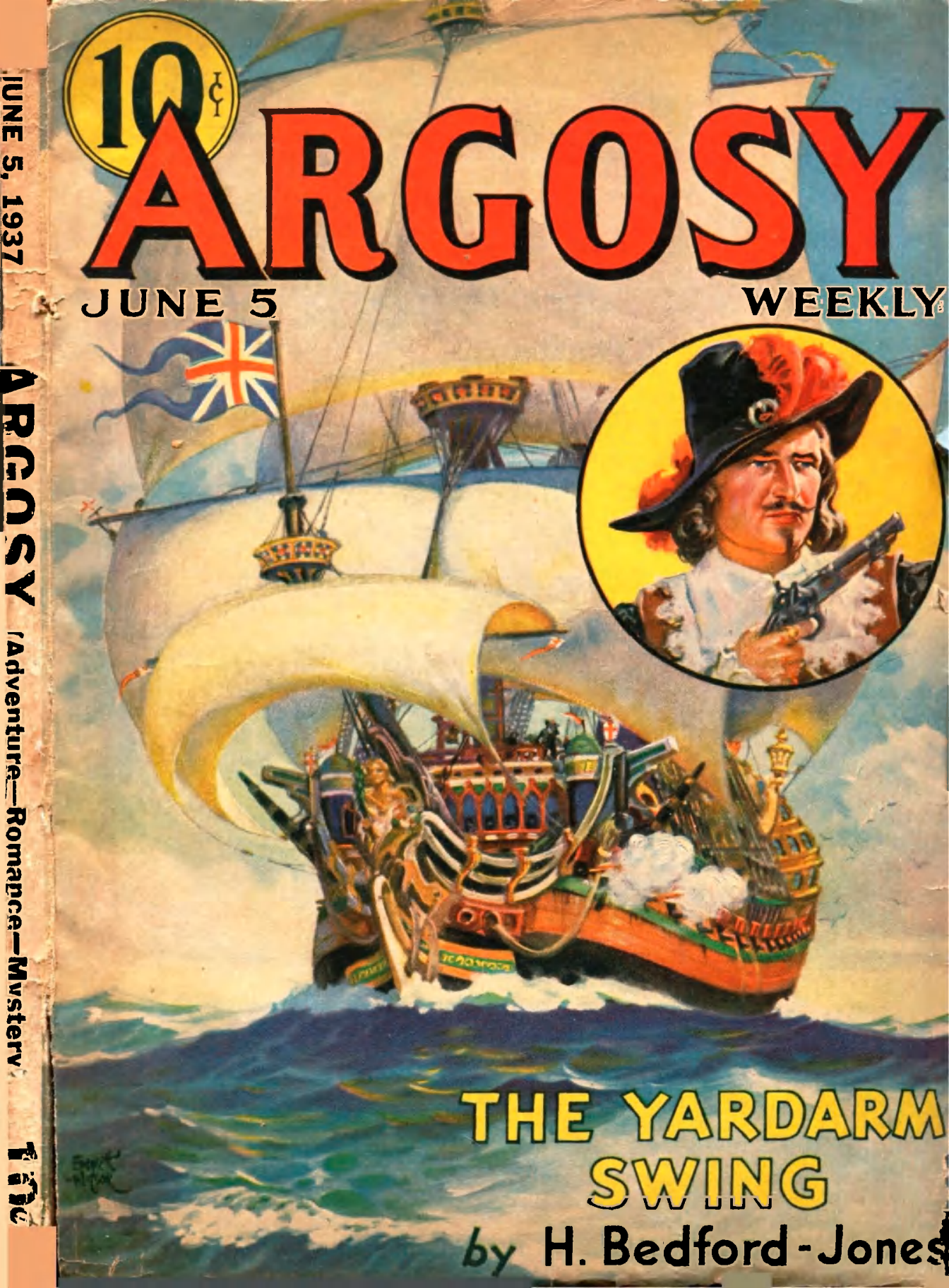

JUNE 5, 1937 ARGOSY [Adventure—Romance—Mystery

We Clung to Life as Seas Broke Over Us

Four Hour Vigil Ends June Sailing Party

"It was a beautiful June evening with hours more of daylight ahead when I set out with two friends from the yacht club for an early evening cruise," writes Bill Dye, of Shaker Heights, Cleveland, Ohio.

"The sky clouded over and darkness fell early. Not having our regular running lights, we tied red and green paper over a couple of flashlights and lashed them to the mast.

"Then, without warning a terrific squall hit us, capsized the boat, left us clinging for our lives to the slippery bottom while the seas broke over us.

"We could see the two flashlights shining under the water and I managed to retrieve one of them. We tied a line around it so that when the waves broke over us, it wouldn't be lost, and then for four long, weary hours took turns waving it toward the shore a mile and a half away.

"Finally, our rescuer who saw the light from the shore, was able to launch a boat. So you see it was the power of the *fresh* DATED 'Eveready' batteries in our flashlight that returned the three of us to the land of the living. I had used those batteries for months before this desperate adventure overtook us, so I know now the importance of flashlight batteries that are *fresh* when you buy them.

(Signed) W. B. Dye"

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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

Volume 273 CONTENTS FOR JUNE 5, 1937 Number 4

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29x5.25-18	2.45	1.11
29x5.25-19	2.50	1.11
31x5.25-21	2.85	1.11
5.50-17	2.80	1.12
29x5.50-18	2.80	1.12
29x5.50-19	2.85	1.12
32x6.00-20	2.95	1.25
30x6.50-20	3.35	1.25
6.00-16	3.50	1.39
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32x6.00-20	3.00	1.25
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6.50-17	3.40	1.25
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The Yardarm Swing

By H. BEDFORD-JONES
Author of "Will o' the Wisp," "Raid of the China Clipper," etc.

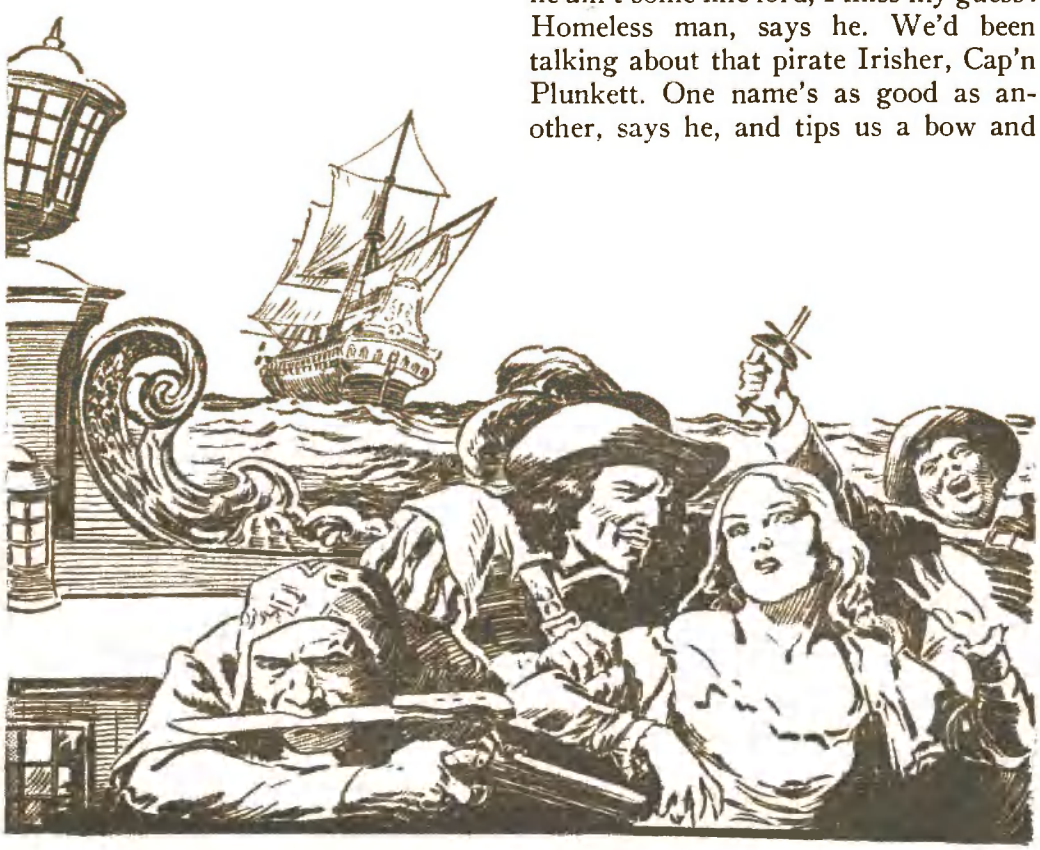
THE manner of his coming to Tortola was no mystery, but the man himself excited a surly admiration among these hard, lawless killers. Three days had passed since Captain Breda's return in the *Haarlem*, bringing the loot of a French vessel and this man who had been pulled out of the sea; already the newcomer bore himself as though he owned the whole island.

Don Carlos, helping to build the gun emplacements for St. Michael and the three other brass cannon, eased himself in his chains. He wiped sweat from his lean, black-bearded cheeks, and listened as a group of buccaneers discussed the man.

A black-bearded man was speaking.

"I mind he was stark naked when we drew him out o' the sea, and lashed to a bit of wreckage. Some ship had foundered in that hurricane. And look at him now! He brought us luck, he did. It was the next morning we picked up the Frenchman."

"Blow me, what is he?" said another. "He slings English better'n me. Cap'n Breda swears he's Dutch. Slip him a word in Spanish, German, French, and he comes back like any one of 'em. If he ain't some fine lord, I miss my guess! Homeless man, says he. We'd been talking about that pirate Irisher, Cap'n Plunkett. One name's as good as another, says he, and tips us a bow and



says his name is Plunkett. Just like that."

"Look at him—look at him wi' the rapier!" went up a cry. "Breda has enough. The cap'n can't stand against him!"

An overseer cracked his whip. Don Carlos bent again with the other prisoners to his labor; but his dark quick eyes sought the figures in the shade. Cap'n Breda, the agile, powerful Dutchman with a satanic glint in his eye, and the slender, handsome man in borrowed clothes—the man with the fine laughing face, the curl of new beard, the hair flying about his neck in a golden mass. Plunkett, eh? A borrowed name.

"Dios! There's the man for my job," muttered Don Carlos. "Why, he looks at them as though they were dogs! He has the air of a prince, the look of a prince—good! I'll hook him if the chance comes. He'll bite, quick enough. He's not one of these bloodhounds. Soldier of fortune, eh? Oh, he'll bite!"

Don Carlos, himself a gentleman and a very capable soldier of fortune until fate brought him to Tortola, was in "hell," and he very much wanted to get out. That is, he was in "hell" except when he was chained of mornings and set to this labor, being far too useful to fry to death just yet.

"Hell" was an iron cage eight feet square, out on the sand just beyond the first palm tree up the beach. There was a door in the cage, fastened by an iron padlock of huge size. The enormous key that fit the padlock was hung to a nail on the palm tree.

Set naked in that iron cage under the broiling sun, one perceived why Captain Breda named it "hell." The iron Dutchman had a sense of humor. The dungeon up yonder under the so-called castle, he had named "purgatory," and

not without reason either. The big brass cannon overlooking the cove, from which a captive was sometimes blown, he called "St. Michael." The humor was a bit obscure here, but was well meant.

"Sail ho!" The man on watch, beneath the sun-shelter on the high sand crest, bawled out the words. "It's the pinnace, Cap'n! But the wind's falling. She'll not be in afore sunset."

Captain Breda, who had been fencing in the shade with Plunkett, hooked his arm in that of his laughing guest, and bore him away to the castle above. The afternoon was past its heat, sunset a good three hours distant. Don Carlos flicked an eye toward the saildot far out on the brazen sea, and went on laboring without complaint. There was iron in Don Carlos, too, and plenty of it; his spirit was strong and he had the will to live.

From the huts and barracks above, drifted the thin screaming of a woman. The overseers exchanged a grin and a jest. More than a few women up there, and any woman who reached Tortola alive had a grim time of it. There was no illusion about this place or the killers who had settled here. The men who were blown from St. Michael's mouth were envied of their fellow captives.

AS he sat with his guest, Captain Breda put the matter into plain words. The powerful Dutchman had taken a liking to this man from the sea, whose intelligence was so obviously superior to any around him. Pipes alight, rum and Spanish wine at hand, they sat under a thatched arbor and looked out at the sea and talked.

"What's in your past?" demanded the hard, grim Dutchman. "You're English, I'd say, yet you're not one of these bleating Englishmen who killed their king. A Cavalier?"

