smoking a cigarette nervously and said, "Good Lord, what's happened here?"

"Go back to bed, Gerald," said his mother, and Gerald obediently turned and went out, Mrs. Torrent after him. By taking a good grip on herself, she managed to be polite to Garda. "I'm sure there's no cause for alarm, Mrs. Sloane," she said. "There's no reason why you and your husband should lose a night's sleep." She looked pointedly at Joel as she said this.

"Run along to bed, Garda," said Joel. "I'll stick around for a few minutes."

As Mrs. Torrent was about to close the door, Wilkes stepped into the library. She disregarded his presence and came back to the chair in which Charlton was sitting, apparently quite conscious now.

"All right now?" asked Joel.

Charlton nodded, but as he moved his head, he winced with pain.

"You got quite a wallop," said Joel, indicating the wreckage of the vase. "What happened here, Mr. Charlton?"

Charlton jumped to his feet suddenly. "The manuscript," he cried.

JOEL and Torrent both whirled to the safe, and while Torrent anxiously rummaged in the interior, Joel looked around on the floor near the spot where Charlton had been knocked out. Just as Torrent turned away from the safe in despair, saying: "It's gone!" Joel straightened up with the leather cover in his hands and said: "Not quite. It was under this chair."

Torrent took it from his hands and said: "Thank God," quite fervently.

Joel turned back to Charlton who fell back in his chair with relief and said: "Can you tell us what happened here now, Mr. Charlton?"

Charlton explained that he had been feeling quite wide awake and consequently sat down in the drawing room with a nightcap and a book. He must have dozed off, he said, and was awakened by a sound which he placed as coming from the library. He went there quietly and found an intruder at the safe. The safe door was open and the burglar was flashing a light over the contents. Frightened by Torrent's intrusion, the flashlight had been extinguished and in the resultant struggle, Charlton had been hit over the head with the vase and knocked out.

"Did you get a good look at this person?" asked Joel.

"Not even a glimpse," replied Charlton. "His back was turned to me and the light was extinguished as soon as I stepped into the room."

Joel found himself slipping naturally into the role of detective. He turned to Torrent. "Did you close the safe yourself tonight?"

Torrent nodded, "I did."

"How many people knew the combination?" asked Joel.

Mrs. Torrent broke in at this point with, "Really, Mr. Sloane, I do not see the point of all these questions. The manuscript is safe and Mr. Charlton is apparently recovered from his accident."

"It was not an accident," said Joel. He turned back to Torrent, awaiting a reply to his question.

"Only myself and Wilkes knew the combination of the safe," murmured Torrent.

Joel turned to Wilkes. "What do you know about this?" he asked.

"Nothing at all, sir," was the reply. "I was asleep when I heard Miss Christina knocking at your door, and stepped to my door to see what was wrong. I heard her say that there had been an accident in the library."

"Do you keep the combination written down anywhere?" asked Joel.

"I did," replied Wilkes uneasily, "but a few months ago, I suspected that my desk had been disturbed and so I destroyed the paper on which the combination was written."

"Did you change the combination?" said Joel.

"No, sir," was the frank reply. "I spoke to Mr. Torrent about it but he didn't attach any particular importance to it."

"Neither did I," broke in Mrs. Torrent. "I don't see why we shouldn't all go back to bed and forget about this. Apparently it was nothing more than a prowler."

"Is the combination of your private safe common knowledge?" asked Joel pointedly.

Mrs. Torrent frowned, and her husband said, "That is strange. But I'm inclined to agree with my wife that no investigation is necessary at this time; thanks to Mr. Charlton," he said, dropping his hand affectionately on his friend's shoulder, "we have the manuscript safe and sound."

"We've got the cover. Maybe we ought to look and see what's inside," said Joel.

TORRENT seemed to go suddenly limp and let Joel take the heavy leather case from his hands. Charlton raised himself in his chair and looked on anxiously. Joel carried the flat, heavy leather case to a table and put it down. He opened the strong clasps on the side, spread it flat on the desk and then took a linen protective case from the inside. Opening this he revealed the two precious pages of yellowed paper, each in a covering of cellophane. He spread the pages flat under the strong light of the desk lamp and peered down at them. Torrent looking over his shoulder heaved a tremendous sigh of relief.

"You gave me quite a turn there," he said, smiling uneasily. He turned to Charlton and said, "It's all right, Vincent."

Charlton leaned back weakly in his chair. Torrent picked up the manuscript, put it back into its cover and tucked it under his arm.

"We had all better get to bed, now," he said. He puts his arm under Charlton's to help him to his feet. "Come along, old fellow," he said.

Joel said, "Don't you think we ought to have the police in, sir?"

"Certainly not," snapped Mrs. Torrent, and her husband also nodded his head.

"I wish no further investigation, Mr. Sloane. I'm quite sure Mr. Charlton shares my feeling in the matter."

Charlton nodded, "Quite so."

"It's your head," said Joel, shrugging his shoulders. And as Torrent and his wife started from the room with Charlton between them, he said, "Better bolt your door tonight, Mr. Torrent."

"I will," said Torrent. He turned to Christina and said, "Coming, Christina?"

Christina Torrent left the room with her father, mother and Charlton, leaving Wilkes and Joel alone in the library. Wilkes was staring after his employer. Then turned and went quickly to the safe. He locked the doors, while Joel looked on. Then went to the doors leading out into the terrace and tried those. They were locked, and he turned away satisfied.

"Good night, Mr. Sloane," he murmured.

"Just a moment," said Joel.

Wilkes looked at him, curiosity in his glance. "You wish to speak to me, Mr. Sloane?"

Joel smiled. "You and you alone. Why didn't you tell them?" he asked bluntly.

"Tell them what, Mr. Sloane?"

Joel sighed. "I somehow got the feeling that there might be something wrong with the manuscript."

"I don't understand," said Wilkes, staring at him wide-eyed.

"I rather think you do," said Joel. "If it didn't fool me, even with an artificial light, it certainly didn't fool you."

Wilkes avoided his gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said in a quavering voice.

"Then I'll tell you. Some enterprising pupil of penmanship has copied the manuscript—very artfully, to be sure—and Mr. Torrent's pride and joy isn't worth a Confederate dollar."

CHAPTER VII

THE LIGHT SLEEPER

WILKES sank into a chair as if the news were truly a great shock to him. "You must be mistaken," he said weakly. "I'm sure it's genuine."

"You're not sure of anything of the sort," said Joel sharply. "It might fool Torrent, or Charlton, or my friend, Mr. Oates, but not a couple of experienced bookmen like you and me, Wilkes." He looked down at the badly frightened old man, cowering now in the huge chair. "Better speak up," he said mildly. He was sure now that he was on the right track.

"I don't know anything about it," said Wilkes.

"How long has it been since you saw the manuscript?" Joel asked him.

"I haven't seen it for a long time," said Wilkes. "A few years. It's kept in a bank vault all the time."

"I saw your face when you stared at it just now," said Joel. "You knew it wasn't the right one. I saw it in your eyes."

Wilkes licked his thin lips. "Yes," he stammered, finally. "I knew it wasn't the genuine man—"

"But you didn't say anything," snapped Joel. "Why?"

"Because I didn't choose to," said Wilkes, with fresh spirit. "By what right do you cross-examine me, Mr. Sloane. "I demand that—"

"Exactly," said a cold voice in the doorway, and Joel turned to confront Mrs. Torrent, grim and purposeful. She advanced into the room, closing the door, and walked up to the two men. Joel lit a cigarette, wishing fervently that he were somewhere else.

"You can go, Wilkes," said Mrs. Torrent.

Wilkes stood up, looked at Joel nervously, and then as his mistress repeated the command, he pulled his bathrobe about him and crept out of the room.

"Now, Mr. Sloane," said Mrs. Torrent icily, when the door had closed, "I would like an explanation of this."

"You know how it is," said Joel. "Once a detective, always a detective. I just wanted to get to the bottom of this."

"My husband's wishes, and mine," said Mrs. Torrent, "were that there be no investigation."

"It gets in your blood," said Joel haltingly. "You can't help it. Something happens, and bingo, you're investigating." He smiled ingratiatingly, then the smile curdled as he saw Mrs. Torrent's hard frown.

"I must ask you to go to your room," she said. "If you try to create any further disturbance tonight I shall be forced to have the servants put you and Mrs. Sloane out. That would be very unpleasant."

"And how," said Joel. "Good night, Mrs. Torrent."

HE WENT up to their room, where Garda was in bed, but not asleep. He sank down on the other bed and heaved a sigh. "Whew!"

"What happened?"

"I had a row with our hostess. I think she's going to throw us both out."

Garda sat up alarmed. "What happened?"

Joel grinned. "We were having a cup of tea, and chatting. Suddenly I made a pass at her."

"You fool!" Garda said scornfully.

Joel became quite serious. "I'm awfully glad I took a look at that manuscript before Oates paid five hundred thousand dollars for it." He smiles sadly. "An out and out forgery."

Garda sat upright in bed as though propelled by a spring.

"It's true," said Joel briefly. "I know it too well to make a mistake."

"Did you say anything?" asked Garda.

Joel shook his head.

"Do you think it serves any purpose to keep quiet about a thing like that?" asked Garda.

"Only mine," said Joel. "The manuscript is a fake, and I won't let Oakes buy it. Consequently, the juicy commission I was to receive is out of the question. But if I can locate the real one, there is in it for me not only the commission but a little gratuity from the insurance company."

"What a mind," said Garda marvelling. "Couldn't you get anything out of the librarian?"

"I had him hanging on the ropes," said Joel, "and then Mrs. Torrent broke in and spoiled my act. I'd like to know where George Clifford was when Charlton went down in a cloud of crockery."

"Go ask him," suggested Garda.

Joel grinned.

"You wanted the suggestion to come from me, didn't you?" asked Garda.

Joel kissed her. "You're a great girl. If Sherlock Holmes had had a wife like you he might have amounted to something." He stood up again, starting for the door.

"Joel!"

He turned around.

"Be careful."

Joel said, "Sure," and went out in the hall, going directly to the door of Clifford's room. No light showed under or over the door, and he peeped through the keyhole to make sure the room was in darkness. He tried the knob then, and was gratified to feel it turn easily. Opening the door a bit, he stepped in, and in the dim light from the windows he saw the sleeping form of Mr. George Clifford, the blankets drawn up under his chin. He was quite sure that Clifford was not asleep, and this was confirmed for him when he took the blankets by the bottom hem and yanked them off.

CLIFFORD, fully dressed, sat bolt upright in bed, a small automatic pistol in his right hand, leveled at Joel. "Put up your hands," he snarled.

"You're a very light sleeper," said Joel.

"What are you doing here?" asked Clifford harshly. "What do you want?"

"Just a few words with you," said Joel reproachfully.

"Why didn't you knock?"

"I didn't want to wake you up," said Joel easily. "The truth of the matter, old chap, is that I wanted to rummage around a bit in your belongings."

Clifford stared at him. "What for?"

"I'm a kleptomaniac," said Joel. "My family has spent millions covering it up. I'd put down that gun if I were you. I'm harmless."

"I'll put it down," said Clifford. "But before I do, I'll find out what your little game is."

"You know," said Joel, "for a light sleeper, you slept through a lot of excitement. We had a burglary downstairs."

Clifford's eyes gleamed but he said nothing.

"Mr. Vincent Charlton was knocked unconscious, attempting to capture a burglar who was going through the safe," continued Joel.

"And I guess I know who that burglar was," said Clifford, with a short laugh.

"I guess you do," said Joel mildly. "I rather thought it might be you."

"Me?" Clifford laughed incredulously.

Joel took a shot in the dark. "Unfortunately for you, Mr. Clifford," he said

smoothly, "I suspected that you might be up to something. I didn't go to sleep at all tonight, but sat up and watched your room. When you came out I—"

Clifford's eyes narrowed. "You're lying," he said.

"Sure I am," said Joel, "and when the police get here you can charge me with defamation of character." Disregarding the gun in Clifford's hand, he reached for the phone by the bedside.

"Go on, shoot me," he said pleasantly, watching the hand with the gun, and as he saw the pistol waver and fall to Clifford's side, he put down the phone, sat down on the bed and said, "Now, for a nice, quiet talk." He pushed the gun onto the floor.

"You left your room earlier tonight—where did you go?"

Clifford hesitated, apparently wavering, and Joel gave him a slight verbal push. "We don't want the police messing all through the house, do we, Mr. Clifford?"

"I went downstairs," said Clifford.

"Exactly where downstairs?"

"I was going out—to meet someone. I was at the front door when I heard the rumpus in the library."

"You didn't go in?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I didn't want to be seen. I came straight back up here and went into my room."

"You didn't care whether Charlton was dead or alive, or what had happened."

"I tell you I didn't want to be seen."

"Not much of a Good Samaritan," said Joel mildly. "You're in the book business, aren't you?"

"Yes." This was almost defiant.

"It's not an insult," said Joel. "I'm in it myself. After dinner, Charlton was talking about stolen books. Did you attach any particular significance to that?"

"Certainly not."

"A man in the book business," said Joel softly, "might have a connection or an idea for disposing of something like a very valuable manuscript."

"I tell you I wasn't in the library tonight," said Clifford desperately.

"I didn't say you stole it," said Joel. "I didn't even say it was stolen. Yet, you seemed to know it was."

"Damn you," said Clifford passionately, and dived over the edge of the bed for the gun.

AS HE did, Joel picked up the telephone and brought it down on his head. He toppled out of bed on the floor, and sprawled there unconscious. Joel regarded him sadly, then stepped to the bureau, picked up a necktie and kneeling beside Clifford he tied his hands tightly behind his back. He left him lying on the floor and began a thorough and expert search of the premises. He went through Clifford's bags first, then through the clothes in the closet, then concentrated on the bureau and dressing table. He brought to light one interesting object, a small, powerful flashlight, this he picked up gingerly, wrapped it in a handkerchief and dropped it into the side-pocket of his coat. He went to Clifford's side and shook him.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty," he called softly. "It's your Prince Charming."

Clifford stirred uneasily, and Joel untied his hands, taking the reasonable precaution first of picking up the gun.

As Clifford came to, Joel said, "All is forgiven—where did you hide it?" He grinned amiably. "You shouldn't have gone for your heater, old chap. It became my regrettable duty to slosh you with the phone."

Clifford said some nasty things. "You get out of here," he finished.

"In a moment," said Joel. "I've got your gun, and I've got your flashlight, carefully wrapped to preserve fingerprints. I doubt very much if these articles are standard equipment for weekend guests, and my candid advice to you, Mr. Clifford, is to stay put. If I catch you trying to sneak out of here . . . but I can see you have no such intention. Good night, Mr. Clifford."

He went out and closed the door, then flattened out along the wall. He heard Clifford's footsteps, then the sound of a key turning in a lock, then he heard Clifford at the phone, jiggling the hook violently and saying, "Operator! Operator!" in a low but passionate voice. Then he heard "Put me through to the Hotel Orandino." After a wait of some three three or four minutes, he heard Clifford saying, "I want to talk with Miss Neville please. It's very important. Please hurry." Joel stayed at his post and heard Clifford tell Miss Neville to beat it right back to Los Angeles, to check in at the Clarendon, and to wait until he joined her there. He explained that he couldn't leave himself at the moment, and Joel, having heard enough, tiptoed back to his room.

"Empty-handed, eh?" said Garda, who was reading.

"My mind is reeling," said Joel. "What a mess!" He sat down on the edge of the bed and kicked off his slippers. "I crept through the door, probably as noiselessly as Sousa's Band, and there was Mr. Clifford sitting up in bed with a gun focused carefully at my head."

"Go on," said Garda breathlessly. "What happened?"

Joel stretched out. "He shot me, and a few minutes later I died. My last words were of you."

CHAPTER VIII

PARTNERS IN CRIME

WITH the manuscript spread open before him, Nicholas Torrent sat alone in his bedroom, the bright light of a table lamp pouring down on the two yellowed pages. With trembling hands, he picked up one page, held it closer to the light and peered at it. He examined it front and back, then slammed it down on the table, and stood up with an oath!

He pulled open the drawer of the table, rummaged in the interior and brought out a small, gleaming pistol just as there was a knock on the door. He put the manuscript over the gun and said, "Who is it?"

"Chris, Daddy."

Torrent controlled his voice by Herculean effort. "I was just going to bed," he said.

"May I come in for a moment?" said Chris.

Torrent went to the door and opened it.

"Thanks, dear," said Christina. "I just wanted to talk to you before I went to bed."

"Of course," said Torrent. "What about?"

"Nothing special," said Chris. "Isn't it wonderful about Mr. Charlton saving the manuscript? I just felt like hugging him when—" She looked closely at her father. "Why, Dad, what's the matter?"

Torrent held his hand over his eyes. "Nothing, dear. I'm tired and all this has been a shock. I can't help but think of the narrow escape Vincent had in the library, and it upset me strangely."

"Of course," said Chris sympathetically. "I was a brute to bother you. You go right on over to the bed and get a good night's sleep."

Torrent smiled wanly. "That's what I need," he said. He let Chris lead him over to the bed and sat down. He patted her blond head when she bent down to pull off his slippers, then lifted his legs up onto the bed.

"Good night, dear," he murmured, as the girl leaned over him and kissed him tenderly on the cheek.

He lay like this for a while, without extinguishing the light, until he heard the door of Christina's room down the hall close. Then he got up, went to the table, took the gun and put it in the pocket of his dressing-gown, spinning the chambers first to assure himself that the pistol was loaded and ready. His lips were tight; his face drawn and haggard when he went out into the hall and straight to the door of his son's room. Without knocking, he opened the door and stepped in. Gerald was sitting on the edge of the bed, moodily smoking a cigarette, and he jumped up as his father entered.

"Hello, Dad."

"You rotten, unnatural pup!"

Gerald blinked. "Why, Dad, what's the—"

"This is the worst of your filthy tricks," said Torrent coldly, "and it's going to be the last. I've stood for everything, even when you started stealing books from my library— He saw the look on his son's face, and added: "So you thought I didn't know, eh? Well, I did, but I kept silent as I've covered up every one of your rotten doings in the past." He stepped up close, his fists doubled. "I want you to get out of here—tomorrow; and take your friend Clifford with you."

Gerald retreated, his face working convulsively. "Why, Dad! I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm not going to have you assaulting my friends under my own roof. You cowardly pup, to attack a man twice as old as you are."

Gerald whined like a dog. "I didn't, Father. Honest, I didn't. I was in my room all the ti—"

"You liar!" said Torrent passionately, and swung his heavy right fist. His indignation and bulk packed the blow with explosive power and Gerald crashed to the floor glassy-eyed. Torrent glared down at his son and heir, then reached for a water bottle and flung the contents splashing over him.

AS GERALD stirred, he bent down and lifted him up on the bed. Gerald moaned weakly, as he came to, and stared helplessly into the stern face that loomed over him.

"Listen to me," said Torrent fiercely. "I don't want you to stir out of this room again tonight. If you do, I'll hand you over to the police and before I do I'll beat you to pulp." He let Gerald fall back limp on the bed and strode out of the room.

In the hall, just outside the door, he saw Christina cowering against the wall.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "I told you to go to bed."

Christina said, "Oh, Daddy!"

Torrent took her shoulders in both hands and looked down into her anguished face. "Your brother and I have had a little quarrel," he said, in a tense voice.

"I heard," said Chris breathlessly. "He didn't try to take the manuscript, did he, Daddy?"

"I think he did," muttered Torrent. "I think he did."

The man seemed completely distraught. He stood with his eyes closed, his hands on the girl's shoulders for a moment, then pulled himself together. "Not a word of this to anyone," he said, and released her. Christina watched him go down the hall to the stairs, then down to the floor below.

The girl stood alone in the hall for a moment, completely distracted, and unaware that the door of Joel's room had opened. He stood in the doorway watching her for a moment, then some intuition told her she was being watched and she whirled suddenly.

"Hello," said Joel cordially. "Anything wrong?"

Christina stared at him, then said, "Oh, Mr. Sloane!" in a low, agonized voice. Joel saw big tears start up in her eyes, but as he stepped forward to her side, Chris turned and fled, scurrying for her own room. Joel could hear her sobs as the door closed. He looked after her, sighed, and went back into his own room.

Garda was sound asleep.

He left the door open a bit, put George Clifford's gun on a chair, where it could be handy in the event of a fresh emergency, then stretched out on the bed, still in his robe and slippers.

He had no intention of going to sleep, but it had been a hard day and night and nature outsmarted him.

In a few minutes he dozed off.

IT WAS 6 A.M. when Joel woke up. He snapped out of his slumber a little ashamed of having dozed off while in the capacity of watchdog and dressed quietly without disturbing Garda who was sound asleep.

Out in the hall, he stopped at George Clifford's room and tried the knob. It was locked, and a little probing with a match told him that the key was on the inside. Apparently George Clifford was sleeping the sleep of the just.

Joel went downstairs, and into the entrance hall where a servant was plainly startled to see him up at this hour.

"Can I get at my car?" asked Joel.

"Yes, sir. Shall I wake your chauffeur?"

"Never mind him," said Joel.

He found the garage and backed out the large sedan Oates had hired in the city. He found his way to the main road and then started for Los Angeles at breakneck speed. Traffic slowed him up in the city proper but he reached the Clarendon Hotel at 8:30.

"Miss Neville checked in late last night," the clerk told him doubtfully. "I don't think she'd want any callers this early."

"Naturally," said Joel, "but I think she'll see me. The name is Clifford. George Clifford."

The clerk went behind the desk and Joel heard him making the call. He came back, beaming. "Miss Neville says to go right on up. Room 822."

Joel went right on up, knocked softly at 822 and heard a voice say, "Come in, George."

He opened the door and stepped in, smiling at Miss Neville who sat up in bed. She was wearing a filmy low-cut nightgown, of which Joel heartily approved, and looked very beautiful though she had just been awakened from a sound sleep. The smile of welcome she had prepared for George Clifford faded as she saw a stranger in her room, and she seemed too startled to speak until Joel gently closed the door.

Then she said, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I represent the Security Mutual Insurance Company," said Joel, smoothly and rapidly. "We write insurance on all sorts of rare books, precious manuscripts, works of art. Are you provided for in your old age. Miss Neville, though that won't be along for quite some time yet—"

"You get right out of here," said Miss Neville coldly.

Joel was hurt. "Now that's no way to act toward one of Clifford's best friends."

"That's a lie," snapped Bobby Neville. She had enough presence of mind now to pull a bed jacket around her bare shoulders, an act Joel sincerely regretted. "You get out of here."

"When I walk out," said Joel, "the police walk in."

Miss Neville looked at him intently.

"I could hardly have found you," Joel pointed out, "unless George told me where you were."

"That's not true," said Miss Neville. "What do you want here?"

"It's a long story," said Joel, and sat down on the bed.

"You've got a nerve," said Miss Neville.

"Your kindness gives me courage," said Joel. "As to what I want here, frankly, Miss Neville, I'm not sure."

"Well, make up your mind," said Bobby, "and get out."

"What were you doing in Santa Barbara last night?" asked Joel.

"Visiting," said Bobby. "Does that break any laws?"

"Not a one," said Joel promptly, "and even if it did, that's none of my business."

"Aren't you a dick—I mean a detective."

Joel shook his head. "I can't be—I'm too smart."

Miss Neville looked at him with fresh interest. "What are you after?" she asked, but her voice was friendly now.

"The manuscript," said Joel, "even as you and Clifford." He looked at her appraisingly. "But you could make me forget it."

Miss Neville was not displeased. "How did you know where I was?"

Joel grinned. "I had some little rumpus with George last night, and sort of threw a scare into him as I left. He got panicky and phoned you. I was listening outside the door."

"The dumb ox," said Bobby contemptuously.

"EXACTLY," said Joel. "The minute I walked in here I said to myself, that girl is throwing herself away on a dumb ox like Georgie. Even if she's got the manuscript, I thought to myself, a dope like George couldn't get rid of it for her."

Miss Neville's eyes grew cold and hard. "What makes you think I've got it."

"Why should a nice girl like you visit a dump like Santa Barbara? The answer to this question is very simple. Georgie grabs the manuscript and tosses it out onto the terrace. You pick it up and make a beeline off the grounds. When George's room is searched, presto!—he's in the clear."

"You're all wrong," said Bobby. "I haven't got it."

"That remains to be seen," said Joel amiably. He stood up and walked to the bureau, pulling open a few drawers at random.

Miss Neville reached for the phone, and Joel crossed the room swiftly and said, "No, don't do that."

"You get out of here," said Bobby, returning to her original theme.

"Be patient," said Joel. "After I've searched the room I'll search you and that ought to be a lot of fun. If you ring the desk you'll get the police in. If you do that you might get into trouble."

"We'll see," said Miss Neville and jiggled the hook.

"All those books Gerald stole for Clifford are still kicking around somewhere," said Joel smoothly. "Think of that before you phone for help."

Miss Neville wavered, and as the operator answered, she said, "Never mind."

Joel nodded approvingly.

"Who are you, anyway?" asked Bobby irritably.

"Just another bookdealer," said Joel. "I represent only myself in this matter, and have no connection with the forces of law and—"

There was a hammering on the door just then.

"Who is it?" asked Bobby, alarmed.

"Police," said a harsh voice. "Open up."

MISS NEVILE looked at Joel with concentrated venom in her eyes. "You lying rat," she said passionately, and as Joel went to the door she hurled the phone at his head. He ducked, warned by some intuition and it sailed over him to crash against the door.

Joel opened up and two men stepped in, both with guns in their hands. One of them covered Joel, who put up his hands, and the other went straight up to the bed. "Come on, toots—up and out."

"What's the idea?" asked Bobby.

"You're both under arrest," said the detective grimly. "Are you going to get out of there, or do I have to drag you?" He turned to Joel. "Hand over that manuscript."

Joel blinked. "Who, me? That's what I came for."

The detective turned to Bobby Neville. "You can save yourself a lot of grief sister, by handing that thing over to me right now."

"You're talking through your hat," said Bobby sharply. "I never saw the damn thing."

"Okay," said the detective grimly. "Get out of there, and you can tell it to the chief."

"Well, let me get dressed," said Bobby.

The detective walked to the window to make sure there was no fire escape, or other mode of descent to the street, then motioned to his companion and to Joel. "Outside," he said.

"Pardon me," said Joel, "but if we're going to leave Miss Neville alone in this room, wouldn't it be a good idea to search the place first?"

"Shut your mouth," said the detective harshly, obviously chagrined because he hadn't thought of that. He went through the room thoroughly, including the bathroom and Bobby's luggage. From her

handbag, on the bedside table, he took a short, pearl-handled revolver, which he wrapped in a handkerchief and dropped in his pocket, then he turned to the others and said, "Okay." He jerked his thumb toward the hall.

Joel smiled. "You're tough," he told the detective, "but not very bright. How about the bed?"

The detective glared, then turned back to Bobby. "Okay, sister, jump out of those feathers a minute."

"I will not," said Bobby, clutching the bedclothes around her.

The detective advanced, ready to lay violent hands upon her, when Bobby capitulated, and stepped out of the bed, pulling a negligée around her.

"Ain't nothin' there," said the law, with considerable satisfaction, then ushered Joel and his aides out into the hall.

"Now that we're alone," said Joel, "would you mind telling me exactly what this is all about?"

"We're taking you back to Torrent's," said the detective in charge, briefly.

"I was going back anyway," said Joel.

"That's fine," said the detective sarcastically.

"But what accounts for the escort?" asked Joel.

"You left there in a pep of a hurry this morning," said his captor. "The chief of police down there wants to have a little talk with you."

"What about? What's the charge?"

"Ain't no charge," said the detective. "Chances are, though, it'll be murder."

Joel gasped.

"Murder," repeated the detective with considerable satisfaction. "You left your gun on the floor, buddy."

Joel leaned back against the wall, weakly, just as Bobby Neville came out.

CHAPTER IX

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

JOEL SLOANE was a model prisoner on the way back to the Torrent house, but Miss Bobby Neville displayed many wildcat characteristics and on two occasions attempted to do bodily harm to Detective-sergeant Hendricks, their escort. Exasperated, the detective finally yanked a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and while Joel protested volubly, and Miss Neville kicked him sharply in the shins, he handcuffed his guests together, then fell back on the seat and mopped his forehead.

"That'll hold ye," he grunted, with great satisfaction.

Joel was upset. "Look here, officer, you can't do that."

"All right," said the detective philosophically, "so I can't do it."

"But what'll my wife think if she sees me handcuffed?"

"She'll think you're handcuffed," said Bobby Neville bitterly.

"I get it," said Joel. He grinned at his companion.

Joel slumped back in his seat, pulled his hat down over his eyes, and was silent for the rest of the trip. When the car pulled into the drive, his worst fears were confirmed with a vengeance, for there on the terrace, obviously awaiting his homecoming, was Garda.

With her was Christopher Oates and Joel thought it would be only a matter of minutes before he lost both a wife and a client.

"Give me a break," he whispered hoarsely to Miss Neville. "Try to keep these handcuffs in back of us until we get in the house."

"Is that your wife?" asked Bobby curiously.

Joel nodded. "Be a pal, now."

"Sure," said Bobby.

Joel waved to Garda with his free hand, as Hendricks escorted them from the car, and then he and Miss Neville began to ascent to the terrace. They walked close together, stepping in unison, and Joel could see Garda's happy smile change to a frown in which was mingled suspicion and distrust. He steeled himself for the encounter.

"Hello, darling," he said, as the

reached the terrace. "Hello, Oates. Dear," he said to Garda, "may I present Miss Neville."

Garda said, "Where have you been?" very coldly.

"I had to go up to the city," said Joel. "I'll tell you all about it in a few minutes."

"Sure he will," said Miss Neville. She casually brought her right hand out into the open, and Joel's left with it. Garda blinked as she saw the handcuffs, and Joel nearly yanked Bobby off her feet in his attempt to get their hands out of sight.

"Don't be so rough, honey," said Bobby tenderly. "You're hurting me, sugar."

Joel groaned.

"All right, get along inside," said Hendricks sharply, and Joel turned with alacrity, yanking Bobby along with him. "It's all a mistake," he called back over his shoulder to Garda, who was glowering. "I'll explain everything." In the doorway, Hendricks unlocked the cuffs, and Bobby Neville gave Joel a cool smile as she turned to go through the door ahead of him. Joel drew back his right foot, and was on the verge of letting fly with it, when Hendricks said, "Hey!"

"I was just stretching after the long ride," explained Joel.

JOEL was led into the library, where a middle-aged hard-faced man was sitting at the late Nicholas Torrent's desk. In a chair nearby was Joe Hilliard, of the insurance company.

Hilliard said, "Hello, Sloane." He jerked his thumb toward the desk. "Inspector Forbes," he said.

Joel said, "Hello, Inspector." He saw Forbes sizing him up, and waited politely until the inspector looked past him to the detective waiting near the door. "Okay, Hendricks. Wait outside."

When the door closed the inspector said, "Sit down, Sloane. Chances are we'll be talking for quite a while."

Joel said, "Thanks," and pulled up a chair. He lit a cigarette.

"There's a lot been happening around here that needs explaining," said Forbes, mildly enough. "Shoot."

"If you mean, did I kill Nicholas Torrent," said Joel, "I didn't."

"Know who did?"

Joel shook his head.

"Got any ideas?" asked Hilliard.

"I've got to find out where I stand first," said Joel earnestly. "The way your police dog sounded on the ride down, I got the idea I was first on your list of likely murderers."

The inspector opened the middle drawer of the desk and took out a gleaming nickel object which he dropped on the desk before Joel. "Ever see that before?"

"Sure," said Joel promptly. "I had that gun in my room."

"Is that the gun you took away from George Clifford?"

Joel nodded.

"What did you do with it?"

"I had it on a chair near my bed when I lay down last night, after the rumpus here. I wanted it to be handy in case—" A great light dawned over him suddenly. "Say, is that the gun the old guy was—"

The inspector nodded. "What did you do with the gun?"

"I wasn't very smart there," Joel confessed, a little ashamed of himself. "I put it on a chair near my bed, where it would be handy if anything popped during the night. When I got up I forgot all about it." He mopped his forehead. "Whew! I can see why you sent out such a hurry call for me."

Hilliard said, "Did you kill Torrent?"

"No," said Joel. "Of course, you'll probably be able to prove that I did, and hang me for it, but in the meantime I think you ought to tell me exactly what happened. You never can tell, I might know something."

"I'll bet you do," said Hilliard. He nodded to Forbes, who was looking at him inquiringly.

"You'd better know something," said Forbes tersely, and dropped the gun back in the desk. "Torrent was found dead in

his room this morning, a bullet right through his head. The gun was held up against a pillow, to muffle the sound. It was done at about three or four o'clock in the morning and we found this gun on the floor near the bed. The door was locked on the inside, and the servants had to break down the door."

"How did they know he was dead?" asked Joel.

"There was a long distance call for Torrent from the East at about 6:30—his broker calling. Craddock came up to wake him, found the door locked, and became alarmed when he got no answer. Then he woke up Mrs. Torrent and she had the servants bust in."

Joel turned to Hilliard. "Did you talk to Clifford?"

"I talked to him for quite a while," said Hilliard, looking down at the knuckles of his right fist. "He didn't say much. He told me you took the gun away from him, and he told me about the deal you tried to work out with him."

"The deal?"

"You wanted him to steal the manuscript," said Hilliard, "and then you would turn it back to us, using your connection with the firm. Then the two of you would split the reward."

"He's a liar!" said Joel hotly.

"That's approximately how he described you," said Hilliard. "He said he didn't trust you, and refused to have anything to do with it, so you clouted him and took the gun."

Joel nodded. "That part is true. I went to his room to talk to him. He went for the gun and I hit him."

"Did you hit Gerald, too?" asked Forbes.

Joel shook his head.

"Somebody did," said Forbes. "He's got a bump on his chin. Claims he tripped over a loose rug."

"LET'S stop this polite chatter," said Hilliard irritably, "and get down to cases. I've got to get that manuscript. When did you see it last?"

"Torrent took it to his room after Charlton was attacked in the library," said Joel.

"Clifford says you searched his room last night," said Forbes. "What for?"

"The manuscript," said Joel.

"But Torrent had it with him in his room."

"Not the genuine manuscript," said Joel sadly, and he heard the legs of Hilliard's chair come down on the floor with a thump. "The manuscript I found on the floor of the library was phonier than a glass eye."

"You're crazy!" said Hilliard hotly.

Joel shook his head. "It's true. That's what I was looking for in Clifford's room. I thought he had swiped the real one somehow and put in the copy. That's why I went up to the city to see that dame this morning. I heard Clifford phone her at a hotel in Santa Barbara and tell her to beat it up to town. My guess was that she carried it off, after Clifford grabbed it and knocked out Charlton with the vase."

Joel felt himself on surer ground now as he read the surprise in the faces of his inquisitors. "Now as far as I'm concerned," he added genially, "I'm no mental giant, but I'm smart enough not to take a gun away from somebody I know will talk, and do a murder with it. I'm also smart enough not to leave the gun on the floor and beat it right out of town, leaving a trail behind so thick even your detectives couldn't miss it."

"I've seen a lot of smart guys do a lot of dumb things," said the inspector. "That's why we have a hanging every now and then."

"How about Wilkes?" asked Joel. "He knew the manuscript was phony but he didn't say anything."

"We'll talk to Wilkes," said Forbes, "when we catch him."

"Did he beat it?" asked Joel.

"Not a trace of him," said Forbes.

"I tried to talk to Wilkes last night," said Joel, "but Mrs. Torrent came in and practically threw me out." He added

maliciously, "There's a strong silent woman for you, inspector."

Forbes said, "Hendricks!" and the door opened at once.

"Yes, Inspector."

"Ask Mrs. Torrent to step down here for a moment, Hendricks."

The detective saluted and went out.

"Want me to stick around?" asked Joel, and Forbes nodded.

Hendricks returned almost at once, alone. "Doctor's with her," he said. "She can't be interviewed. Maybe later in the day."

Forbes turned a penholder nervously in his fingers. "Okay," he said. "Bring down the daughter."

Joel nodded approvingly, as Hendricks went out, and returned in a few minutes not only with Christina Torrent but with Phil Charlton.

CHRISTINA'S face was haggard, her eyes were red from weeping, and her general demeanor was one of hysterical fright. Charlton was belligerent enough for two, however.

"Look here, Inspector," he snapped, his right arm around Chris in a protective pose. "This girl is hysterical and terribly upset. Do you have to question her now?"

Forbes nodded. "We want to find out who killed her father."

"It's all right, Phil," said Chris weakly. Joel brought a chair for her and she sat down.

"Will you wait outside, Mr. Charlton?" asked Forbes mildly, and with a final, encouraging pat on the girl's shoulder, Phil Charlton went out. Christina started to cry almost as soon as the door closed. Forbes got up and came around to the other side of the desk, on which he perched facing Christina. "I know what a rotten time this is for you to be answering questions, Miss Torrent, but we've got to work fast."

"I know," said Christina.

"Do you know of any quarrels or difficulties between your father and his librarian, Mr. Wilkes?"

Christina shook her head. She seemed surprised.

"Do you know of any reason why Wilkes should run away last night?"

The girl was frankly astonished. "No," she said. "Did he?"

Forbes nodded. "Apparently he left the house sometime after the disturbance in the library last night. Did your father ever discuss the manscript with you, Miss Torrent? Did he ever tell you that it was a—" Forbes caught the warning gesture Joel made at this question, and hesitantly abandoned it. "Never mind that," he said. "Miss Torrent, were your father and brother on good terms?"

Joel felt that this was the question the girl had been waiting for. She looked nervously from the inspector to him, then turned back to Forbes. "Of course," she said.

"They had no recent quarrels?"

She shook her head. "No." Tears started up in her eyes again, as she said this, and Forbes pressed her.

"You didn't know of any arguments about money—about any debts your brother incurred?"

Christina was crying too hard to speak, but she shook her head defiantly.

Hilliard tried one. "Miss Torrent, did you know your brother had taken some books from your father's library recently books he sold to a dealer in the city?"

Christina disregarded the question. "He's innocent," she cried wildly. "He didn't do it . . . he didn't . . . you're trying to frame him!"

"Now, Miss Torrent," said Forbes placatingly, "we're just trying to get all the facts about—"

He looked toward the door as Hendricks came in with another detective, and the three men started to their feet as they saw the flat leather case of the Torrent manuscript in Hendrick's right hand.

"Where did you find it?" demanded Forbes, as Hilliard and Joel opened it, Hilliard lifting out the manuscript.

"In Gerald Torrent's room," said Hendricks methodically. "It was in the fire-

place chimney, held up there by adhesive tape."

"Come on," said Forbes grimly to Hendricks and Hilliard. "We'll have a talk with the lad."

Joel watched them go, then turned to Christina, who was looking after them. She seemed to have aged ten years in the past ten seconds. "Better go upstairs and lie down," he said gently.

Slowly, as though she were in a trance, she turned to him. "Mr. Sloane—Mr. Sloane—you don't think they'll—"

"It looks bad," said Joel briefly.

The girl nodded slowly, then stood up. She walked unsteadily out of the room and Joel heard her faltering footsteps on the stairs.

CHAPTER X

CALL THE PRESS

"WHEN I saw that detective bring you in here handcuffed to a woman," said Garda coldly, "I made up my mind I wouldn't lift a finger if they shot you at sunrise."

"But, darling," protested Joel, "it was business."

"Sure," said Garda resentfully. " 'Honey' . . . 'Sugar!' " she repeated contemptuously.

Joel winced. "That was a mistake. I looked like somebody she knew long ago."

"Sneaking out of here without a word, and dashing off to that blond whatever-it-is!"

"I just didn't want to worry you," said Joel. "Anyway, you know you're the only blonde in my life."

Garda turned her back.

"Now don't do anything rash," Joel cautioned her. "As the wife of a notorious murderer, you can sell your memoirs to the newspapers and maybe even go on a vaudeville tour. *My Life With A Human Fiend*—there's a good title for the story, but before they march me off to the gallows, let me give you one piece of advice—watch your spelling, it's atrocious."

"I am not going to forgive you," said Garda, "and that's that! The detective told me he found you sitting on that hussy's bed and she was wearing hardly any clothes."

"Maybe," said Joel. "I didn't notice."

Garda turned around. "Didn't you really?"

"I only have eyes for you," said Joel earnestly.

"Then I forgive you," said Garda, "but with reservations. If I find out you made a pass at that wench, I'll—"

"Come here," said Joel indicating his lap, "and I'll tell you the whole story."

Garda sat down, as indicated. "Leave out the sordid details," she said, "and I'll listen to you."

Joel told her about the trip to the city, his arrest, and the interview with Hilliard and the inspector, concluding with, "Right now I'm on a spot, but they'll have a fresh suspect before long."

"Really? Who?"

"The house is full of them," said Joel. "Wilkes beat it in the middle of the night, which looks bad. Gerald Torrent is practically in a cell right now. Mrs. Torrent has a job of plain and fancy explaining to do as soon as the doctor lets us question her, and there remains George Clifford, as shady a character as you'd ever want to meet."

"Put them all together," said Garda, "and what have you got?"

"An idea," said Joel. "Can you get Christina Torrent and bring her here—then leave us for a few minutes?"

"Oh, Joel! Leave the poor girl alone. She's wretched."

"This is a special favor I'm doing her," said Joel. "I'd rather talk to her than to the police."

She studied him.

"What about?"

"Do as you're told," said Joel gruffly. "The first duty of a detective's wife is to follow orders."

"Some of your orders would make a detective's blood run cold," said Garda. She got up, though, and said, "Wait here. I'll try."

"IF YOU want to know whether you can trust me," said Joel quietly, "just remember that I had plenty of opportunity to talk to the police about you and your brother this morning."

Chris Torrent looked up at him. "I don't know anything," she said weakly. "Leave me alone."

"I can do that," said Joel, "but it won't help you in the long run. You were pretty upset when I saw you in the hall last night. Your father had just gone downstairs and you were standing out there crying. You started to tell me something then, but you changed your mind. What was it? Tell me now."

"I can't," said Chris.

Joel tried another tack, though he felt like a heel for it. "I only knew your father for a little while," he said softly, "but he was a fine man—too fine a man to be brutally murdered. The information you're sitting on might lead us straight to whoever it was—"

Chris jumped up. "No! No!"

"It's written all over you," said Joel implacably. "The police won't hem and haw with you, you know. They'll get the story out of you somehow."

Christina hesitated nervously. She seemed about to speak.

"You're hiding something," said Joel. "Shielding somebody . . .Gerald, I think."

Chris Torrent stared at him, her eyes wide open, then wavered unsteadily, and Joel jumped up just in time to catch her as she slumped down in a faint.

He was holding her in his arms, when the door opened and Garda came in. "Oh, pardon me," she said coldly, and turned, but Joel stopped her.

"She's fainted."

Garda came to the rescue. "You beast, what did you do to her?"

Joel deposited her on the bed and mopped his brow.

"Water!" snapped Garda, and he brought it, handing the glass to Garda who held it to the unconscious girl's lips.

"There," said Garda, "she's coming to." She turned to Joel. "Beat it."

JOEL left and went back downstairs to the library. He found Hendricks on duty at the door, and after inquiry inside, the detective passed him in to where Inspector Forbes was sitting at the desk, Joe Hilliard, as previously, nearby.

"Well," asked Joel politely, "how did Gerald stand up under the third degree?"

"Nobody laid a hand on him," said Forbes resentfully. "Where do you get that third-degree stuff?" The inspector didn't seem very happy.

"Sorry," murmured Joel. He pulled up a chair, without being asked, and poured himself a drink from the decanter. "Have you got a case against him?" he asked.

"Why?" asked Forbes, still far from cordial. "So you can queer it?"

"If you have," said Joel coolly, "you won't need me. if you haven't, I've got an idea."

"Let's hear it," said Forbes, and Hilliard leaned forward in his chair.

"You've got to believe me," said Joel, "that the manuscript we've got—the one you found in Gerald's room—is a phony."

"All right," said Forbes. "I believe you."

"Another thing—you've got to play along with me and not tell anyone that it's a phony."

"Get to the point, will you."

"Get the newspapermen in here," said Joel earnestly, "and give them a story about how the manuscript was missing, but it has been recovered by the police and is now safe and sound. Not a word to the papers about the fact that it's a forgery."

"He's got something!" said Hilliard excitedly.

Forbes shrugged. "I'm damned if *I* know what he's got."

"Don't you see?" Joel leaned across the desk and spoke emphatically. "Why should a copy be made at a great expenditure of time and money? For one reason, so that the real one can be taken out without suspicion. The real one may have been sold to somebody. But if we announce that the manuscript is safe and

sound with us, we're going to hear an anguished squawk from whoever might own the genuine manuscript."

Light slowly dawned on Inspector Forbes. "And if Torrent found out," he murmured, "there would have been one hell of a row."

"Exactly," said Joel. "How does it sound?"

Forbes summoned Hendricks, and when the detective entered, he asked, "Are there any newspapermen outside?"

"Millions of them," said Hendricks. "They're crawling in through the drainpipes."

He looked disgusted.

"Let them in," said Forbes briefly. "Bring them in here."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

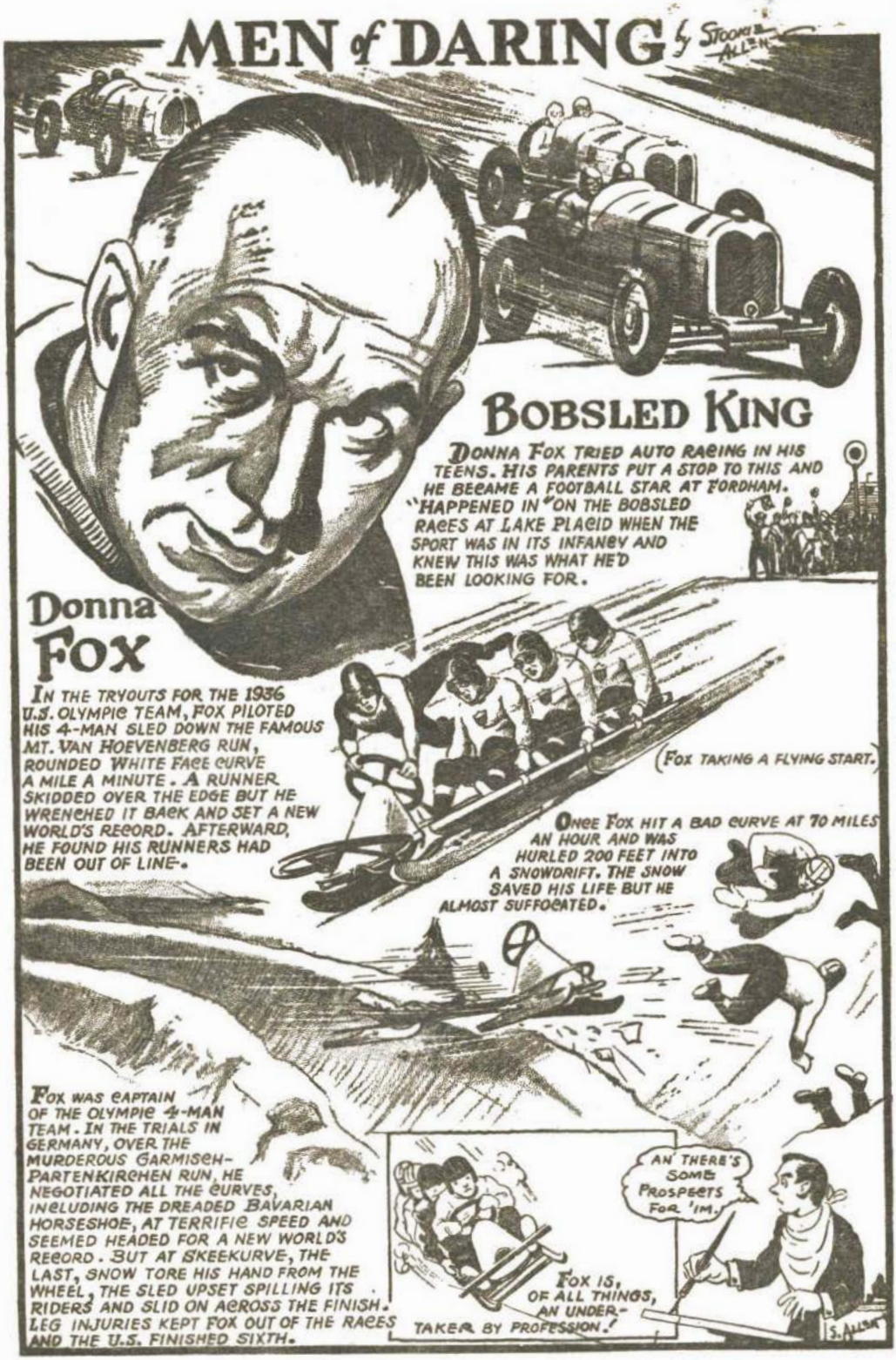
Nervous as a Rat

IN DESPAIR over the growing prevalence of the nervous breakdown, psychiatrists have turned to rats for assistance. The rats accommodated, if unwillingly; and the result is a rather neat explanation of why people stop behaving like human beings. But first let us follow the rodents to neurosis.

Dr. Norman F. R. Maier confronted four white rats with two differently marked cards; pretty soon the animals discovered that if they jumped against one card, it toppled over, uncovering food, while they simply bruised their heads against the other one. Then Dr. Maier switched the cards and kept on switching until the rats gave up. But, being a scientist and ingenious, Dr. Maier compelled them to jump at the cards by a blast of air. Finally he removed one card. Faced with this new situation, the baffled rodents went completely to pieces. They ran around in circles, had convulsions, and eventually fell into comas, glassy-eyed. In fine, they exhibited as nice an example of the nervous breakdown as you could find in any home.

Dr. Maier's theory is this: that an individual (or rat) suffers a nervous breakdown when he is forced to respond to a situation and yet does not know how to behave. On the other hand, problems that don't have to be solved do not produce neuroses. But they're a luxury. To all of you in confusion—remember the rat with the glassy eyes!

—*Algernon Blaire*



A True Story in Pictures Every Week

The Man Next Door

By PAUL ERNST

Author of "The Man from Painted Arrow," "The Gentle Gunman," etc.

He was a curious fellow, that gray-haired, nondescript little man who moved into the old Smythe place. There wasn't anything in the least remarkable about him . . . except, maybe, the way he looked at snow as if he'd never seen it before, and how he didn't know what a pound was and thought it was warm that cold wintry day . . .

A Short Novelet

I

NEEDLESS to say, this part of the story was never handed in to the New York paper for which I am a reporter. I knew too well what the editor would have said. "Interesting, but hardly news, Phillips." And he'd have looked at me as if convinced I was slightly mad.

As so often happens, it broke when I wasn't out for a story at all. I was on a vacation; home for the first time in four or five months: resolved not to think shop even if a volcano broke loose in our peaceful Connecticut village.

I got home about ten o'clock at night. It was January and cold. Dad, big and bearlike in an ulster, smoking his eternal pipe, met me in the comfortable old family

sedan and drove me from the station in winter darkness.

"Good to see you, son." That was all, but the look in his eyes went beyond the reticence of his words.

"It's swell to see you, Dad. News?"

"We're all about the same, Jim. Mother's over that cold she had. Bill Wilson, the boy you used to play hockey with in the next block, married a Bridgeport girl and took her to Boston where he has a new job. Kay's still the same. The house next door has finally been sold, and the new owner got in just before I started to the station to pick you up. I saw lights there and reported to the watchman, who checked in and then came and said everything was all right, it was the new owner."

"So Kay's the same," I said. That was the most important item in his compact bulletin.

"Yes. I think she's been wondering why a newspaper reporter, whose profession is writing, seems never to extend his capability to writing personal letters."

"I've been a heel," I said. "But I have something to tell her this time that I hope she'll be interested in. I got a nice raise the first of the year."

Dad's deep-set eyes looked into mine. "She's pretty nice, Jim. Hope she takes it right."

We got near the house. I saw the house next door, that he had mentioned. It's a big, rambling, wasteful place, white, built in 1860 or thereabouts. It's a hundred yards from our house, on the fringe of town with a lot of trees between. Only now, with the trees bare, you could see the house plainly.

"Looks like the new owner is burning candles," I said, noting the uncertainty of the light shining from one of the windows. "I suppose he'll get the electricity connected in the morning. So they've finally sold the joint. It's been a white elephant to the Smythe heirs for a long time."

However, I wasn't really much interested. One huge, old-fashioned house, fully furnished, vacant for nine years, had been sold at last. So what?

THE house I was interested in was our own, white and clean-lined in an acre of yard, looking like a Christmas-card house with the snow around it.

"Kay's in with mother," said Dad. "She thought she'd like to greet the prodigal, too. You don't mind?" He said that with solemn lips and a sardonic twinkle in his eyes.

"Do *you* think I'll mind?" I said, punching him on the shoulder.

He stopped the car at the side door, and we went in.

"Jim!"

I'd forgotten how nice it is to have a female parent put her arms around you and remind you that you're her son.

"'Lo, Jimmy."

That was Kay, five feet nothing, red-brown of hair, warm brown of eye, solemn-lipped but with a twinkle usually in her eyes that was not unlike my father's.

"I suppose you think you'll escape the mugging epidemic," I said. "See that mistletoe over your head."

"Where?" she said innocently, tilting her head up.

So I got her in the soft white of her throat under her chin first, and on the lips second.

We talked around, as you will when you've come home after a little absence. We got all caught up with news and intimacies. Then, more to be saying something than because I was really interested, I said:

"Wonder what kind of neighbor you've drawn out of the shuffle? The Smythes, who lived in the house next door when you bought this place, were pretty stuffy, weren't they, Dad?"

Dad nodded, and shrugged. "The new man's name is Carpenter. That's all I know. I didn't even know the place had changed hands till I sent Pete, the watchman, over to investigate the lights."

"What did Pete say Carpenter was like?"

"Pete was pretty vague. I gather that Carpenter is a very average-looking person, middle-aged, with not much to say. I

don't know if he's married or not. Pete didn't see any one there but him. I suppose there's a Mrs. Carpenter, though. A bachelor wouldn't take a house that big."

"It's the reporter's nose for news," said Kay, red lips solemn and provocative. "He's home about fifteen minutes and starts investigating local doings."

"The hell with the man next door," I said. "Mom, would there be any apple pie and milk around? You know—apple pie with lots of cinnamon in it?"

"Well, perhaps," was the answer.

We got to bed about as late as you'd expect we would, and were just starting breakfast when there was a loud and hurried banging on the door. It was John Wither, sheriff, a man of forty who had been sort of elder brother to me when I first started carrying a shotgun through the fields in hunting season. He was bundled up in heavy coat and fur gloves.

"Jim," he said. "Nice to see you. I heard you were home, and though I'd stop in about something that just broke. Though maybe you'd want in on it."

"Swell to see you, too, John. What's the break?"

"Trouble up at Blanchard's. It isn't rightly in my jurisdiction, but they've sent out a broadcast for all the local law around, and I'm on my way up now."

It was on the tip of my tongue to thank him and say I guessed I wouldn't go because I was on vacation. But I didn't. Blanchard's, in case you don't already know, is a de luxe institution for neurotic and psychiatric cases. It caters to wealthy people. It is so de luxe, in fact, that they don't even whisper that it's an insane asylum—though that's precisely what it is. Trouble at Blanchard's might involve one of our best families.

"An attendant was killed," said John. "So if—"

"Be right with you!"

I went out to join him at his car, getting my left arm into my overcoat and holding some toast in my right hand. He started off fast.

"Didn't get much over the phone, Jim. One of Doc Blanchard's incurables escaped. They found it out about half past seven this morning, at the same time they found the dead guard."

"Who was it that escaped?"

"Fellow by the name of Herrin."

"And he killed the guard?"

John's tone was funny. "I don't think they quite know that, Jim. Seems the attendant died in some peculiar kind of way that has 'em all stumped."

BLANCHARD'S SANATORIUM is about twelve miles from our town. We got there in twenty minutes or so. The place is twenty acres big, all surrounded by a high spiked fence. In the center is a thirty-five room building that was once a copper magnate's private home. There are bars over most of the windows.

We went in. There were twenty or thirty cars there. Constables and sheriffs and state police were buzzing around. Two local news correspondents of the free-lance type were there. John and I cut through the lot to Doctor Blanchard, a peppery man of sixty but without a gray hair in his black, sleek head.

"Hello, Sheriff Wither," he said. "You here too?"

John nodded soberly. "Sergeant Turney, State Police, called. Guess he wants everybody in this part of the state to work on getting your escaped . . . er, patient back again. Doctor Blanchard, Jim Phillips, reporter on the New York *Ledger*."

Blanchard nodded, and his black eyes asked that I go easy on unfavorable publicity. He was sensible, didn't try to hide anything. He came clean after a few prodding questions about the escaped man.

"His name is August Herrin. No living relatives. He is fairly well-off—lives on a trust fund set up by his father. He came here last May. Not what you'd call violent. He was deeply interested in astronomy. In fact, he has written several treatises on the planets, particularly Mars, that have appeared in scientific journals. We indulge our patients, here. We allowed—in fact encouraged—him to set up a quite ex-

cellent telescope for study. He spent his nights at it, when the atmosphere was clear, and slept during the day."

"He sounds not only sane, but intelligent," I said.

Blanchard shrugged. "In his normal periods, he is. But now and then came an interval which we watched him very closely. Incipient criminal insanity. He almost got an attendant once before. Highly dangerous to have him out."

"This hobby of astronomy," I said. "Did that have anything to do with his unbalance?"

Blanchard chewed his lip. "Of late I've thought it might have. And I've considered taking his telescope away from him after all. You see, he got to concentrating on Mars. All he observed was that one planet. Said he was looking for traces of life there."

"Many quite sane students specialize in some one planet or star," I retorted. "And many quite sane scientists have looked seriously for traces of life on Mars."

"But last night, just before light out for the rest of the institution, he called the attendant nearest him and said he had just seen a tiny flash on Mars, as if some being there were trying to communicate with Earth."

"Well," I said, "many quite sane professors have thought to see just such a thing, and there have been several proposed plans for Earth to try to communicate with Mars."

He chewed his lip again. "That's why I wasn't quite sure whether or not to take his telescope away from him. Even a specialist can't be sure sometimes about the line between sane acts and unbalanced ones. . . . But that's enough about Herrin, I believe. The unfortunate attendant? He is in the left-wing reception room. There will be an autopsy, An expert is on his way up from New York, at our request. Most peculiar. . . ."

BLANCHARD went off, and John and I entered the building and turned left into the first room off the hall.

"What *is* this peculiarity that has been mentioned so much?" I wondered.

John shrugged solid shoulders. We pushed a way through white-coated Blanchard attendants, police and photographers.

At first I thought the attendant killed —at least that was the assumption—by the escaped Herrin, was physically unmarked His face was in repose, and normal. There was no blood anywhere on his white uniform. His bare head was untouched by weapon of any sort. Then I saw his eyes, and felt my body cringe a little into clothes that suddenly seemed too loose for me.

The man's eyes, wide open, were red. They were so solidly, deeply crimson that you could barely make out the pupils. They looked like dull rubies in his head.

"What on earth . . ." I exclaimed.

A state trooper standing next to me turned.

"Yeah," he said. "If you can figure that one out, you're better than we are. And look at his hair."

The dead man's hair, light blond, had a queer baked look. It was dry and stringy, as though it had been exposed to heat. The scalp showed more pinkish than it should have, carrying out the same impression of heat. And the eyes . . .

They looked as if they had been . . . cooked . . . I thought, with a slight shiver.

"You don't know what did it?" I asked the trooper.

"No. We're stymied. Haven't the faintest idea how he died. And if we can't dope it out, there's nothing to tie this guy, Herrin, in with the death except that the guard died the same night Herrin got away."

"Attendant, please!" said Blanchard, who had come in on the tail of the trooper's words. "We do not have guards here. They are attendants."

The trooper didn't even bother to shrug I buttonholed Blanchard.

"You have a picture of Herrin, of course?"

He shook his head. "We have no rogue's

gallery here. This is not a cheap institution. And no one has ever gotten out before, so that we didn't think it necessary . . ."

I mentally cursed his pomposity. "Describe him, will you?"

Blanchard parroted a description he had probably given fifty times that morning.

"Herrin is about fifty, gray-haired, average height and weight, undistinguished face. The chin is rounded and his nose is slightly curved up. Eyes gray-brown, ears a little large for his head."

"That description might apply to hundreds of men."

"Mr. Herrin is a very average looking fellow," Blanchard sighed. "I wish, now, that we had a file of pictures of our clients. I shall certainly start one immediately."

Sure. After the horse was stolen.

John Wither was about ready to go. I joined him after a last look at the dead man's still face—and his eyes. Red as blood. Red as fire. Like dull round rubies in a skull that somehow gave that odd impression of having been baked dry.

II

It was about one o'clock when I got back to the house. Lunch was ready. Kay met me at the door with that announcement. Also with another announcement.

"Your new neighbor is lunching with us," she said. "I saw him wandering like a lost soul around the grounds next door, and passed the time of day with him. He looked so sort of forlorn that, on impulse, I asked him to come in. And your mother extended the luncheon invitation."

The table was set in the glass-closed porch off the dining room. It was very pleasant with the winter sun shining in. Kay and I sat on one side of the table, the new neighbor, Carpenter, sat on the other, and mother and father held down head and foot respectively.

Carpenter was a very deliberate, rather vague man with not much to say. We asked him how he liked his new place, and he said it seemed to be all right. We asked him if he intended to stay there regularly, or if he were keeping a place in town too, and he said he didn't know. He was quite pleasant but apparently one of these people who don't know the meaning of small talk.

Kay asked me about the Blanchard thing.

"There are some very curious angles," I said evasively. I didn't want to go into details. His eyes . . . It wasn't a luncheon-table conversation. "I phoned it all in. The late evening editions will have it."

"Why did they have Sheriff Wither go up?" said Kay. "Do they think perhaps the escaped man came down toward our village?"

"They don't know where he went," I said. "I guess they just wanted all local law officers to get a first-hand description and be on the lookout." I turned to Carpenter, smiling a little. "Don't get the idea that this is a usual thing in your new locale. This is the first time any one ever got away from Doc Blanchard."

Carpenter looked mildly at me, and took eight or ten seconds before replying.

"I'm sure it isn't usual," he said finally.

It was almost as though he had to search his memory for the right words. I watched him for a few minutes after that, and noticed that his actions were on the same order. Slightly delayed, I mean. He picked up a spoon, held it for two or three seconds as if trying to remember what you did with spoons, then put it in his coffee cup. He looked at the cup for a little while, thoughtfully, then picked it up and drank out of it. I decided that Carpenter must have just convalesced from a long illness that left him tired and fuzzy-minded.

HE LEFT about two-thirty, thanking us very formally and deliberately—as though searching for the proper words—and went across to the house next door. Watching him idly through the window, I saw him stoop and pick up a handful of snow, which he regarded for a minute or more as if snow were something very curious indeed.