Plunkett smiled at him. "My good cap'n, my past is a blank. I've wiped it out. I'm dead, and born again. A past—bah! It sickens me. No home; wanderings; penniless, dependent on charity, too much of a gentleman to beg, ashamed to steal—out with it all! Now I'm a free man in a new, free world. That's enough."

"Enough for me," and Captain Breda nodded. "You'd make one of us, with training. I can use you. Here's a whole world for the taking; anyone can seize what he wants, if he can hold it. Another year, and I'll have a buccaneer stronghold here that no fleet can put down. But mind you, no silly sentiment! Throw in with us, and overboard with all fine gentleman's notions."

Plunkett still smiled. "So I understand."

"Aye. Clap an eye to number one first, and a yardarm swing to all the rest." Breda wiped rum from his stiff beard. "It's a killing game in this new world. The English threw us Dutch out o' Santa Cruz; the Spaniards came on 'em and not one was left alive. The English in Barbados and elsewhere are fighting each other like madmen. The French fight each other cat and dog. The Caribs, who owned all these islands, are getting killed off fast, but they still have teeth. It's a world for the grabbing, and I've grabbed this island of Tortola as my share."

"A mad world," said Plunkett. "Hard to credit we're living in modern times, in the year 1652! Yet it's a tempting world, this of yours. I'm for it. I'm not so sure I'm for you, Cap'n."

"You'll never find a better friend or partner," said Breda bluntly. "Here's a world for the taking, and the strongest

takes. All law's broken down. The quickest to kill is the top man, has the most land, rum and women. A simple creed. Another twenty years, and the powers will have divided up or seized all these islands; now's the time to act. We were all Dutch when we settled here, but now we've got a mixture of the damnedest fighting men you ever saw. No milksops, mind. Killers. A hundred and two-score in all. Plenty of others coming in to grab, like this fellow Plunkett, whose name you took. He's a dirty pirate if there ever was one. It goes to show that if you step in now while the time's right, you'll get in ahead of the crowd."

The blue eyes of Plunkett dwelt curiously on that hard, grim face, with its glint of satanic humor.

"I'm surprised you ever bothered pulling me out of the sea," he said ironically.

"The men said you'd bring us luck; they were right." Breda chuckled. "Mind you, look out for number one if you join up! Anyone who disputes me, gets a yardarm swing; it's a good motto. My word's law here. I've got brains. So have you. I can use you; I offer you friendship and a place. Where can you find a better?"

"I don't know—yet," said Plunkett.

"Ha! What you need is a wench, to make you contented. There's a Spanish jade Bose has broken in finely. She has a sweet face; if you'd like her, I'll get Bose to turn her over to you."

Plunkett repressed a little shiver, smiled again, shook his head.

"Thanks; I like your advice better than your offers. Save the women for those who want 'em; if I see one that I like, I'll take her. A yardarm swing, eh? Like the Frenchman you swung up yesterday when he went against your will. Aye, a good motto."

He rose and stretched himself. "Well, I'm off for a swim."

"Sharks, you fool!"

"Carib John says there are none about today. He knows. I'll chance it."

He sauntered away toward the dazzling white curve of beach beyond the cove, and as he went, his smile died out, and his blue eyes chilled.

An empty, impoverished title behind him, none to mourn him save a brother, a life he loathed; and here, freedom! A bloody freedom, yes, but for five years past he had lived with war, with men who had a cause and slew for it. He was twenty-five, and no stranger to death.

He sunned himself, swam lazily, reflected lazily. This strange new world was fascinating and repellent. Islands everywhere, and all the tales alike. The Spaniards at Santa Cruz massacred by the French. The English at St. Lucia massacred by the Caribs. The Caribs—sleek brown Carib John was one—massacred by everyone. Each man's hand against that of very other man. The yardarm swing—a good motto.

Of these men around him, even of Breda, he felt contempt. Animals all of them, savages, killers, in a world where the underdog got no mercy.

"My place isn't with them," he thought. "With the French, the Spanish, the English? I've no reason to join any of them; I'm reborn. I've no cause, save my own self-preservation. Time enough when I find a reason, a cause, an interest."

He knew the change in himself. He had landed here a derelict of sunny good humor. The things he had seen here made him writhe—the cruelty all around, the brutality, the excesses. He hated this isle and its buccaneers. Plunkett! He laughed to think of the name he had taken. Once he had met

this Plunkett, with his commission from the Duke of Ormond; a cruel, lusty man, now no better than a pirate.

HE stroked back to the white beach. Sunset was at hand. The pinnace, of some thirty tons, was winging slowly in with the falling breeze. Everyone ashore was crowding down to watch her arrival in the cove. The work had stopped, the prisoners put back in chains for the night.

Slipping into his clothes, Plunkett headed to join the throng, and then came to a startled halt, glancing around.

"Prince!" The voice came again. He knew he had betrayed himself, and turned. He found himself close to that iron cage called "hell." He met the flashing smile of Don Carlos, who was speaking French.

"Monsieur, will you return here later tonight, when we may talk without being noticed? I wish you to help me. I can offer you what your heart most desires."

"Little you know," said Plunkett, eying the man curiously. "What made you address me by that title? Who are you?"

"Don Carlos Alvarado. That title? Perhaps I know more than you think. Careful! That bull of Bashan wants you. Return later."

Captain Breda was roaring at Plunkett to hasten and join him. As Plunkett obeyed the call and strode away, Don Carlos grinned anew. The fish was hooked! With the proper handling, all might go well.

Two hooks are better than one, however—or worse.

The pinnace came in. A score of men splashed ashore, the craft was run high, the unlading began, half a dozen prisoners were hauled to the beach. At sight of the dainty slim girl among them, Plunkett stared hard for a moment.

She was young, garbed in tattered, sea-stained silk brocade, the ruins of a hat were perched on her head, blood was smeared across her dress and shawl; yet she was delicately slim and slender, her head carried high as only few could bear to do, her face white with fear but her eyes level and unafraid.

Then Plunkett was striding toward her, parting the throng and breasting the two surly guards from the pinnace. To them, he was a complete stranger, and they would have struck him aside from the women; but he shoved one and tripped the other, and unheeding their curses, went on to the girl.

He stood before her, met her gaze, and bowed very gallantly. He was about to speak, when those two guards overtook him with a storm of oaths and blows.

Next instant, with a snatch of steel, wild uproar mounted the fading sunset. A sword clashed and clanged, blood spurted on its quick slash, a man was down. The crew of the pinnace poured around. Captain Breda was into the mêlée with a storm of oaths, and there stood Plunkett with the second man cutting at him, a smear of blood on his curly beard, his eyes all ablaze as he thrust and cut.

It was over in a flash, before Captain Breda could intervene. The second guard staggered and caught at his throat, and pitched down beside his fellow. Plunkett stood leaning on his blade, panting a little.

"Blast you, art gone mad?" shouted Breda.

"The lass belongs to me," said Plunkett. "Look out for number one, says you! I'm doing it."

"Swing him up! A yardarm swing!"

yelled the crew of the pinnace, who had brought in the loot and the women. They pitched at Plunkett. Breda's men jumped in and prevented them. A surge of figures, hot words storming up, fury let loose all around. Breda himself recovered from his astonishment to still the noise with his blasting oaths.

"You fool, you've killed two good men!" he roared at Plunkett.

"Aye. They struck first."

Assent shrilled up. Others cursed at him. Captain Breda shifted his gaze to the girl, and wiped his lips. He looked at Plunkett, and his rum-shot eyes narrowed.

"I'll settle this i' the morning, lads," said he to the men. "Take her to my quarters; lock her in the back room and give me the key. Leave the other loot for sharing by daylight. Tonight's for rum, women and talk. Those who brought in the other women can have 'em. Tell the cooks to break out all stores regardless—every man his fill of rum and meat. Plunkett, you with me. Poincy, with me also and make report."

A howl of delight went up, a wild ringing yell from all hands. Tongues buzzed as the men of the pinnace met explanation of Plunkett's presence.

Poincy, the squat Frenchman who captained the pinnace, fell in with Breda and Plunkett. The slim girl was led away to the captain's quarters. The other women were whirled off with scream and struggle and bearded obscene laughter, as the hundred-odd buccaneers broke up and flooded for the huts and barracks above the cove.

BREDA'S was the castle, so-called; a ramshackle affair of beams and canvas and thatched roofs, around the core of a building erected by French or Spaniards years ago from coral blocks. Here Breda kept his Carib women and his possessions safe; and here, while the twilight deepened into starry night, he sat with his two guests, one of the golden women serving out food and rum and Spanish wine.

"Report," said Breda to the squat Frenchman.

"Little enough, Cap'n." Poincy was obsequious, currying favor, a powerful little brute of rolling muscles and hair. "What we got, was out of an island craft bearing up for Martinico, crowded with French refugees. Where from? I dunno. We took out the likely ones, unloaded everything worthwhile, and knocked a hole in her bottom. I fetched that slim girl for you; a fine lady, she is. There were two of 'em, but the other gave us the slip on the way home and went overboard. This one ain't been hurt. I kept her for you."

Captain Breda fingered his stiff beard and his hard chin, and shot a glance at Plunkett. The latter had altogether lost his sunny look; his eyes were no longer young, but chill and old. He got up and left the table and went into the next room. Poincy jerked a thumb after him.

"He kills our men and doesn't swing for it? Or is he one of us?"

"Not yet. Most of the men are for him; luck, they say. He'd make a leader, if we had another ship. He can give orders. He has the knack."

"Be damned to him," growled Poincy. "You're not giving that girl to the likes of him. I'll take her, if you don't want her."

"I want her. I'll keep her."

"Right. Then I'm off, before somebody grabs that woman I grabbed for myself. No more need of me?"

"Not tonight. I've posted the guards."

Poincy swaggered away. Plunkett came back with a fresh pipe, sat down

and filled it, lighted it at a candle, and met the gaze of Captain Breda.

"Well?" he said, unsmiling. "I saw you look at her. What's to be next?"

"The yardarm swing, if you force it," said the older man with level threat. "Wake up to yourself. Forget your fine gentleman airs. Here you're one of us."

"I'll make you realize it," said Plunkett, and swigged off his tankard of rum.

"What d'you mean by that? Look here, life's cheap. Women are for the taking, anywhere. Plunder, ships, what you like; but needs must be a man to play the game, like the one whose name you've taken — that Plunkett. Raiding the English islands, with a commission from Ormond so he can't be hung as a pirate. Who the devil cares for such things? Here's your commission," and Breda slapped the sword at his hip. "Forget this lass."

"Suppose you forget her," said Plunkett evenly.

The Hollander scowled. "Are you drunk, to oppose me?" bit out his voice.

Plunkett took warning. "Drunk? Perhaps. This rum has gone to my head. I'll go for a stroll, cool my brain, and come back to settle matters with you."

"In half an hour, then," Breda nodded. "That Poincy is a surly fool; say the word, and he'll swing in the morning, and you in his shoes. Think it over. Either you're one of us, or you're not."

Plunkett sauntered away, along the trail to the cove. Two men sat down there in the starlight, swigging rum as they talked. No sense setting guards to watch the cove; boats don't walk away when the tide's out. Plunkett agreed with them, paused for a word and a jest, and went his way.

He swung his course around toward the palm trees. The face of the delicate lass tormented him. The words of Captain Breda, those keen satanic eyes, were further torment. One of us—or else not! A yardarm swing? Fall in with Breda, and all was well; go against him in the smallest thing, and it was another swung up for the men to stare at. Leave that girl to Breda, eh?

"So, Prince, you have come back."

The soft, low voice brought him to the bars of "hell" where Don Carlos peered out.

"What makes you call me that name?" said Plunkett curtly.

"Oh, a little girl told me you were a prince! Here, take the key from the palm tree yonder, and free me. There are boats in the cove. Take the big one, put water and stores aboard, and go. Everything from the pinnace is piled there. Do it quietly, and they'll never know till morning."

"Go?" said Plunkett. "Where?"

"To Barbados, the English island. My galleon was wrecked there; I know the place, know where to look aboard her. Gold, if that means anything to you; pearls from Mexico, emeralds from Peru. She's ballasted with silver —guess what she has in her lazaret! I wouldn't tell these swine even to save myself, but I'm telling you. There's fortune for the having. Will ye do it?"

Out of this hell and away! Plunkett stared at the starry horizon. This Spaniard was worthwhile—fortune for the taking, eh? Two men were better than one, yes. And the French girl up yonder, the slim and lovely girl, with Breda lusting to turn her into a screaming crazed slattern like the others—no, by Heaven!

"I'll be back," said Plunkett, and went striding away.