"The absent-minded professor," I said.

"He seems a very nice man," Mother defended, as if I had said something slurring.

"Sure. . . ."

Wither came to the door about then, and I forgot everything else in my curiosity as to the developments of the Blanchard ruckus. John had some highly unusual news.

"They've concluded the autopsy," he said. I was out in the yard with him, not wanting the folks to hear the gruesome details. "The New York medical examiner opened up the man's brainpan to see what made his eyes and hair and scalp look like that."

John took a chew from a plug of tobacco, masticated, and spat. His eyes were round and puzzled.

"You know, that New York doc is the most completely flabbergasted guy I ever saw. There's no mark on the outside of the man's skull. But the inside—well, it looks as if somebody had turned his brains to cotton soaked with gasoline, and then lit a match to it. The skull on the inside is so seared it's charred. Looks a little as if the lymph and stuff had suddenly turned to concentrated sulphuric."

"For Pete's sake," I said.

"Yeah," said John. "Ditto. The guy's eyes and hair looked as if they'd been exposed to extreme heat. Well, they had been. From inside his head."

"That's impossible! How could . . ."

"It couldn't," said Wither. "But it was. Looks like Herrin didn't have anything to do with the guard's death, anyhow. Far as anybody can figure out, no human being could kill like that."

"Are there any theories at all?"

"A few goofy ones. Somebody said some kind of a heat ray might get such a result. But there's no machine anywhere around Blanchard's that could give out a heat ray—if there's one anywhere in the world, for that matter. Somebody else said that maybe the guy had somehow bumped a loose wire with his head, and electricity did it. But there's no exposed wires at the place carrying more than a hundred and ten volts, which wouldn't do things like that to the inside of a man's skull."

"Beats *me*," I said. "Anything else?"

"We know how Herrin got away," said John. "Not that it matters much, I guess. One of the troopers got hold of a woman who said she saw a strange man drive her neighbor's car away. Near Blanchard's. She reported it at the time, but the boys had something more to do than stand on their heads hunting for stolen cars. It wasn't till later that they tied the two in together, and realized that Herrin was the stranger who got away in the car."

John spat tobacco juice.

"The woman said a kind of funny thing. She said the man didn't seem to know how to drive a car for a minute, after he got in. He started with a jerk, and wobbled down the road. But before he'd got out of sight the car was going smooth enough. It was as if he'd had to figure out how to run the thing, she said."

"Does Herrin know how to drive?"

"Sure. They asked Blanchard that. Blanchard says Herrin has owned cars all his life. So I guess the woman was mistaken, or else Herrin had kind of forgot how to drive while he was in the place, and had to take a minute to remember. Not that any of it matters."

I THANKED him for letting me in on the latest details, and stepped to the corner to phone it to New York. When I got back to the house, I saw Carpenter wandering around in his backyard, so I stepped down to him instead of going directly in our place.

Carpenter had scuffed up a bit of frozen sod and earth from under the snow, and was pinching it experimentally between fingers blue with a cold to which he seemed oblivious. He nodded to me, and spoke, while looking at the frozen grass roots and earth.

"It is very"—there was a ten second interlude during which he seemed hunting for the word—"very fertile around here, isn't it?"

"Here?" I laughed. "Hardly, compared to some parts of the south and west."

"It seems extremely fertile to me. Probably it's this heat."

"You speak as though it were ninety in the shade, instead of about ten above zero," I said.

"Ninety in the shade . . . Oh, yes, I understand."

I wondered for a moment if Carpenter were a foreigner, with English that was a bit rusty but had no trace of an accent when at last he did choose his words.

"I must travel a little. But I find that I tire easily." He looked down at his own body with the oddest expression: as if it were a machine that had never been much good anyhow and at present was in extreme disrepair. Yes, he'd just recovered from a long illness, I decided.

"Perhaps it is simply the weight of the atmosphere," he said slowly, with a little experimental pause before finding the word, atmosphere.

"I guess we're no lower than any other part of the east coast," I said, grinning. "Go south a ways, and you'll think you've hit something, if it's a muggy day. The usual fifteen pounds per square inch pressure feels like thirty-one and a half."

"Of course, of course," said Carpenter vaguely. And even more vaguely he repeated, "I must travel a little . . ."

Mother called me from the house. "Jim. The sheriff's on the phone."

I went in. John's voice was hard.

"Come on downtown. Henkel's office. You know, Henkel, the real estate man."

"What's up, John?"

"Henkel's dead. Got the same dose the guard at Doc Blanchard's got—whatever that may be. Same kind of thing. His eyes . . . His head's still hot. I think maybe we're in for some kind of an epidemic nobody ever heard of before. Or else . . ."

"Or else?" I prompted him.

"Maybe Herrin did kill that guard, in some way nobody can figure out, and is right here in town going on with the killing—starting with Henkel."

III

FOR the moment, the vacation was shot. This second thing, coming so close on the heels of the first, was too big to phone about. I decided to go into town with it. We are less than three hours drive from my office.

I commandeered the family sedan. "Back about ten," I told the folks. I dashed out. Carpenter was still wandering around his grounds. He looked so desolate, so alone and alien, that I had the kind of impulse Kay must have felt when she asked him into our house.

"I'm taking a quick run down to New York," I called. "Want to go to the city for anything? Come along, if you like."

"Oh, yes," Carpenter said, coming out to the car. "I would like to see the city."

He got in.

"Your house all shipshape to leave on such short notice?" I said. "Any electric stoves on or anything?"

He thought that over. "No, everything is all right."

I didn't say much for awhile. I was thinking as I drove, trying to coordinate things.

Bill Henkel, enterprising young real estate agent, had been found dead in his office by his secretary when she came back from a late lunch. He was lying on the floor, with his telephone in his hand. In all respects he seemed to have died just like Blanchard's guard.

There was the dry, stringy look to his hair, and the feverish pinkness to his scalp. There were the eyes—red as fire, solidly crimson, as though they had been steamed. When they opened Henkel's skull, they were going to find the same fantastic condition they'd discovered in the guard's.

I tried a few vague theories myself. Could some one have injected powerful acid into the man's skull? But how? Henkel, and the guard too, would have had to be knocked unconscious before a thing as crazy as that could be done. And on neither man was there a mark of violence of any kind.

Would some sort of artificial fever machine, of the type used in diathermy, have induced such a terrific internal heat? But those contraptions are ponderous. No one could carry one around to use like that. And again, why would Henkel or the guard have submitted to such treatment without a struggle?

The idea of a heat ray of some kind seemed most plausible. But the generation of heat rays is, so far as I know, confined entirely to laboratory experiments that have not as yet got very far. . . .

"I don't think any of you will be able to solve it," said Carpenter, who had been sitting very still beside me.

"Eh?" I said, startled.

Later, I recalled the intonation the man had used. I don't think any of *you* will *ever* be able to solve it. He had verbally underlined the two words like that.

At the moment, however, I thought only of the rather amazing fact that Carpenter had seemed to read my mind. Then I got the plausible explanation, of course. Carpenter had been near enough back at the house to catch some of the sheriff's words to me, had known I must be thinking about them, and had put out that statement.

"Maybe not," I said, laughing a little. "It looks like it now, at any rate."

We were silent a while longer. Then Carpenter said, in a low, thoughtful tone, "Fifteen pounds to the square inch."

I WAS puzzled for a moment, then realized that he was going back to my idle mention of the average atmospheric pressure, for no reason that I could think of.

But he did an even more inexplicable thing a moment later. There was a flashlight in the pocket of the door next to his knee. He took that out and held it.

"Would this be a pound?"

"Oh, no," I said. "That would weigh less than half a pound."

He put the light back in the pocket, while I drove on with one eyebrow up a bit. He looked out at the snow-draped countryside we were speeding through.

"You say this is quite cold for this section?"

I was completely at sea, now. Carpenter had spoken vaguely of traveling a little more than he had. He'd seemed to be unfamiliar with climate and topography of the south and along the east coast. Where the hell was he from, anyway? California? But even a person who had never been out of the state before would know something, from reading, about the rest of the United States, wouldn't he?

"It sometimes gets colder," I said, feeling childish, "but not much."

Such talk was more uncomfortable than no talk at all. I turned the car radio on, and settled back to listen to a good swing orchestra. Carpenter sat still as a stone beside me, but his eyes were unblinking and absorbed. Glancing sideways at him, I had the craziest impression—that he was looking through the solid metal of the dash at the chassis of the radio. But I knocked myself out of that fool notion in a hurry. Damn it, Carpenter was giving me the jitters with his asinine questions and queer looks. I was sorry I'd impulsively invited him along.

I turned from the orchestra to a political talk. But suddenly words besides those of the speaker seemed to come to me, barely audible.

"Ours must have been like that, in the beginning, long ago. Crude . . . rudimentary. . . ."

I had stared at Carpenter before the words were done. Stared in amazement. I was sure I'd caught those words. And, if so, Carpenter must have spoken them. But the man's lips were not moving! They were a straight, still line in his face.

Looking straight ahead at the road, and feeling a little chill touch the base of my spine, I said, "They'll be broadcasting power over these things soon. We won't need motors in our cars. We'll get power from a central broadcasting station."

"Of course," said Carpenter, simply, as if agreeing with a statement so self-evident that it needed no agreement. "You will broadcast more than power, some day."

"Oh?" I said, feeling resentful somehow at his calm cocksureness. "What else would be broadcast?"

His eyes flicked quickly to my face.

"Thought, for one thing," he said, as if experimenting with me, playing for reaction. "Thought—and perhaps intelligence itself."

"You mean maybe a person's mind can be broadcast over a distance by something like radio?" I said, staring and then laughing. "Don't be absurd!"

"Mind, intelligence, soul, thought," Carpenter said, with a little pause before each word, as though searching his memory for it. "They're all about the same, aren't they? Without substance, as electric power and radio energy are without substance. Hence, able to be broadcast."

The conversation was getting utterly mad. But it was sort of interesting.

"What kind of receiving set would you rig up to receive the broadcast of an intelligence, or soul?" I grinned.

Carpenter didn't grin back. With all the seriousness in the world, he seemed to turn the problem over in his mind. As if it were a practical, hard question that must be settled right now.

"That," he said, "is—I mean, would be—the difficulty. To broadcast an intelligence? Comparatively simple. To receive it? Extremely intricate. An intelligence must have a material conductor, just as electrical energy, to accomplish tangible results, must have metal to course through. An intelligence, to mean anything, must have a body. A 'receiver,' as you put it. So, now, an intelligence is broadcast, on a narrow beam toward a limited section. The person in that limited section whose concentration on the section from which the broadcast is being made is most intense, will be apt, whether he cares for it or not, to become the receiver."

"It looks to me," I said, "as if you were patching together a fine example of dual personality. The guy on the receiving end already has one intelligence—his own. Now you put another mind in his body. So then what?"

Carpenter looked as if he were beginning to tire of the game.

"The broadcast intelligence would rule as the stronger. The other? Perhaps it would lie dormant, perhaps be driven forth, disembodied. I don't know." He frowned a little at the thickening buildings just north of the city. "How slow. What a crawling pace."

"Say, I'm doing fifty," I said, nettled. "That's not bad on a slippery road with traffic around."

I WAS completely annoyed with friend Carpenter by now. I suspected he was kidding the daylights out of me. We went along in silence, into town, through clanging outer streets toward Uptown Manhattan. Traffic hit its bad worst in the icy streets. Drivers took insane chances to gain ten feet in space and ten seconds in time. Pedestrians tried earnestly to commit suicide by crossing against lights and in the middle of the block. Horns hooted for no reason except to express their owners' futile impatience.

I thought I caught words again—though again when I glanced in surprise at Carpenter, I saw that his lips were not moving.

"And they thought *me* dull, fit only for experiment."

"What?" I said to Carpenter, yelling over the traffic din.

He shook his head, as if to indicate that he had said nothing. I put everything out of my mind but the wheel. Driving in New York's rush hour is a full-time job.

"Where shall I let you off?" I said

"What?" he said.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I have no place particular in mind," he said placidly. "I'll wait in the automobile for you when you stop."

"I might be gone an hour," I shrugged.

"That will be all right."

I parked, finally, near the newspaper building and went on up to the editor's desk. Warburton, at the desk, said something no one had ever heard him say before.

"I don't know how to handle this story, Jim."

I said nothing. I hadn't known how to handle it, either.

"Nothing known can make a man die the way you say Henkel and that guard died. . . . You're sure you got it all straight?"

"I saw both of 'em, after they were dead," I said.

"We've got to put out a theory, at least," Warburton said plaintively. "Otherwise the whole state of Connecticut will go balmy. A crazy man at large with some new method of killing, perhaps from a distance! I don't want to start a panic. Maybe acid was somehow shot into their skulls—"

"I thought of that," I said. "It might produce about those results. But no trace of acid was turned up at the autopsy of the guard. And there would be traces if such a thing had been used."

I put Warburton up to date, while he chewed the wire end of his green eyeshade. Then I went back to the car.

Carpenter was in the front seat completely surrounded by newspapers. Apparently he had bought one of each edition on the big stand a hundred yards from where I'd parked. He wasn't reading, however.

I got in with a rather curt nod. He piled the papers in the back of the sedan. I started north, toward home.

"I've read your news pages," he ventured. "They seem very complete. There are a lot of wars going on, aren't there?"

"Bigger and better every year," I said morosely. I had him pegged now, I thought. He was from some obscure foreign land, perfectly in command of our language, but with a highly alien point of view. An educated Eskimo might talk as Carpenter talked.

"Since they are so busy destroying themselves, it should mean little to them if they were faced with wholesale destruction from an outer source."

"Now is that nice?" I said.

"I beg your pardon," he said politely.

"Didn't you say something—" I stopped in confusion. What the hell! Was I hearing things? Or dreaming them in some subconscious section of what I regard as my mind?

IT GOT to be after nine o'clock. I was hungry and a little cold and looking forward to a late dinner at home. I didn't say much. Neither did the curious man beside me. I thought he was sleeping, and I felt drowsy myself, with home about fifteen miles away and the motor purring smoothly. Then I had the oddest feeling.

It grew on me slowly. From being drowsy, I became more and more tense and vibrant. I had the sensation you get sometimes in summer when an electrical storm is on the verge of breaking around you in full force: when your body is so susceptible to static electricity that every little hair on your skin seems to crackle with a faint discharge.

The feeling lasted for perhaps three minutes, coming to a climax so uncomfortable that I shifted in my seat and felt itchy all over.

After that, abruptly, it stopped. I stared at Carpenter. He had his eyes closed and seemed utterly still and relaxed. Whatever had caused my queer sensory experience had apparently left him untouched. I decided I was just nervous because I'd gone without a meal.

Twenty-five minutes later, at about a quarter of ten, we drew up in front of Carpenter's gate.

"Thank you very much," he said, "for taking me to the city."

"You're welcome." I wanted to get warmed and fed. I drove on to our own gate and went in.

And the first person to meet me as I entered our door was John Wither, Sheriff.

"Jim," he said, "more trouble."

"You mean—like Henkel?" I had to force the words out.

He nodded. "Old Pete, the watchman. Only a little way from here. Over in the backyard of the next place, in fact. He couldn't have been dead more than half an hour when I found him. Mrs. Newman,

four houses down the line, said she saw him pass at a quarter past nine. It must have been about five minutes after that that he . . . got it."

"In Carpenter's backyard!" I said. "That is close!"

"Very. Now, nobody knows much about this neighbor of yours, Carpenter—"

"Wait, John. You're on the wrong tack. Carpenter was with me a half hour ago. In fact he has been with me all afternoon and evening. He went to New York with me."

"Hell!" said John, after a moment. "That clears him, at least, doesn't it? Well, keep your eyes peeled, Jimmy. If you see Herrin, call me fast."

I thought of dead men with their eyes heat-reddened like dull rubies in their skulls, and with brains that looked—what was John's description?—as is some one had turned them to cotton soaked in gasoline and set a match to them.

"I'll keep my eyes peeled, all right," I said fervently.

IV

I DIDN'T taste my belated dinner much. After it, I was abstracted. Not that it mattered any. There wasn't much said. The death of old Pete, right next door, weighed heavily on us.

At about eleven Kay said she thought she'd go home. I put on hat and coat and gloves to walk the three blocks with her.

"What's on your mind, Jim?" she asked. "Pete's—death?"

"Naturally," I said. "That, and the indication it gives that Blanchard's escaped lunatic is so near."

But I was evading when I said that. These things were on my mind, of course. But there was more than that pressing me down. Only I couldn't discover just what it was.

My mind felt heavy, foggy, depressed. Yet under that, like lightning under fog, was a queer, breathless excitement. Thinking of Pete? Yes, certainly. And of Henkel and the guard. But in addition, my subconscious mind was trying to steer conscious thought in another channel, too. Something odd, something fantastic, something colossal, which was almost but not quite added up from many small facts thrown at me one by one.

I was back at our gate before I thought definitely of Carpenter. That curious person . . . I didn't go in. I went on, for a turn around the block, with the suppressed and seemingly reasonless excitement swelling within me.

Curious man. The winter cold had seemed warm to him. How he had dwelt on the simple fact that the pressure of earth's atmosphere is roughly fifteen pounds per square inch! Hefting the flashlight and saying tentatively, "Would this be a pound?" As if he didn't know what a pound was!

Scuffing up frozen turf and remarking that the earth seemed very fertile. Scrutinizing snow as if he had never seen it before. Like a native of some far-off, backward country. . . . Yet he had thought my fast driving into New York very slow. A crawl, he had called it. Inhabitants of backward countries would hardly be used to more speed than that. Nor would they be able to converse so fantastically about the possibilities of radio—

My mind came to such a full stop that my body did too. Standing stone-still on the sidewalk in the January night I stared ahead as if at phantoms. The reasonless excitement deep down in my mind seemed to grow abruptly to suffocating proportions.

Staring at the car radio he had said, "Ours must have been like that, in the beginning, long ago. Crude . . . rudimentary . . ."

But wait a minute! He had not *said* that. He couldn't have. I'd been watching his lips—and they hadn't moved. You can't read a thought that completely, word for word. It's impossible. Yet—it seemed I had.

"Thought, for one thing, might be broadcast," he had said. "Thought—and perhaps intelligence itself."

And later—"Mind, intelligence, soul, thought. They are all about the same. Without substance, as electric power and radio energy are without substance. Hence able to be broadcast."

I was leaning against a tree now, feeling literally weak in the knees. My heart was pounding in my throat as if my body were suddenly too small for it.

"To broadcast an intelligence? Comparatively simple. To receive it? Extremely intricate. An intelligence must have a material conductor . . . a body. A 'receiver,' as you put it. Say an intelligence is broadcast on a narrow beam toward a limited section. The person in that limited section concentrating the hardest on the section from which the broadcast is being made will be apt, whether he care for it or not, *to become the receiver.*"

"Good God," I whispered into the night. I was walking again, moving, where I did not notice or care.

Small facts adding up laboriously and slowly into a total never seen on earth before.

August Herrin, escaped lunatic from Blanchard's, mingling insanity with lucid periods in which he was a quite competent astronomer. Specializing on Mars. Studying Mars only a few hours before he mysteriously escaped. Reporting crazily that he had thought to see a tiny flash from the red planet.

A guard killed by something impossibly like a heat ray. Henkel killed. The watchman killed . . .

Pete had been killed about a half hour before I got home. And what had happened at that time? With the man, Carpenter, sitting utterly still and with eyes closed beside me, I had felt as though bathed in the kind of static electricity that precedes a violent summer storm. Though this was winter—January. At the very moment, as near as could be figured out, in which Pete had met his death. . . .

A GATE had clicked behind me a little while ago. I had scarcely heard it, had not noticed. But I did now. For now I found myself standing at a door with my hand on the knob.

The back door of the house next to ours. How had I got there? I didn't know. But I did know that I didn't want to go in. I wanted to run, yelling for the sheriff and all the men he could gather. I wanted to get machine guns, gas bombs, every weapon the mind of man has figured out.

I didn't want to go in that house. I willed myself not to. I stood there, sweating in the icy night. And my hand, as if belonging to some one else, turned the knob and opened the door. There wasn't even a hesitation about the move.

I walked forward through a dark kitchen. There was no hesitation about that move, either; as if drawn on a string, I went straight through to the hall, down that, and to the front room of the place.

Carpenter was in there, seated at a table. The room was lit by two nearly spent candles. It was as cold as the temperature outside. Neither heat nor light had been turned on by this man we had spoken of as the new owner of the old Smythe place. He was livid with cold, but paid it no attention whatever. It was as though his body were of no concern at all to him—any more than if it had belonged to some one else.

He said nothing for a moment, just sat there staring at me out of a white, expressionless face. I stood in front of him, crazed with the instinct to race away, and unable to move a muscle.

After quite a long time he said, "You have guessed."

I nodded.

"You are singularly dull not to have thought of it long ago."

I was. Why had Henkel died? Because, as real estate agent he handled this property, among others. When it was reported that the house was tenanted, he thought it odd that he had received no word from the owners. He had been about to telephone about it—and had been stricken down to avoid untimely exposure of this . . . this creature . . . before me. Why had Pete died? He had evidently found some-

thing during his rounds indicating that all was not well here.

Now I stood before this figure with the white face, terrible in its calm and impersonality. And I knew far more than either Henkel or Pete. I was far more an obstacle than Blanchard's guard.

And I was utterly helpless.

A queer and unknown generation of heat in a man's skull—enough to sear his very brain and char the bone around it—

I will never know such fear again. Because never again will I know such danger. And then it started. My head felt hot. It was a thing almost indescribable. A needle-point of heat seemed to have become buried in the center of my head, just over the roof of my mouth. It expanded and grew in intensity . . .

AND then it stopped. As I was reeling before the calm, still figure—whose eyes now seemed so enormous as to take up the entire upper half of the dead white face—the awful feeling stopped.

"No, I won't kill you. It isn't necessary. I am going anyhow."

There was no movement of the lips. There was, I realized, no audible sound. But those words came.

"You . . . you will be back, though?" I heard those words, my words, as if some one else had spoken them. "You, and millions more like you?"

"No." The eyes in the white face had grown normal again. And dull and tired. "It would be so easy. Mankind is divided and bickering. Weak and ineffectual. And it is so beautiful—and rich—here. But two things prevent. Atmospheric pressure and the relatively intense heat. Too much effort would be required to insulate us against the crushing pressure and the heat till evolution could adapt our race."

"Unless," I heard my fearful, cracked voice, "all came as you did? Projected intelligences taking over the earthly bodies here?"

The seated figure shook its head, dull, morose, baffled.

"Experiment has proved that an alien intelligence cannot be transmitted through the experience of birth. With earth bodies, we would beget earthlings, dying out in a single generation as far as our own race consciousness and wisdom could know. . . . Such is the report I am forced to make to my superiors. . . ."

Not in one single line did the seated figure change. The face was white and still as it had been before. But the hands stirred restlessly and into the nondescript, gray-brown eyes of the man I had known as Carpenter, came such a different look that it was as if they had been turned abruptly into the eyes of another man.

"Why is it so cold?" he said. Even his voice was different: peevish, vacillating.

August Herrin looked around. "What room is this? I don't recall a room like this on the grounds. Where am I? Where is Doctor Blanchard? Where is my telescope?"

Once A Hero—

By
EUSTACE COCKRELL

Author of "Gloves for the Governor," "Round Trip," etc.

The soldier returned but no flags waved and no bands played. . . . The best the town could do to welcome him was to try to lynch his only friend

"If there's a human being within my sight in sixty seconds," Perry Manion said, "I'm going to kill him!"

ABOUT halfway down the depot platform there was a wooden post, sort of; and it had an arm on it that stuck out where they hung the mail sack and when the Fast Mail came through a hook used to reach out from the mail car and snatch the sack off of the post. I used to like to watch the Fast Mail when it came through and took off the sack. That's why I waited that morning.

I should have been home weeding the garden.

Mr. Fay—he was the station agent—came out of the depot carrying the mail sack to fix on the post. It was so warm that he hadn't put on his coat and he had on his black things that came halfway up his arms. They kept his shirtsleeves clean, I guess.

The train whistled down on the levee and he got the sack fixed and took a big watch out of his pocket and looked at it and then went back and got his hoop with the green piece of paper on it that the engineer would lean down and catch on his arm.

I liked to watch that, too.

I kind of nodded to Mr. Fay, but didn't say anything. He didn't like boys very well and I think maybe he knew I helped do what we did to him last Hallowe'en. He kind of smiled. I guess it was because it was such a pretty morning.

"She's stoppin' this mornin'," he said. "Got a passenger gettin' off."

I felt a little cheated. It seemed grand when the trains just whistled and wheeled right across our Main Street without even slowing down, but when they stopped they were just trains like the eight-twenty my father rides to the City on sometimes.

I went over and climbed up on a baggage truck and sat down. "I wonder who it is?" I said.

"Somebody in a mighty hurry to get here," Mr. Fay said, and he sounded almost genial. "You have to buy a ticket clear to the city for them to stop number eleven for you."

The train came up around the bend back of the mill but it was already slowing down and when Mr. Fay held up the hoop and the engineer took it and the hook pulled off the mail sack it seemed sort of silly when the train went on and stopped in a little ways.

But almost at once it gave a couple of big chugs and started moving out. There was a man in a uniform walking up the platform from the last Pullman toward us.

He had his head down and he was walking a little faster every step he took, but the train was gathering speed and I figured that by the time he got to where the tracks cut across Main Street, the train would be out of his way if he wanted to turn left, up toward where most of Sassoon lay.

He walked on past me and he looked sort of familiar but I didn't know who he was though I noticed Mr. Fay looking at him with a funny look on his face like he was trying to make up his mind to something. Then the man was past us and the train was out of his way and he turned to the left up Main Street and started running.

I didn't think it was funny for some reason. It seemed sort of natural. There'd been a lot of excitement from time to time in the Spring with soldiers coming back and one or two had been real heroes like Homer Green and they'd done funny things, too.

THE man was across the tracks and had turned up Water Street to the right and there was something about the way he was running, even in the boots that made him an officer, made me feel like I ought to know who he was. He got even with the back of Mr. Green's lumberyard and he was going faster all the time when Mr. Fay grabbed me by the arm.

"Catch him!" he hollered and I could tell the way he said it he was having trouble with his false teeth. "Catch him, Eddie!"

"Catch him?" I stammered. "What for?" Mr. Fay had given me a start.

"Where's your bicycle?" he yelled. "You got to catch him. Don't let him get home. You got to catch him."

He pulled me down off of the truck and was shoving me. "My bike's home," I said. "What do you want to catch him for?"

"Don't let him get home, Eddie," Mr. Fay said again and he sounded like he was asking me a big favor. "Run your best. I'll call up Eve Norton and maybe she can head him off." He gave me one more great big shove. "It's Perry Manion!" he said.

I started running. I cut through Mr. Green's lumber yard and out onto Pine Street and I saw him come out of Water Street heading out South Street and I took a deep breath and put on more speed. I had gained on him cutting through the lumber yard but even in my sneakers he was running almost as fast as I was.

I had seen him run that way on the football field and in track meets for Sassoon High when I had been a little boy and I remembered that he'd gone away to college and been on the first team down at State before he quit school to join the army and had been sent, somehow or other, to Siberia. His folks, for months before they'd died hadn't heard from him. Everyone thought that he was dead.

I whipped down South Street under the big old trees that almost met over the pavement and my breath was coming hard, now, but I tried to put on more speed.

I remembered when Doc Manion had died, only four days before Mrs. Manion and they said they'd worked themselves to death during the flu epidemic. Doc Manion had been our doctor and he'd always been sure that Perry would come home when anybody asked him about him.

And now he was home.

Three blocks out South Street I was close enough to him to yell but I didn't have the breath and I saw Eve Norton ahead of me come running out of her cottage with her apron still on and look

up the street and see him, and I heard her call.

Perry Manion slowed down and he half turned as he gave a big whoop. "Hey, Eve," he yelled. "Come on over." Then he was running again and Eve was running after him, too, now calling. "No, no, no." And she sounded like she would be crying if she'd had the breath to cry.

I caught up with her. She had on high heels and I caught her just as he turned down Manion Road, around the clump of lilac bushes and stopped.

He was standing there, kind of swaying and his breath was whistling out of him and he looked like he was getting smaller and smaller and smaller. I caught up with him and I was puffing like a steam engine. And I didn't know what to say. He looked at me but he didn't see me, it looked like.

"I'm Eddie Miller," I said sort of foolishly. "I tried to catch you."

He didn't say anything, just stood there looking up the curling gravel drive to where the five big chimneys stood.

Eve Norton brushed past me then and grabbed him by the arm. "I tried to stop you, Perry," she said. "It burned last winter after your father and mother died."

"I thought they must be dead," he said, "when I came around the lilac bush." Just like that. Kind of calm and flat.

EVE NORTON took hold of his right arm, up by the muscle, in her two hands and put her head against him and started crying. "Dicty Lou," she sobbed, "kept the yard cleaned up. He knew, too, you'd come home." Perry Manion didn't hear her, I guess. He looked at me over her head and his face looked just like a face. "Thanks, Bud," he said. Then he shook Eve Norton off his arm and turned around and started walking back toward town.

Eve Norton caught up with him and took hold of his arm again. "They worked so hard," she said half choking, "during the flu. And it was only four days apart; I mean." She stopped. "And they always knew you'd come back."

Perry Manion kept on walking. Right down the center of the sidewalk. I was sort of trotting along beside him on the parking. "Of course," he said. "Of course." He took four or five more steps and Eve Norton started to say something more. "Never mind," he said. "Never mind, Eve."

Something was wrong and it was getting stronger. All that easy talk. I couldn't stand it. "It was cold," I said. "The night of the fire. It was burning all over before the fire department could get out. It was" —I started to say *great* and caught myself—"it was awful."

"Very interesting," Perry Manion said.

"Dicty Lou burned all the hair off of his head," I said, "the night of the fire." I didn't want to say that. I didn't want to say anything.

I wanted to get away from Perry Manion and not be trotting down the parkway beside him but something kept making me try to talk to him and try to make him be different. I felt that if he would throw up his hands or ask a question or cry or cuss or anything it would be all right. Not all right but better. But this was something that I couldn't understand and it scared me.

"Yes," he said. "Dicty would do that."

"Perry," Eve Norton cried. "Perry, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going down to Washoe's," Perry Manion said, "and have a drink."

"Washoe's is closed," I prattled not wanting to, but talking anyway sort of nervously and silly. "Washoe's is closed up. We got Prohibition now, and my father says it's a fine thing."

"Does he?" Perry Manion said.

"Yes, he does," I said.

We were back as far as Eve Norton's house, now, and Eve's little brother Breck was in the back yard throwing a tennis ball against the barn. *Goodbye Maw, Goodbye Paw, Goodbye Mule With Your Old Hee Haw,* he was singing.

"Breck," Eve Norton screamed, then she caught herself. Perry Manion started running again. "Goodbye, Eve," he said.

And he was running down South Street toward town.

HE WENT on down to Washoe's that day and Washoe's was closed up just like I had told him it was, so he went across the street and up over Williams' Drug Store to Doc Holt's office and Doc Holt wrote him out a prescription for a pint of whisky and he got it and sat down in the drug store and drank it up. It made his cheeks sort of red but it didn't change his eyes and nobody said anything much to him because by that time it was all over town about him being back and how he'd run all the way home from the depot, with Eve Norton and me running after him. Everybody felt mighty sorry for him.

They felt sorry for him for two or three years.