Frantically, Don Carlos spoke after

him, tried to fetch him back. The low soft pleadings turned to bitter curses as Plunkett disappeared in the obscurity.

The hook had not failed, however; it was merely that another barb was exerting a stronger pull. Plunkett had found reason, cause, and interest in life. When he came back to where Captain Breda sat, his eyes were shining again and a laugh was on his lips, so that Breda looked at him with a thin smile.

"I see you've found your senses."

"Right," said Plunkett, and took up the big pewter candlestick from the table. "Come into the next room, Cap'n. I've some news for you."

Breda, who was top-heavy with the rum, stumbled after him with half-laughing curses.

"What the devil is your news?" he demanded.

"Watch," said Plunkett, and blew out the candle.

Not a sound came from Captain Breda, except the heavy thud as the solid pewter hit flesh and bone, and the scuffle of the sandy floor as he dropped.

They found him there in the morning, all trussed up and gagged to boot with bits of the silk brocade dress the slim girl had worn. It was Poincy who recognized the bits of dress, and who belched out a bawdy jest on the matter, which had better have been left unsaid. Captain Breda relished no humor save his own, and said as much when they swung Poincy up to the yardarm of the ship and left him to turn and twist in the wind.

II

THE pinnace was a stout craft. Afloat with the tide and towed out by their two oars in a shallop, without a soul the wiser, she afforded the three of them all that heart could desire.

"The devil!" said Plunkett. "Cross the ocean in a boat, when we've fine craft like this for the taking? Not I! To work, Don Carlos!"

Now, lolling next afternoon on the sunny deck, Don Carlos laughed at the memory of it, and laughed again at sight of Francia, and laughed for very joy of freedom. With canvas up and a fair wind, the stout pinnace bowled along heartily. For Barbados? Don Carlos set the course and Plunkett kept it, until from his post at the tiller he saw the Spaniard making free with the slim girl, and heard her cry.

"Now let's settle the matter once for all," said Plunkett, as he held the lean black-bearded man against the rail with a dirk at his heart. "Perhaps you did not know the lass is mine—"

"The sail! Look to the tiller!" cried Don Carlos suddenly.

"Look to your life," said Plunkett, and drove in the dirk until the flesh was pricked. "Quickly, now! Be a gentleman, Don Carlos!"

"It was my mistake," said the Spaniard, and made handsome apologies to the two of them. He put out his hand, and Plunkett took it; the dark eyes were straight and true. He had done well not to kill the man, and said so.

"Assuredly," and Don Carlos laughed again. "I baited a hook for you with the story of treasure; it was true. I wanted freedom, and I have it. The *señorita* is yours, my friend, and we play the game together, honestly, like gentlemen. Done?"

"Done," said Plunkett. "It's your trick at the tiller."

Don Carlos left them, and Plunkett turned to Francia, and took her hand, and looked into her eyes. What he read there, drew at him; he kissed her fingers, and she smiled a little, and they were very happy together.

"For you're mine, and if you say the word, I'm yours," said Plunkett. "A new life, and life together, if it please you, as soon as we can find priest to marry us. I knew it from the moment our eyes met, last evening."

"I'd ask nothing better — except clothes." She laughed, as she looked at her cotton skirt and pantaloons.

"Those are best suited to the work," Plunkett observed. "So all's understood, and the dream lies ahead. You know nothing of me, nor I of you, but we're friends. I've no past; everything lies in the future."

"And I've no past except terror," said Francia, "so I'm content if you are."

All three of them were drunk with liberty, with the wide horizon, with flight and sunlight and the lone ship's deck. The world was far away, forms and ceremonies and polite words were gone with the world. Here was reality and no pretense.

Plunkett marveled at it. He was alive for the first time in his life. Youth brimmed in him, and in the girl Francia. Don Carlos, eying them, sighed a little and shrugged. He spoke them pleasantly, jested about having burned his fingers, and seemed a very honest *caballero* on the whole. He, too, had lost his past and all his world with it. When his galleon was lost, everything else went with it; there was no return for him unless he wanted to go into chains and prison. So he, also, hoped to carve out his own future, like so many others, and there was no laughter in his dark eyes when he spoke of it. Instead, there was a flicker of grim black ice.

To all three of them, with death and ruin faced down and left behind, the little things of life did not matter. To Plunkett, this was a fit opening of his new self, his new future. The motto of Captain Breda lifted before him—number one first, and a yardarm swing to all else! A good motto, he reflected.

Francia took her turn at the tiller, a slim steely thing with delicate body blossoming under the cotton, and her trust set wholly in the man whose eyes had summoned her. Frank, impulsive yet cool-headed, she was no pale flower to wilt in the sun of life. There was such steel in her as island folk had to know in those days. Women, like men, must survive by wit and worth, or go under and be lost.

THE days passed, the pinnace drove on; whither? Don Carlos was not too certain of his course. He was a nobleman, not a sailing master, and admitted it with a laugh of gay irresponsibility.

"You have a treasure in her," he said to Plunkett, with a nod toward the slim figure amidships. "One treasure already is yours. Don't be too greedy, my friend!"

"You've promised another. I'm greedy for all that offers," Plunkett rejoined. "Barbados lies far from any Spanish traffic lane. How came your ship there?"

"Hurricane," said Don Carlos. "Hurricane, driving us far. The reefs swallowed the galleon; but I know the spot. I got ashore and was sheltered at a plantation, and was on the way to Georgetown when Captain Breda raided that coast and took me in with the rest. Two months I've been in chains, waiting for the right man to free me; then you came. The gods are kind."

To Francia, he remained very polite, very merry, quite impersonal; somehow she did not like him. Plunkett weighed him, liked him, yet did not trust him. At the same time, Don

Carlos was a gentleman, and this bond lay between the two of them.

Unarmed, but provisioned well enough, they fled on and on across an empty sea, and with each hour, each day, Plunkett became more vitally aware of the truth in the words of Don Carlos. Here in this girl Francia d'Albret he had indeed found treasure, such treasure as he had never glimpsed in camp or court; a devotion, an utter absorbing love like the sudden blue glitter of a sword in sunlight.

On a morning, the dream ended in hot haste. Plunkett was wakened by a shout from Don Carlos, and leaped up to see a ship bearing down on them out of the dawn mist, a noble craft of five hundred tons.

Voices bawled aboard her, heads lined her rail, her canvas slatted in the wind and she luffed. Plunkett leaped to the tiller beside the Spaniard as a hail drove down at them, an order to bring the pinnace under her lee.

"English," said Plunkett, staring up at her. "Obey, obey! We've no choice." He leaped to the rail and waved a hand. "What ship are ye?"

"The *Confederacy.* Take the line and make it fast. Who are ye?"

"The pinnace *Good Hope,* Cap'n Plunkett in command, escaped from buccaneers."

For some reason a roar of laughter, of interest, of excitement, swept the rail of the ship, as the pinnace drew under her. A line was flung. Plunkett made it fast, the sail fluttered down, the pinnace hung in beneath the other's counter.

"Come aboard, Cap'n Plunkett!" roared a voice, amid more laughter. A rope ladder was tumbled down, caught, made fast. Plunkett met the eyes of Francia, met the gaze of Don Carlos, and shrugged.

"No help for it. Climb!" said he, and led the way.

He was up and over, the other two following. Half a dozen of the ship's crew were ready to go down and occupy the pinnace. Plunkett stared around. English faces, English oaths and a Scots burr here and there—then the curious throng opened and two men swaggered forward to eye him. A big man in a red velvet suit that accorded ill with his red hair and red beard, and a thin dark man, both gentry by their look.

"Cap'n Plunkett, is it?" exclaimed the big fellow, pawing his red beard and grinning. "Faith, the name's honest anyhow! I'm Sir Thomas Plunkett and this is my friend Sir George McNally—and where the devil got ye your name?"

Plunkett had gone hot and cold at sight of this man, and cursed his own too-ready tongue, but there was no help for it. With a merry laugh, he took fate by the neck and launched a lie that had enough truth in it to bite.

"Not from your house, Sir Thomas, but from the Athlone branch," he said. "What! Ye don't remember me, and the day we met three years ago? It was in Ormond's camp by Carrick ford; I was with the gentlemen who came from King Charles to talk with Ormond."

Over the red beard, the eyes of cold, cruel blue lit up. Sir Thomas stepped out, and extended his hand.

"By'r Lady, I mind your face if not your name!" swore he in lusty amazement. "Well met, and welcome! Who the devil are these two? Buccaneers, you say?"

Plunkett turned to Francia and the Spaniard.

"We're out of buccaneer hands, Sir Thomas," said he. "Mademoiselle Francia d'Albret, this is Sir Thomas

Plunkett, a very worthy Irish gentleman. My affianced wife, Sir Thomas. And this is my good friend Don Carlos Alvarado."

EVERYTHING was in a brawl of excitement. Sir Thomas sent a sailing-master to captain the pinnace and keep her close to the ship; McNally took the three below to the cabin. Others pressed around, a babel of talk swept up.

Cavaliers, King's men, these Scotch and Irish and English. The name of the ship should have told Plunkett the truth, but he had missed it. The Irish Confederacy, combining with the Duke of Ormond against Cromwell, had loosed these raiders on the far outlands, to fight at sea for a cause lost on land —or more truly, to loot for their own hand.

Here were friends, then; friends to French and Spaniard and Cavalier, with half a dozen other gentlemen crowding into the cabin, and Sir Thomas coming down to stare at the three and talk. Plunkett sketched how they came here, and Sir Thomas bowed to Francia and ran his eye over her slim length, and sent her to a private cabin.

"We've no women's gear for you, but we'll have it soon enough," said he. "The damned Barbados planters have gone over to the Parliament fleet, and we'll use your pinnace to raid 'em. Plunkett! Have ye heard any word of Prince Rupert's fleet?"

Here again, Plunkett diced with destiny. He had feared the question.

"Aye," said he. "I was aboard the ship of Prince Maurice, Rupert's brother. The fleet's put back for France. Our ship went down in hurricane."

"Your ship?" cried half a dozen voices. "What of Prince Maurice?"

"Gone with all hands," said Plunkett. "I was picked up by those buccaneers."

In the silence, Sir Thomas eyed him.

"Ye look not unlike Prince Maurice yourself, cousin. I met him once, I recall; a fine young lad, who fought by Rupert's side like a good one. Well, so he's gone! God rest him! Will ye have food?"

"And drink," said Plunkett, "And sleep. And clothes."

All three in abundance, but Sir Thomas had little joy of this news. He had counted on joining the fleet of Prince Rupert, and now must fry other fish.

Noon past and gone, Plunkett wakened in his cabin to decision. He had only to shave his beard and name himself, and he was again Prince Maurice; many of those aboard, like Sir Thomas, had seen the boy or had fought with him. To establish identity would be simple.

There was rank, honor, command for the having. Empty rank, inherited honor, command because of birth; all the restrictions and barriers imaginable. Flatterers, sycophants, liars all around. No command of destiny—and this was a sweet thing, once tasted. Francia as a mistress, yes; as a wife, no. Like young Charles of England, a prince without a kingdom, dependent on charity and borrowings. Faugh!

"A new world and a new life!" said Plunkett, and was out of his berth and into the clothes placed at his disposal.

His companions were sleeping. He coursed the ship, talked with the men, received shock upon shock of cold realization. All men here aboard, lusting for rum and women. High ideals? A cause? To the foul fiend with all that! Roundhead enemies in plenty to

prey upon. Sir Thomas and the McNally — tales enough of those two leaders, sharp and bitter tales, merciless. There was no discipline here.

And now the ship was heading up for the Barbados shore. There to strike and raid the plantations; then off with loot and women, to lie carousing in a hell-broth of human excess. And if the fates were kind, to run down Parliament ships, merchants from the colonies to England.

Plunkett thought of all this with chill misery, as he sat in the cabin that afternoon between Sir Thomas and the McNally, who were intent upon frying their own new fish as quickly as might be. They questioned him and spoke without pretense.

"We're on the loose," said McNally shrewdly. "We can use any French or Spanish port as a base, by virtue of our commission from Ormond; but in that case we'd have to keep hands off French and Spanish ships. And it's there the profit is."

"Aye," said Sir Thomas, plucking at his bushy red beard. "Ye know, this Cap'n Breda has the right of it—a place of his own, a company of men drawn from all parts, and the yardarm swing to all the world! Times are changing. Buccaneers will be doing that here and there. Like that chap Levasseur, who's seized on Tortuga Isle, and established himself there. We should do the same."

"But you're for King Charles," said Plunkett.

The two laughed.