Trouble was, my father said, that he drank all the time and that he wouldn't do anything but lie around over in his hotel room and drink up the money Doc Manion had left him and he never had a civil word for anyone and it just couldn't go on.

People, my father said, couldn't go on acting like that in a civilized community and he would say that *Homer Green* was in the Argonne and that *Homer* was back helping his father run the lumber yard and that *he'd* returned to normal life. That's what my dad said. I heard him tell Eve Norton that one time.

"I suppose you're right," Eve Norton told my dad. "But it isn't just the same. It's, it's—well," she said, "it isn't the same." And she walked away from my dad.

Eve Norton wasn't looking pretty like she used to, those days, and Perry Manion, he looked like a spook, pretty near. He never did get real husky again after he came home.

Sometimes, they said, he used to go down below the levee, where Dicty Louis lived and talk to him. Dicty Louis was pretty old by then and his crippled foot was getting worse all the time.

Dicty Louis had been Doc Manion's darkie and though since Perry Manion ran that time from the depot out to where his house had been and he never had gone out there again, Dicty Louis used to go out every once in a while and cut the grass and clean up the yard just like the house was still there.

I remember he kept the rose bushes out back to where the yard was awful pretty. Other colored folks didn't like Dicty Louis very well. He kept to himself so much.

I guess he was coming back from Dicty's the night it snowed. It didn't snow every winter in Sassoon, but this winter it came a hard snow in February and it was fine and cold and everyone was having a fine time. They had found some sleds around town and everybody, all us boys, were out sliding down Old Town Hill. It was at night and it was still snowing.

I had just come down a belly-buster by myself on Hod Davis's Flexible Flyer and I was starting walking back up the hill when I saw this figure kind of staggering up the little lane at the bottom of the hill that led up from Leveetown. He called to me and I knew it was Perry Manion. He was staggering pretty bad.

"Bud," he said. "How about a lift?"

I didn't know what to say but I stopped. He got on up to me and put his hand on my shoulder. He was having sort of a hard time standing up and he smelled awful. "If you'll pull me on that sled," he said sort of thick, "to the hotel, I'll give you something nice."

Before I had a chance to answer he walked on back and sat down on the sled. I didn't know what to do but I was a little scared of him so I turned around and started pulling him to his hotel.

I had to help him off the sled when we finally got there and he kept his arm around me and told me to take him to his room. I didn't want to but I did.

He fell over on the bed and lay there for what seemed like a long time with his eyes shut. His room was an awful mess. I started edging toward the door

when he spoke to me. He didn't sit up and he didn't open his eyes. "See that trunk over there?" he said and he waved his hand at a little army locker in the corner.

"Yes," I said, wanting to leave but kind of scared to.

"Well," Perry Manion said. "Dig down to the bottom and get out a medal. You'll see three or four down there."

I went over to the trunk and opened it. "I don't see any," I said, wanting to leave worse than ever.

"In the bottom, in a corner," he said.

I rummaged around some more and found them and took them out. They didn't look like much.

"Pick out a nice one," he said still not opening his eyes, "and pin it to your manly little breast. You are a very brave lad. You've done a small service for the town's most undeserving."

"I've got to go," I said desperately, "I'll put the medals back."

"I shot some boys about your age," he said, "to get those medals. They probably had sleds, too, once. I do wish you would take one."

"I've got to go," I said, and I bolted out the door.

THE first thing I knew about it was my father talking on the telephone the next morning. It made me forget all about the night before. Dicty Louis had killed old Mr. Williams and stole his money.

Mr. Williams was the one that had the drug store and he lived out on Manion Road the first house past where Doc Manion's house had burned. They found Dicty Louis's crippled tracks in the snow. Real faint but they could tell. The sheriff had him locked up in the jail. That's what some one told my father over the telephone.

My father left right after that. And as soon as my father left I sneaked off, too.

It was the prettiest morning I ever saw. The sun was out and it had quit snowing and the snow was so bright it looked sort of blue and hurt your eyes so you could hardly see. It was cold and real still.

I got down town and I didn't know just what I'd come down for. There were some men standing in front of Mr. Williams' drug store, talking, but they weren't saying anything when I got up and looked in. The store looked funny and all empty inside, though everything was there except Mr. Williams.

I went across to the grocery store to get warm.

I went in and up to the stove and I heard somebody I didn't know say: "He carried his money home with him sometimes. There ain't but one thing to do."

And whoever it was went out of the grocery store and walked across the street to where the men were in front of Mr. Williams' store, and I saw that there were a lot more men than there had been before. I went back across, too, and kind of hung around the edges.

Hod Davis was there and I asked him: "What're they doing? Mr. Williams," I went on, "he's not in there, is he?"

"He's up to the funeral parlor," Hod David said.

The men up closest to the door, that had been in a tight little knot, scattered out and started walking away.

"What are they going to do?" I asked Hod Davis.

He looked down at me and his face was the queerest thing I ever saw in my life, because he had a sort of smile on his face and I never saw anyone look like that before in my life.

"They're gonna lynch him," he said and he turned and hurried off.

IT WAS in the air, all right. Something funny was. The streets after the men left Mr. Williams' store were pretty near deserted and when you did meet somebody they didn't look right at you when they spoke and they were all hurrying, the few that were out on the streets, like they were going some place in a hurry and were late. Nobody had shoveled the snow off of their walk.

Eve Norton looked different, though, and when she grabbed me by the arm her face looked different from any other face I'd seen since I came down town. The others all looked like they were just about to take an airplane ride. Kind of excited but kind of pleased, too. Eve, she looked plain scared, but she looked kind of mad at the same time.

"Eddie," she said and she gripped my arm. "What are they going to do?"

Somehow I couldn't tell her what Hod Davis had told me. It was like—well, I don't know what. "I don't know," I said.

She shook me by the arm. "Eddie Miller," she said and she looked madder and not so scared. "What are those men going to do?"

I didn't look at her and I remember my voice changed right then, half of it came out natural and the last half came out high. "Hod Davis said they were going to lynch him."

She still had hold of my arm. "Come with me," she said. "You're young and not like the others," and she started pulling me down the street away from the jail where I'd been going. "We've got to get Perry," she said.

"Perry Manion? . . . Perry Manion isn't—"

But I stopped what I was saying and came along with her. When we got to the hotel she told me to wait down in the lobby and she went upstairs. The room clerk wasn't there, and I sat there by myself on the edge of the old leather couch by the fireplace.

Pretty soon Eve Norton came back down. She came back down by herself. She sounded awful tired and like she was near crying. "He won't let me in," she said. "I've come over and tried to talk to him so often he thinks I'm just lying to him. He said he went to see Dicty last night."

"You mean he thinks Dicty never did it?" I asked.

"That doesn't make any difference," she said, and I didn't understand what she meant. "It doesn't make any difference whether he did it or not." She stopped for a long time and I thought she wasn't going to say anything more. Then real soft she said: "I wasn't thinking about Dicty."

"I helped him home last night," I said, "on Hod Davis's sled." I stopped a second. "He wanted to give me a medal but I never took it."

Eve Norton straightened up. "You go up," she said. "Yes, that's it. You go up and tell him you've come for your medal." She was talking real fast, now. "You tell him you've come for your medal and when he lets you in tell him about Dicty. But don't tell him you've seen me."

"But," I said, "I don't want a medal and besides—" I stopped when she looked at me like she did. "Is he—is he drunk?"

"No," she said. "He's not."

"I'll try," I said.

She stopped me. "He loves Dicty Louis," she said. "And he won't let anything happen to Dicty Louis. And," she stopped. "Maybe you don't understand," she said, "but if he saves Dicty Louis from those men, it's going to do something to him, I think. Something to him. And it may save Dicty Louis's life."

I didn't understand and I didn't see it made much difference about Dicty Louis, but the way she looked at me I went on up.

I WENT on up but I didn't want to and when I got into the dark old hall I walked on past his door, walking quiet. But finally I got to the end of the hall and turned around and when I got back to his door I stopped and knocked once, ready to leave.

He called to me. He sounded all right. "It's Eddie Miller," I said. "I came for my medal. I forgot it last night." And I said *night* real high. It made me kind of mad and I didn't feel so scared.

I heard the springs squeak and then the door opened and he was standing there kind of swaying and he looked awful because his whiskers had grown out some during the night and it made him look gray and dirty.

"Come in," he said. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to review the events that led up to the medal." And he went over and sat down on the bed. He hadn't taken his clothes off, just his shoes and coat.

"I rode you home on the sled last night," I said.

He looked down at the floor like he was thinking. "Oh, yes," he said. "You brought me home."

"Yes," I said and I moved a little nearer the door. "Did you hear about Mr. Williams?" I asked.

He sat up straight and his eyes got funny and narrow. "Mr. Williams?" he said, real low.

"Yes," I said. "Dicty Louis killed him. Last night, with a club, and took his money."

Perry Manion didn't say anything and it looked like he was trying to hold his breath.

"Hod Davis said they were going to lynch Dicty," I said.

"So it *was* true," he said and I could hardly hear him. Then he bent over and got his right shoe on though his hands were shaking and he didn't try to tie it. Then he got his other shoe on. He gave a little laugh—it was a mean sound—and he walked over to the trunk and bent down to where I had left it open last night and he fooled around in the trunk a minute and when he straightened up he had two great big guns. He stuck them in his belt.

He stood there a second. Then he kneeled down again and he took out his medals. He pinned them on his chest. "They may serve as additional reminders," he said, "of the efficacy of *these,*" and he patted the guns. He was sort of moving toward me all the time, though I didn't notice it, until he had me. His hand was like iron.

"I'm sorry," he said and he sounded like he had his teeth shut, "but if the sun is on the snow I'm afraid I won't be able to see. You'll have to walk with me."

I tried, at first, scared, to jerk away, but he slapped my arm up behind my back and I like to've hollered. "I'll let you go," he said, "when I see the crowd."

We came down the stairs and into the deserted lobby and out onto the snow and it hurt my eyes so's I could hardly see and I saw Perry Manion take his loose arm and throw it over his eyes.

He walked close to me, like we were walking down the street together and my arm was numb and my heart felt like it was going to jump out of my chest, walking down the street with the worst man in town.

But nobody was on the streets and the stores were empty.

There was a big crowd around the jail. The sheriff was standing on the steps yelling at them and it looked like every man in Sassoon was standing down there in the jail yard. "All right," we heard the sheriff yell, "don't burn the jail, boys. There's other prisoners in there."

I realized that my arm was free and hanging by my side. Perry Manion was gone, and you could feel like a weight something awful and bad that you couldn't look away from and that you couldn't let go.

THEN Perry Manion was standing by the sheriff and he had those great big guns in his hands and his hands weren't shaking at all.

"Dicty Louis didn't kill anybody," Perry Manion said.

And it was quiet as late at night.

Somebody way out at the edge of the crowd yelled then: "Get that drunken bum outa the way." And a lot of people started yelling and three or four started for the steps. But when they got right to the bottom step they stopped.

The guns were awful big and steady. Perry Manion swung his right gun up to his chest, to the medals. "I got these," he said, "for killing poor dumb fools like you." He stopped and it was terribly quiet again and nobody moved.

"You want to live," he said. "And I don't." He said it soft but you could hear him clear out to the edge of the crowd

where I was. "The twelve of you that want Dicty Louis worst, come on and get him. I'll be out of ammunition, then."

Nobody moved. Everybody just stood there like they was froze and nobody said anything, but Perry Manion's medals were pretty in the sun.

They stood there a long time. "If there's a human being in my sight and range in sixty seconds," Perry Manion said, "I'm going to kill him," and he shot his left cuff back and looked at his watch.

Nobody moved. Nobody moved for what was an awful long time and then all at once right up at the front somebody—it sounded like Homer Green—yelled: "He's crazy!" And he shuffled back.

Perry Manion cocked both his guns and looked at his watch. You could hear them click back where I was when he cocked them and then you couldn't hear anything because the snow was flying and people were falling down and yelling. In a minute there was just one person standing there, right about twenty feet in front of the jail and Perry Manion pulled up his right gun, slow and careful, and fired.

The figure spun around and then Eve Norton called to him. "It's Eve, Perry. Good for you, Perry." She walked up to the jail, and the first red drop that fell off her glove hit the snow on the first step.

Perry Manion grabbed her and held her. "I can't see," he said. "The snow. Eddie Miller had to lead me over."

I ran down behind the stone wall of the jail yard and got real close. Somehow everything was different now and I wasn't scared.

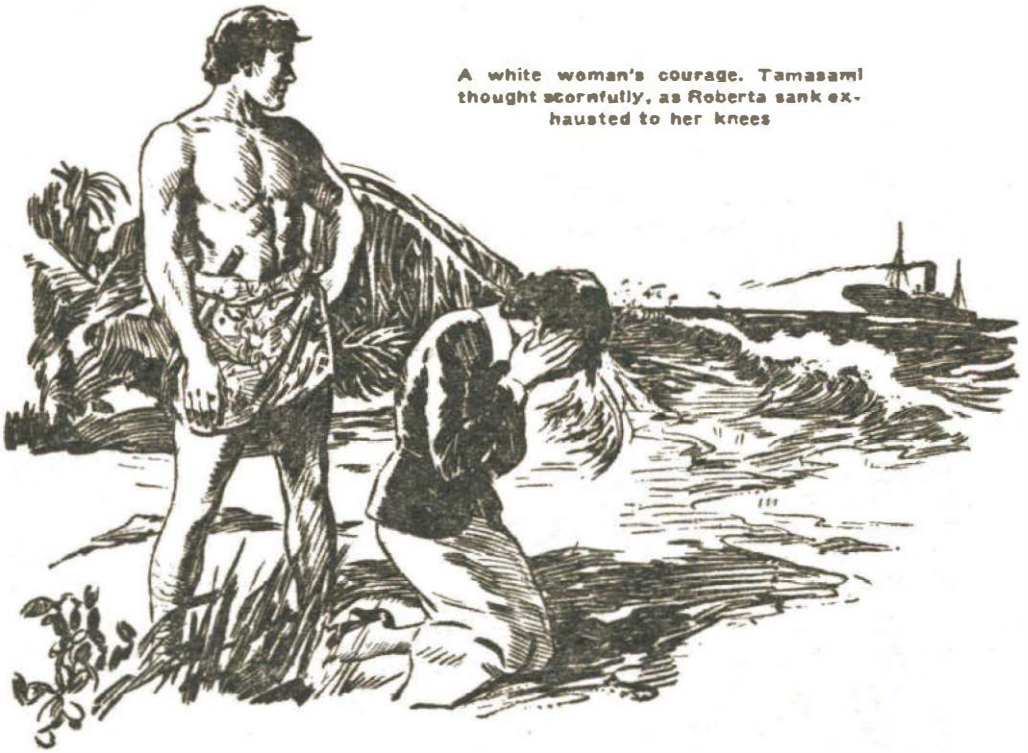
Perry Manioo turned around and called out. "Call a doctor, Sheriff, and get your car. We're taking Dicty Louis away."

I GOT my head pretty near, clear up from behind the wall and I saw some other heads come out and Eve and Perry went into the jail and pretty soon the sheriff's car came out and I could see Dicty Louis and Perry in the back seat and that the sheriff was driving. Doc Holt's car got there, then.

They took Dicty clear to the City, but it turned out Dicty never did it. They caught the one that did it with the money and the sack. He'd turned his foot to make it look like Dicty in the snow, and when they let Dicty loose he went out to shovel off the snow from the walk in front of where Doc Manion's house burned down.

But me and Perry Manion was already there and about finished with the snow and Eve Norton was up around the house with her arm in a sling telling Perry how she was going to build when Dicty got there. He stood there on his crippled foot looking at us a minute, then he looked at the rose bushes and said to Perry Manion:

"Them flowers wan't hurt a bit by the cold. It'll be mighty pretty here in the spring, Mister"—and he almost said "Perry" before he stopped—"Captain, suh," he said, and I remembered that Dicty Louis used to call old Doc Manion, "Captain, sir," when I was a little boy.



A white woman's courage. Tamasami thought scornfully, as Roberta sank exhausted to her knees

Lost Harbors

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

TAMASAMI the white boy grows to manhood on the island of Niu, happy there with the natives who have adopted him, and disturbed only by a fear and a bitter hatred of his own race. For Tamasami cannot forget how, twelve years before, he saw murder done on shipboard; how one white man slew another and foundered a ship—for a sack of pearls. And occasionally, driven by some strange urge, Tamasami paddles out into the island harbor to a place where a single mast reaches up from the ocean floor. This is the only visible relict of the pearler *Fairhaven*, sunk a dozen years before—the ship on which Tamasami served as cabin boy.

In San Francisco the Reed Darrow Steamship Lines have become famous almost overnight. Only a few seamen, paid for their silence, know that Reed Darrow murdered his captain in the South Seas; and even they are not aware that the Darrow sea empire is founded on a stolen sack of pearls. So Reed Darrow is sure of his safety; all he desires now is to marry Celeste Cameron, the beautiful daughter of a great San Francisco family. He realizes that Celeste's sister, Roberta, hates and distrusts him; but she cannot prevent the wedding, he is convinced.

THEN Reed Darrow learns of a mast tip in a South Seas harbor and dispatches his henchman Ritchie to erase that last clue. Ritchie he can trust, for the little Cockney was once his partner in mutiny and murder. But Ritchie returns from his trip a truculent blackmailer; he has seen and identified Tamasami, and he is enraged by the knowledge that Darrow doublecrossed him with the pearls. Angrily he demands money—and Darrow throws him out.

At length Darrow sails on his private yacht for Niu, determined to make sure personally that the former cabin boy will remain permanently silent. And the yacht carries a stowaway—Roberta, sister of Celeste Cameron. For Ritchie, itching for revenge, has

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told her the story of Darrow's past; and she has hidden herself in an unused cabin of the yacht, that she may learn the truth about her sister's lover.

THE yacht drops anchor at last in the harbor of Niu. That night, when Darrow and the crew have gone ashore, a visitor arrives silently—Tamasami, resolved to sink Darrow's ship as Darrow sank his twelve years before. But Roberta, realizing who he is, manages to dissuade him; she is warning him that Darrow seeks his life when the voice of Reed Darrow himself breaks in mockingly. . . .

CHAPTER XI

CLOUDBURSTER WAYS

WAVES lapped gently at the ship's sides. Other than this no sound came, although to Roberta the night was shrieking. The tension of it petrified her as she stood hopelessly before Darrow.

"I wouldn't do anything rash," Darrow advised. He advanced a step, his eyes fixed upon an axe in the hands of Tamasami.

"Sabotage, eh? Out to scuttle me, are you?"

"It's a trick he learned from you, Mr. Darrow," Roberta said.

"You sink my ship, I sink your ship," said Tamasami.

Darrow's smile hardened. "Hardly with an axe. We build keels of steel these days, you know. Anyway I wouldn't try it—not while there's a shell in this shotgun."

Roberta took Tama's arm and stood close by him. "Don't worry. He wouldn't dare shoot, Tamasami. I've ridden this yacht before and I know the crew. They won't let him get away with a thing."

"Quite," Darrow agreed with complete assurance. "In the meantime, boy, you better drop that axe."

"It isn't *his* axe," the girl retorted. "It's yours. The one you sunk a ship with one time."

"Drop it!" Darrow's command was harsh. He shifted the pigeon gun from the hollow of his arm to his hands.

Instead of dropping it, Tamasami clubbed the axe and advanced toward Darrow. Darrow whipped the pigeon gun to his shoulder and the hammer clicked back. "Don't, Tama!" cried Roberta frantically. "Please—he'll kill you."

Desperately she pulled at Tama's arm until, with fierce reluctance, he stood back. The girl took the axe from him and laid it on the hatch.

"That's better," Darrow said. He lowered his gun. The derisive smile returned to his face as he spoke to Roberta. "I've known you were aboard since sundown."

The fact more than dismayed her. "You knew?"

He nodded. "When I came back with a bag of doves, I saw you peeking from the porthole of the guest-cabin bath. Why else do you suppose I sent everyone ashore?"

Of course! What a fool she'd been thought Roberta. There'd be a deck-watch left aboard, usually, even in a peaceful lagoon like this. And now there was only Darrow.

The girl looked helplessly out across half a mile or more of dark water. The distant singing, and candlenuts glimmering among the palms, told her that the *Kava* party had not yet broken up.

"Even your friend the good Captain Walts is ashore." Darrow smiled. "Honest seamen, his crew is, just as you say. A man in my position can't afford to travel with any other kind."

"Men in your position have been hanged," Roberta challenged. "I warned Celeste. I told her—"

"A good deal too much," he cut in. "So I'm afraid your conversations with my future wife must be interrupted. Sorry. But you leave me no choice."

"He will shoot me first," Tamasami said calmly. "When he does, lady, you jump into the sea."

"There'll be no shooting," Darrow corrected, "unless you force it."

"He only wants an excuse, Tama," Roberta warned. "He doesn't dare let us go."

"Exactly," Darrow said. "It wouldn't

be discreet for me to let you go. Or to let you stay here, either." He gestured with the gun barrel. "Get into this boy's canoe, both of you."

Roberta turned in despair toward Tamasami. But Tama, she saw, had become instantly acquiescent. He was assenting to the last demand with a quick nod. Some plan was in his eyes. Evidently he was more than willing for the conflict to be transferred from the deck of a yacht, which was Darrow's element, to a *paopao* which was his own.

"I suppose we'd better, Tama," Roberta sighed. "He'll kill us if we don't." Maybe Tama planned on tipping the canoe over, she thought, and plunging all three of them into the lagoon.

AT THE point of his pigeon gun Darrow drove them to the landing ladder and down into Tama's *paopao*. He followed himself, keeping his aim constantly on Tama's head.

Tama took up the paddle. He sat in mid-canoe, facing Darrow in the stern while Roberta huddled in the bow. "Paddle that way," Darrow directed. He pointed with his gun toward a dim light down the bay.

"That's a ship," Roberta protested.

"A ship bound for Brisbane," Darrow admitted. "Her crew won't hurt you. You'll be set free at Brisbane. Can't you see all I'm playing for is time?"

Was he? Roberta doubted it. What good would a month of time do Darrow! Of only one thing she was certain—disobedience meant two quick shots from that gun. The ruthlessness of this man appalled her more than ever now. His life and fortune were at stake.

"Do as he says, Tama." However disreputable the crew of that ship over there, their incentive for murder could hardly match Darrow's.

"A little more to starboard, boy," Darrow ordered.

Tama was paddling toward the distant deck light. "Jump, please," he again advised Roberta, "and swim to the beach."

She heard the shotgun's hammer click back and caught the warning in Darrow's eyes. "If I jump, he'll shoot you, Tama," she said. Then, desperately: "Tip us over, Tama."

Nothing would have suited Tama better. A sudden upset would splash them all in the sea, with Darrow impotent to use the gun. But this, unfortunately, was an outrigger. The very function of the outrigger float, a log riding well out on one side, was to make a tipover impossible.

In Tama's mind was another ruse. He concentrated on it, watching his chance. They were more than half way to the ship now, and nearly a mile from shore. Tama kept paddling steadily, but increasing the length of his strokes. And with each stroke he brought the paddle further from the water.

Then he struck. The paddle's blade swung with a swish toward Darrow's head. Darrow fired just as the paddle smashed against his gun barrel. A single number six shot burned through Roberta's right arm as she huddled just beyond Tama in the bow. She screamed. A dizziness swept over her. Hazily she saw Darrow bang the gun barred down on Tama's head.

The paddle had deflected Darrows' aim, making him miss. Only a stray shot found flesh—Roberta's arm. After that the advantage was all Darrow's. Tamasami could not swing the long, awkward paddle back for another blow. He was seated, Darrow was standing. Quickly Darrow knocked him senseless with the gun.

Roberta was now on hands and knees, fighting nausea. She collapsed across Tamasami. And the *paopao*, with its impetus, glided on.

The goal loomed near in the dark—a rusty little tramp with a single funnel. A voice came from her rail, hailing Darrow.

"Ahoy, Cuttle," Darrow shouted back. "I'm coming aboard."

Roberta felt a jar. It was the impact of the *paopao's* prow with the ship's side. She looked up and saw three men at the rail. They were tossing a rope to Darrow.

"Let down the steps, Dicksong," Darrow shouted. "You got passengers."

The three men seemed genuinely surprised. Clearly they were not expecting any such move as this by Darrow.

"What's going on?" one of them bawled hoarsely.

"Never mind that," Darrow retorted. "Lend me a hand and stop gawking."

Other faces appeared at the rail. "Stop him!" Roberta cried faintly. There was no answer. She tried to get up but Darrow's hand pushed her flat. "Lend a hand, you lubbers!" Darrow yelled again.

Other hands were laid on Roberta. She fought them off with a bleeding arm. Tears of impotent rage blinded her. "Don't touch me," she cried. "I'll go."

SHE went shakily up the steps. Tamasami was dragged up after her and she saw that his eyes were open now. The island boy staggered to his feet on the deck, only to find Darrow's shotgun at his chest.

Seven rough men crowded about. Roberta appealed to them frantically: "Don't let him!"

"We don't even know what it's all about, miss," Cuttle said. And he seemed to her more astonished than hostile. Of Darrow the man asked, "Who the hell is she, anyway?"

"She invited herself in," Darrow said bitterly. "And here she is."

He turned to Roberta. "Go into that cabin and call the boy in after you."

It was no use resisting. She took Tama's arm and guided him into the cabin.

When he had locked them in there, Darrow relaxed. "What about a drink?" he said to Cuttle.

Cuttle took him into the saloon and opened a bottle. Darrow looked about him with a sallow grin. "Just like old times!" he murmured. "Wonder if the kid noticed it's the same old tramp."

"Never mind that," Cuttle said nervously. "See here, Darrow. We didn't bargain for anything like this. You wired us at Tahiti to meet you here, and we did. But when I saw you in the bush this afternoon you didn't say anything about a girl."

"Didn't know about her myself, then," Darrow acknowledged. "So I simply told you to let it be known ashore that you're short-handed."

"Sure," said Cuttle. "And when every able-bodied native on the island offered to sign on—all these Samoan kids want to be sailors—I was to pick one named Tamasami. And put to sea with him for keeps."

Darrow drained his glass, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "That scheme's off, now. The girl knows everything the boy does—and she packs a hundred times more dynamite for the lot of us!"

Cuttle gave an unhealthy grin. "I don't reckon the boy knows where he is. This bag o' barnacles don't look much like she uster."

Darrow agreed. The tramp, re-named, re-painted and re-registered, would hardly be recognized after eleven years..

"Not that it makes any difference now."

"What got you into this blow o' wind, anyway?"

"Ritchie. He ratted. But leave Ritchie to me."

Dicksong, pallor showing through the stubble of his scarred face, joined them. "See here, Darrow," he whined. "Five thousand ain't enough—with a girl in it."

"Not half enough," said Cuttle.

"Right," Darrow said quickly. "So I'll double it." He produced his wallet and from it took ten bills, each of one-thousand-dollar denomination. He passed them to Cuttle.

"Got the same old crew?" he asked.

Cuttle nodded. "And nobody else except three black Canaques that made a getaway from New Caledonia. The French prison there thinks the sharks got 'em."

"All right, Cuttle. You got your cargo. Take it away." Darrow tossed down one more drink and then went briskly out on deck.

Cuttle followed, catching up with him as he was descending into the *paopao*. "But

hold on, Darrow. Sure we got our cargo. But what do we do with it?"

Darrow's eyes flickered. "Don't bother me with details, Cuttle. If you lubbers want your necks stretched, put 'em ashore at Brisbane. Or Washington, D.C., for all I care. I imagine you won't, though, when you think it over."

"That's you all over," Cuttle complained hoarsely. "Always passing the buck."

Darrow was in the *paopao* now. He picked up Tama's paddle and made ready to shove off.

"Listen, Cuttle," he called up. "I want to be fair. Tell you what I'll do. There'll be another ten thousand one year from now—if those witnesses haven't been heard from."

Cuttle moistened his lips. "Another ten thousand one year from now, you say?"

"If they haven't been heard from."

Cuttle's voice came huskily. "They won't be heard from," he promised.

"That's the ticket." Darrow shoved off and sent the *paopao* swiftly back toward the yacht.

THE yacht's crew had not returned when he arrived there. Darrow let the *paopao* drift away and ascended to his own deck. Some time during the night, he knew, the tide would beach the canoe.

An axe and a flashlight lay on the afterdeck hatch. Darrow threw them into the sea. Then he rearranged the hatch cover. From there he went to the guest cabin to clean up all evidence of a stowaway. In a very few minutes he packed Roberta's bag, weighted it with bolts and dropped it over the side.

His nerves were jittery by then. so he went to his cabin and mixed a rum punch. "To Celeste!" he offered with a smile as he held it to the light.

Which reminded him that he'd better get in touch with Celeste. Not from here of course, although he would make it no secret that he had called at Niu. He could write her a note and post it at Suva.

With amazing composure he did so, ending:

Give my best to Roberta. I'm bringing home presents for both of you.
Yours with devotion, Reed.

Oars were splashing alongside when he finished. Running steps up the ladder and then Walts' voice boomed from the deck. Came the grinding of pulleys as a shore boat was hoisted to the davits.

Darrow emerged, smiling. "Nice party?"

"The usual thing," Walts said.

"Not much kick to that *kava*," remarked the wireless man.

"Only thing I got a lift out of," the mate asserted, "was that *taupo* dance. Worth keeping for a pet, that girl."

"Too bad she hasn't got a telephone number," the bos'n complained. "I found out her name, though. It's Violet."

"She was kidding you," the mate jibed. "They don't have names like that down here."

Darrow was fretting to up anchor. Yet he resisted the urge to do so. He must seem in no hurry before Walts.

Walts was his witness. So was every other fool on the *Flying Fox*. Darrow smiled confidently as he turned back into his cabin. Every man jack of them would have to say, if questioned, that nothing unusual had transpired at Niu.

He went to bed and slept soundly. Looking out in the morning, he saw with relief that the tramp freighter had gone. A faint haze drifting back over the reef was the only sign of her now.

On the shore Darrow saw no sign of life except one native girl who stood on the beach. She was staring wistfully out toward the yacht.

The mate's voice came over, shouting orders to heave anchor. The chains rattled and the yacht swayed gracefully from her loosened leash.

Her prow swung toward the reef. "Full speed to Suva now," Darrow called to Walts.

The girl on the beach, he noticed, had spotted a drifting *paopao*. He saw her run into the water and wade to it. She was climbing in it. She was paddling now. Swiftly out toward the yacht.

The yacht was gliding out slowly, maneuvering cautiously to hit the reef's channel. The girl in the *paopao* came on rapidly and without caution. Darrow watched her idly. She knew nothing, he thought, and so could do him no harm.

She was gaining. Soon she was within a length of the yacht. She stood in the canoe, crying shrilly, "Tama, Tama, come back?"

The mate grinned at the bos'n. "So you told her your name's Tom! You married men never take any chances, do you?"

"Tama, Tama, come back to me!" cried Vaila. Darrow caught a note of despair in her voice.

Half the crew were jibing at the bos'n. "Told her his name's Tom. Must have had a pretty good line, at that!"

"I didn't," the bos'n insisted stoutly. "All I said was, 'What's your name, cutie?, and she said, 'Violet'. She did, so help me."

The yacht gained speed and went slicing through the reef channel. The sight of Vaila, calling in despair from her *paopao,* faded out beyond the spray there. The incident reminded Darrow that he needed a stiff drink. For he had recognized that *paopao;* and he knew the girl was calling not for Tom but for Tamasami.

When he looked out again, they were in open sea and at full ahead for Suva.

HIGH peaks of the Fijis were raised after fifty hours. The *Flying Fox* moved in with Diesels purring to drop anchor in Suva's broad bay. Here were many ships from all the seven seas. A Matson liner was just pulling out for Auckland. Lighters were piled high with copra and sugar. Darrow's clean-lined yacht slipped in to a berth within the very shadow of a British cruiser.

"I'll go ashore, Walts, and get finished as quickly as I can."

Ashore, Darrow's first act was to mail the letter to Celeste. Also he sent her a cablegram of love.

Next he telephoned the governor's aide-de-camp for an appointment. This meant a wait; for even a shipping tycoon like Reed Darrow could not walk in at will upon Sir Hugh Yager, Governor of Fiji and High Commissioner of the Western Pacific.

Idling in a hotel lobby, Darrow received a frantic cable from Celeste. Roberta, had mysteriously disappeared. Would Darrow please hurry home and help find her?

Expecting this, Darrow's reply was already written. He had only to file it now:

Shocked about Roberta. Love and sympathy. Will hurry home via Honolulu.

Sir Hugh would see him now, Darrow was informed.

His conference with the high commissioner was artful. Darrow asked countless questions about trading concessions in all the British islands of the South Pacific. His intentions impressed the commissioner as sincere. Actually Darrow only wanted to establish a convincing motive for his present cruise.

From Government House he went again to the cable office. Another cablegram of distress was waiting him from Celeste. He filed another expression of deepest sympathy.

"Here's still another one, Mr. Darrow," the clerk said.

The last cable was from the San Francisco police. What did Darrow know about an ex-employee of his named Ritchie? The only slim lead the police had was that the missing girl had, at the time of her disappearance, been inquiring along the waterfront for Ritchie. Darrow scribbled his answer:

Ritchie undependable. Discharged from my employ for inefficiency and insubordination.

Darrow returned to the *Flying Fox.* "Looks like I'm not going to be able to take on these concessions, Walts. Too much red tape tied up with it."

"You're through here, then?"

"Entirely. We'll go home immediately. Stopping at Honolulu, of course, so I can look into that dockage deal."

Walts gave orders for departure. When

the yacht was under way he rejoined his owner in the salon. "Hope you're not too disappointed, Mr. Darrow."

Darrow made a grimace. "I imagine I do look rather hard hit, Walts. But it's not about the concession. Truth is I just got some distressing news from my fiancée."

Walts raised his eyebrows sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Mr. Darrow."

"I can't understand it," Darrow brooded. "She's got a young sister, you know. And the kid's disappeared."

"The devil you say!" The captain's face clouded. "That's a rum turn, Mr. Darrow. I always liked Miss Roberta. Last time I saw her was just before we sailed. She came aboard asking about a man named Ritchie."

"The police know that, Walts. They're looking for Ritchie, high and low."

"I hope they find him," Walts said. He turned away.

"Hope *I* find him first!" came inaudibly from Darrow.

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN BEARING GIFTS

VAILA mourned on the beach at Niu. Tama was gone from her. That dreadful premonition had come true. Hadn't the old women warned her? No matter how deeply they seemed rooted here, white men always went away in the end. And now Tamasami had left her for a beautiful girl of his own race.

On a fine white yacht, Vaila was sure. The girl had asked for him, hadn't she? And the girl had come on the yacht. So of course Tama must have gone away with her on that ship.

Vaila remembered the name of the ship, but just now she could think only of its Samoan equivalent. The term her own people used to name the great bats which preyed on the mangos of Niu.

"O le pe'a!" she cried bitterly. "Bring him back to me who loves him."

Vaila knew them well, the hideous, winged *O le pe'as!* They sucked and destroyed fruit, greedy, wasteful creatures, always whirring overhead by night to prey upon the very life of the island.

And now a ship bearing that name had robbed her of Tama!

Vaila stood up, her cheeks wet with tears, and went wearily to the village of *fales*. Faipule, the oldest chief, stood leaning on his bamboo cane there.

"It is not seemly, my daughter," he rebuked mildly, "that a *taupo* should weep."

"My heart shall cry all days and night," she answered, "for Tamasami."

"There are other young men," said Faipule.

"For me there is only one."

Vaila went on up the village street and through a banana thicket to a high clearing beyond. An oval *fale* stood there, clean and new, and the sweet bushy smell of its roof mocked her. Tama's house. It was to have been her own after only one more moon.

On her last day with Tama they had gathered armfuls of lovely flowers and had woven them into garlands. Gaily they had festooned the rafters of this house. The garlands and wreaths were still in place, entwining the rafters and wall posts, but fading now like the hope in her breast.

Vaila went in to throw herself face down on the shell floor. Old women found her sobbing there, at nightfall, in inconsolable grief.

IT WAS only a day later when an incoming mast was reported to Faipule. The high chief was puzzled. No trader was due. Neither was this the month for an inspection from Tulofa.

Faipule went with a crowd of his people to the beach. The ship came in and was seen to be a small packet from Apia. Only one boat came ashore from it. The man in it did not come to trade.

He was a grave, homespun man of middle age. His build was blocky and solid. His cheeks had the look of burned leather and he came ashore wearing loose, rumpled whites and a hard straw hat. A seafarer,

Faipule thought, by the way he handled the oars.

A man, too, who knew the courtesies of the islands. For he came directly to Faipule with gifts—a huge, black umbrella and a dollar watch.

"My name," he announced with an engaging smile, "is Martin Mason. I come only to visit you a few hours."

Faipule already owned an umbrella, as do all high chiefs in Polynesia. But this was his first watch and it delighted him. He held it to his ear and it ticked.

Lesser chiefs crowded around to admire the watch. To each of them Martin Mason presented a carton of cigarettes. His social status was impregnable by then. Such generosity must not go unrequited. There must be speeches of gratitude at the guest house, and the *kava* must flow without stint.

Faipule raised his umbrella and led the procession there, walking in dignity beside the guest. At the *faletele* Mason was ushered to the post of honor. He sat down with his back against it, legs reaching out on the floor.

Each chief and family-head took his post according to rank. The *taupo* was sent for, to mix the *kava*. Coconut leaves were spread and heaped with fresh fruit while the speaking began.

They were speeches of gratitude, of which Mason understood no word. He attended patiently, however. A report came to Faipule that the *taupo* could not be found. This annoyed Faipule, for upon occasions of distinction only the *taupo* could mix *kava*.

Mason's turn came for a speech. "You understand English?" he asked.

They all nodded vigorously, although only the younger of two talking chiefs really could. This one, in his extreme youth, had attended school at Apia.

Martin Mason then brought from his pocket an old, much-thumbed clipping of shipping news. It was the same item which some months ago had served to disturb Reed Darrow in his San Francisco office. The item which Darrow had there displayed with full instructions to Ritchie.

Mason's smile now faded and his face grew grave as he re-read the item. Then he spoke his speech.

"I am a seafaring man. A long time ago I sailed before the mast of a whaler. Sometimes, but not often, I stopped in port with my kinsmen."

Mason paused. A blank look was on every face but one. Only one, he could see, understood him. So he addressed that one, resuming slowly and distinctly.

"My kinsmen were poor. They were my brother, his wife and a small boy. The boy is—was—my nephew. I used to tell him stories of the sea. He lived by the sea, as your own children do, and he loved it.

"His parents died when I was off whaling. It then became my duty to take care of him. I came there to find he had run away to sea. I traced him to a schooner called the *Fairhaven*. Never could I find the *Fairhaven*. Now I know that it lies in a lost harbor"—Mason pointed to sea—"not many leagues from your land."

Faipule looked questioningly toward the younger of his talking chiefs. The latter arose and spoke eloquently for five minutes in Samoan. His interpretation, Mason guessed, would be inaccurate; yet close enough to the mark.

"I come now," Mason proceeded, "to ask if any survivor ever reached this land. Mainly I am concerned with the fate of my nephew. His name is Jimmy Mason."

Again a speech of translation. Faipule shook his head. No man named Jimmy Mason had ever come to Niu.

"But he wasn't a man, then," the guest explained. "He was only a boy of ten years." By way of comparison, he pointed to a small native boy now peeping from a ginger bush nearby.

Imemdiately every chief in the *fale* began talking. Heads nodded. A ten-year-old boy—eleven summers ago? Of course. This good friend must mean Tamasami.

Mason's pulse quickened. "Tamasami?"

It meant, he was told, "Child of the Sea."

"This boy is a cloudburster," explained the erudite talking chief.

Mason leaned forward intently. He knew the Samoans always called white men "cloudbursters."

"Is he here?"

No. Only recently, Mason learned, Tamasami had left them. The guest should speak with Vaila, they suggested. When she was no longer *taupo,* Vaila was to have been Tamasami's wife.

"He have build a *fale* for her," said Faipule.

"Built a house, did he?" prompted Mason. He was on his feet now, popping questions.

"Vaila know all about Tamasami," the talking chief said. "They love much together both of them."

"Show me this house, please."

THEY escorted him up the village street and through a banana thicket. Martin Mason saw the eminence with a new *fale* on it. Faded garlands hung from the rafters.

He entered and his eyes fell upon an old brass box—a sea chest.

"Will you leave me alone here, please?"

The islanders withdrew and left him there. Martin Mason dropped to his knees beside the chest. He pushed the lid of it back. In it he found nothing but a sheaf of mildewed papers.

He took the papers and looked through them. They were the articles, he saw, by which the crew of a ship had signed on. The name of the ship was *Fairhaven.* It proved that some survivor of that lost vessel had been here. Anxiously Mason thumbed through the papers, scanning names. Able seaman, able seaman, cook, deck hand—cabin boy! The name on the cabin boy's article of service was James Mason.

Martin Mason remained there on his knees for a long time, staring at the name of his nephew. And now they called him Tamasami, child of the sea! The revelation held Mason in a spell of awe. Yet he could not doubt. Washed up on this island, his nephew must have lived here for all these years.

Only to go away, recently, on some ship. Which ship? He must hurry back to the chiefs and find out. Mason put the *Fairhaven's* articles of service in his pocket, closed the chest, arose and left the *fale.* He was making toward the banana thicket when he heard a step not far back of him.

Mason turned. He saw a girl, slim and pretty, enter the *fale* with arms full of flowers. With sadness in her eyes she looked up at faded wreaths there. Mason saw her stand on the old brass chest and begin tearing them down.

He knew who she was, then. She must be Vaila, the *taupo.* The one who was to have married Tamasami. Plainly she was mourning his desertion. No less clearly she was still loyal, and came now to regarland the house.

Martin Mason went quickly to her. "You are Vaila?"

She turned, startled, and saw sympathy on his face.

"I, too, love Tamasami," Mason said.

"You bring him back?" she asked breathlessly.

He shook his head. "I haven't found him yet, Vaila."

"He has go away with a girl of his people," Vaile told him.

This was a jolt to Mason. The chiefs had said nothing about that. Perhaps only this sweetheart of Jimmie's knew of it.

"Are you certain of this, Vaila?"

She nodded. Then she returned to her errand of tearing down faded garlands.

Mason helped her. Taller, he could reach higher. She sat down after a while, bare legs crossed on the floor, and began to plait the stems of her fresh flowers. Hibiscus, ginger, allamandra and frangipani. Again Martin Mason helped her, this time by festooning the garlands where the old ones had been.

EACH knew, by the time it was done, that they had much in common. Here was a kind, honest cloudburster, thought Vaila. And he loved her Tamasami.

"I am his father's brother," Mason said.

She looked up quickly. "The one who have tell him stories of the sea?"

"Yes, the sailor who told him about the sea."

"We have speak of you," said Vaila.

"About this girl he went away with. Who is she?"

"She is a white girl."

"What did she look like? How old? How tall? How was she dressed?"

"About tallness like me," Vaila said. "I think same years old like Tamasami."

"Pretty?"

Vaila nodded. "She have hair like the sun and cheeks like the ripe mango."

"A blonde, huh? What sort of dress was she wearing?"

"The dress for swim," said Vaila. Her hands smoothed down her own slim hips, indicating a tight swim suit.

"What color?"

"Like the sky color. Her hat is like that too. It is of funny rubber."

"A blue bathing suit and cap to match," repeated Mason. "Do you know her name?"

Vaila did not. But the girl had swam ashore from a fine yacht, she asserted, looking for Tamasami. She had a picture of Tama. She must have found him, for Tamasami had gone away on that yacht.

"What yacht? Do you know the name of it?"

"It is called," she said, "the *O le pe'a.*"

"An odd name for a yacht!" objected Mason.

"I cannot remember the English," she said, "but here we call it the *O le pe'a.*"

The point was vital. He must know the ship's name.

"Come, I show you," Vaila offered.

She led him up a path into the bush. Deep in the forest they came to a mango tree. Vaila pointed up. "Look, there is the *O le pe'a.*"

Mason looked up and saw two fruit bats roosting in the sun. Rather they were possum-like mammals hanging by long clawed hind feet and tails from a limb, and with giant black wings folded about them.

"Ah!" Mason exclaimed. "You mean flying foxes!"

"That is it," Vaila agreed. "The ship —her name is the *Flying Fox.*"

"Thanks, Vaila. You've helped me a lot," Mason said gratefully.

It irked him that he had no present for her. But he could send back something handsome from the next port. "I'm off to find Jimmie, now. I mean Tamasami."

"You send him back to me, please?"

"I'll tell him he's crazy if he doesn't come." Mason smiled. "Goodbye, Vaila."

He hurried down the path to the village. There he stopped only long enough for an informal exchange of greetings with Faipule. On to his boat, running. In a few minutes more Martin Mason was oaring back to the packet which he had engaged to bring him here from Apia.

"I've found him," was his exulting announcement to the packet's master. "Or just as good as found him. All I got to do is look up the registries and find out who owns a yacht called the *Flying Fox.*"

CHAPTER XIII

LOST ISLAND

THE girl angle puzzled Martin. He assumed she was some guest on a pleasure craft, who, sight-seeing ashore, had fascinated Tamasami. With the result that the boy had hired out as a deck hand on the yacht's crew. The white girl's interest, of course, could hardly have been more than casual. By this time, thought Martin Mason, she was probably through with him.

Not for an instant did he think of looking for a dingy tramp freighter.

The dingy tramp held a southeasterly course for five days from Niu. She was in shoaly water by then, with the chart warning of numerous hazards. Cuttle steered her with caution to avoid smashing on submerged rocks and shoals which studded the sea here. It was a no-man's water, and usually given a wide berth by all traffic.

Dicksong stood by him at the tramp's

helm. "Darrow'll raise hell about this," he warned.

"What he don't know won't hurt him!" Cuttle growled.

A third man, Buford, was idling on the bridge. He tossed his cigarette over the rail and cocked an eye toward Dicksong. "And what of it? He passed us the buck, didn't he?"

Dicksong grimaced. "Yeh, he passed us the buck, damn him."

"If there was only the boy, it'd be different," argued Cuttle.

"We could send him up the mainm'st," Buford said, "some time when we're buckin' a gale. If he got bucked off to the sharks, it'd be an accident, wouldn't it?"

"You can figure that way on a boy," Cuttle insisted, "but not on a girl. I may not have any heart, mates, but I've got a stomach; and it just won't stand a jolt like that."

"Mine neither," Dicksong admitted with a grimace. "I'd be seein' sharks in my rum all the rest of my life."

It was a thing they had talked over constantly for five days and to which they could find only one answer.

"One year, he said, didn't he?"

"One year and then another ten grand. That is if they ain't been heard from by then."

"On your scheme, Cuttle, they'll kick over lonk afore that!"

"I can't help that, Dicks. Just so I'm not there to see it happen."

"What we don't see ain't gonna hurt us," agreed Buford.

Cuttle looked ahead and saw white water. "Better give her half a point to starboard, Dicks."

"How far we come from Niu?"

"It logs about a thousand miles, Dicks."

"Then this ought to be the place," said Dicksong.

An hour later Tamasami was brought from the hold. It was his first sight of the sun for five days. Therefore he had no faint notion of the course traveled. His eyes blinked at the blinding light, then turned toward Cuttle and Dicksong. Back of these he saw five other white men and three black Canaques.

Cuttle unlocked a cabin door and Roberta emerged. She was haggard, on the ragged edge of collapse. She stared with helpless bitterness at the crew on deck. Then the sight of Tamasami standing there gave her a start of relief. Tama reacted the same way. Each captive had hardly hoped to find the other still surviving.

"I take it you don't like this boat, miss," Cuttle said. He evaded her eyes.

"I'm not crazy about it," Roberta answered dreamily.

"All right. You can get off if you want to," Cuttle offered.

HE POINTED. Roberta looked and saw land less than a mile away. It was a small, rocky lowland with spray smashing cliffs at one end and a white, glaring beach at the other. A few stunted palms showed at the highest point.

"Mind you, miss," Dickson amended with a smirk, "you don't have to get off unless you want to."

"What land is it?" she asked.

"It ain't Valparaiso," Cuttle said. "But if you like it better than this deck, you can have it."

The girl had a vision of savages on that land. Or if not that, then complete desolation.

Her eyes met Tamasami's. He looked at the land, then back to her with a decisive nod.

"Take your choice," Cuttle urged with a nervous impatience. "It's a better break than you've got from Darrow."

"You mean—him too?" Her eyes indicated Tamasami.

"I mean the pair of you. It's like this, miss. You was wished on us. Ever hear about the lubber had a bear by the tail and couldn't let go? That's us, miss. Your feet on dry land is all we can do."

She assembled her wits desperately. "Suppose I offer you fifty thousand dollars. My sister has money, lots of it! If you'll—"

"It's no go, miss," Cuttle broke in. "That's a lot of dough, but a feller's neck's worth more."

A bribe, she realized, would do no good. These men didn't dare risk exposure at any price. No more than did Darrow himself.

"Very well. Put as ashore."

"Lower away, men," Cuttle bawled.

A boat was lowered. Despair and relief confused Roberta as she embarked in it with Tamasami. Dicksong and Cuttle went along too, with a black at the oars.

How far, the girl wondered, had they come from Niu? Like Tamasami, she had been brought food only at night and so knew nothing of the course followed. Time, however, she had kept track of. By intervals of light through her keyhole she knew that five days had elapsed since Niu.

There was no lagoon. Wild white water broke over the boat all the way in. Closer, the land seemed to Roberta even more desolate. No thatch of roof showed between barren sand and ragged palms. But Tama's face relaxed.

The boy's searching eyes, scanning the shore, saw details which struck him as not unpromising. A darker strip of green beyond the palms, he knew, was foliage other than fronds. A thicket of short, scraggly *papayas*. The roots of *papaya* usually went down to fresh water, Tamasami knew.

A series of dry washes down the beach, too, indicated heavy rainfall. Tropical deluges must fall here for eight months of the year, the same as Niu. And Tama knew that rain makes life.

"Duck, miss," Cuttle warned. A great roller came over, all but capsizing the boat.

Then they were through it and the keel struck on sand. "Here you are, miss. Step lively."

Tama jumped out into waist-deep water. He leaned back into the boat, gathered up Roberta in his arms and then waded a few yards to the beach. He set her down there.

They turned to see Cuttle shoving off. Cuttle was averting his eyes. But Dicksong was staring back at them with a sallow grin. With poor grace of apology the man called back, hoarsely, "It's the only out we had, miss."

THEY watched the boat's retreat until it reached the tramp steamer. Faintly across the water, and derisively, came the whine of davits as the boat was raised there. A grinding of the anchor chain, then the tramp was moving out and away.

Roberta turned forlornly to Tamasami. He looked back at her stolidly, unsmilingly, as bronze as any Indian and no less stoic. His bare, brawny chest, his mat of reddish hair, made him seem like a primeval savage. "They are evil men," he said simply. "We forget them."

"But what on earth can we do?" Unconsciously her cry uttered her complete dependence on this strange and strong young islander. This, for Roberta, was a hopelessly lost harbor. But not for Tamasami. An island in the sea was his element. From this instant, she knew, the command was his. His cunning, his strength, his island craft—these alone she must lean on to survive.

"Come," he said abruptly, and strode inland toward the islet's eminence.

It seemed to him only natural when she followed a pace behind. A man of the islands always led, and women followed.

He reached the eminence. The palm trees there were only cabbage palms, with one expection. This one leaned toward the sea and had a few undersized *nius* growing in the fronds. But from here he could overlook the islet's opposite shore. Along it grew a fringe of coco palms, tall at the water's edge, shorter and stubbier further back from the sea.

Roberta stood gazing in the other direction, the one from which she had come. The tramp was fading out of sight. The full of bitterness of it lashed her now. She sank in despair in the sand and covered her face.

Tama looked gravely down on her. Yes, he thought, she was a woman without strength or courage. If only she were Vaila!

Vaila would stand with him, to fight and to conquer this land.

He looked up again at the coco fronds overhead. In a minute more Tamasami was shinning that tree, bare feet gripping the bole with a practised facility. At the top, he broke off two green coconuts and tossed them down.

He followed to the ground. Then from a pouch of his *lava-lava* he took the one tool left him with which to carve life from this wilderness. It was a short copra knife which he always carried there. With it he cut a small hole in the end of each *niu*.

He stooped over the girl, held the *niu* to her lips, made her suck the sweet cool milk from it. Just so, eleven years ago on the beach at Niu, Vaila had held a coconut to his own lips. The memory brought a smile of sympathy to his eyes.

"Come," he said again. He walked away. And once more she followed.

The *papaya* thicket lured him. In it were pear-shaped bulbs of fruit which grew not from branches but directly from the boles. What else? Tamasami kept on, exploring with energy this new land.

First to the farther beach where the coco palms grew more abundantly. A turtle crawled past them toward the water. Tamasami pursued and turned the creature on its back. It would be there when he came for it.

He continued on, Roberta plodding dizzily a pace back of him. Already they could see every limit. The land reached a bare half mile in any direction. Only at one end did a cliff rise from the sea. A madness of surf lashed it.

Tamasami went to the cliff and studied its face.

"Look!" he cried, pointing. "Birds."

She could see no birds. But in the fissures of the cliff were signs of a rookery. Sea fowl came here to nest in season.

Tamasami went on to explore and found little else. He looked hopefully for breadfruit, but there was none. Nor bananas. He did find a thicket of pandanus. These would make poles, thought Tamasami. He found also a small patch of bamboo.

The sun was low now. Roberta saw Tama pick up a large square rock and carry it to higher, level ground. He selected another to place beside it.

"You too," he said shortly.

His tone was imperative. She picked up a rock and followed him. Its weight made her stumble. The hard ground bruised her feet, slicing at the silly pumps there. Thorns tore at her sports suit as she searched for more rocks.

"What are we doing?" she asked dully.

"We are building a house," announced Tamasami.

CHAPTER XIV

VIEW OF ALCATRAZ

THE *Flying Fox* eased in through the Golden Gate and on past the eucalyptus-crowned prominence of the presidio. Reed Darrow stood on his bridge beside Walts.

"She'll meet us at the Blue Ring docks, I suppose," Walts suggested.

Darrow nodded. He was braced for that meeting with Celeste. All this past week she had been sending him frantic radiograms about Roberta.

"I can't understand it," Darrow murmured, "the girl disappearing like that!"

Police, he guessed, would also meet him at the dock. There'd be a routine of questions, naturally. He'd need to keep his wits on edge every minute. The police, he conceded, rarely accept a coincidence without probing into it. The apparent coincidence in this case was that the girl had disappeared on the very night of this yacht's departure from San Francisco.

A thing which he glimpsed now from the corner of his eye made Darrow wince. It was a small drear island in the bay. A lost harbor for felons with stone walls looming there—Alcatraz.

"If it's kidnapping," Walts remarked, "the F.B.I.'ll be in on it."

Crimes on the high seas, Darrow reflected, came also under the jurisdiction of the F.B.I. Again he winced, and was glad when they were past Alcatraz.

■

In an hour they were docked and he saw Celeste's pale face on the pier. She waved at him, her smile forced and unnatural. The minute the landing bridge was placed she came running up it and aboard.

Darrow awaited her with nerves jangling. Would she accuse him?

Relief all but wilted him when she came straight into his arms. He kissed her, held her tear-stained cheeks between his hands and saw complete trust in her eyes. Far from accusing, she did not even faintly suspect.

Self-confidence surged back through him.

"I've wanted you so, Reed!" she murmured. "You *must* help me find her, dear."

She clung to him, pitifully eager. Everyone else had failed her. The police were all so futile. But Reed never failed.

"Why bless your heart, of course we'll find her," Darrow promised. "When did you last see her, Celeste?"

"The same night you left here, Reed. I was in the library reading. She came through, spoke to me and then went on up to her room. In the morning I looked in and she was gone."

"Did she take anything with her?"

"That's the odd thing about it," exclaimed Celeste. "Her overnight bag and a few things were missing. Just as though she'd decided to weekend with some school friends. So for a few days I didn't worry much. Then I called up everyone. No one has seen her."

"It proves, though," Darrow suggested, "that she went away of her own accord."

"Do you know what I think, Reed?"

"What?"

Celeste flushed. "This may hurt you, dear. But it's the only thing I can possibly imagine."

"I'll grin and bear it," he said.

"Well, you know as well as I do that Roberta opposed our engagement."

"To the last ditch. So what?"

"I think she disappeared as a protest. And to erect an obstacle. She knows I'd never think of getting married as long as I don't even know where she is."

"Nonsense! That wouldn't stop you."

"Oh, but it would, Reed. You don't realize how close I've always been to Roberta."

Darrow was shocked—yet at the same time relieved. Shocked because Celeste wouldn't marry him so long as Roberta was unfound; relieved by this extremely simple theory of her disappearance.

"Nothing," he urged gently, "must postpone or interfere with our own happiness, Celeste." The wedding date, as scheduled, was now only a few weeks off.

"No, Reed," she said with finality. "I couldn't be happy while my sister is missing. We must wait till we find Roberta."

DARROW became aware of a uniformed figure nearby, waiting to speak to him. He recognized Inspector Kerns of the police.

At the first opportunity Kerns stepped forward. "May I have a word with you alone, please, Mr. Darrow?"

"Of course," Darrow said, smiling. "You won't mind waiting a minute, Celeste?"

He turned her over to Captain Walts and went into the saloon with Kerns.

"I'm working on the disappearance case," Kern said.

"I presumed so. By the way, did you ever pick up that fellow Ritchie?" With an effort Darrow kept anxiety from his voice.

"No, haven't been able to lay a finger on him. Fact is the Ritchie angle doesn't look so hot, now that we learn she went away of her own accord."

It was clear to Darrow that Celeste had told Kerns of her theory. But the inspector looked upon it only as a remote possibility. "I can think of a slant ten times more logical than that, Mr. Darrow."

"Let's have it, Inspector."

Kerns looked him steadily in the eyes. "I'll come out with it bluntly, Mr. Darrow. Did you elope with your fiancée's sister?"

Darrow was dumfounded. "What an idea! I did not. As a matter of fact she dislikes me intensely."

The inspector was not impressed. "It's happened before," he said. "Lovers starting out by hating each other—and then suddenly they've married."

"You haven't mentioned this to Miss Cameron?"

"Naturally I haven't. It would shock her, and it might not be the solution."

"Of course it's no solution."

"It's logical, though," Kerns insisted. "You meet a lady and become engaged. During a long engagement you're thrown a good deal with her sister, younger and very attractive. A clash at first, but gradually you transfer affections. Neither of you want to hurt Celeste's feelings. So you elope to Honolulu where the bride lies low until—"

"You're a fool!" Darrow broke in.

"Explain then why she disappeared the same night your yacht left. Also explain why she took along a key to the guest cabin."

"Did she?"

"The key's missing from the house."

"Misplaced, somewhere. Women are always losing keys."

"You won't mind if I run it down?"

"Help yourself. Ask Captain Walts. Ask every man-jack on the yacht."

Without waiting for an answer Darrow buzzed for the first officer. "Take Inspector Kerns around, mate," he directed. "Let him interview all hands. Then show him the log of this last cruise."

Still flushed, Darrow went out and joined Celeste. They went ashore to her car.

"What did the inspector say to you, Reed?" she asked as they drove toward Nob Hill.

"He's got several angles," Darrow evaded. "One of them, of course, is the Ritchie lead. By the way, just what did Ritchie tell you that day?"

She looked straight ahead, shivering. "It's too weird for words, Reed. Something about your leading a mutiny, one time, and killing people. And stealing pearls—"

"Did Ritchie say he was there?"

"Oh, no. He made it clear that he himself wasn't there at all."

"Then how could he give all the gory details? I hope you weren't too much distressed, my poor darling."

"I was—but only for you, Reed."

"Ritchie," Darrow said, "is a crook. I found it out and fired him. He came in, blind drunk, and swore he'd get even."

"I'm sure it is. If his story had a grain of truth, he would have taken it to the police."

"Of course he would."

"But this isn't helping us find Roberta."

"We'll move heaven and earth."

DURING the next few days he seemed to do so. Due to journalistic publicity on the case, dozens of false rumors were coming in. A girl resembling Roberta was reported as having been seen in Dallas, Texas. Another in Des Moines. Another in Miami. In each city Darrow engaged private agents by wire. He spared no expense.

All the while dreading only one hazard, Ritchie. If Ritchie should turn up and tell the truth. . . .

There was only one answer to that, Darrow thought fiercely. He himself must find Ritchie first.

Kerns called to admit sheepishly, "That elopement angle was cuckoo, Mr. Darrow."

"I said it was, didn't I?"

"But we have to try everything, understand. I talked with every man on the yacht, down to the cook. They all say the girl wasn't aboard. Moreover, they all saw you go ashore at each of your three stops. You went alone each time."

Darrow gave him a cigar and the man went out.

He went directly then to a luncheon engagement with Celeste. Again he urged against postponement of the wedding. But again Celeste was firm.

Returning to his office, Darrow found a stranger waiting there. He was a square-built man of middle age with a frank, weathered face.

"I'm Martin Mason," the caller announced.

"A shipping man, are you, Mason?"

"I've followed that trade all my life," Mason said. "Although I never got any further than a mate's ticket on a whaler."

"Yes?" Darrow drummed impatiently on his desk.

"Lately, I've been tracing a yacht called the *Flying Fox.*"

Darrow was naturally startled. "Well?"

"It's your yacht, isn't it, Mr. Darrow?"

CHAPTER XV

WALK SOFTLY, MR. DARROW

FOR half a minute the shipping magnate regarded his visitor narrowly. Then: "It is. No secret about that."

"I'm looking for a nephew," Mason resumed. "Young fellow about twenty-one years old. I believe he joined your yacht's crew recently, on an island called Niu."

"Possibly he did," Darrow countered with caution, "but I doubt it. My yacht did call at Niu on her last cruise, but I can't remember the skipper taking on any new hand there."

Mason's manner continued to be engaging and quite without suspicion. "Naturally a man in your position wouldn't be concerned with such a detail, Mr. Darrow. May I take it up with the yacht's master?"

"By all means. Walts is his name. You'll find him on board now, I imagine. The yacht's at pier 77."

"Thanks. Also I'd like to speak with a young girl who was on that cruise with you. All I know about her is that she's blonde, and went swimming at Niu in a blue bathing suit."

Darrow stiffened. For a moment his guard was down, and Mason's eyes fixed curiously on his face.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about." Darrow's stare was contained and steady now.

Mason's puzzlement grew. "Just the same, Mr. Darrow, I'd like to question the crew."

"Go right ahead."

Mason's consultation with Walts ended exactly as had Kerns'. There'd been no girl on the cruise. Nor had any island boy been signed on at Niu.

The entire company of the *Flying Fox* backed up Walts.