"King Charles be damned. He's gone and done for; Crummel holds all England now. There's Dunbarton and nine hundred more Scots, captured at Worcester, slaving on the Barbados plantations now. They'll not join us. I sounded out Dunbarton when we saw him. Bloody pirates, he says; better be a slave with godly men—bah! The dour fool is a slave on Cap'n Higginbotham's plantation on the northeast coast. There's fourscore of the fools around there. You'd think they'd be glad to take freedom with us."

"You're men of a different stripe, you and your crew," said Plunkett blandly. They caught no hidden bitterness in his words, but nodded and pushed on the decanter. McNally swore a huge oath.

"That rascal Dunbarton said to my face that we needed to be as right as our cause before he'd take our hand in his. The blasted fool!"

"A plague on you! He's dead right," said Plunkett, losing his head suddenly. Impulse burst loose in him. "A sorry life for gentlemen who serve the king! A royal cause and a lost cause, pitched into the devil's stewpot."

He checked the mad folly of his words, too late. They stared at him with hot eyes, until Sir Thomas spoke.

"Perhaps you'd like to walk back whence you came, cockerel?"

"No, no," spoke up McNally hastily. "He's young, Thomas, and he's one of us, and you can't treat him like a blasted Roundhead. Watch your tongue, Plunkett, and get sense into your head."

"Aye," said Plunkett submissively, with a curse to his hot folly. There was no more talk.

IN the sunset, he met Francia on the wide quarterdeck. Someone had turned up woman's clothes from a chest, and she was tricked out in them. Beneath her laughter and gay words, Plunkett divined something sharp and uneasy in her. Few aboard here could speak French, and she had no English, but the eyes of hungry men spoke for them.

"I'd sooner be in cotton breeches again and aboard the pinnace with you," said she, her eyes going to the little craft that followed them. Plunkett followed her gaze, then looked at the groups of men idling in the waist, and the long brass guns under their tarpaulins.

"Aye," he assented. "But wait and see. Where's Don Carlos?"

"Down below," she replied. "He's in talk with the captain, the redbeard, and some of the other gentlemen."

Plunkett whistled softly, and scowled at the sunset. His mind went back to the dour Scot who preferred slavery to rakehelly freedom—Dunbarton, aye. There had been a Colonel Dunbarton with the king's army, a man stiff as a ramrod, too godly for most of the gay Cavaliers.

Darkness came, and dinner, a roaring jovial dinner with Francia at the right of Sir Thomas, and Don Carlos very friendly with all; but with few words for Plunkett, and this was a trifle singular. The wine flowed free, and toasts were thick and fast. Sir Thomas and the rest were in a wildly exuberant mood, as though some great rich news had come to them. One more day, said they, and Barbados would be on the horizon, or might be there with morning. Yet Plunkett noticed that for him there were sidelong glances and guarded speech, while about Francia these gay wild gentlemen centered their looks and broken French and their eager jests.

That evening they gave him new quarters—a tiny cubby off the stern cabins, scarcely more than a closet. When he wakened in the morning, the door was fast barred. He pounded at it furiously, until Sir Thomas called through the door to him.

"You're under restraint, Plunkett. Make any noise, and you'll go into chains for'ard."

No more. There was an opening high up, shuttered, but too small to permit him any egress; this was in the very stern of the ship. He swung out the port shutter and that was all he could do. A prisoner, eh? It looked strange and ominous. The day outside was fair, as he could see through the opening, and the ship bowled along merrily with the wind behind her. Two men brought him food and water, watched him with dirks in their hands, locked him up again. They would answer no questions.

Afternoon brought the voice of Francia to him. She was outside on the stern walk, a gallery beneath the overhang of the poop above and the rudder below.

"Francia!" he broke out. "Can you hear me? What happened—"

"Oh, be quiet, be quiet!" she cut in imploringly. "I found where you were; I have only a minute. Don Carlos has told them everything, about the treasure. They're going to help him get it. They'll kill you unless you're very quiet. They said so; they mean it. The captain wants to kill you anyway. Trust to me—"

"Get me a weapon! Pass it in to me!" said Plunkett.

"I will. But wait. Wait!" Her voice fluttered like the wings of a bird beating at hopeless bars. "We're close to the land. Tonight I'll come again. Leave everything to me. I owe you everything; I'll pay it—"

Her voice ended abruptly. A mutter of other voices; then she laughed, brightly and merrily, and the laughter of Sir Thomas chimed in.

Plunkett clenched futile fists and cursed. Look out for number one—he had forgotten that part of Captain

Breda's advice. Don Carlos, the opportunist, had merely hooked him with fine words, back there. Now the Spaniard was allied with strength.

"Quiet!" said Plunkett to himself. "By Heaven, I'll be quiet enough—for a little while!"

And what hurt worst of all was the fluttering voice of the girl, the chiming laughter of Sir Thomas, the hungry eyes of that lusty red-bearded man. Plunkett knew it was not for his own hasty words, or the excuse of the gold, that he was doomed here.

III

"MAURICE!"

He had told her his name. Now, in the night, he heard her speak it. The ship was anchored; the flowery smell of the land-breeze, the dank hint of coral reefs at low tide, filled the air. Plunkett went to the opening and put his hand through it. His fingers closed on a long dirk. Her fingers touched his, and her lips.

"Do nothing yet," she said. "Here is the land. Tomorrow they seek the right place; it is close by. Then they stand out to sea so that the people ashore will take no alarm. Tomorrow evening they return and land suddenly. That is the time—for us. I'll let you know. We can run away together."

Plunkett laughed softly. "Perhaps. And you? No trouble?"

"None yet," she rejoined, but her voice fluttered again. "If it comes—"

"Then turn the key in my door lock," said Plunkett, fondling the dirk. "God keep you! Tomorrow night."

She was gone. He hid the dirk under the pallet that served him as bed.

With morning, drawing himself to the opening, he caught glimpses of the blue land, and long reefs awash. Barbados, eh? And Dunbarton was there. His mind went more and more to that dour, stiff Scot. And to the slim lass Francia, with red-bearded Sir Thomas lusting after her.

It was hard to stay quiet, that day, as the land faded. The two men brought his food and drink; not the same men, this time. Two of the Scots. As they unlocked and opened the door, they were talking.

"I was in Colonel Dunbarton's regiment," said one of them. "I knew him well."

Plunkett looked at them as they came in. "What are your names?" he asked. They gazed at him blankly, shook their heads, refused to talk. Presently they were gone, but those words lingered with him. He had known Dunbarton, too—rather, had known the old colonel's son, who had been killed in the Midlands.

He remained quiet. Evening, and the land-smell again, and the creaking, wallowing ship came to anchor well off the reefs. The pinnace came alongside in the moonlight, the boats were put out; the stout oak shook to the tread of feet up and down the deck. In the midst of all this, Plunkett heard something shaking at his door, then the key rasped and the door swung in.

He reached out in the darkness, and the slim girl fell into his arms, breathing hard. He held her against him, and thought of the pulsing heart of a bird he had once held within his hand.

"What's wrong?"

"It—it's come," she panted. "They're leaving now; he's seeing them off, and then coming back for me. He locked me into the cabin, but I got out by the window. He thinks I'm safe in there—"

"Hold on," said Plunkett, laughing. "Who's he seeing off?"

"Why, Don Carlos and the captain, the redbeard. They're gone to look for the treasure and camp there."

"Eh?" Plunkett stiffened. "Then—oh! Then it's the other one who bothers you!"

"The dark man, yes. He's to leave in an hour with most of the crew, to raid the island plantations. But first—"

She shivered and clung to him. Plunkett's eyes opened wide in the darkness. So it was McNally and not the redbearded Sir Thomas! Or perhaps both of them, and McNally was trying to cheat Sir Thomas in respect to the wench. He patted the shoulder of Francia, and kissed her.

"Come along. Now take me back to his cabin with you."

She hesitated. "No, no! You don't understand; he's coming back—"

"That's what I do understand," said Plunkett. "Run? Hide? Slip overboard? Not a bit of it! The yardarm swing—that's my game now, and not forgetting number one. So come along, and no more talk."

She obeyed him; authority lay in his voice.

PRESENTLY they came into the passage where a lantern hung, and she pointed to the door of a stern cabin, with the key in the lock. Plunkett opened the door and closed it again behind them. A large, fine cabin, well appointed and even luxurious.

Plunkett closed the window, a fine large one with the stern walk outside it, and looked about the place. He opened one of the chests, then another, and glanced with distaste at the girl's ill-fitting garments. He chose others, from the chests, and tossed them at her.

"Here, shift into these; you have a man's part to play, and best do it as a man. I fancy this nut-brown suit for myself. And here—take back the dirk. I see a sword here that becomes me better. Ha! A brace of pistols too."

She stood staring at him. "What? Change into these clothes, now?"

"Here and now." Plunkett laughed. "Both of us. Go into the corner, there, and turn your back; I'll do the same. Let the lantern swing — we'll want it soon enough."

Her laugh rang on the cabin like a silver bell.

Plunkett dressed himself with care, plundering the chest for lace and a plumed hat and linen, with a very handsome baldric of embroidered silk, and Cordovan top-boots which fit him to a nicety. He looked at Francia, a slim figure in black velvet, and with a laughing word flung her a cloak from the chest.

"Put it on, put it on! You'll need that before anyone takes you to be a man. And a hat to go with it. Do you know how to charge a pistol? Then charge this brace. I see the chest yonder has powder and shot."

He went then to the table, on which a map or chart of the islands was outspread, with marks on the coast of Barbados. He could make nothing of it. Wine, tobacco, pipes were here; obviously, McNally and Sir Thomas had laid their plans at this table, and Don Carlos with them, by the number of tankards. Plunkett found the wine good and put down a draft, then filled a pipe and lit it at the lantern. Francia, the pistols loaded, was gazing at him with shining eyes, and he smiled.

Before he could speak, there was a heavy step and an oath at the door.

Plunkett snatched one of the pistols, dropped his pipe, and was behind the door as it opened and McNally came into the cabin.

"What, not locked after all? Come, lass! That argues well—"

"This argues better," said Plunkett, and shoved the pistol into his ribs.

The other turned his head, and his dark features were suffused by a rush of blood.

" 'Sdeath!" he exclaimed. "You—"

"Put your hands in front of you—quick! Francia, knot something about his wrists; take a strip of that gown you wore, anything. Easy, my dear Sir George! It would be a pity to blow a pellet of lead through you. I remember, Prince Rupert used to say it was a dog's death for a gentleman—"

His lightly mocking voice had an edge that turned McNally's face sallow. Francia was quick with the work; the man's wrists were bound, but not his tongue.

"Why, curse you. I'll see you strung up for this!" he exclaimed hotly.

Plunkett nodded and uncocked the pistol. "Perhaps, but I doubt it. Are the boats coming back with the pinnace?"

"Aye."

"Good. D'ye mind a fellow aboard here, a Scot, who was in Dunbarton's regiment?"

Sir George scowled at him, eyes probing. "The man Stuart, yes. What of him?"

"Francia, slip your cloak around the gentleman's shoulders. Then pour wine, fill the pipes, have all ready against our return. You and I, Sir George, are going on deck." Plunkett carefully cocked the pistol again. "I'll have this against your back, and the wrong word or move out of you will see you dead."

The dark man turned sallow again, for Plunkett meant his words.

"Here, what's it all about?" he exclaimed. "Ye need bear me no ill will. You've suffered nothing—"

"Peace, my good Cavalier; do your talking outside." Francia had put the cloak about McNally's shoulders. Plunkett turned him to the door. "Call down to your men that when the pinnace and boats come back, they're to embark—all of 'em, except Stuart and four others. They're to wait with one of the boats for you. The rest are to go down the coast five miles and then await your coming."

"What the devil—"

The pistol shoved into McNally's back and his voice died.

"Do as I say or you'll die before your time!" snapped Plunkett. "And your time's not far off at best. Obey me, and when we return here you're a free man with a sword in your hand."

"Oh!" said the other, and repressed his oaths.

Plunkett shoved at him, while the girl held the door open. In the passage, he took down the lantern and held it.

"So it's the girl in your mind, eh?" Sir George began. "Well, I meant her no harm. We should be friends—"

"We'll be friends, aye," said Plunkett grimly. "When we come back to the cabin, and not before."

THEY came out on the quarterdeck, and Plunkett urged the other to the rail.

"Lads!" Sir George sang out to the men in the waist. The pistol prodded him. "Orders are changed. Angus Stuart, you and four other men remain here with one boat, for me. The rest of you, all hands, pile into the pinnace and boats. Wait for me five miles south along the reefs. I'll be along within the hour."

"What, sir?" cried out a voice. "You'd not leave the ship empty?"

The pistol prodded, and Plunkett spoke under his breath.