"There's a loose screw somewhere," Mason admitted.

Walts agreed with a flush of annoyance. "I should say there is! First the police come asking if I carried a girl passenger last trip—and now you!"

"The police?" Mason was immediately alert.

"Sure, the police. They figured Roberta Cameron might have been aboard. But she wasn't."

"Who's Roberta Cameron?"

Walts' eyes widened. "Don't you read the papers, man!"

Mason went back to his hotel and read the papers. He called at the library then and studied back issues for a month. He consulted the police. Soon he was in possession of every known fact about the disappearance of Roberta Cameron.

WHEN a visitor was announced at the Cameron residence, Celeste prepared herself to receive any one of the special agents employed by Darrow. They weren't getting anywhere, she thought gloomily. What she wanted was a man of action.

Martin Mason was just that. She knew it almost instantly. A man with a purpose.

"I'm interested in the search for your sister," he said bluntly, "because she was last seen with my own long-lost nephew."

"Where?" asked Celeste breathlessly.

"At an island called Niu. That is, she swam ashore from a yacht anchored there and asked for Jimmie."

"Jimmie?"

"My nephew."

Celeste's head was spinning. "But Roberta couldn't have known him! And she wasn't on that yacht."

"So says the crew, Miss Cameron. She may not have been on the yacht but she positively was on the island while the yacht was anchored there. Tell me; does

your sister have hair like the sun and cheeks like a ripe mango?"

More than ever confused, Celeste nodded.

"Does she own a blue bathing suit with a rubber cap to match?"

Celeste caught her breath. "How did you know?"

"Is that blue swim suit missing from this house?"

Celeste sat rigidly on the divan, staring at him. She saw an earnest, weathered man with a sandy complexion and keen gray eyes. Most of all she saw an alert vigor of purpose.

"Yes! It's one of the things she took with her. But—"

"Then she was there!" said Mason with conviction. "I don't know how she got there, or why she was there. But she was there. Where my nephew took refuge after the *Fairhaven's* wreck."

She had never heard of the *Fairhaven.* Ritchie's wild story had mentioned no ship by name, or time, or place.

From his research Mason knew that police were looking for a man named Ritchie. Patiently he inquired of Celeste until at last, with reluctance, she told him about the man's call here.

"But don't you see, in a vague way it fits," insisted Mason. "Ritchie says that Darrow—"

She raised a hand. "Please. Mr. Darrow is my fiancé."

He smiled an apology. Here was a situation needing tact. "Very well, Miss Cameron. Let's leave Mr. Darrow out of it. What have we left? Just this: Ritchie talked about a mutiny from which, after bloodshed, a cabin boy escapes. My own nephew was cabin boy in the *Fairhaven.* I've got ship's articles to prove it.

"Eleven years later Ritchie blurts out certain revelations, to yourself and sister. Your sister disappears on the same night a yacht sails for Niu. It was on Niu that my nephew took refuge from the wreck of a scuttled ship. A girl on Niu sees a girl resembling your sister there, and connects her with my nephew. They both disappear, as has Ritchie himself. Too many coincidences unless they connect, Miss Cameron."

When he gave her the details about his conference with Vaila, Celeste was forced to admit it. Then she told him about a key to the yacht's guest cabin. It, too, had disappeared with Roberta.

And a blue bathing suit—that identification by Vaila impressed Celeste far more than anything else.

For hours they discussed this strange chain of evidence. "We need two witnesses," Mason said at last. "Ritchie and Vaila. We know where Vaila is. And the police must find Ritchie."

He left her to interview Inspector Kerns.

AND Reed Darrow, during days which followed, became more and more aware of a stiffening tension. He read it on Celeste's face. Always there was a searching look in her eyes. Was she beginning to doubt him? She did not say so. But sometimes, now, she complained of a headache when he came to call.

And once, calling at her house, he found her with Martin Mason. Mason greeted him gravely, making no reference to either Roberta's disappearance or his nephew's. Celeste sat pallid and nervous.

The men left together. Darrow's resentment, once they were outside, broke leash. "May I ask," he demanded curtly, "just what you have in common with Miss Cameron?"

"We're each looking for a lost relative," Mason answered quietly. He moved on to his cab leaving Darrow to the torture of his own pumping nerves.

Worse, Darrow soon became aware of a redoubled effort by the police to find Ritchie.

An idea about Ritchie sent Darrow late one night to his offices. He pulled out files of canceled checks there. Pay checks cashed by Blue Ring employes for many years back. Darrow assembled those which had been endorsed by Ritchie.

Many of Ritchie's waterfront haunts were known to Darrow. He had tried them

all, and so had the police.

A score of the monthly pay checks had been cashed at a bar in San Mateo. San Mateo being only twenty miles south down the peninsula, Darrow drove down.

It was a rowdy resort, wide open at this midnight hour. Ritchie was not among the present customers. A drunk reeled out. Darrow slapped him on the back and gave him a dollar. "Know an old sailor named Ritchie?"

The man didn't know Ritchie. But he did know the bartender's first name. Darrow walked two blocks to a public phone and telephoned the bar. He made his voice a thick mumble. "Listen, Bud. I'm 'Arry Ritchie. Wot abort cashin' a check for me?"

"Not on a bet, Ritchie," the bartender said coldly. "And stay out o' here."

It encouraged Darrow to believe that Ritchie was still around San Mateo. The shipping magnate drove there for three successive nights to look into bars and pool halls. On the third night he found Ritchie. The man was living at a cheap apartment under an alias.

Darrow did not accost him. But at home in San Francisco he conducted an experiment in physics. First he filled a gallon kettle with water and set the kettle on a lighted gas stove. Under the kettle he inserted the tip end of a thin metal lath. The lath's other end extended out, cantilevering a foot or so from the stove.

On the free end of the lath Reed Darrow placed a clocked and loaded pistol. It was a firearm with an extremely sensitive action. Weighting the free end of the cantilever, the only reason it didn't fall to the floor was that the gun weighed less than the full kettle now pinioning the lath's other end.

Darrow went into the other room. He waited two hours. Then came the report of a gun in the kitchen. A gallon of water had boiled away, making the kettle eight pounds lighter. A tipping lath and a falling gun—the sensitive action striking with a jar on the floor.

It could be done, concluded Darrow. He'd need to use a silencer for the first shot, of course. The second shot, two hours later, should be the only one heard.

TWO days later Inspector Kerns called on Celeste Cameron. His approach was grim. "You remember that man Ritchie we've been looking for?"

"Yes."

"We've found him—dead! Shot in San Mateo."

"Oh!" exclaimed Celeste.

"He was shot at exactly eight o'clock last night. Do you happen to know where Mr. Reed Darrow was at that time?"

"At eight o'clock? Of course. He was dining with me at the St. Francis."

"So he tells me," admitted Kerns.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Hollander strained his eyes upward, bracing his big body against the pitch of the ship

That She-Devil Sea

By
FRANCIS GOTT

The brine ran thick in the blood of them both; and both were big, with the brawn of giants. But singly they could not conquer the ocean's rage that piled against their stricken freighter

MAYO HALLOWELL had never been friends to any man. Unlike many large, powerful men it was not in his nature to push an unobtrusive way through life as if apologetic of great size and bone-crushing strength. No—he snarled defiance and shook his big fist in the face of man and nature alike.

"Fool!" cried Grugar Sparr, a man as big and strong in his Dutch way as Hallowell himself. "Some day the sea she hit you hard *und*, py Gott, you go down *und* you neffer coom oop!"

With a line clamped tight in his strong, white teeth, Hallowell could only snarl his contempt at the blond Hollander. Together, on the boat deck of the tramp freighter *Sal Ebra*, three days out of Bergen, Norway, Boston-bound on a winter sea, they fought a thrashing lifeboat.

"Voork *mit* the sea und she help you like an angel." Sparr shouted unheeded advice and wisdom into Hallowell's long and pointed ear. "But if you fight her *und* curse her, she fight *und* curse you back—she become she-devil!"

Icy needles of spume stabbed at them from out of the darkness. The wind was a steady, maddening drone as it flowed by bridge and rigging and boat davits. The ship heaved and yawed and lunged like a tortured thing forgot by time itself.

Impatiently, Hallowell snatched the line from his teeth and, while Sparr strained inboard on the lifeboat, laced it through a ring bolt in the deck and deftly made it fast.

"That'll hold you—blast you!" He spat and drove a kick at the lifeboat's side.

The Hollander shook his head in mute

reproach. Although young, in his late twenties as was Hallowell, his race was old in its dealings with the sea; better make friend than enemy of both calm and angry waters.

Hallowell, however, came of that new, Down East New England race whose triumphant mastery over the sea had been glorious and all too brief. His great grandfather, master of a hard driven clipper ship, had cursed out his conviction that if spars and canvas and rigging didn't hold, why then let 'em go by the board, damn 'em! Such thick-headed stubbornness, oddly successful, had bred brine into the bone itself.

His job done, Hallowell headed aft. He wanted hot coffee. Not wishing to get a useless wetting, Sparr waited until a sheet of spray settled before he followed in his slower fashion.

"What next, bos'n?" asked a shivering, blue-lipped, dumpy seaman, swathed in a two inch thickness of clothing, warming his stubby hands on the steam percolator as Hallowell entered the messroom.

"Coffee up while you got the chance, Dabney," rasped Hallowell, turning the spigot of the percolator and darkly eyeing three other seamen, in dripping oilskins, driving the chill from their bones with hot coffee. "Hell is bustin' loose on the ocean tonight!"

One of the men said:

"The deck engineer says we opened a plate and have a fathom of water in number two!"

"Yeah."

"The old man, he push her too hard," muttered Sparr, entering and taking Dabney's empty cup. "He run her full speed through so heavy a sea."

"What you want, Dutch, wallow and pound your guts out in the trough with the ship under no steerage way?" Hallowell glared at Sparr, his deep-set blue eyes stabbing flames of mockery. "Drive her, I say. We can take it."

"Half speed iss plenty." The Hollander blinked, his own eyes as blue as Hallowell's but calm and placid.

HALLOWELL snorted. Unlike the other nine men in the forecastle, he and Sparr were officer material. They both held licenses certifying them to sail as second mates on any tonnage, any ocean. The other men were good seamen; they would remain such—yet never reach the bridge.

Officer material. Which told a story. There was more than unlike, opposing and clashing temperaments back of the Down Easterner's and the Hollander's rivalry. Both had shipped on the *Sal Ebra* on the same day. Both were driven by ambition and held the same grade of license under which they had never sailed. Both knew promotion would come—but neither knew who would be chosen first.

Times were hard. The American Merchant Marine was fast approaching absolute obsolescence; new ships were slow in building, even under the prodding and enticing encouragement of government subsidy. Even the constant threat that Europe's dictators would plunge the world into another war did not hasten American shipbuilding. Therefore berths were scarce for newly licensed young officers.

The fact that Hallowell, as boatswain, held a petty officer's berth and that Sparr was only an able seaman did not necessarily mean that Hallowell would be promoted first.

Good boatswains—like top kicks in the army—are hard to come by. Besides having an unfailing knowledge of seamanship, hair on their chests as the saying is, and great physical endurance, their hides must be tough. They must be leaders of men. Their lot is one of constant hell from skippers and mates and unvarying abuse from the crew. They are riddled between two fires. They stand alone.

And Mayo Hallowell was a good boatswain. There is a saying at sea that good boatswains never reach the bridge. For what skipper wants to undertake the responsibility of losing a good boatswain by making of him a third-rate officer?

Sometimes Hallowell feared that he fitted into his job too well. His was an

unfriendly nature—an asset in the makeup of a natural-born boatswain perhaps, but a decided drawback on the bridge where mates are inclined to be friendly and clannish. Gulping down his steaming coffee, he wondered whether he would get a third mate's berth before the Hollander.

"Bos'n!" Leadbetter, the tall, gangling chief mate hailed him from the doorway, his frayed cardigan jacket showing through a long tear in his wet black oilskins. "Number one hatch has been stove in. Yuh got to get up there an' make a frame o' dunnage over it. A nasty mess."

Jamming his sou'wester down over his coarse black hair and fastening the chin strap, Hallowell crooked a finger at his men and headed for the open deck with alacrity. His swarthy, bony face glowed ruddily from fiercely burning inner fires. Always his big body screamed for action.

In the mate's wake, his seaboots skidded across the starboard side of the after well deck, while the *Sal Ebra* reeled and brine swirled waistdeep in the port scuppers.

He swung himself up the ladder to the amidships deck and beat his way forward, bent double, against the drumming wind that flowed against his big body like a strong tide.

The forward well-deck was in a smother of foam. A yellow beam, reaching fan-shaped fingers, knifed down from the range light on the topmast through driving scud to play upon a sea swirling over the forecastle head.

"There's a five-foot hole in the hatch!" Leadbetter shouted grimly. "If we don't get it battened down tight, number one will fill an' we'll be down by the head."

"Gotd!" croaked Loeser, a skinny ordinary seaman, making his first trip. "I'm sick!"

"Get for'ard!" Hallowell rasped, grasping Loeser by the arm roughly but not unkindly. "Snake them two by fours out of the storeroom and forget your belly."

WATCHING his chance, Leadbetter plunged down the ladder and started forward through knee-deep, foaming brine. Here was a mate a man could willingly follow to Hell itself, Hallowell thought, dragging Loeser to his feet from the sucking waters.

They got up under the partial protection of the forecastle head. Using the heels of their calloused palms, Leadbetter and Hallowell pounded free the ice-encased dogs of the steel door leading into the storeroom. One by one the men dodged within.

"Here, Loeser, hold this flash!" barked Hallowell, shoving an electric torch into the youth's trembling hand. "See that you keep it steady—right on that hole in the hatch."

Now that Loeser had a job to steady him, Hallowell turned to the others. The mate snapped a switch on against the bulkhead. Storeroom and forepeak were flooded with light.

Another mountain of water struck the bow and half buried the forecastle head. The ship reeled and shuddered as if heading into a hail of ponderous boulders. The storeroom and forepeak were heavy and smoky with dust, and paint and oil fumes from the paint locker.

The men's faces were strained and haggard. They kept wary, watchful eyes on swaying gear. The storeroom, up here in the very bow of the ship, was like a cased-in torture chamber, the roar of the gale eerily muted, being hurled and pounded and twisted by shrieking, screaming furies descended from outer space.

"Drive spikes into them two by four." Leadbetter's voice sounded strained and forced. "Hustle 'em over that hole an' make 'em fast to the sound hatches. Then this old tarp on top an' more planks over that. A tight job. An' see that none o' you get washed away!"

"Better we run a lifeline to the winch," Sparr suggested, wiping his face, dripping with brine.

"How can yuh work mittenin' onto a lifeline?" snarled Hallowell. "Yuh make me sick."

As if oblivious to the boatswain's jeering tone, the Hollander calmly took a

piece of new three-quarter-inch line and stepped outside. He knotted one end to a ring bolt near the door, waist-high. Then he worked his way aft and drew the line taut about a winch.

He returned. "Safer now," he said complacently, reëntering the storeroom after ducking a whirling disc of water, lifted bodily from the crest of a comber by the terrific wind.

"Yuh ought to be in an old maid's home, Dutch." Hallowell laughed harshly.

Leadbetter and the men held their peace. The rivalry between the Down Easterner and the Hollander was no affair of theirs. It grated on Hallowell, however, that their very silence favored Sparr, for Sparr possessed a friendly nature.

Working together, clutched and battered by the droning, scud-laced wind which, because of its great force, seemed to have the bodily density of the ocean itself, the seamen hurried their work on the broken hatch.

Lundstrom, a burly, thick-set, aged A.B., stood with knees braced against the hatch battens, training the mate's flashlight on the working men. In the shelter of the storeroom, clutching a steel dog of the door, Loeser shivered, the green froth of sea-sickness upon his lips, training the other torch from the opposite direction.

All at once, a comber, flattened by the wind, reared out of the darkness and deluged the straining seamen.

"Better you hang to that lifeline, Lundstrom!" Sparr shouted a warning. "The next vun will be bigger yet!"

"Aw, let the guy alone, grandma!" barked Hallowell, shoving the Hollander from the path of a log which had rode the comber aboard. "Better you tend to your own safety."

"Ya!" cried Lundstrom, his Swedish pride flaring. "Oi vass batten down hatches vhen you cry at your mudder for drink!"

The uproarous laughter of his comrades was whipped away by the wind. Sparr's blond, light-skinned face reddened.

Suddenly, without warning, a sea, greater than all the rest, white crested mane streaming above night black waters, reared over them. It was every man for himself.

"Get back!" Hallowell shouted at Loeser as he whirled to slam shut the steel door to keep the storeroom from being flooded. The door shut, he threw his weight on a dog, clinging to it tenaciously, shoulders hunched.

TONS of water cascaded down upon the deck, tore his legs from under him, beat at him, buried him under, sought to drag him away and drown him. But with pain wrenching at his arm sockets, his breath pent to bursting within his chest, he held on, until the *Sal Ebra* shook her bow and foredecks free of the ocean's grip.

Then he turned, half expecting to see the decks swept clear of men. But, with the exception of Lundstrom, the lifeline had saved them.

Lundstrom, however, lay battered and half drowned, one booted leg tightly wedged under the catwalk covering the steam pipes. The flashlight, still going, was gripped stubbornly in one gnarled paw.

"We can't do any more with the hatch," shouted Leadbetter. "It's tight. Get amidships with Lundstrom—all hands! You see to the storeroom, bos'n."

"The sea—she be vun she-devil!" cried Sparr, bending over Lundstrom's tortured body.

Hallowell snorted savagely and cast a glowering look upon the Hollander. The sea was the sea no matter how you treated her. The fool Dutchman!

"Give 'em a hand with Lundstrom," he ordered Loeser.

The youth nodded shakily and stepped out upon the deck.

By the time Leadbetter and the others had carried Lundstrom amidships, Hallowell had stowed what gear was stowable. He switched off the lights, slammed shut the door and jammed tight all the dogs.

On his way amidships, he slipped on a stretch of ice covered deck and sprawled

to his hands and knees. Rising, he shook his big fist into the teeth of the elements and cursed luridly in three languages.

He opened the door of a spare cabin abaft the galley on the starboard side of the fiddly.

"How's he doing?" he asked, looking in on Lundstrom, stretched out, hoary face pain-racked, in the after of two bunks.

"His left leg's broken in two places," said Leadbetter, his long, kindly face creased with worry. "Left wrist broken, too, an' his collar bone cracked. Plenty o' bruises, but he's tough. The old man is whittlin' splints for him now."

Hallowell went aft and stepped into the messroom.

"If Lundy had o' listened to Dutch," Dabney was muttering, "he would o' not got bashed in."

Hallowell let forth a grudging grunt of agreement. He felt that in some way Lundstrom was the victim of his and Sparr's rivalry.

One by one the seamen, cold, tired, wet, left the messroom, heading for their warm bunks.

Alone and thoughtful, Hallowell sat wedged between bulkhead and table on the wooden bench, munching on a piece of cold meat. The *Sal Ebra* shook more and more often to the rising fury of wind and sea.

He half envied Grugar Sparr his friendly attitude. A big fat cockroach came scuttling toward him across the table. He placed the edge of his palm on the oilcloth and headed it off. The insect hesitated, stolidly took its bearings, and then scuttled away against right angles.

Several times Hallowell headed off the creature. Finally he shrugged. "Guess you got as much right on this ocean as me, friend cockroach," he grunted.

He lifted the insect, taking care not to pinch it too hard, and placed it on a piece of meat. Quietly complacent, the bug began eating. Hallowell chuckled. The cockroach reminded him of Grugar Sparr.

Time he turned in. Boatswains got little enough rest as it was, even in the best of weather, on an old ship where everything was always giving out or going wrong. He twisted the steam valve of the percolator. The middle watch would need hot coffee. He went to his room. Within two minutes he was asleep.

HE FELT as if he had no more than closed his eyes when he awoke to a touch on his foot. It was one of the A.B.'s on the mate's watch, a tall, dark-eyed gloomy looking fellow by name of Means.

"Mr. Leadbetter says clear away the lifeboats on sta'boa'd side," the man grunted.

"Eh? What's wrong?"

"All smashed to kindlin' wood. We been takin' a turrible beatin'. Reckon they ain't much hope left."

"Aw, snap out of it, fella!" Hallowell rasped. "Engine's kickin', ain't it? We're still awash, ain't we?"

When Hallowell reached the open deck, he saw a gray, spume-swept dawn slowly creeping over a raging, angry sea. The ship, masts arcing widely, was slowly beating ahead two points into the teeth of the storm like an invincible, ice-sheathed juggernaught.

He groaned when he saw the ruined lifeboats. Lips tightened, his gorge rose. The ocean was like an enemy; the flying streamers of scud and spindrift were taunting regimental banners; the endless swollen combers, determined fighting forces—striving to batter and pound and rack the *Sal Ebra* into submission.

"Fight that she-devil ocean und she bash you in!" Grugar Sparr's deep voice laced away with the gale as he forced himself up the steel ladder to the boat deck. "Neffer would she pound so much if the skipper slow the speed."

Casting a dark look at the Hollander, Hallowell bent to cut away the wreckage. An hour passed. The job done, the seamen went for breakfast.

"Second assistant says we sent out a SOS!" was Means gloomy announcement. "But Sparks won't say."

"An SOS? Blazes! What for?" burst

forth Hallowell. "This is only a sample o' the bad weather this old hooker has been through in her long life. Snap out of it! Smile, man! Smile!"

"Yust the same we be down by the head," was Sparr's stubborn verdict.

"Aw, forget the weather, Dutch," snorted Hallowell. "Shove them fried eggs under your belt. They're part o' your wages. You'll need 'em . . ."

It was a day of mounting strain and stress. The harried seamen chopped ice from decks and ladders, tightened ever loosening lashings, and lassoed an outlaw drum of heavy oil, lunging, sliding, careening, upon the after welldeck. After supper, they were ready for their bunks.

But they were to have no rest.

"The fore topmast just carried away!" Leadbetter shoved his dripping form through the forecastle door. "It's bangin' blazes out o' the foremast. Get up there and cut it loose, before it rams through a hatch. Try to make the wireless fast to the foretop."

Following the mate and trailed by his men, Hallowell reached the break of the forward welldeck. Somebody from the bridge was playing a beam of a flashlight upon the madly thrashing topmast. Held by its wire supports, it crashed and banged against the foremast and the tops of the cargo winches with each lunge of the ship.

"A risky job!" grunted Sparr, at Hallowell's elbow.

"Huh! Afraid to tackle it, eh?" rasped Hallowell, and then was sorry he said it, for although Grugar Sparr could justly be accused of being overly cautious, cowardice was not in him.

Leadbetter started down the ladder, the others behind him. Dabney, weighted down by a heavy coil of stout new line, tripped and fell. He slid halfway across number two hatch before Hallowell collared him.

Two flashlights now played on the mangled mast from the bridge. The fallen wires of the aerial, also the heavier mainstay, whipped against the port doghouse. The lookout was making them fast, temporarily, to an awning stanchion.

Hallowell and Means, wary, their senses alert to every motion of ship and pendulum-swinging topmast, watched their chance and then whipped in. On another ship, Hallowell had once seen an oiler's skull crushed like an eggshell between a swaying lifeboat and the scupper plates of the boatdeck during fire and boat drill. It hadn't been a pretty sight.

Taking most of the work upon himself, he made fast an end of line about the topmast as the *Sal Ebra* momentarily steadied herself. He didn't want any of his men crushed by this insensate battering ram.

As Grugar Sparr had said, it was a risky job.

WITH two lines reaching aft to port and starboard and another forward to steady the piece of wreckage, Hallowell took hammer, cold chisel and heavy-duty wire-cutters from Dabney, who had secured them in the engine room, and started aloft.

Without waiting for orders, Grugar Sparr darted in, a coil of rope over his broad shoulders, and began climbing the narrow steel ladder behind Hallowell.

"Get back, you lunkhead!" Hallowell shouted. "You want to get killed?"

"It iss too hard a job for vun mans," came the Hollander's calm shout. "I hold you while you voork."

Hallowell clamped his mouth shut to keep his breath from being taken from him by the wind. He started inching his way aloft again. Despite the fact that he didn't give a damn in this exhilarating battle of pitting his man-strength against the elements, he was glad of the Hollander's support. He would need it up there on the foretop. But he feared for the Dutchman's safety.

The wind sought to snatch them away; the mast strove to hurl them off; and the ice fought them after its treacherous, passive fashion.

Sparr stopped to make his line fast to the mid-section of the wreckage when it swayed in toward him. To avert the possibility of the heavy mast plunging through the hatch, it would have to be lowered.

Hallowell reached the foretop and jackknifed himself outward and up, flat on chest and belly.

"Blazes!" he cursed when a sliver of glass pierced his hand from the shattered range-light. "Careful o' broken glass!"

A two-foot splintered stump of topmast remained. Attached to this was the range light, its outer case of thick, faceted magnifying glass shattered; by some miracle one of the two inner electric bulbs still glowed brightly and defiantly.

With his body partially supported by Sparr, he severed one of the wire supports with several blows of hammer and cold chisel. The forestay had already snapped when the mast had carried away. Twisting carefully, he handed the tools to Sparr, nearest the remaining wire.

Sparr first tried to free the wire by attempting to twist the turnbuckle, but, as it was frozen with rust and he couldn't remove a cotter pin, he was unsuccessful.

Hallowell knotted the line about the stump of the topmast, forming a bight. With an elbow hooked through this, Sparr could lean farther out. He struck a few sharp blows. The wire gave way. His job done, he handed the tools back to Hallowell.

The *Sal Ebra* shook to renewed onslaughts of the storm. The foremast vibrated violently; the ship listed far over to starboard. Sparr gave a choked cry and slid sickening out into space. But the line saved him.

Hand over hand, aided by Hallowell, whose belly seemed frozen within him, Sparr drew himself back to safety.

"You damned, bloody ocean!" cursed Hallowell, nostrils flaring, fist knotted in cold anger against the surging black waters far beneath them.

"No! Not so, bos'n!" cried the Hollander, his booming voice wind-muffled as by a blanket. "Better ve die at sea like men, then like sheep—hit py auto cars ashore!"

To the signals of the mate, spotlighted beneath them, they lowered the topmast. The wireless aerial was quickly repaired. The same line was made fast to its spreader. Slowly, they drew it aloft and secured it firmly.

THEIR job done, breathing their relief, they started down. Hallowell's hands were so numb with cold he had to use them like stubs. When they stepped from the ladder, they found Leadbetter and the others attempting to lash the topmast against the port bulwarks to ring bolts in the deck. The heavier, splintered butt end was already lashed down.

Suddenly tons of brine surged over the starboard bulwarks. The *Sal Ebra* shuddered from keel bolts to main truck. Clawing at the handle of a winch, Hallowell held on grimly.

As if looking at news flashes on a movie screen, he saw the port bulwarks buried under, saw the smaller end of the topmast bob upward buoyantly, saw it catch Leadbetter in the stomach and neatly flip him overside as a stick would flip a pebble.

The vivid thought raced through Hallowell's brain that it was not the sea that murdered. No—it was a few money-grubbing owners, sitting ashore in warm offices, sending ships to sea with rotten gear. The mate had requisitioned a new topmast three trips before—but had been refused.

With a horrified cry, Hallowell started toward the bulwarks, brine sucking at his legs. The pull of the racing waters was too much. He was dragged to his knees, rolled over on his side, forced under.

He gasped, thrashed desperately, but his helpless body was slammed against the bulwarks, sucked across them—into the sea's maw!

He lost consciousness. . . .

HE OPENED his eyelids to unexpected brightness. Light stabbed through his eyes, into his brain. He blinked and looked about him. In muddled astonishment, he saw he was in the same cabin with the grotesquely bandaged Lundstrom. Captain Swaley, Sparr and Dabney were bending over him.

"Ya dum near cruised on a spree wid the

mermaids, bose," Dabney's lips twitched humorously, nervously, the while he rubbed Hallowell's hairy chest with a steaming hot towel. "Dutch yere jumped in after ya at the end o' a line. We couldn't get the poor mate—be's gorn."

Hallowell smiled crookedly. Moses Leadbetter's kindly soul had returned to its maker. He had gone the way he would have wished to go. His tomb was broad and vast and needed no marker. A lesson there—for a young fellow who had to follow along the same traditions. . . .

"Which leaves me short a mate," muttered Captain Swaley, shrewdly eyeing Hallowell and Sparr in turn. "I'll raise the other mates a grade. Put one o' you boys in third. Yuh both rate th' berth. Who'll I take?"

"Sparr is the better man." Hallowell's answer beat the slower spoken Hollander's.

"Not so!" boomed Grugar Sparr. "Hallowell voorked harder than me."

"Well, I guess we can fix you both up."

Captain Patrick Swaley's fat sides heaved. "Sparr, you take over the third mate's watch in the morning. Sea's flattened. Glass rising. Better weather. With my mate gone, I can't lose my bos'n too. So give her hell to Boston, bos'n! Then you take over second officer Fenton's duties. He's transferring."

"You're white, Cap'n, an' thanks," said Hallowell. "It means a lot."

"I thank you, too, Cap'n," grunted Sparr.

"Alvays vhen cooms vun time to celebrate," wailed Lundstrom peevishly, "I gets bunged oop!"

"Let's you an' me be friends, Dutch?" Hallowell shoved forth a brawny arm towards Grugar Sparr.

"I always vass your friend, you *dumbkopjt*," the Hollander grunted placidly. "Only always you fight too much with that she-devil sea to find it oudt!"

"Lor' lumme!" Dabney chuckled. "I never seen anything like it!"

Mayo Hallowell grinned.

SEVEN OUT OF TIME

Here is the amazing adventure of John March who followed a whispering whorl of dust into a timeless Otherworld, where present, past and future exist simultaneously. For a race of incredible beings were stealing the living and the dead from the Earth to possess the secret of man's existence—and John March alone could turn the key of time. Beginning a brilliant new novel by the author of "Drink We Deep"

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

THERE ARE SMILES THAT MAKE YOU HAPPY

A skeleton's golden grin, though, causes nothing but misery; here it turned a town upside down, broke at least one heart, and ended by weaving the strands of destiny into a hangman's noose. A novelet of Four Corners, by

THEODORE ROSCOE

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—March 18th

The old man was thigh-deep in the torrent before Randolph could get to him

Steamboat Gold

By GEORGE W. OGDEN

CHAPTER XXVI

RAMPAGE RIVER

MOSS GREGG drove over during the afternoon. He said he felt that the curse had been lifted from that spot by the return of the river to the Narris, and a man might walk in it safe and happy from that day forward.

"I told you it was a marycle, John," he said, twisting his wise, prophetic beard.

"Yes, you did," Randolph confessed, feeling a reflection of the awe that this event struck to the soul of the old man.

"Moore was right about it; he was right to the dot. It's all come out like he said it would 'way back before you was borned!"

"It was a remarkable prophecy—it seems now that it was almost inspired."

"It was inspired. No knowledge of man ever helped Moore to lay his course fifty years ahead as true as he done it, Jonathan. There's a purpose in it somewhere; it'll come to our understandin' in the end."

"It must be so, Captain."

"But she took your treasure right out of your hands—right out of 'em, Hugh tells me. It was right there in plain sight, and he had the danamite to blow it open."

"Yes, the river took it."

"The old man said it would, too; he said no man ever'd touch that money."

"He told me that, Captain, more than once. Well, you told me, too, that I'd never need a steam-shovel to uncover the wreck if the river got at it for an hour."

"Yes, I did tell you that, John; but I never suspicioned it'd come back here

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in my time or yours. Well, you don't seem to be grievin' much over it, anyways, John."