"She's safe enough," returned McNally. "Sky's clear and sea's quiet. Besides, I'll send some of you back before dawn. No more of your impudence, but do as I say."

A submissive murmur sounded.

Sir George marched back again with the pistol in his loins, and so they came down to the cabin and the waiting Francia, who swung the door shut behind them. Sir George looked at Plunkett, angrily.

"You rogue, I see you've made free with my things!"

"I don't think you'll be needing them." And Plunkett smiled.

The other scowled. "What d'ye mean, anyhow? No need for you to treat me like an enemy. We took you aboard, made you welcome—and here you act like a mad dog!"

Plunkett shrugged. "You're quite right. Here, hold out your hands—Francia, loose him. Sir George is a friend, a good warm friend. He's joining us in a pipe and a health to King Charles. I see you have your sword, McNally; very good. Leave it in the scabbard, now. Pray be seated."

The dark man was puzzled, uneasy, uncertain. Plunkett spoke with the greatest of courtesy, yet the pistol remained cocked in his hand, and his eye was sharp. Seating himself, McNally took the flagon and pipe Francia handed him, and Plunkett took the seat opposite. The ship was swinging gently.

Deliberately, Plunkett set out to be the most charming of men—a natural gift which in other days it was said Prince Rupert and his brother Prince Maurice possessed in the highest degree. Gradually, McNally relaxed, unbent, warmed to the wine and friendly talk. He answered Plunkett's queries about the map, showed how the ship now lay almost directly off the plantation of Captain Higginbotham, how Sir Thomas and Don Carlos had gone with a third of the crew to the reefs a few miles up the coast, and even spoke of the treasure, quite freely.

"The don says the wreck was swept into a lagoon inside the reefs, easy to get at," he observed. "We should know by tomorrow night. I've promised to move north with the ship, or send the pinnace and boats, by that time. Sir Thomas will camp ashore till then."

"Undoubtedly." Plunkett, who still held the pistol ready, smiled a little.

"And you're in on the Spanish gold, remember," said Sir George heartily. "I tell you again, we mean you no ill—"

"Listen!" broke in Plunkett. "The boats!"

They fell silent. There was a scrape and a surge, as the pinnace came alongside. Voices broke forth, feet tramped the decks. After a little, feet came heavily down the passage and a man rapped.

"Ask what he wants," prompted Plunkett, his pistol jerking a little.

Sir George obeyed, and a voice responded: "It's the bo'sun, sir. Sir Thomas is safe landed and camped. Amn't I to stay aboard with men to hold the ship?"

"Why, damn your eyes, you've got the orders!" shouted McNally. "All hands with the pinnace for shore work. One boat and four men wait for me. Get about it!"

"Aye, sir." The feet slogged away.

McNally gave Plunkett an uneasy look. "What the devil are you at, with your pistol? Ye still bear me ill will?"

"None in the world." And Plunkett laughed. "But you've insulted this lady."

The dark man flushed. "Damme, I'll apologize to her—"

"No," said Plunkett. "You have your

sword. I have your spare one. Much better to kill me, and then have your will of her. Eh?"

The dark eyes stabbed at him. "Zounds! You're not serious?"

"Quite. There—the boats are off, by the sound. After all, Sir George, you're a gentleman; or once you were." Still smiling, Plunkett picked up the flagon in his free hand, drank off half the wine—and suddenly shot the balance into McNally's face.

Cursing, furious, wiping his eyes clear, Sir George came to his feet. Plunkett uncocked the pistol and handed it to Francia. He caught up the naked blade he had taken from the chest.

"Curse you, I should ha' let Sir Thomas string you up!" snapped McNally, and his sword scraped clear. "So that's the way of it, with your fine airs. . . . At ye, then! And I'll have your life, you cursed cockerel—"

The steel clashed and slithered. The slim girl shrank into a corner, staring.

Italian tricks of fence, in this day, were rare; the sword had an edge to use, and the point was a lesser evil. The dark man sprang in fast and viciously, his edge slashed and slashed again. But the low-beamed cabin hindered that work, and so did the blade of Plunkett.

"I think you have the better weapon," said Plunkett, as he parried a cut at his knees. And, with the parry, with the words that caught the attention of Sir George, he seemed to loose himself, to uncoil like a spring. His arm shot out, and the blade that prolonged his arm, and all his weight behind it drove in the fearful thrust.

The dark man stood against the bulkhead as the steel doubled and bent. A hoarse cry escaped him. The blade sprang straight again and stood there, buried half to the hilt—through him, and deep into the bulkhead behind him. His own sword fell, and then he made a convulsive, spasmodic movement.

"Heaven help me!" he said, and choked, and went limp, so that his head fell forward on the blade and hilt protruding from him.

Plunkett stooped and picked up the fallen weapon, and sprung it in his hands.

"Aye, the better blade," he said. "And you're lucky, Sir George, that you've escaped what Sir Thomas will have coming to him if my luck holds!"

He went up to the limp man and looked into his face, and turned away.

"Ready, Francia? Give me the pistols, and the sling to hold them. Thanks. You carry the lantern."

Steel in his voice, steel in his eye, no laughter in his face now. The girl obeyed him in silence, wide-eyed, a flush in her cheeks. Death was no stranger to the island women, where French fought French like rabid dogs, since the West India Company had sold its islands to the Knights of Malta and anyone was master who could take. But Plunkett paused, his eye lingering on her face, and he warmed suddenly.

"Ah, you're a fairy out of the sea, my demoiselle!" he said suddenly. "But I've not time for beauty this night, or for love. An eye to number one, and the yardarm swing for all else—that's the word! Come along, comrade. And keep that dirk of yours ready to hand."

IV

ANGUS STUART and the four men with him obeyed meekly, blankly. They were utterly bewildered, but the pistols of Plunkett argued against argument.

With slow-dipping oars, the boat crept in. The moon was high and clear.

The ship had been anchored off a break in the fringing reefs of the island, and Plunkett had learned from Sir George and the map exactly where the Higginbotham plantation lay, a mile inland. It had a landing here, with a rough road to it.

"There's a light seaward," said one of the men as he rowed.

Plunkett saw the light. None of them knew what to make of it. Not from the boats and pinnace; these were hugging the reefs. The light swung out at sea and a bit south. A ship of some kind, obviously, and Plunkett checked a hot oath of dismay. Well, the night was young, and if his wild shrewd plan could carry on—the devil!

"You," said Plunkett to Stuart, "are under my orders, with your men. Have you any objection?"

Grunts replied in cautious negation. He went on swiftly.

"We're for the plantation. I want speech with Colonel Dunbarton. You, Stuart, know him. Your job is to find him. Tell him that a friend of his dead son, one who was there when Jamie was killed, wants a word with him. You other men guard the plantation house, two front, two rear. No looting, no killing. My errand is with Dunbarton."

"Aye," came the assent in explosive relief. All five men were Scots, and the name of Dunbarton was as magic. Plunkett's air of authority was perfect; his transposition from a prisoner to a plumed cavalier, with Francia in similar guise beside him, suggested nothing singular to these men. Changes were sudden, in such times.

The reefs glittered with phosphorescence, dim and silvery in the moonlight. The beach appeared, with a stout wharf and warehouses. Beyond, lay the road. The boat scraped, was run up above tide mark. Plunkett was on dry land again, striding out along the rough track with Francia, his men ahead and behind, the moon riding high.

"What now?" The girl's hand pressed his arm lightly. "Aren't we safe?"

"Safe enough," he said. The men knew French. "Security's better than safety. Wait and see, my dear."

She ventured no further question.

The track led through broken, rough ground, always with heavy vegetation closing in, always with the shuddering vibration of surf on the reefs trembling in air. It passed now along a shallow gully, with low overgrown banks to right and left. And here, of a sudden, an unearthly bubbling sigh broke upon them—a sound so eerie, so close at hand, that one and all stopped short.

There was a crash in the vegetation ahead. From the rear, another crash and another. Angus Stuart bared his steel with a word of alarm.

"We've walked into a trap, sir—"

The words died on his lips. A swift convulsive horror seized upon them all: Plunkett went cold, and the girl caught at him with sobbing breath. Something moved above them, in the moonlight, against the stars. Something crashed in the brush beside them. A monstrous beastly head on long, undulating neck reached across the sky; a high towering shape, unearthly and fantastic, seemed to follow that hideous reptilian head.

Another crash opposite. There upreared a second frightful apparition, with a queer bubbling grunt to prove its verity.

"Ware the beastie—the deil himself. . . ."

WITH the frightened cry, the men scattered, broke, fled. Plunkett, like the others, found himself running

in blind panic, Francia beside him. Crashings and huge stirrings in the brush drove them on, but there was no pursuit.

Angus Stuart appeared ahead, lumbering on alone. At Plunkett's voice he halted, stood staring, wiping sweat from his bearded face.

"Heaven forgi' me! What was it?" he panted.

"No dream, at all events," said Plunkett, with a glance back. "Where are the men?"

"Still running—but not this way. Gone to earth, maybe. I'll not take this road back for a chest o' gold bars! The foul fiend himself—"

"Two of him, then, and others still, by the sounds." Plunkett laughed shakily. "Well, move ahead. Find Dunbarton. We can't be far from the plantation. Change plan; don't alarm the house, but get Dunbarton if possible. The slave quarters will be in the rear, or at one side. Come along."

They moved on. Francia uttered a soft word.

"What were they? Monsters of some kind. Like things from an evil dream."

"We'll find out from Dunbarton. If we reach him, we've a chance of fortune and great horizons; if we fail with him, at least we're safe. You'll see, my dear. All the future is now staked on that man."

"And you," she added.

The trees opened; a richer, sweeter odor assailed the throat. Clear in the moonlight, the rear of the plantation buildings were disclosed. Sheds, stables, sugar refinery, slave barracks, and the house like a far white ghostly shape on beyond. Angus Stuart had halted, and now spoke softly.

"I don't know this place, but it'll be like the ones near Georgetown. It was there we talked with Dunbarton. The slaves will be locked in for the night. Shall I go ahead and see if he's indeed here?"

Plunkett nodded, and the bearded Scot moved on.

Too bad about the four scattered men, thought Plunkett; they might change all his carefully laid plans. Those accursed monsters—he glanced back the way he had come, with a touch of fear. Something inhuman, prehistoric, about them. To find such weird creatures here in an island of the New World, where anything might happen, shook the brain and the senses.

The wait seemed interminable. Francia, the cloak wrapped about her, was stretched out beneath a tree. Across the far open spaces of canefields, nothing moved. Nothing moved closer at hand—ah! Something grew in the moonlight. At last! Two figures, coming by a path that curved from one side.

Angus Stuart spoke, and Plunkett answered.

Here was Dunbarton himself. A tall, gaunt shape, angular gray beard jutting out, a craggy, towering thing unbroken by sorrows or defeat or slavery "So ye knew Jamie," he said abruptly. "What's your name?"

Plunkett went close to him, looked into his bleak hard face.

"I've taken a new name," he said. "I've cast away my old name. I've come to offer you freedom and a new horizon. I've an empty ship waiting. You can—"

"Never mind all that," broke in Dunbarton. "I talked with Angus, coming here. Your name?"

"Maurice. Maurice Plunkett—it's all the name I'll ever have."

"And I'll have no truck wi' godless rogues and buccaneers," snapped the old Scot stiffly. "Son, belike, to that red-

bearded Plunkett, him and his gallows friend McNally—"

"Who's dead," said Plunkett. "No. I'm no relation. I took his name by chance, and shall make the best of it. After all, I was beside your son when he died."

"A lie," said Dunbarton with a growl. "There was none with him except Prince Maurice and his brother Rupert. Prince Rupert told me so himself."

"And your son died with the name of his mother on his lips. Kathleen."

The tall gaunt Scot leaned forward. He looked into Plunkett's face; then he drew back suddenly, and a shiver took him. Plunkett went on speaking.

"I'm no buccaneer, Colonel Dunbarton. I offer you freedom, war on Parliament; ships and men, a chance to carve out a career with honor; and my orders to obey. No looting of other men; no excesses; strict discipline; honor first, and a yardarm swing to those who oppose us. And the first to swing, I think, will be Sir Thomas Plunkett. Is it yes or no? We've not an hour to lose."

Dunbarton caught his breath.

"The voice of Prince Rupert—the face of Prince Maurice—"

"Prince Maurice is dead," said Plunkett. "He went down with his ship. Yes or no?"

Dunbarton saluted stiffly.

"Yes, your—yes, sir," he snapped.

"How many men can you reach, and how quickly?"

"A score here with me. Loose us, and an hour before daybreak we'll have a full fourscore from the plantations roundabout."

"At the shore landing, then. Ah!" Francia, wakened by the talk, was approaching. Plunkett turned to her. "My dear Francia, this is Colonel Dunbarton. He can't marry us, but he'll see us safe married at the first chance!"

"And the beasts, Maurice?"

Angus Stuart fell to laughing, as did Dunbarton, who made answer.

"Camels, Cap'n Plunkett. Camels from Africa. Cap'n Higginbotham has brought in half a dozen of the brutes, to handle the sugar where the carts can't go. They're tethered along the shore road, to feed."

Plunkett broke into a laugh, a joyous ringing laugh.

"Camels! So that was it. . . . I've heard of the brutes, but never saw 'em before. Well, loose your men here; no noise, no alarm. Gather all you can, an hour before dawn on the shore. I'll await you there."

A quick, firm grip of the hand, and Plunkett turned shoreward, Francia at his side, exultation in his heart, the strange ways of destiny forgotten.

Forgotten, too, that far, dancing light he had glimpsed at sea.

V

PLUNKETT, in his glow of dream come true, had counted upon picking up at least one or two of those panic-stricken men, and so sent Angus Stuart with Dunbarton. He met no one, however. The white coral beach shimmered emptily to right and left of the drawn-up boat. The seaward light had disappeared. They were alone.

With a laugh, Plunkett stretched out in the sand beside the slim girl. She understood everything now, and her low voice was vibrant with eagerness.

"Oh, Maurice, it's a thing to make the heart beat faster! Men to obey you, a fine ship to sail away in—shall we go to Martinico? To the French islands?"

"Heaven knows! Sooner or later,

yes," he said, peering at the sea and the reefs. "The ship idle and empty. Sir Thomas off to the north seeking gold. The pinnace and boats miles away to the south. I'm sorry to lose Don Carlos and his treasure, but we'll not tempt destiny."

"No," she said briskly, gaily. "And where first, Maurice?"

"What matter?" He made himself comfortable. "We've the whole New World to pick and choose from, my dear. Think of that—and waken me in an hour, or if one of those four lost men shows up."

Her hand in his, he fell asleep almost at once.

Plunkett wakened to chill coldness, darkness. The moon was far in the western sky, a thin dank mist veiled the stars. He found a cloak over him —her cloak. It must be close to morning. A voice had roused him—it came again.

"The devil stabbed me! Look out, Cap'n! There he goes!"

"After him! Zounds, ye dogs, ye've let him slip!" That was the voice of Sir Thomas, and it brought Plunkett to his feet with one leap. Francia? Gone. No sight of her, no sign of her. But other shapes on the white sand, rushing at him, giving tongue as he came erect.

Bewildered, still half asleep, he caught at his pistols. The powder was wetted by the dew or dawn-mist; they failed and he went sprawling as the rush hit him. No chance to get out sword. He was down, pinioned, held futile by harsh handgrips. Over him came and stood Sir Thomas, with lusty furious oaths of rage.

"Who is it? Ha! The cockerel himself. And the other was the lass. Ye've let her slip, blast the lot of you! After her, fetch her back. . . ."

"No use, sir; she's hid in the brush by now," said a man. Others gave surly assent. "After hearing o' them monsters, devils or whatever they be, I'm biding here."

Upon the oaths of Sir Thomas broke the silky laugh of Don Carlos.

"They're right. If there's any truth in that story, I stay here also."

"The story's a deuced lie. No such creatures exist," swore Sir Thomas. "The island has no monsters, no wild animals. You're all a pack of fools!"

"Shall we run out the boat, sir—"

"The ship's safe enough; camp here. When daylight comes, we fetch back the lass. Bring up those four Scots rogues."

Plunkett, wrists and ankles fast bound, was jerked to a sitting posture. The men grouped around. There was no need to ask questions; the four frightened men had fled up the shore, apprised Sir Thomas of what was up, and had brought him. And now those same four men were led forward in the starlight.

Sir Thomas, in a cold fury, lashed them with his tongue for cowards and traitors.

"Dunbarton, eh?" he went on. "Because this rogue ordered it, ye obeyed him—all my orders flung overboard, to boot. Obeyed him, when ye should have stood to your duty—"

"We had no pistols," growled one of the four. "Besides, it was Angus Stuart who took the orders."

"Well, I have pistols." And with the word, Sir Thomas fired.

He fired again. Two of the hapless men slouched forward and fell quiet. "Back to work, ye dogs!" cried Sir Thomas at the other two. "That's a lesson in treachery for all hands. After this, ye'll know whose orders to take."

"Said and done like a brave man,"

spoke out Plunkett on the silence. "Like a true gentleman, egad! King Charles would be proud of you this night."

Sir Thomas turned to him, came to where he sat, and paused.

"Found tongue, have you? Where's Sir George?"

"Waiting for you in hell," said Plunkett. Sir Thomas lashed out a savage kick that sent him toppling over. "And you'll swing, the minute we get aboard," he snarled. "Come, speak up! What's your play with Dunbarton? Do ye know him?"

Plunkett struggled erect. "I've met him. We hoped to find safety and shelter through him, but those accursed monsters frightened us all. Look out for them! I tell you, they're fearsome beasts!"

The grouped men murmured. Sir Thomas rapped out an oath.

"Come with me, half a dozen of you! Watch this rogue. If there's monster or devil up this road, I'll face him down; and find the lass to boot!"

SOME trooped in behind him as he strode away. The men settled down, talking low-voiced. That cold-blooded execution had put fear into them; Sir Thomas was a man to be obeyed. But Plunkett was aware of Don Carlos coming to him and squatting down, and speaking with him in Spanish.

"So, my friend, I begin to think that I made a mistake."

"In not putting a knife in my back?"

"Far from it. In not sticking to you, instead of switching to these others," said the Spaniard coolly. "They're a pack of rascals. They've no wits, no brain. Now, you were clever in leaving that ship empty—but they don't see it. I do."

"Your wisdom is a bit late," Plunkett said bitterly.

"Better late than never. We've found the right spot among the reefs; whether the wreck's there, we don't know. Tell me your whole scheme, *caballero*. It may be well worth while becoming friends once again. Where did you hope to get a crew?"

"To the devil with you," said Plunkett.

The other laughed silkily. "What, still surly? Look you, *caballero*. You did me a good turn back there at Tortola. If it's to my advantage, I'll repay it yet—"

Plunkett spat out an oath. With a shrug, Don Carlos rose and left him.

Dismay, chagrin, despair came upon him. Francia had left him for a little—and in that unguarded moment, Sir Thomas had arrived. She had stabbed one man and got away. He was taken. He could expect nothing from her. Even if Dunbarton came now, he and his Scots would be unarmed and helpless. Here were a good thirty men, most of them with fusils, all with cold steel, and Sir Thomas to lead them.

As he sat there, he saw the first graying paleness lifting in the east. A desperate impulse seized him. A hopeless chance, yet it might lead to something. He spoke out sharply at the grouped men.

"Lads! You've followed two rogues on the path to hell. You've fought for King Charles and so have I. Here's your chance to fight for him again, if not for loot and women. Colonel Dunbarton's bringing fourscore true men to take the ship and go. I've killed Sir George; he's dead aboard the ship now. The other men are with the boats, down the coast. Turn me loose, let me deal with this mad dog who captains you, join with me and Dunbarton in an honest cause—"

Two or three came running at him,

striking him silent and asprawl with a storm of hot oaths. His plea had failed, like his pistols. None the less, some voices rose in quick protest, in eager discussion. But he failed, and worse than failed, for now Sir Thomas would learn all his plan. One of the men already was bawling away at the captain, but his voice fell silent abruptly.

From the road came the roar of Sir Thomas, an exultant shout, and presently a little group of figures straggling along behind the red-bearded swaggerer. Some of the group ran to meet them, pouring forth all Plunkett had said. More oaths, heated raging oaths this time, as Sir Thomas comprehended everything.

The party straggled up. Francia caught? Plunkett peered in desperate hopelessness, then his heart leaped. Not the slim lass after all, but stout Angus Stuart, held by two of the men, captured. He had doubtless come with some word from Dunbarton, only to fall foul of this group.

"So it's out and out treachery, is it?" burst forth Sir Thomas furiously. "Ye damned traitorous dogs—aye, you, Angus Stuart! Ye've gone against the commission of His Majesty, ye've betrayed us all, ye've sought to leave us stranded and marooned here while ye walked off with the ship, you and your bloody Scots!"

"Aye, to an honest course!" shot out the Scot, struggling with the two men who held him. "Dunbarton's worth a dozen of you, ye roistering rakehelly Cavalier—"

Sir Thomas, who had reloaded his pistols now, stepped close and the smoke gushed on the dawn light. To the report, Angus Stuart sagged forward and fell on his face.

"That for all traitors!" lifted the sonorous voice.

"And a yardarm swing to murderers like yourself," cried Plunkett.

Sir Thomas turned around, slowly.

"Say you so, cockerel?" he exclaimed, with ominous self-control. "You'll crow another tune ere long; and if you've killed poor McNally, it's more than a hempen rope you'll get." He swung toward his men. "Look alive, lads! Matches alight, guns ready. In case those ragged godly Scots come down on us, let 'em have it. You, Wat, take six men and go aboard the ship, and fire a gun to bring back the pinnace and boats. We'll take one look for the lass, and then come aboard—"

His words died in his throat. He stood stockstill, staring out toward the graying east, where the sea was lightening fast. Some of the men followed his look. A sharp word burst from one of them.

"A sail! A ship, and she's standing in—"

Excited exclamations, a general movement, Sir Thomas and a few others striding toward the shore as though to see better. Under cover of it all, Plunkett found Don Carlos at his side, and sinking beside him in the sand. The dark bearded face was all alive and the soft voice was vibrant.

"Look at her, look at her, *caballero!* You can't make her out yet, but you'll know the lines of her quick enough. And no blind chance, either. Why, think you, did Cap'n Breda hold me in 'hell,' eh? To make me talk. He'd picked up news of that wrecked galleon of mine. He was coming to the torture next—to make me talk. And when I got away, he knew I'd come back to this coast to seek her out—oh, he'd picked up the word that I had gold to offer the right man! Perhaps I'd talked too much; what matter? So here he is, and your old friend the *Haarlem* with him."

"No!" blurted Plunkett, peering out to sea. He could see only the vague ship there, the blur of canvas, no more. "No! It's one of your lies. It couldn't be his ship—you never said before that he knew anything about your accursed treasure. . . ."

Don Carlos chuckled. "I do not tell all I know, *amigo!* I didn't tell these fools that I knew about their monsters, their ungainly devils—bah! I've seen camels many a time. I was here before, when I was wrecked. No, I do not tell everything; but now I'm offering you everything. You have luck, you have brains. What's it to be? Say the word if my friendship tempts you once again, as your luck tempts me!"

Plunkett wrenched vainly at the lines that bound him. The *Haarlem?* Captain Breda? It was incredible, it was impossible; until the words of Don Carlos sank into his mind. No, this man had not told everything. Perhaps he had told the truth now, a part of it. . . .

It was a curious moment. Breeze had swept the light mist away. The east was gray, the shape of a vessel standing in for the girdling reefs. Pandemonium had broken out among the men. Some were surrounding the boat, dragging it through the white sand toward the water; others were calling, shouting. Sir Thomas stood silent, staring to sea.

And then, without warning, lifted one awful scream of human terror.

VI

PLUNKETT wrenched around.

That appalling shriek was echoed, reëchoed from a score of throats. The group of men were flinging away their arms, scattering, bursting in every direction. Straight across at them from the road and sheds were sweeping half a dozen enormous and grotesque shapes in the gray dawn—camels, reptilian heads high, fright spurring them, like monsters of a bygone age brought to life and sweeping down upon their human prey at that fantastic striding pace.

"The devil's upon us! The devil himself!"

With the yell, blind horror and utter panic fell upon everyone. Plunkett, himself barely able to repress a chill of fear at sight of those gruesome animal forms, felt Don Carlos leaning over him, heard the short quick words.

"Swiftly, *caballero!* Friendship? Alliance again? Yes or no?"

"Yes!" cried Plunkett frantically.

The knife swept down and sheared. The lines fell away; he was free. Over them went those stalking shapes of terror. Plunkett scrambled to his feet in the sand, clapped hand to the sword that was still at his hip, and was suddenly aware of a flood of ragged men streaming forward across the sand.

A voice crackled out—that of Dunbarton. The ragged men flung themselves on the abandoned weapons. Some of them went leaping forward toward the boat, which was in the water; they caught it, dragged it back, struck down the men in it. The pistol of Sir Thomas barked, and then he was down and half a dozen Scots piling on him. The poor frightened camels were careering up along the curving shore and away.