"I haven't got a regret for it as heavy as a blade of grass, Captain."

"You're right; it ain't worth grievin' over. No amount of money's worth a sleepless night."

"I've got so much more to be thankful for than I thought I'd have by this time that the money—if there was any in the safe—looks pretty small to me right now."

"Yes, you've got your life to be thankful for. I heard about the way Juliet seen the river comin' in and run down here, sensin', somehow, that you'd be down in that hole. Wasn't she the quick-headed little pigeon to think of what she did?"

"She was—none quicker in this world."

"How do you reckon that ladder come to break when you started up it, John? I thought we had it nailed on as tight as all git-out."

"There's no telling, Captain."

"Well, anyhow I don't believe there was more than nine dollars in that blame old safe—always did say so, and always will."

"It's a comfortable belief to have, Captain, and I'm going to adopt it, too," Randolph said with a smile.

NOT much of a smile, though, for cheer or mirth. Captain Gregg told Mystery afterward that it looked like it had been screwed out of him with his thumb in a vise. He might talk lightly of having no regrets, but the recollection of that safe hurt; Captain Gregg knew that it hurt.

"You was purty wise in your own gineration, John, as the feller said, puttin' your tent up here on the bank. You saved your clothes and stuff, anyhow."

"There wasn't any foresight in that, Captain; I set it up here to get the wind."

"Two rivers runnin' where there was only one a little while ago!" the captain marveled, looking toward the hills, nodding gravely to express wonder for which he was short of words. "But there'll be only a streak of the old channel left by morning—it'll all be goin' through the Narris when she bores a channel deep enough to let it all in here."

"It's reaming it out fast, the trees over there where the lake shore used to be are going—look at them—you can only see the tops of the tallest ones now."

"It's a marycle!" said Gregg. His way of saying it proved the satisfaction that he had in that word. Until his last day he would set himself up as a sort of minor prophet on the strength of his declaration that a miracle was imminent when the river began its midsummer rise.

"Yes, Arkansaw he poled right home and told us you was back. So you was gittin' blood-poisonin' in that arm where you cut it on the saw, was you, and you had to rack out to Kansas City and have it burned?"

That was the explanation of his absence that Randolph had agreed upon with Juliet and Hugh.

"I hurried to catch the two o'clock train that night, and left a note under the rope of the windlass."

"Ye-e-s, that's what Arkansaw said. Must 'a' blowed away."

"I suppose so."

"Well, I tell you we was purty well shook up around here for a couple of days."

"I'm sorry I caused all that trouble and worry, but you know a person can't delay with that sort of thing."

"No, I knowed a feller once that died from a settin' hen clawin' him on the hand. Did you see Mystery?"

"Yes, she's up at the house with Juliet."

"I reckon Julie's kind of unsettled in her mind over the old man?"

"She's considerably worried over him. He's been away since early this morning."

"I reckon he's projec'n' around somewhere; he'll turn up."

"Of course. It isn't every day in his life that a man sees big things like this. He's probably so taken up watching this new river grow that he's forgotten time."

"It's Moore's day to laugh—it sure is his day! But I tell you, John, many a

man's lost his all in the Narris today, and it'll be a mary—it'll be a up-and-down wonder if a lot of 'em wasn't drowned. I stopped up there by the head of the Narris today to peel some pawpaw bark to tie m' buggy tire on, and I got to talkin' with some fellers that'd come from over there. They said no end of stock was caught, and—Lord, look at that current! Look at it, man—you can nearly hear it whiz!"

THE river had spread to a great breadth in the Narris, for an immense volume had been poured suddenly into an insufficient measure. Along the shore on the side of Moore's farm the water turned in slow, broad-sweeping eddies, or ran spreading and creeping into the low places with the timid hesitancy of a blind creature feeling its way.

Out in the old channel, beyond the spot where Randolph had sunk his shaft, it bore a different face. There it went hurrying, bearing with it the trophies which it had gathered on its way. As it spread in that slow, blind feeling on its new shores, it floated stacks of grain and hay, houses, stables, and miscellaneous possessions of farmsteads, moved them off quietly and gently, as with apologies for the reclamation that was so thoroughly effected, and marshaled them into the speeding procession of its greedy triumph.

A few were out with skiffs, trying to salvage something out of the general ruin. Randolph recognized Arkansaw among them by the masterly sweep of his long oars, the masterly control of his craft on that rioting mad river. He went rowing beside roof, or bobbing submerged small dwellings, ready to risk his life to save any whom misfortune might have overwhelmed and the flood carried away.

"That boy orta git out of there—that ain't no place for a skift," said Gregg in subdued, small voice, as if speaking to himself, or as if the spectacle of a so mighty force made him weak in the realization of human impotence.

Not a sound of human distress came from the river, not a cry rose along its shores. It seemed as if it came from a place of the dead, bearing with it the plunder of the lost, as a wild, headlong army insolent with victory, rich in spoils, might come, trampling through a fair green land. Through such a silence it went, black and drift-clogged in the bright sun, that it seemed all living creatures had fled before it, or panted dumb upon its shores.

Not a sound. Only the wash of the savage waters as they turned upon themselves like wolves in a rout, and tumbled in snarling whirlpools which gulped worthless driftwood and the valuable belongings of men in monstrous avidity. Foul from its fat waters the steaming vapors rose, the purgings of the land for a thousand miles. And over the spot where the *Morning Star* had lain so long there turned the most savage whirlpool of them all.

"I wonder if it took old Sam Langworthy's house?" said Gregg, stretching himself to see over the trees which still remained standing on the farther shore of the river.

"I don't know, but it's more than likely it's gone. The river is spread away back past the shore of the old lake."

"Look at her over there, John. Look how she's borin' down to that old boat! By Henry! Look at that—look at that!"

The old man caught Randolph's arm, pointing with gesture of excitement.

"What is it, Captain? I don't see—"

"Them barrels of whisky, blast my melts, them barrels of whisky! She's whoopin' 'em out of that hole like they was feathers. Don't you see 'em bobbin' around that whirlpool over there?"

CHAPTER XXVII

WHIRLPOOL

CERTAINLY there was some dark object now and then visible in the angry sweep of that mighty swirl that bore great resemblance to a barrel. For a moment only the eye could catch these shapes in the dark water as they were

thrown up for a flash into the sunlight and then jealously sucked down again out of sight.

But as Randolph watched all doubt dissolved. Now the black head of a barrel danced a moment in the solemn circle of the whirlpool, now the rounded side showed briefly, like some ungainly creature of the river coming out to revel in the joy of this devastation after a long and sluggish sleep.

The ironical humor of the situation was so acute to Randolph that he laughed with mirth that seemed at once immoderate and inexcusable to Captain Gregg, who was buckling himself up furiously and milling his tobacco as if he had a bet up on the time it would take him to beat out the last drop of juice.

"It's goin' to hell! It's all goin' plumb to hell!" he lamented, stretching his impotent hand out toward the mocking waste that the Missouri was making of the cargo of the *Morning Star*.

"Let it go! What do we care?" said Randolph, struggling with his mirth, shutting it out of all his countenance but his eyes.

"Nations! If I could hitch a rope on one of them barrels!"

"You never could land it, Captain. There's no buoyancy in them—it's only the strong current that keeps them up a second or two."

"I'd resk it if I had a skift—"

The captain jumped as if pricked by an inspiration.

Off up the river bank he went tearing through the corn, yelling across the troubled waters to Arkansaw, signaling him with his hat. Arkansaw was in midriver holding his skiff against the current like a hawk balancing to dart upon its prey.

He was watching for a life in peril or property afloat that he might fasten on and tow ashore, but when he saw his father's frantic signal he threw his power into his oars and came speeding toward that bank.

Gregg started back to the point opposite the wreck, waving imperative orders for Arkansaw to put in with all haste.

"Come in and git me!" he yelled, making a trumpet of his hands.

Arkansaw was doing his best to make a landing where Randolph and Gregg waited, but from the point of his prow one might have thought his intention was to strike off for Omaha, or some upriver place.

Between strokes the stiff current slued his stern around, whirled him and rocked him, but untroubled and sure Arkansaw came on, the side of his long, low skiff presenting, drawing nearer, nearer, with each mighty pull on the oars.

Gregg was bucking and chewing at a rate never approached before in all his days.

He began talking again to Randolph, and pointing toward the whirlpool, where an unmistakable barrel rose now and then; turned and circled and sank. The old man's excited behavior detracted Arkansaw from the delicate labor in his hands. A moment he ceased pulling, leaned on his oars and looked. Only a breath later, it seemed, he was struggling to tear his boat out of the indrawing suction of the great whirlpool.

Gregg said nothing, but Randolph heard him catch his breath with a gasp like a knife had been set in his back. As his son fought with his long oars and strong arms to pull his craft out of the danger which Gregg, in his fever of excitement, had overlooked, the old man went down to the water's edge and watched. His hands were clenched as if he grasped the spokes of a steering wheel, and his old face was as bloodless as the ashes on a hearth.

Stern first the whirlpool caught Arkansaw, jerked his boat in with rude and sudden triumph, spun it for a moment, the long oars beating it like frantic arms. Captain Gregg shouted, but with more of despair than encouragement in the sound. Randolph, beside him now at the river edge, saw him cover his eyes with his hand as the skiff reared prow upward and sank.

THE old man was thigh-deep in the river before Randolph could lay hold of him and drag him back to shore. "He'll swim out. Watch for him—he'll make it!" he shouted as if he spoke to one deaf.

Gregg did not speak, but Randolph felt his grip on his arm tighten as if his muscles set in their last rigor as he watched the whirling débris in that pool of death. It seemed a long time—Randolph was holding his breath as if his own head was under water—before they saw Arkansaw, far down the river below the whirlpool.

"He remembered—he remembered! He dived through it, dang his little hide!" There was unmeasurable pride and tenderness in the old man's voice, and on his bearded face the tears were running down.

Randolph let out a yell of relief, triumph, and encouragement, and Arkansaw threw up one long arm and waved it, to let them know that he was safe, and still a gentleman in spite of his misfortune.

Then he came swimming hand over hand, in long and strong strokes, swimming as if he fled from death and hell!

A quarter of a mile down the river he made his landing. He was running to meet them when they came round the corner of the old store, his eyes big, his hands trying to tell them what his tongue for the moment seemed unable to express.

"Did you git stove in anywhere?" the old man asked, running to Arkansaw, feeling him over for broken ribs.

Arkansaw lifted an arm, ran it along under his nose, sniffing it; passed the other in the same peculiar inspection, looking at Randolph and his father with expression of unutterable feeling. Suddenly he found his tongue:

"No, I ain't stove in—I ain't even touched," he said. "But, gee-mo-nees, you orto 'a' seen the whisky out there in that blame old swirl!"

"Whisky?" said Randolph.

"Whisky?" echoed the old man.

"Rivers of it—barrels of it bustin' all around me like eggs in a fire! Say, man! I swum in whisky for a mile!"

"Damn whisky!" said Gregg. "If I hadn't been so hot after it I wouldn't 'a' run you into that hellhole of poppin' barrels!"

"It's breaking them up, is it, Arkansaw?"

"Breakin' up ain't no name for it, John! That swirl's a regular funnel, only it's workin' backward. It must be borin' heads out of them barrels down there like the little end of a cyclone. Tell me! I got enough whisky in them five minutes to last me the rest of my days!"

"You thought once there was some doubt of ever coming across enough," Randolph grinned.

"Sa-a-ay man!" Arkansaw twisted his head, sniffed around over his shirt again, an expression of nausea in his speaking face.

"I was bab-tized in whisky; I was sopped to the gizzard; I was he't to the bone! You can have it. You can take it all. I don't want no more of it in mine!"

"Damn whisky!" said Gregg again with increased stress. "No matter how long a man lives it looks like it'll git him some way, if he keeps on settin' his mind on it. I never wanted none of that cargo nohow. I just imagined I did. And look what it nearly come to!"

"Yes, I lost my durn skift!" said Arkansaw.

"If you hadn't 'a' dived, sonny, you'd 'a'—you'd 'a'—"

"Shucks! You always told me to, pap."

THEY stood again opposite the whirlpool, Gregg looking Arkansaw over with wondering and admiring eyes. There was a new softness in the old man's face; he kept his hand on his son's shoulder as if it needed the evidence of touch to assure his eyes that he had come out of the river safe and whole.

"You can have it, gentle-men," said Arkansaw thoughtfully. "You can go ahead and take it all. I'll never git the smell of that booze out of m'nose if I live a million years!"

After Gregg and Arkansaw were gone

their way home, Randolph stood by the river, turning in his thoughts the young man's fortunate escape, together with many other things.

The bones of Langworthy's victims were scattered under the dark waters now, the evidence of his long delving and dark misdeeds destroyed. All his days the scoundrel might walk unchallenged now, purged of his crimes by the river that ran as foul as his own heart's blood.

And of the treasure, so nearly won through so much labor, through the waste of so many hopes? The river had taken it from him, as Caleb Moore had told him it would snatch it, and buried it deeper, beyond any further possibility of discovery.

So ended that quest, so finished the romantic chapter of his youth.

Randolph had been searching the farm, the schoolmaster having gone in another direction, in an effort to locate Moore, whose unaccountable absence was causing Juliet great distress. She feared that he had been caught in the flood. By agreement the searchers were to meet at the camp, and there Randolph was waiting the schoolmaster's return.

Gregg had been gone a long time, and the sun was almost down to the corntops when Hugh arrived, covered with burrs, his face scratched from forcing his way through brambles and thickets.

"Have you found him, Hugh?" Randolph asked as the schoolmaster came to a stop at the tent, wiping his forehead on his sleeve to check the flow of blinding sweat.

"No, but I started the devil out of his hole up there a little way, and almost ran him down!"

"Langworthy? Was he still sneaking around here?"

"Nested up there like a rabbit in the corn, waiting to sneak back to try some further devilment, I suppose."

"Or to take stock of what he already had done. Do you think the old man met him, Hugh?"

"God knows! If he did he's a dead man! I never saw so much Hell in a human face as there was in that demon's when I started him out of his lair. I had a club in my hand. I struck him once—one good, fair blow. I might as well have struck water—he was so wild, so much a beast, he couldn't feel pain!"

"But he ran from you—he could feel fear."

"He ran. For some purpose that I cannot question, the Almighty"—the schoolmaster lifted his hat in reverence—"delivered him out of my hand!"

"I was watching for him, too, for I didn't believe the river got him. If I'd met him, Hugh, I intended to shoot him like a rattlesnake!"

The schoolmaster's chest was heaving, his breath so far spent that he labored yet to overtake it. "It may be that he's been spared for your hand," he said. "He's wronged you more than any living man."

"I hope the old man didn't meet him this morning, moody and melancholy as he was, with his fantastic grievance against Langworthy for building the levee. Why, look there, Hugh! Isn't that window of the old store open?"

"I believe—yes, it is open. The old man's down there."

"Of course. We should have thought of that."

THEY hurried down to the old brown storehouse—the brown river in front of it, an unfaithful mistress come back to it to mock its battered age and the frailties of its decay.

The timbers of the old wharf had been wrenched out of their anchorage in the drifted soil and carried away, and as the flood increased it tore the half-fallen freight-shed from its shaking supports and whirled the debris into its stream of spoils.

The main building, standing on ground several feet higher than the wharf, to all appearances was safe and solid and good for any floods, either of water or fortune, that the years might bring.

The main current of the river set in strong against that shore, bending over

in a long sweep from the submerged site of Skillet Lake, doubtless following precisely the track that it ran in half a hundred years before.

Deep water was again before Caleb Moore's door; the largest steamer that the Missouri ever floated could have docked there beside what remained of his once-famous wharf.

Now and then as the two men approached the building, walking close along the shore, the current sheared off a great piece of land the plumed corn nodding stately farewell as it sank. It appeared that the Missouri was determined to take a heavy toll from Moore for coming back to him after all its fickle years.

Faint sounds of heavy articles being moved about came through the open window, dust rose out of it into the still air as if Moore had made a fire within those old walls out of the sad scroll of his gloomy life.

"He's there getting ready for the boats," said Hugh. "He told me he'd be ready when they came, God pity him!"

The door was closed and locked from the inside. A neat sheet of white paper was posted on its gray, cracked panel, this notice written in a clear, strong hand:

TO OUR PATRONS

Owing to an invoice of stock, this store will not be open for business until tomorrow morning.

Caleb Moore, Prop't.

There was a pang in Randolph's breast as he read it, as poignant as sorrow for the dead.

"The shock has broken him entirely," said he.

"Do you think we'd better see if we can persuade him to go home, John?"

"We're strangers—we're outside his life. I don't believe he'd take it very kindly if we called him out—I even doubt if he'd know us. He's gone back fifty years."

"He might remember when he saw you—you've been—"

"I doubt it, Hugh. I wouldn't like to disturb him—I think we'd better leave that to Juliet. I'll go and tell her where he is."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WOLF PACK

MOORE came to the door at Juliet's entreaty, but refused to open it. He appeared to be entirely rational on all points save that alone of his ancient storehouse and moldering stock. He seemed unaware of both fatigue and time, laboring there in the musty gloom among the things which must have fallen apart at his touch.

"*Grandpère,* you haven't had anything to eat since breakfast," she urged, the anxiety of her face in strange contrast with the gentle coaxing of her voice.

"There'll be time to think of that when I've straightened things out here a bit, child," he answered.

"Mr. Randolph is back," she called, lifting her voice, "all safe and sound. Wouldn't you like to see him?"

"Thank heaven for his safe return!" came the fervent reply.

"You know the river, *grandpère,* has taken the—what he was searching for. It has taken everything!"

"It has taken much, child, but not everything," the old man replied, chiding her grief. "It has returned far more than it has taken—far more. I must run to work now, Juliet; there is a consignment for St. Jo—"

His voice sank, inaudible, as the sound of his feet drew away. Juliet turned from the door, choking on her tears, groping out with her hands as if her sorrow had struck her blind.

Sunset came—night. Moore was still at work among his ancient wares, a dim lantern lighting him, so pale of beam that it must have been fed on a candle that had outlasted the waste of those ghostly years.

They waited there on the crumbling shore—Juliet, Mystery, the schoolmaster, and Randolph—hoping that he would tire at length and come out for refreshment.

Again and again Juliet went to the door or window and called him, but after the first impatient reply and command for her to leave him undisturbed, the old man paid no heed.

The current charging against the shore full head was cutting away the land rapidly. There was not tree-root nor stone on that side to turn its gnawing.

Persistently it bored and scooped, undermining blocks of acres at a time. All where the wharf had been was gone, and on Juliet's last attempt to reach the door Randolph had drawn her back only a heart's beat before the land remaining in front of the threshold caved in with a roar like breaking surf.

He would not permit her to approach the window again, for the insidious current was laboring darkly at the corner of the old building, as if in execution of a predestined plan to hollow out a track for steamboats so they might load and discharge directly at the old merchant's door.

PRESENTLY the soft, thick gurgle of running water near their feet drew their eyes from the warehouse. Hugh lit the lantern, unwilling to trust the report of his ears. There, between them and the old building, the water ran, only a rivulet yet, but black from the main current and spreading every moment.

"It's cut across the neck up there," he said. "That used to be an island where the store stands, and it will be again in a little while."

"Grandpère, grandpère!" Juliet called, running distractedly toward the building, stopping only when her feet struck the water, "the river is rising; you must come out!"

"I'll go over and talk to him; maybe I can make him see his danger," Randolph proposed.

"Oh, how fast it's rising!" said Juliet despairingly.

"I'll go with you," the schoolmaster offered. "We'll bring him out."

"By force, if we must," said Randolph, already knee-deep in the swift, hard-pulling little stream.

"There's somebody coming," said Mystery, her eyes big in the lantern light. "It sounds like a lot of men!"

Randolph and the schoolmaster stopped, moved by the same reluctance to leave the women alone.

"Stay with them," said Randolph. The schoolmaster turned back to shore.

There came a hail from a little way up the bank: "Randolph, Atchison! You down there?"

"What's wanted—who is it?" Randolph called back.

The schoolmaster held the lantern up to look under its beams. Several men had halted a few rods back from the warehouse, some on horseback, some afoot. They came forward, silent and mysterious on the nature of their visit. At the rim of the lantern light they stopped. One on a horse detached himself and came a few yards nearer.

"We'd like to have a few words with you two gentlemen, if you please," he said. His politeness was strained; it seemed to disclose that they had come there on no social nor friendly purposes.

Randolph turned and came ashore.

"What do you want, Stapleton?" the schoolmaster asked, lifting the lantern again, flashing it in the horseman's face.

"We want to know what you two men know about dynamitin' the levee and lettin' the river through," the farmer replied.

"Oh, what a monstrous charge, Mr. Stapleton!" said Juliet, forgetful of her grandfather's danger.

RANDOLPH was so astonished by the accusation that he could not answer it for a breath. Then he stepped forward as composedly as he could for the indignation that trembled over him.

"Gentlemen, this is very serious," he said.

"We know it, Randolph," the spokesman replied.

"And it is as unjust as it is serious,"

Randolph went on. "I wasn't any nearer the levee today, nor for several days before, than right here, gentlemen, and I have proof of it. Mr. Atchison went to Richfield this morning; he can prove to your satisfaction that he wasn't within five miles of the levee when it broke."

"Yes; we know he went to Richfield, Randolph," somebody in the crowd said.

"We know what he went for," said another.

"Dynamite—that's what he went for," called somebody in the background.

"I don't deny it—I've got it yet, in the original package," said Hugh.

"Mr. Randolph was here when the flood came, Mr. Stapleton," Juliet protested indignantly; "he was trapped in the shaft he had sunk to the wreck; somebody tore out the ladder, and I—I saw—"

"She saw the river coming in, from the upper balcony of her home, and ran down here to warn me," Randolph finished for her, seeing that she hesitated. "I was in that hole, forty-four feet down, gentlemen, and I couldn't get out, due to the treachery of a man I can name. He broke off a section of the ladder, and shut me in. The water was pouring in on me when Miss Moore came—I'd have been drowned in a few seconds more. She let down the rope and hauled me out."

There was a noise in the old store as of a window opening or closing. Moore was no longer at the desk where his lantern stood. The men in the crowd drew together a little at the sound, and spoke in low voices among themselves.

Juliet, marking their fear, whispered to Randolph:

"Shall I call him again?"

"I don't believe it would do any good, Juliet," said he.

"You bought dynamite," somebody insisted.

"Yes, and you used it," another charged. "The river was fallin'; it never broke that levee without being helped by some one."

"Hugh Atchison didn't get back from Richfield until two hours after the levee broke," Randolph told them. "We can produce plenty of people who saw him on the road."

"Well, if you've got proof, I'm glad of it, gentlemen," the leader said. "But a judge and jury'll have to pass on that; it ain't our place."

"They bought the dynamite; that's proof enough for us!" said a shrill man in the dark.

"Fetch 'em along. What's the use foolin' around about it?"

"We've got together, and we've talked this thing over," said Stapleton from his saddle, "and we decided it was our duty to take both of you over to jail and turn you over to the sheriff till the grand jury can act. Randolph, you was seen runnin' away from that levee not an hour before the river broke through."

"What a lie!" said Juliet, in scorn.

"Nobody ain't asked you to put in," some one of them reminded her.

"Bring 'em along; cut out this damn jawin'," came the too plain suggestion from the crowd.

The schoolmaster put the lantern down.

"Gentlemen, we're not going with you," Randolph said decisively. "We know who's back of this movement, we know who made the charge, and we also know all this talk about the sheriff and grand jury is a sham."

"If you're honest in your intentions, Stapleton," said the schoolmaster, "leave somebody here to guard us if you're distrustful, and go and get a warrant for us. Send the sheriff here with it, and we'll go. But we'll not go an inch with any mob, now or later."

"Oh, to hell with a warrant!" said one, pushing forward. "If you're afraid of 'em, Stapleton, git out of the road and let a man—"

MYSTERY GREGG snatched the lantern, jerked it with deft movement, and put out the light. "Run—run into the corn!" she whispered.

A commotion in the mob ensued, for the putting out of the lantern had left it as dark as a pocket there among the shadows

of corn and glooming warehouse. Men called to each other, shouting directions, cautions; urging others to lay hold of them and prevent their escape.

Even if their intent had been to fly, the quickness of the mob would have prevented their going. The inflamed farmers swarmed around the two men; the click of gunhammers was heard, and Stapleton's loud warning to be careful of the women.

"Hold! Hold! You scoundrels!"

It was the voice of Caleb Moore, sounding from a dark window on the shore side of his store, where he had come unseen and unheard.

"Grandpère, grandpère!" Juliet called to him.

"Randolph—Juliet! Where are you?" the old man asked.

"Here, *grandpère*—here!"

"Strike a light and stand aside from between me and that pack!"

Hugh had found the lantern; in a moment he had a match to it and a light.

"Step to clear—away to one side—and give me range at them, the prowling curs! Now, you clear out of here, you skulkers, clear out!"

The farmers had drawn back at Moore's first word. They were afraid of that mysterious building, where tradition and superstition had been heaping shudderful tales for half a century; afraid of the strange old man whom they never had understood. But the leader was assuring them, calling them back.

"He can't hurt you, boys—it's only a bluff," he said. "He can't git at you—don't you see that water runnin' between here and the house?"

Randolph slipped away to the tent and got his revolver, which he had left there not two hours before. When he returned, the leader of the mob was standing on the water's edge arguing with Moore.

"But let me tell you, Mr. Moore," he was saying in deferential, conciliatory speech, "we heard—"

"But you didn't see," the old man cut in with contempt, "and on heresay you've come down here on my property to drag two better men than any of you out and hang them. Yes, I suppose if you'd had the spunk, you and your daddies ahead of you, you'd have come down here and hung me, and burned this place, long ago."

"Yes, but let me tell you, Mr. Moore, Clint Johnson and his fam'ly nearly got washed off and drowned, and Sam Langworthy and his wife ain't been seen since the river took their house. Lives have been lost, and no end of stock. Wheat and hay was carried off in the stack, and barns and houses, and the New Jerusalem cemetery was washed—"

"I know, Stapleton; I know. I stood on the bank and saw it all go—I saw more than you can tell me. Let me ask you skulkers if there's something you realize."

THE old man's voice grew in volume; it came stern and deep over the black water, where little points of stars wavered in the spreading stream that cut him off from shore. "Do you know the river has come back to the Narris? Listen to it, stoop down and lap it with your tongues, you dogs! Old crazy Moore, as you've called me for more than forty years, told your daddies before you it would come back and bring the boats. They laughed; they laughed a long time. But the river's here!"

Moore struck the timbers of his old house with something that might have been the stock of a gun, a resounding blow.

It was too dark for them to see his outline in the window, across which the vines had clambered and grown dense. In the hour of his triumph Caleb Moore had become a voice, a voice of accusation, of arraignment for the old injustices and fancied wrongs, and they feared it more than twenty guns.

"You build a levee to hold it back, but it wasn't any more force against the river than my hand, and I told them it wouldn't be when they were building it. The old river melted it like a hot poker laid to butter, and returned to her right and lawful way. Listen to me, you pack!"

Moore struck the timbers of his window again, blow upon blow, as if he commanded order of an unruly throng, although if the cornfield had been standing empty before him it could not have been more quiet.

In his pause a section of the shore undermined by the river gave way and plunged with the sudden, lunging sound of a leviathan taking to the deep. Its surge ran over the narrowing island where the storehouse stood, and broke against the old building's side.

"Listen to me!" Moore commanded again, his voice sounding nearer, as if he leaned from the window. "Somebody told you Randolph and Atchison blew your levee up, and you were suspicious enough, narrow enough, blind fools enough to swallow the lie. Randolph and Atchison didn't have anything to do with it and if you're looking in earnest for the man that cut it, go and find Joel Langworthy, the hound of hell!"

The farmers made no answer to this startling charge. They huddled there in the dark as if for the comfort of shoulder against shoulder.

"I told you it would come back to me," said Moore, "and you had a better reason to come here and charge the crime to my hand than to these innocent men. But I would have waited God's own hour as I waited for more than fifty years. It never was my thought that the river would return to me through the work of an iniquitous hand, but since it is so, I do not challenge the inscrutable ways of Providence. The river is here, and Joel Langworthy is the man that put the charge of dynamite in the levee and let it through!

"It washed out your burying-ground," said Moore unfeelingly, "it ripped your old daddies out of their graves and rolled their bones off to hell and damnation that was their due! I told them it would come and trample over their headstones—I told them, and they laughed!"

The vindictiveness of his bitter years was discharging itself.

Caleb Moore was as cruel as his old river in the day that had come his turn to laugh. Shocked as he had been by the old man's revelation, Randolph could not suppress a thrill of satisfaction in his victory, terrible as it was. For they might have been kinder to him through all his barren years.

He knew that the old man was mad, that the constant bearing of his mind upon that old disappointment had worn a groove in his brain in that spot, leaving the rest of his perceptions clear. This was not a lapse, to be overpowered by the magnificent will-force as he had thrown it off for no knowing how many years before.

"Now you know, you hounds, so clear out of here!" the old man said. "I've got three shotguns loaded with buckshot, and I'll turn them loose on the man that hangs around here thirty seconds longer."

"Ya-a, it's a bluff—he can't git at us!" said one.

Randolph took the lantern from the schoolmaster's hand and walked toward them, holding the light high so that it fell on the pistol that he leveled upon their crowded mass.

"It's no buff—clear out of here," he said.

There was a commotion in the corn as if a herd of cattle had been turned into it as each man struck a line for himself and bolted into the dark. Distrustful of them, fearing that they might fire on him, Randolph jerked out the light.

The little group at the water's edge strained and listened for another word from the dark window. Presently the stock of the gun clumped on the floor, and the window sash complained as Moore started to close it. They heard him speaking, as if in explanation to any friendly ear that might hear.

"I must prepare for the return of commerce," he said.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RETURN OF COMMERCE

THE little branch of river that had reached behind the store had widened during Moore's arraignment of the

mob until now it ran an unfordable torrent.

Mystery Gregg stood shivering in the lantern light as if a chill had struck her. After a bit she began to cry, and would not be comforted by Juliet's brave assurances and that all would end as God might will.

"I can't stand any more; I can't bear to stay here and see—and see—" She finished her weeping protestation by a terrified gesture toward the old store. The schoolmaster put his arm around her, and calmed her, and pressed her to sit down and rest. "No, no—I want to go home; I want to go home!" she said. "There has been so much suffering today—I can't stand to see any more!"

"Hugh will take you home—he can take a horse and buggy, Juliet?"

"Of course. Rouse up one of the men, Mr. Atchison, and tell him I said to drive you over."

"I think you'd better go to the house with them, Juliet," Randolph suggested in all tenderness. "I'll stay by till—till morning."

"I'll stay with you."

"It's a long time till daylight again, Juliet—you'll be worn out."

"I'll watch here with you, Jonathan."

The schoolmaster took Mystery tenderly by the hand and led her away.

Juliet was greatly troubled over the old man's perils. She proposed many impossible schemes to lure or drive him out of the shivering old building, which was coming in greater danger of the river every hour. On both sides of it now the current was eating away the earth; each mass that slumped into the river sent waves climbing toward the ground windows, lapping the dusty panes.

Randolph assured her in some measure after a while, and drew her a little farther away upstream, where they could watch the old man's shadow as he came and went about the preparations for the trade which his broken mind believed would come on this new flood.

"It's hard to believe, he's so clear and rational in everything else. He knew those men—didn't he tell them off, though?"

She appeared proud of the old man's payment of a long-standing score, and shared his triumph with him, as Randolph himself had warmed with Moore's denunciation.