"Maurice! Maurice!"

Plunkett turned. A whirlwind flew into his arms—Francia, all in a flame of joy and eager excitement. Dunbarton followed, a gaunt figure with great gray beard jutting, and saluted Plunkett stiffly.

"How'll I call ye, sir—Cap'n? It was her notion, sir, to drive out the beasts on 'em—" Dunbarton broke off, as he sighted the bodies on the sand. "What

devil's work is this? And what's that ship out yonder—?"

Plunkett wakened. "Good lord! We've only one boat to get your men out—"

"Two barges under the shed here, Cap'n."

"Get them out! Every minute counts—get aboard, quickly! Where's Sir Thomas? Ah!" Plunkett strode at the group by the shore. "Bind him, men, take good care of him! Clap him safe aboard. Here, Francia! Great work, lass, great work. Here's our old friend Don Carlos. Keep an eye on him for me; he'll bear watching."

Fourscore and again a score of those ragged Scots who had been slaves, yelling, pressing around, obeying Dunbarton swiftly. Two boats were carried out from one of the sheds and dragged into the water. Other men came running—some of the fugitives, recovered from their terror. Of these, Plunkett chose a score who might be reliable, and bade the rest to the devil. Then he was running for the boat, with Francia and gaunt Dunbarton coming after.

As the men pulled out, Plunkett eyed the incoming ship, now a scant mile off the reefs and shortening sail as she headed in. The *Haarlem*, no doubt about it; no running from her, no time to beat out to seaward. He swiftly sketched to Dunbarton who and what she was. Evidently she was coming in to lay aboard and seize the ship anchored helpless here.

"We'll trip her." Plunkett eyed the two large boats putting off from shore, loaded to the very gunnels with men. "There's enough of our crew here to help things out. Arms, powder, and stay under cover. Any of your men who know cannon, load and shot the guns, but no firing. Not a shot until I give the word."

"Aye," said the dour Scot. "Shot in the guns, or bags of bullets?"

"Bullets," said Plunkett, and laughed. "You know your business."

"Who's yon man wi' the black beard?" Dunbarton pointed to Don Carlos.

"A Spaniard, a friend, one who'll serve us well if he's well watched."

The men leaned on the stout ash, the crowded boat surged forward; another five minutes, and they were clambering up the ship's side.

Now was business, sharp and stern.

FOR men aboard a strange ship, the Scots did uncommonly well; and luckily, there was a leaven of the old crew to set things going. By the time the two large boats surged in under the rail, the guns amidships were being readied, arms were coming up, powder was served. Plunkett watched the bound, furious, cursing Sir Thomas fetched aboard, and ordered him taken into the cabins and guarded.

The *Haarlem* was drifting down under the light breeze, closer and closer, with obvious intent to lay this helpless ship aboard and keep her intact. No flag, no hailing voice, but decks crowded with men, and at the tiller the powerful figure of Breda himself.

"He'd love to meet you," said Don Carlos. Plunkett looked at the man, read hatred in the black eyes and snarling features, and laughed a little.

His eyes lifted to a figure beside him. "Francia! Below with you—"

She laughed gaily. "Give orders to your wife, Maurice; just now, I'm your comrade."

He shrugged helplessly, darted to the rail, ordered Dunbarton to keep all men down and under cover. And as though to prick out his words, at that moment the *Haarlem* erupted with white spats,

fusils banged out, bullets came tearing and screaming aboard. That was Captain Breda's greeting, abrupt and crude as his tactics. Undoubtedly, until the very last moment, he thought this motionless craft to be some island trader caught unawares.

"Drop your ports, Dunbarton, and let 'em have it," said Plunkett quietly.

The bullets hummed around. A few men were down. The *Haarlem* was lorging in, bows on, men ready with grapnels to make fast, so close now that every face along the bulwarks stood out clear and distinct. A sudden yell of recognition burst from Captain Breda, as he saw the figures of Don Carlos and Plunkett.

It was drowned in a wilder yell from his men, as the ports of the ship dropped and the five guns were run out.

The grapnels were flung, the two ships were almost touching, as the guns belched and roared.

The deck reeled. A crash, and both ships staggered in contact. Howls and screams swept the deck of the *Haarlem* as that storm of hot lead tore into the crowded faces along her bulwarks. None the less, Breda's men came pouring over her bows, over the rail. Steel glittered through the smoke, pistols banged. The fierce stream of men struck into the Scots. Dunbarton's fusils spoke in a scattering volley, and then it was hand to hand.

Plunkett leaped for the waist, with Don Carlos at his heels. Breda headed his men, blood from a bullet-scrape crimsoning his face and beard, a satanic figure that hewed terribly; but the crash of those guns had doomed his hope. Here were no terrified merchants to flee at the first touch of sword. These ragged men were veterans of a dozen stricken fields, with freedom in the offing.

Plunkett, with sword and dirk aflame, plunged into the thick of it. Hot work, swift work, snarling faces and striking blades. Then Breda, cutting down a Scot, swinging around to find Plunkett upon him, roaring out an oath as the steel crossed and clanged. He attacked with vicious fury, bearing Plunkett back and back. Twice the blade of Plunkett drove home, only to slip aside harmlessly. He spat out an oath.

"Steel under your jerkin, eh?"

"The best Milan—and you to the devil!" snarled Breda, rushing him.

Plunkett met the rush, stepped into it, caught the Dutchman's blade with his long dirk and wrenched it aside. They were almost breast to breast for an instant—and Plunkett brought up his sword-hilt. The pommel struck Breda between the eyes, sent him staggering in blind fury. Plunkett was in at him, striking again; the sword-hilt dropped the man this time in a quivering sprawl across the deck.

Plunkett had one swift vision of a swirl of figures. Francia was in that knot, her dirk plunging, and he rushed into the swirl. His edge bit, his point drove home. He caught Francia by the arm and shoved her to one side, indicating the senseless Hollander.

"There's your work—get him tied up!" he cried, and was gone into the thick of the fight once more.

They died hard, those men of Tortola. A little knot of them remained by the rail, asking no quarter, getting none. Dunbarton had led some of his Scots over to the deck of the *Haarlem* and had the other ship secure now. The sun was up, flaming on the bloody decks, as the last of the buccaneers followed his mates.

But they had taken dire toll of the ragged Scots before they died.

* * *

Plunkett stood at the quarterdeck rail and looked down at the massed faces below. Sir Thomas stood there, and Captain Breda beside him, bound figures of hate.

"A very simple matter," said Plunkett coldly. "Thomas Plunkett, you stand accused of the murder of Angus Stuart and two other men in cold blood. You're adjudged guilty. Have you anything to say?"

"I'll not be judged by you," stormed Sir Thomas.

"You'll be hanged by me," Plunkett returned. "But it'd be a pity to have you at one side of the mainyard and the other side empty. Cap'n Breda, you've murdered a good twenty honest men this fine morning."

"You'd do well to give me back my ship and take me as partner," said the tall Dutchman, his bruised face all bloody in the sunlight.

"That's a matter of opinion," Plunkett answered coolly. "What I take, I keep; a good motto. But there's a better, and I recommend it out of your own mouth, Cap'n Breda. Look out for number one, and a yardarm swing to all the rest! Think of it as you swing. Take 'em away, lads!"

He turned to Dunbarton and Don Carlos and Francia, his blue eyes chill as the scuffle moved forward along the decks.

"The pinnace and boats are coming," said Francia.

"With men to fill our ranks," Plunkett nodded assent. "We'll soon have enough men to take care of both ships; and there's Tortola for the taking, if we want a good haven. That nest needs cleaning."

"But there's gold for the having, first," said Don Carlos.

"Right." Plunkett nodded again. "I may leave you and Colonel Dunbarton to find that wreck, while I take a run ashore on a more important matter."

"Ashore?" The shaggy brows of Dunbarton drew down. "You'd not raid the island?"

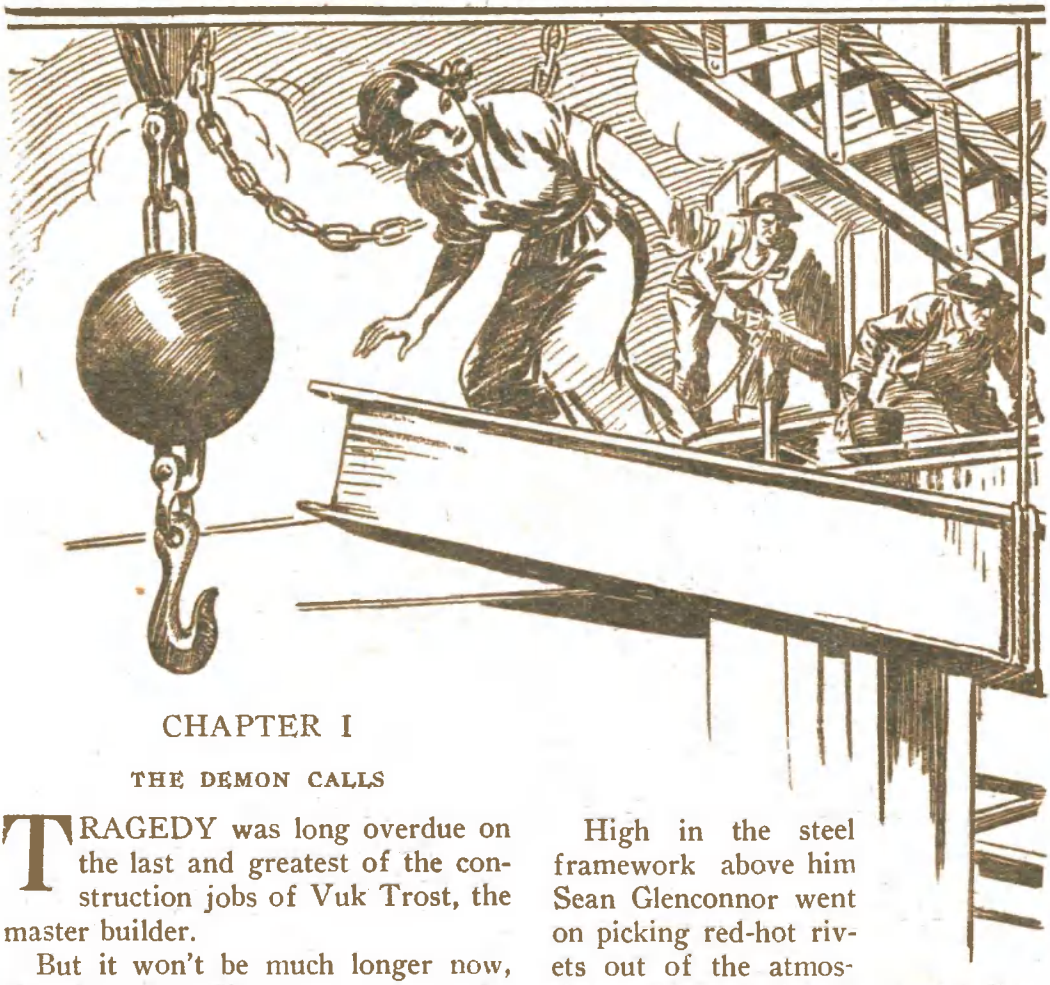
"Ashore?" echoed Francia, and came quickly to him in appeal. "No, no, Maurice! There's no luck ashore!"

Plunkett smiled. "But there's someone to marry us, my dear."

She laughed in comprehension. Don Carlos chuckled softly. Old Dunbarton eyed them with his dour, grim gaze, and shook his head.

"The quicker about it, the better, if I'm any judge," he grinned.

"Right," said Plunkett.



CHAPTER I

THE DEMON CALLS

TRAGEDY was long overdue on the last and greatest of the construction jobs of Vuk Trost, the master builder.

But it won't be much longer now, thought Mark Ferrol, grimly. as he stepped out of the elevator onto the newly finished transfer platform at the forty-first floor of what was about to be the tallest building is the world.

Slightly dizzy, as always at this naked height, Ferrol stood still for a moment and strained his eyes upward into the dazzling glare of July sunlight, looking for Glenconnor.

He was up there, all right. Ferrol could hear him. And presently Ferrol saw him, swallowed hard, and unconsciously dried the palms of his hands on the sides of his pants.

"Glenconnor!" he yelled. "Come down!" But wind whipped the words back into his mouth unheard.

High in the steel framework above him Sean Glenconnor went on picking red-hot rivets out of the atmosphere with a steel bucket and bellowing a dismal dirge in minor key.