"There is no doubt, Juliet, that his mind has broken at last."

"Listen! Hear how the bank's going all up and down this side. Oh, isn't there some way to save him, Jonathan?"

"If it keeps on cutting over here, Juliet, and scouring the channel out like it is, it will recede into its own bed in a little while and leave him safe."

HE DOUBTED whether the farmers believed Moore's declaration that Joel had blown up the levee, for the old man had not offered any evidence to substantiate the charge. If they believed it, then surely Joel would be called upon, sternly, to pay.

A dreadful toll the Missouri had taken from the people of the Narris that day. Men would not forget it as long as a drop of blood ran in the descendants of those who had raced that wild black wave.

The river appeared to have reëstablished itself in the Narris for good. From the volume of water passing at sunset it seemed that there could not be a great amount left in the old channel. Already the frogs were chanting along the new banks as if they had lain under the sand there since the day the river left the Narris fifty years ago, and waited for it, like Caleb Moore, secure in the faith that it would come back and give them life.

"The river has taken a great deal from you today, Jonathan," she said. She was sad, regretful, standing beside him, watching the beam of her grandfather's light quaver over the encroaching waters. She was calm, too, as if the tempest of her fear had passed.

"It's nothing to me now, Juliet. That's over; it's done."

The light of their lantern shone into her face. He had turned to her as he spoke, and now stood gazing.

She was bareheaded, her hair had broken its bonds and fallen in lovely disorder on her neck, a strand of it shadowing her cheek.

"All your work is lost, all your brave hope wasted," she said, gazing away thoughtfully into the darkness that pressed upon the river. "Oh, Jonathan! It must have emptied your heart."

"It would be a poor heart," he said gently, "if that could empty it of hope. The river took a great deal away from me today, Juliet, but as your grandfather said, it left more than it swept away."

"It was there, almost in your hands."

"Yes, I'll go on believing that the treasure was there. The river's got it, but it didn't leave me poor. It left me youth and strength, courage and new hope—more ahead of me than I ever had before. Life balances yet, Juliet, as they say it always has done. I have my compensation for disappointment and spent hope; I've been paid a good deal quicker than life makes its adjustments in the general run of things."

So there came love in that sad hour, with its sweet ministrations; love, always young, and warm of touch, as death is old and sorrowing.

MOORE was carrying and arranging his old wares; the sound of his labors was plain to them. It was almost midnight. The river was rising rapidly as the breach at the head of the Narris widened, letting more of the flooded stream come pouring through. It had cut so close to the foundation of the storehouse that now and then the branches of a tree scraped its weatherboards as the current whirled it by.

Only a little triangle of land was to be seen upstream from the building now, on which it seemed to ride like a house on a barge. Once in a while Moore would come to the door, his shadow leaning out over the water as he stood in the light. After searching the river as if for something expected, or to mark its stage, he would turn back to his work.

"The channel is deepening, but the river is rising so fast it's spreading," Randolph said. "I'm sorry now I didn't have Hugh send Arkansaw with a skiff—we might have been able to get him off."

"If he wouldn't leave it for me at the beginning, he wouldn't come for anybody else at the end," she said. "We couldn't have compelled him to leave—he might have shot somebody."

"It would be a risk," he admitted.

"I heard something down the river a minute ago, or I thought I did. Do you suppose—there! What is that?"

It sounds like—I think a steamboat must be coming up."

They listened to the sound, sharp above the murmur of the river and the crash of falling shores.

"It's a paddle-wheel," he said.

Moore came to the door. They could see him, the light behind him falling on his white hair, as he strained out to listen.

"He hears it, too; he's been expecting it," she said. "There—see its searchlight!"

"There's the bell—the pilot's feeling his way into strange waters."

"It's been a long time since a steamboat passed through the Narris."

"Yes. I wish Gregg could see it. That's the way the *Morning Star* came up fighting the flood current the morning she went down."

"But she must have been a bigger boat than this one; this is only a toy compared to some I've seen on the lower river."

"She would have made several of this one, your grandfather said. Look at that light—it's feeling around as if they're lost."

The boat's searchlight, pointing like an exploring finger, wavered from side to side of the river as if the pilot sought landmarks in his confusion.

Now it shot straight ahead for a little, shifted again presently from shore to shore over the widespread flood. The pilot was puzzled by his strange surroundings, and was coming on with caution.

The boat was not more than a quarter of a mile below when there came a jangle of bells, and the sound of the wheel ceased. The searchlight was hunting frantically for

some familiar mark, while the boat drifted back under the pilot's hand. Now the light struck Moore's building, wavered there, then fixed on it an inquiring eye. Bells sounded, and the beat of the wheel. On again the boat came, with more confidence and speed, as if the pilot had found a friend.

"He knows the old building—he understands that the river's back in the Narris. I'll bet he's an old-timer."

"He must be," she murmured.

NEITHER spoke again as the steamer came breasting the current, which ran fiercely at its work of reaming and shearing. They stood in the shadow of the old building, which fell long and grotesque from the searchlight.

Juliet reached out with appealing hand, as if she feared that the passing of the boat would separate them and leave her alone in her vigil on that crumbling shore.

In the warehouse Caleb Moore was moving with new activity. He came to the door with the lantern now, its feeble candle like a fox-fire in the sharp amethyst glare of that modern contrivance on the approaching boat. Old and new were meeting in the door of that house of buried recollections.

The steamer had been holding close inshore to get the slacker water.

Now the pilot swung her out into the stream, as if afraid to trust himself so near a shore where corn came down and stood in the water's edge. The searchlight flashed across the faces of Juliet and Randolph as the operator withdrew it from the warehouse and the boat, a hundred yards out, seemed to stand a moment as it gathered strength to push on against the stiffer stream.

Moore was standing in his door, holding his ancient lantern out as far as he could reach. He waved it as the steamer came abreast, and called across to her, his voice loud and clear.

"To greet the return of commerce to the Narris! Welcome, welcome back!"

The pilot answered the old man's salute with a blast of the whistle, and the steamer pushed on. The swell came in heavily against the low shore, running up it in the roar of falling earth. It came mounting to the door of Moore's warehouse, where he stood with his feeble light held high; it thrashed against the battered weatherboards, it leaped in deep upon the floor.

Juliet moaned as if her best-beloved had trampled on her heart. The building shivered, the pale lights within it trembled as though a wind had come in to vex them.

With that foreboding tremor the old house moved forward, slowly at the start, like a ship leaving the ways, gathering speed as it lurched; lifted on the swelling waters, it lurched; stood a moment poised. Down then—swift as an avalanche, in a great hissing surge of falling land.

They ran to the water's edge with wild vague cries. The building was sinking; its lights gone. Deliberate and slow it moved now, with a high solemnity in its final great displacement of the eager waters which pressed upon it to bear it away.

Commerce had come back to the Narris, but it was the commerce of a new age which laughed at the sad revival of the old. It had reached out in its proud strength and done a kindness to the last outpost of the past that stood sentinel upon those shifting shores.

Caleb Moore was gone.

His hopes, and his sad distractions, and his long dusty dreams were done. The river ripped out the little gore of land where his storehouse had stood, and its waters closed over the spot. Down its funereal current, far down in the thick obscuration of night, it bore the black hulk of the old building away, hastening it with impatient whirls, crowding it forward with such haste as the heirs of a dead man who have waited long for their inheritance hurry his body to the tomb.

The watchers of the night were still there at dawn, gazing in chastened sorrow across the great river, gray under the breaking morning as if it carried the ashes of the whole world's penances down to the absolving sea.

Juliet drew away from it, shuddering, afraid of it with the daylight on its face—cruel, somber, triumphant, appalling thing. She was cold with sorrow, sick with unuttered pain.

It was but a man's duty to comfort her with the strength of his arm and warm her at the fires of her heart.

Love again; coming in the sad daybreak to triumph over the bitterness of death, as love had exulted over men's strife and lifewaste, and sad wreckage of the earth's green hopes through all our centuries, which are but a day in the vast chronicle of pain. But not to exult in arrogance, not to celebrate in wild-lifted song. Nunlike and warm-handed comes love in such an hour, with the shadow of old sorrows in its eyes.

"I'll telegraph down the river and have them watch for him—maybe we can bring his body back and give it burial here," he said.

"That would be his wish, I know."

But Jonathan Randolph knew as his words sounded that it would be a vain quest. No man would look again upon the face of Caleb Moore.

The creed of the imperious Missouri was deep in the young man's recollection that solemn dawn. What it gathered in such a season of its wild harvesting it hid away among its silt-heaped treasures to come into the sunlight nevermore.

CHAPTER XXX

THE DEVIL LIVES HERE

"IF MYSTERY understood the true nature of the man, Hugh, and his hideous affliction, she'd come to her senses in a hurry."

"Yes, if she knew, Jonathan; if somebody could make her understand this awful curse, fastened on him by some unholy prenatal desire. She doesn't know, so she grieves her heart out in silence, believing him dead."

"You and I know he's not dead—others know it. He was seen after the flood reached its height, and it was Joel, and nobody else, that set that mob after us."

"It was Joel, with his devil's disposition."

They were in the schoolhouse, where the master was adding to his wall lessons and adornments, preparatory to the opening of the term, only a week away. Chalk dust had settled on his reddish hair and eyebrows, giving him a look of age.

"What do you suppose he's skulking and hiding this way for, Hugh?"

"Because the man's dead in him; he's gone back to the beasts."

"It's five days now since he blew the levee, and nothing either heard or seen of him."

"No; they've dropped the hunt for him," said Hugh.

"Well, I wish he'd waited three hours longer before he blew that levee, Hugh."

"Yes; I'd have been there with the explosives; we'd have opened the safe. The best thing to do with disappointments like that, John, is to call them dreams, and forget them."

"It hits a man pretty hard, Hugh, after he's banked on it so long, and come within smelling distance of it, as you said that day."

"It hits him right where he lives, as the man said. I know it; I know it as well as any man alive. I've tiptoed up to what I thought were some big things in my own life, just to see them turn to dust when I put out my hand to touch them. It takes those things to make a man; it takes fire, and vinegar, and gall."

RANDOLPH got up out of the schoolmaster's chair and stood forward a little, with a drawing-up to his frame and a squaring of his shoulders as if he shook off a load.

"I know it, Hugh; I haven't got a thing to complain of or mope over. It was only a shot in the dark; I've got as much as I had when I began—yes, I've got more; I've got a great deal more."

"A treasure that cannot be weighed, counted, or even estimated," the schoolmaster said, a little glow in his face as he

worked away again. "When she goes away, Mystery will sink and fade, unless some other solace comes into her life, which I despair of giving."

"She may not be grieving over Langworthy; it may be only the effect of all this turmoil. Mystery is a sensitive woman; when she sympathizes with a person she lifts more than half his sorrow to her own back."

"All she needs is a glimpse of the devil in his own guise," said Hugh. "The Narris will never be clean as long as he's left skulking in it—never safe. He was all devil that day I started him out of the corn."

"I never heard anything like it except the tales of medieval times, when they used to drive stakes through the bodies of people believed to be vampires, and pour hot vinegar on their graves."

"Among certain Malay tribes reversions of similar nature are not uncommon, and there are many recorded instances of it among our own Indians," the schoolmaster said. "Devils always have possessed men; we have the authority of Holy Writ for that.

"Back somewhere, when men were nearer the beasts than they are now, it must not have been uncommon for the evil in Men's souls to override them and drive them out night-prowling the way this devil has terrified the Narris community for years. The lycanthropic beliefs of ancient and medieval peoples, as well as our own Indians of the present day, and savages of other lands, must have had their foundation in some sort of fact.

"While the transformation in body from man to beast by any sort of magic is physically impossible, as we know, the complete reversion of a human soul to bestiality is possible, as we have seen.

"In my opinion this occurs when the divine spark lent every human being from the Source has been withdrawn because it has been debased by the one upon whom it has been bestowed. Divinity subtracted, man becomes a creature. He is in such a state we describe as accursed.

"This spark of divinity has not been wholly withdrawn from Joel Langworthy before; only at times it has been taken from him in correction of his sins, leaving his soul intermittently dark.

"At such times he went out on his vicious excursions; at such times he peered in at Caleb Moore's window, his face all demon, and made the old man believe he saw something not of this earth. He came to your window in a spell like that, and attacked you in the tent.

"The divine gift has been taken away from him forever now; the spark in his soul is out. He is a brute, with the cunning reasoning of a human, but the raging of a tiger in his heart."

"In other words, Joel Langworthy, in the past overwhelmed by this peculiar madness only at times, is now wholly insane."

"That would be the scientific explanation for it, I suppose, Jonathan. It will do if you want to soften his devilish behavior down and excuse it. To me he is a man denied of God."

"If the divine in a man is put out, Hugh," said Randolph thoughtfully, "it is certain that the diabolical will reign supreme. His powers of evil will not be diminished, but increased. Langworthy is a doubly dangerous creature in the state that he skulks the woods today."

"Doubly dangerous," said the schoolmaster, nodding his solemn head, "and as God is my judge, if I meet him I'll shoot him down!"

HE LIFTED his hand in witness of his vow. Randolph felt the blood leave his face, a coldness prickle over his skin. The schoolmaster's words and bearing were in such dissonance with the placidity of the schoolroom, its peaceful birds coming and going upon its walls. But there was no question of the terrible sincerity of his declaration. Sentence of death had been pronounced upon Joel Langworthy, the man denied of God.

"Still, it may be that he's dead," Randolph reflected.

"No, I'd feel the relief of it in the air around me if he was dead; that suffering woman would be drinking the sunshine again if she was free from his machinations, too. His influence has been heavy over her since that day she warned you to leave off the work and go away."

"I thought at the time he had something to do with that," said Randolph curiously.

"He suggested it by that peculiar power that the man possesses of projecting his mind through the ethereal spaces."

"Not uncommon, well established by scientific investigation," Randolph said.

"Yes, telepathy—to speak to from afar—a good enough name. He seems able to employ it only with women. Where he repels men, he attracts women. He calls them to him, in spite of themselves; he speaks to them over distances in the night. In the Narris they name it the 'whispering gift'."

"Arkansaw told me he could tame horses by whispering to them, but I never heard that he could call a woman to him against her will."

"Not every woman, of course; only those upon whom he has played his devilish arts and prepared the way."

"Has he ever tried to call her—Mystery—to him that way, Hugh?"

"He has tried, but never has succeeded," the schoolmaster said with the solemn gratefulness of his heart in his words.

"What has kept her; what has held her back from him when you were absent, Hugh?"

"The strongest magic against diabolism in the universe—the voice of love!"

The schoolmaster smiled a little now as he looked up, as if some of the pain had gone out of his patient heart.

"You know the old belief that a stream of water is a barrier that no warlock can cross?" said he. "It is only the allegorical expression of a truth in a way that meets the primitive understanding. The warlock is the evil of the earth, the running stream the purity and truth."

Randolph was quiet as they walked home to Moss Gregg's. The shadows were long, and there was goldenrod beside the road, early messenger of autumn. An autumnal coolness had come into the days, also since the return of the river to the Narris, as if that gigantic labor completed the summer's tasks, although the corn was still green and the trees in the vigor of rounded foliage. Quail were whistling here, answering far off, calling the covey together for the autumn feeding, the winter company. The hazelnut burrs showed a faint whiteness, fuzzed with a down like a young man's lip.

AFTER supper that evening Hugh brought out his guitar at Juliet's invitation. But all his entertainment was instrumental; he could not be induced to sing. Gregg sat rocking in his sling-bottomed chair, Arkansaw and Randolph on the porch steps.

In the background of growing darkness the white dresses of the ladies glimmered where they sat on the porch near the musician.

Mystery was baking bread, as she explained when the entertainment began, making apology for an occasional trip into the house to watch the rising of her loaves.

She had stationed herself near the door to be able to slip in and out without distracting the performer. Her domestic activity was soothing, rather than disturbing, to the entire company, and the schoolmaster most of all, there was much unostentatious competency in her soft coming and going, like a mother bird serving the young, in her nest.

There fell a lull in the music after a while, when darkness had settled and the clear stars were out. There was a young moon, and a cool and friendly wind took the loneliness out of the night. Mystery was within; the sound of her oven doors closing on the risen loaves came to them in the musician's pause. Gregg moved his chair over a little nearer the steps and squared round, with much squeaking and groaning of the loose boards under the rockers.

"Well, I reckon Joel must 'a' got drowned, too," he said. "Lucky for him if he was, for I tell you they've got a rope laid up for him in the Narris if he ever shows his cussed face ag'in."

The old man's observation fell with startling discord on the ears of both Randolph and the schoolmaster, for they had put the accursed creature out of their minds for that peaceful hour.

"He was seen that evening," said Arkansaw, "on this side of the Narris. My opinion is he tried to row over, and got sucked down a whirlpool. He couldn't swim as good as me."

"There are few men that can do that, Arkansaw," Randolph said.

"She's quietin' down now," Gregg said. "I was down to your place this evenin', Julie—it's stopped eatin' your land."

"I didn't believe it ever could be satisfied, Captain Gregg," Juliet returned bitterly.

"It ain't; it never will be." Captain Gregg spoke with deep solemnity, almost awe, his voice low as if he feared that he might turn the vindictive, greedy river against himself. "I've seen it rant and rob here and along for a mighty long time, but I never saw the day it was satisfied. It's like a wolf; it stops eatin' because its strength gives out, not on account of havin' enough. It lays by with its paws on what it's taken, waitin' for fresh strength to cram down more."

"It's been kind to you; it hasn't taken as much as an acre of your land in all these years, has it?" the schoolmaster asked.

"Not much more, anyhow."

"It seems a singular piece of favoritism," said Randolph. "Maybe you offer sacrifices to it, like the ancients did the river Nile."

"It's because I knew it well enough to pick out a piece of land on a reach instead of a bend," the old pilot said. "Maybe I could 'a' picked a purtier location and better land, but—"

"You wouldn't have had your elmtree," Juliet said with quick sympathy. "That's worth more than fifty acres of land."

"You' right, Julie, it is. I wouldn't deal it for—"

A SCREAM from the back of the house cut off his words like a slash of a sword. The schoolmaster dropped his instrument and leaped through the vines at the end of the porch. While the others stood inactive a moment in the sudden chill of aprehension, they heard him crashing through the growth of weeds and vines along the picket fence.

Randolph and Arkansaw followed.

When they came up to the schoolmaster, he was bending over Mystery, who had fallen near the little gate. The light of the lamp was streaming on her through the open kitchen window, her white dress flaring on the ground like a morning-glory.

There was a sound of something running away through the corn. The schoolmaster was straining to listen after it, his arm under Mystery's head.

Juliet and the old man came hurrying through the house.

"What's the matter?" Gregg asked, turning in shocked helplessness from face to face.

Nobody answered, for one was as wise as another. Juliet was on her knees beside Mystery now, where she lay as if dead.

The schoolmaster withdrew his sustaining arm and let Mystery's brown head rest on Juliet's knee. In one great bound he was gone through the open gate, like a hound unleashed, following the thing that sped ahead of him through the rustling corn.

Randolph bent a moment over the unconscious girl.

"She's not hurt—just fainted; must have seen something—"

Gregg was lifting her, calling her baby names, imploring her to tell him what it was, pleading and exclaiming in tender incoherence.

Randolph turned to Arkansaw, who stood as if shocked out of reason and motion.

"Get your gun and come on—hurry!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE HOUR OF RECKONING

RANDOLPH could hear the schoolmaster rushing ahead of him like a wind through the corn as he labored over the furrowed ground. The master had the advantage of length of legs and start; now and then Randolph was obliged to stop and listen for him lest he lose the trail, the sound ahead of him growing fainter every moment.

Now it was lost to him, the field as quiet as if no hot pursuit had shaken the tranquillity of the night.

It was so dark between the corn rows that he could not see the ground. Overhead the placid sky displayed its time-old jewel wares, a golden brooch of moon-rind in the southwest paling downward into the mists. He struggled on, his breath spent.

A shot off there under the moon, in the direction of the schoolhouse. On again, with second wind, as if he ran for the prize of his life.

At the fence he stopped to listen.

There had been no more shooting, but Arkansaw was coming, true as a beagle on his trail. He waited for him to break cover of the corn; shouted to him from the shadow of the brushwood along the fence.

"It was the snappin' ghost!" said Arkansaw as he came up, gun in hand. "I tell you, John, it was the snappin' ghost!"

"He went toward the schoolhouse—listen! Do you hear anything?"

Arkansaw held his breath. All that either of them could hear was the welling of his own blood.

"Was it you shot over here a minute ago?"

"No; it must have been Hugh."

"Didn't hit him; no bullet that ever was molded ever will hit him. He's turned hisself into a bone skeleton and got away from Hugh by now."

"I'm going on over toward—there!"

"That's Hugh," said Arkansaw.

A shout had sounded from the direction of the schoolhouse. Both of them were over the fence in a flash, running across the pasture between the cornfield and the little grove of walnut trees around the school.

The schoolmaster was standing in front of the building, the open door a black oblong in the white wall. Arkansaw was first to him.

"Is he there—you got him, Hugh?" he panted.

"Did you hit him?" Randolph inquired breathlessly.

"I think I crippled him when he went over the fence—he broke in there," the schoolmaster replied.

"Did you see him, Hugh? Was it the snappin' ghost?"

"It was the snapping ghost," the schoolmaster replied, steady of word and unshaken of hand, but with a terrible earnestness on him and in his voice that was like the solemn background of night.

"If it was him, nothing but a charmed bullet—"

"Watch the back doors and along one side—Randolph will take care of the other," the schoolmaster directed him, not waiting for Arkansaw's views on the merit of a magic ball.

ARKANSAW didn't stand to argue, for fear was not in him, having a double score now to settle with his old enemy, the snapping ghost of the Narris. He ran round the corner of the house, trying the shutters as he passed.

"Stand over there where you can sweep the other side, John—he might try to get out by a window."

Randolph stood at the corner, where he could command the windows on that side. The schoolmaster could be seen but dimly from his post; he appeared to be stripping up his shirtsleeves, laying bare his arms.

"What's your plan, Hugh—what are you going to do?" Randolph asked.

"I'm going in to wring that devil's neck!" the schoolmaster replied.

Randolph protested against such a blind risk. "You'll have no chance without a

light, even with your gun," he said to him.

The schoolmaster was set in his heroic determination, unreasonable, self-sacrificial as it was sure to prove. He said no more, but started forward. Randolph intercepted him before the open door.

"You're not going in there, Hugh."

"Don't try to stop me! Stand aside, I say; stand aside!" The schoolmaster's voice trembled with passion as he took hold of Randolph's barring arm.

"Listen to reason, man! You've got nothing to gain by going in after him; he can't escape."

"I've got nothing to lose but my life, and what does that matter? He's killed her!"

"He didn't hurt her, Hugh—he's only cured her, man—cured her—don't you understand?" Randolph drew him away and aside from the dangerous vicinity of the door.

"She was dead," groaned the schoolmaster—"dead in my arms!"

"She'd fainted; she wasn't hurt. I tell you, Hugh, it's the luckest thing for both of you that could have happened. Her eyes are open now—she's cured."

"If she saw the devil in him, if she knew him."

"She was expecting him, Hugh. Couldn't you see her uneasiness all evening? He called her, I tell you, the way he has spoken to her over distances before."

"That may be so," the master admitted; "but I thought that she was dead!"

"She's all right again by now. The sight of him was a shocking revelation, but it's cured her."

"Thank God if it's true!"

Something clattered to the floor in the schoolhouse, falling sharply, like a slate. The master started, leaping forward.

Again Randolph interposed, holding him back. "He's there, he can't get away. Wait till daylight, Hugh."

"What do you suppose the devil's doing in there?" Randolph felt the schoolmaster's hand tremble on his arm. "Do you suppose that he can be destroying my work?"

THE question came with such simple sincerity, such gravity of apprehension, that the triviality of the offense conjectured by the schoolmaster seemed to take its place along with that other dark event of the night. Ordinarily it would have been a question to provoke a smile.

"Surely not," Randolph returned with a soberness scarcely short of the schoolmaster's.

"His life is forfeit to me already; he'll never leave that building alive!"

"I thought I smelled coil oil—is there any in there, Hugh?"

"Only in the lamps."

"That's what he's doing; he's taking them down, emptying the oil on the floor."

"Preparing to burn it!"

"I think he intends to burn it; but what he expects to gain—"

"We must have help to put it out. Its loss would be a terrible blow to the district! I'll ring the bell!"

The bell hung in the school yard, on a white-painted framework. As the schoolmaster reached it and began to sound a clamorous alarm, a light flashed in the schoolhouse. Randolph ran forward, discharging his revolver at the light, which flickered and burned low a moment, like a match, then leaped in sudden flame beyond the inner door.

Arkansaw came running.

In a moment the fire was roaring in the schoolroom, the light of it reaching out in a red beam through the open door, falling on the schoolmaster at his frantic work. His own claim of vengeance was set aside; the anxiety, the dread, the deepening pain of his heart, sounded in the loud peal of the fast-ringing bell.

"Watch the windows, Arkansaw; he's going to try to get away!" Randolph shouted.

They drew back from the door, each taking a corner of the building to watch along the sides. Remembering the back doors, Arkansaw ran to a point from which he could command them. There was no sound of life from within; no sight of the wretch who found himself driven at last

to face arraignment on his unspeakable crimes.

Faraway shouting sounded above the crackle and roar of the fire. The schoolmaster gave off his ringing at the bell and came running, his revolver flashing in his hand.

His face, illuminated by the leaping flames, was curiously ealm; it held in it no horror and no eagerness for revenge—only the inexorable decision of a man ruling final judgment.

Here and there armed men broke out of the night into the light of the fire, stopped a moment as if struck inactive with amazement and alarm, then ran shouting and mingling, lifting their helpless hands.

Then men, seeing that the fire was beyond them, began to ask how it kindled on a clear and calm summer night, no brand of fire within half a mile of it. The question came to Randolph presently, and he answered it.

Grimly the armed farmers drew a waiting line around the burning building.

"He's in there—that devil that cut the levee—he's the one that done it!" they told each other as they stood with ready guns.

THE fire had burst the windows and was reaching up to the cornice, lunging at the overhanging trees. The schoolmaster seeming to feel that the tragedy would not be finished by fire alone, stepped forward and approached the door. His garment was open, his chest was bare; the sweat of his labor glistened on his face.

"Men, if he shows himself, I ask you to leave him to me," he said. "I've registered a vow with God Almighty that I'll put an end to his black and bloody life if I'm favored with the chance. Help me to keep that pledge, men; leave him to me!"

They drew back a little, giving him room and a fairway to the gaping door.

Crouching like a wrestler, the schoolmaster waited. In a moment the indraft sucked the smoke out of the vestibule. A tall, gaunt figure, naked to the waist, stood there against the curtain of fire, his sinewy, knotted arms outstretched as one crucified, his wild hair blowing in the fiery blast.

"It's Joel Langworthy!" said Arkansaw, clutching the schoolmaster's arm. "It ain't no—"

The schoolmaster flung away his hand, fired: leaped nearer, fired. Joel Langworthy stood unshaken, as if the shots had passed through him like a shadow. The fire leaped around him, lighting his face, black in the evil of his inheritance, distorted out of human kinship, as Randolph had seen it once before. His teeth were gleaming, as if his farewell to the world was a snarl.

A glimpse of him so—sharp, terrifying. An exclamation like an explosion of horror broke from those who hemmed him there to meet death in the fire of his own kindling.

Then, after that sudden, violent cry, all of them were silent; the thing they saw happening in the ring of flame struck them immobile and voiceless.

Slowly Joel Langworthy turned his back upon them, as if in disdain of the schoolmaster's bullets, as if in contempt of death. He stretched his arms wide as if to embrace the flames, as a man might open them to receive his bride.

There was contempt, majestic even though so diabolically mocking, of them in this slow turning upon their anger. Contempt for their present knowledge and past ignorance; for their awe and silence as they watched him rise to the last appalling act of his dark life's tragedy.

A burst of flame swept the roof from eaves to comb, crackling the shingles like dry forest leaves; a welling cloud of smoke drew round him, hiding him for a moment from their eyes. Now the roof gave way, sinking in the shriek and wild exultation of high-lifting fire.

They saw him again, briefly, like a figure discovered by a lightning stroke, as he leaned with arms still spread and flung himself, face downward, into the flames. . . .

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ALTHOUGH, from where we sit, the Spring is still far from Springlike, with not enough genuine balmtb in the air to e courage the growth of so much as a small but determined cactus, the fruit crop seems to be u sually advanced. Below, at any rate, are the first luscious berries of the season, aimed variously at us, one F.T.F., and assorted scriveners. Pausing only to duck, we make way for

E.R.G.

One good, enthusiastic raspberry to F. T. F. of January 14th's ARGOSY for his comment on "Lost House." Birds like him always pick the lousiest (pardon the slang) stories to back up, then begrudge other readers a really good story.

In my opinion, "Lost House" was one of the greatest stories of '38 equaled only by "I'd Climb The Highest Mountain," and Joel Rogers' two novels in All-American; and I'd rank any of the four seven miles above the highly-touted "Ship of Ishtar," which I found only a falsely dramatic fairy-tale.

For its sheer charm of style alone, "Lost House" was superb; and descriptions and characterizations were excellent. Along with those points it was a mystery story, not just *supposed* to be one.

The sooner I see more stories by F. S. Wees, the better I'll like it.

The same goes for Joel Rogers, who is, indisputably the best author of our time. I'll remember his *Okie Crow Kugelmann, Adolph Wie, Lenoir, Jacqueline,* and the rest long after I've forgotten even Dickens' *Scrooge* and *Tiny Tim.* Let Rogers go back to his war-spy novels where he is king. They'll fit in ARGOSY—and any one who's once read Rogers will never forget him.
Kulpmont, Pa.

WE ARE encouraged by E.R.G.'s (we wonder if he knows that *erg* is energy) appreciation of "Lost House," which we considered a fine mystery, but which most of the readers seem to have taken with unruffled calm. . . . At the moment we are in possession of one freely given promise for a story from Joel Townsend Rogers.

But even we aren't brazen enough to publish an IOU. . . . Follows more fruit from

GORDON PUGH

This is my first and perhaps my last letter to ARGOSY.

You are doing such a good job I don't think I need ever write you again.

The year 1938 gave ARGOSY a bumper crop of good stories. Now after hemming and hawing over the entire year, I give the cup to C. S. Forester, for his splendid Hornblower stories. The author kept me on pins and needles while reading an installment, and then had me cursing my life away, longing for another week to magically appear. Mr. Forester has sure aged me.

The raspberry prize goes to those two punk stories "Two Hours To Go" and "It's Hard To Die"—were they crummy? I'll say. One was a 15-for-a-dime detective story, and the other was a slow moving picture, all talk, no action worth a hoot.

Well this is all, your start for '39 looks good to me, for they come no better than Burroughs. Oh, by the by, "Ishtar" was wonderful but I didn't give it the credit due the story because it was a reprint, and after all I think Capt. Hornblower was a teeny weeny bit better, don't you think so, too?
Creditvale, Ont., Canada.

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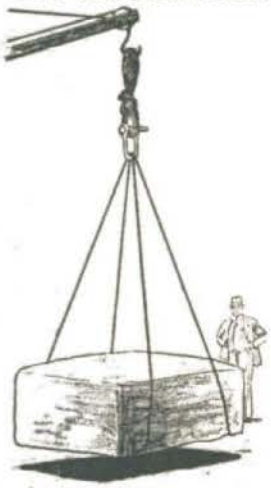

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