Glenconnor was drunk . . . very, very drunk. He swayed on the narrow girder on which he stood, scuffing the edges with his heavy feet like a clowning tight rope walker. He never missed a rivet. Had Glenconnor missed a single rivet he would probably have plunged after it immediately in acute embarrassment. Glenconnor was a talented "catcher," drunk or sober, and vain of it.

He ornamented his song with many a Celtic quaver and flourish, and although drowned out periodically by the staccato stammer of the rivet guns, his voice rose again and again,

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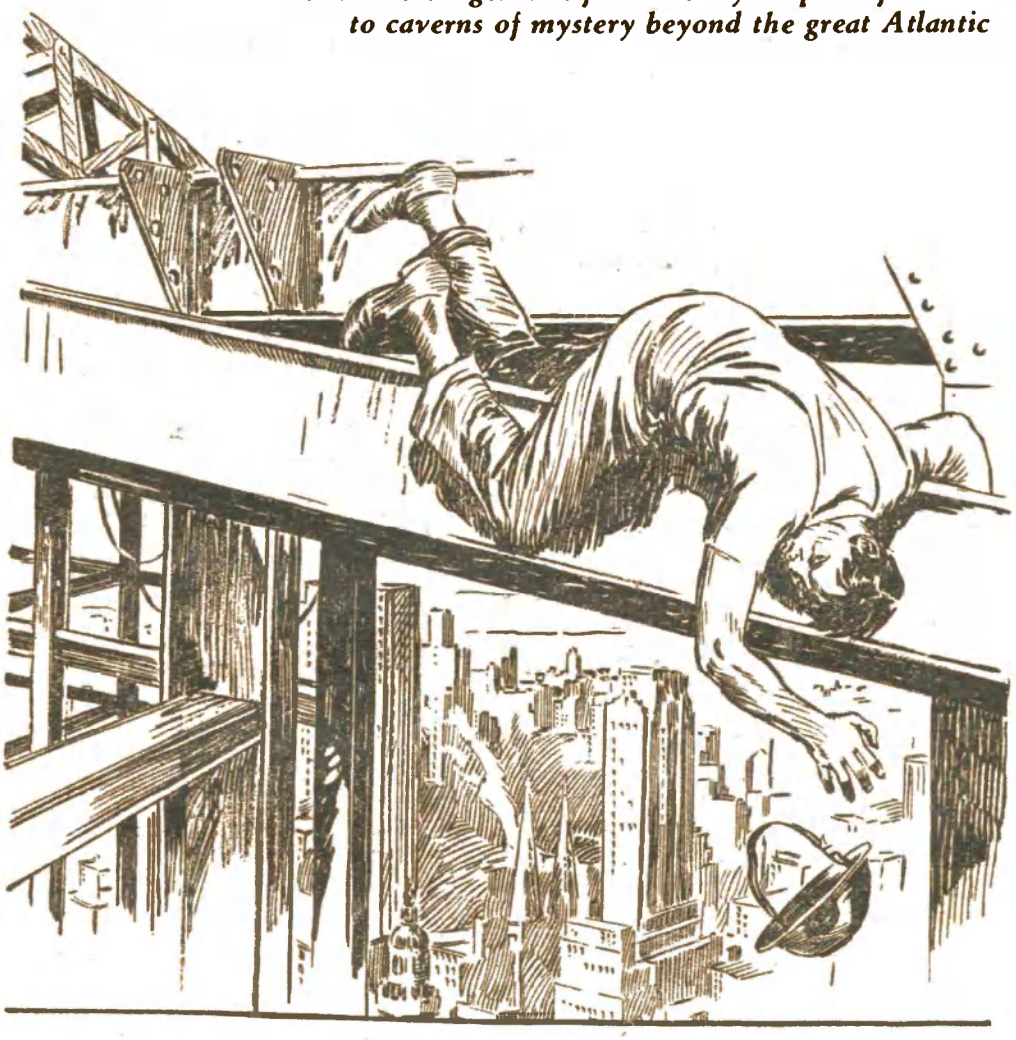


tearing through the steel forest like the highly amplified wail of a base Banshee.

All the men working within earshot had laid down their tools to watch his antics with shocked eyes round with awe, for Glenconnor was putting on a good show, no doubt of it.

He teetered on the brink of doom like the man in the chair-and-ladder act and all the while he kept up that doleful, demented Irish howl that

froze the blood pleasantly in the watchers' veins, while his nimble footwork sustained the hope that maybe he was just clowning after all.

Ferrol knew better. He had seen Glenconnor like this five times before. Old Trost, the big boss, who had sent Ferrol aloft to reason with Glenconnor, claimed to have witnessed the performance once a year for seventeen years. This made eighteen. The boss said that was enough of such nonsense. Glenconnor was old enough now to know better.

The argument seemed to lack force and persuasion as Ferrol reviewed it now. But it did seem desirable to get Glenconnor the devil down from there somehow and without delay.

Cursing his own bad luck and worse judgment in accepting the mission, Ferrol left the nice security of the transfer platform and went on and up into the windy reaches of the forty-second story. There a young hurricane clawed at his nervous system and made the girders resound like the strings of a monstrous harp.

Ferrol went on.

He hated height. Always had. The big oxlike steel pushers with their dainty, catfoot tread inspired him with a holy kind of awe. But he had done a good deal of steel work himself of necessity and he had no excuse for stopping now. Old Trost's orders were always obeyed. The Trost jobs were executed on principles of military precision as well as mathematical accuracy. Ferrol was old Trost's right hand man; his first assistant and most loyal friend. It was up to Ferrol to set the example of simple obedience to the old man's captious request.

"Get Glenconnor down from there!" old Trost had commanded with curiously shaking lips. He wiped them with a gnarled hand suddenly grown feeble and tremulous. Fear was in old Trost's keen eyes. "I don't care if he smashes every bone in his bull's hide, but I won't have him doing it on my job!"

Ferrol had stared at his boss, shocked by the intensity of the old man's feeling. But he knew the roots of it. Trost was a fear-ridden, ghost-haunted man, badgered by shapeless superstition. He had lost a man on every job for seventeen years. Some black fate seemed to dog his projects from the bitter day that Terry Glenconnor, brother to the drunken Sean up here, was killed in the first of that long series of accidents. Terry had been a sand hog, killed by a fool blunder while the caissons were delving into the muck of a new excavation.

This was the anniversary of Terry's death and his brother Sean, whom old Trost had loyally reemployed on every project since, celebrated the tragedy annually by getting magnificently drunk. For the rest of the year Sean maintained a dour, still-tongued sobriety, but the second of July was Sean's date to howl, as he was howling now. It was a queer twist, inexplicable. It nearly drove old man Trost crazy.

"This is the last!" old Trost had added, huskily, as Ferrol left to do his bidding. "This is my last big job. There hasn't anything happened yet, Ferrol. Get that Irisher down from there!"

"Yessir," Ferrol had tossed back as he ran.

BUT the nearer he drew now to the loudly grieving son of Erin, the less likely seemed the possibility of averting tragedy from this last of old Trost's jobs as a master builder.

Only it won't be Glenconnor, Ferrol informed himself, with a gasp, as a tongue of wind lashed out at him with forked fury. It'll be me!

As Ferrol set a gingerly foot at last on the same girder with Glenconnor, the big Irishman saw him and a gleam of reason flickered in his eyes. Then a broad inviting grin, foreign to his gloomy weathered face, greeted Ferrol's airy, casual salute of greeting.

Said Glenconnor:

"So the old man's sent a jinniwink up fer me! Now, what d'ye think of that!" Then he went on with his grieving.

Ferrol came towards him along the narrow strip of steel and halted half a dozen feet away.

"Orders, Glenconnor," he said shortly. "Quit clowning and come on down to the office. You're fired."

There was a dry choke of protest from the bucker up. He spoke past Glenconnor's weaving form and addressed Ferrol as if they two were alone on a mountain top.

"You wouldn't have a bucket of beer about you, would you, Mr. Ferrol? It's dry work up here today." He made a feint at spitting on his gloves and then showed them to Ferrol significantly to prove them still dry.

"That's an idea," said Ferrol, gratefully. "I haven't. But Glenconnor here'll go down and get us some."

Glenconnor wagged his bull's head and paused in his song. "No," he disagreed. "Beer's a fine thing, but it's a thing that comes best first and last. It's a fine glow I've got. I'll not be damping it down with beer." Again his hoarse howl rose and the warm wind whirled it about his head. He looked stark mad with that silly grin on his face and those words of grief coming out of his long, thin-lipped mouth seemed to be sung by another man inside him.

"Oh, why-eee diddy die-eee?
Wail—fer—th' widdy—!"

"Listen, Glenconnor," said Ferrol. "You're a man of sense—"

"I am not," said Glenconnor positively. "Not at this moment."

"Oh, you know that?" Ferrol demanded—and Glenconnor grinned more broadly at him.

Ferrol edged on steadily, holding Glenconnor's eyes with his own. The wind shifted and Ferrol braced himself with a wave of icy nausea. He felt as if the mouth of hell were opening under him, inhaling deeply, sucking him down. The long girder writhed crazily under his one swift downward glance and he felt a sudden dissolution of his legs under him.

He did not stumble. He went down limply, clutching the girder with every muscle and nerve, adhering to it with every available inch of his body as if he had melted in the blaze of sunlight like soft wax. As if from a great distance he heard Glenconnor's strangled cry:

"Saints in Heaven! Hang on, kid. Hang on!"

CONSCIOUSNESS returned gradually to Ferrol.

"Quit squeezin' that bit of iron," he heard Glenconnor say. "It's got feelin's the same as you and me. Somebody get a hook up here!" he roared.

"Coming up," said a clear, quiet voice very close above Ferrol's prostrate form. A woman's voice. It continued serenely: "Of all the witless stunts. What in the world were you trying to do, Mark?"

Ferrol groaned. Embarrassment joined the stew of emotions that held him plastered to the girder. He managed to lift an eye and saw directly ahead of him a slender girl's form crouched casually on the same strip of steel. A pair of slim brown hands held the yellow linen skirt down discreetly but the wind insisted on showing up an excellent pair of ankles. Ferrol couldn't see her face but he didn't have to know that she was smiling faintly, the cool, supercilious little smile with which she surveyed all his activities. He was old Trost's best aide but he had reason to believe that he didn't stack up very high with the boss's daughter.

Naturally he did not answer her. He was afraid to breathe. It was a devil of a spot. He couldn't even writhe when he heard her say, presently:

"Don't fall asleep, Mark. But you do look so comfortable—!" A little rippling giggle. "I was watching you from the office through pop's glasses. You folded up, sort of in coils. It was lovely. But nobody seemed to be doing anything so I thought I'd better send up a hook from the transfer platform."

"You think of everything," Ferrol managed to mutter. "Where the devil is it?"

He felt it then, cold and heavy and reassuring, and he transferred his death grip to it with rapturous delight. Still clinging like a cat to a curtain, he felt himself swung out over space and guided to a gentle bumping halt in safety.

The girl got up and walked quietly back along the narrow steel girder, her small feet treading casually, surely, one ahead of the other in a smooth, Indian-like glide. She had been raised on construction jobs. She could catch a rivet almost as well as Glenconnor.

She could do other things as well. At twenty, Melitsa Trost was a talented sculptress. Mark Ferrol knew it well, for his own architectural talent had once won him the *Prix de Rome*. He had a huge respect for the girl's ability and something more that he stubbornly refused to acknowledge.

Ferrol took himself out of the big hook's cold embrace and hailed Glenconnor.

"Hi," he said. "How about it? Party over? Are you knocking off for the day?"

Glenconnor withdrew his gaze from the slim girlish form treading the single track of steel. "Yep," he said. "Ye've taken all the good out of it fer me. What'd ye want to do, kill yerself?"

Ferrol laughed. "You wouldn't have let me," he pointed out. "Anyhow, you didn't."

Glenconnor glared at him. "Next time—" he said.

"Come on down with me now and have a drink," said Ferrol. "I want to talk to you. The old man's worried."

"He's got a right to be," said Glenconnor. "Forty-two stories and not a man hurt yet. His private devil's behindhand, ain't he?"

"Through no fault of yours," Ferrol pointed out. "That's what I want to talk to you about."

"I'll talk about nothing," said Glenconnor, "until I've slept off this load." He moved away heavily.

Ferrol gave up with a shrug. When Glenconnor was sober he wouldn't talk at all, about anything.

WHEN Ferrol went down the transfer platform, he found Melitsa waiting for him.

He looked at her sharply. It might be his imagination, but he thought her lashes were wet. And there was a mark on her red lower lip as if she had bitten it hard. A quick elation filled him. Had she really been scared —about him?

She turned upon him furiously.

"A man of your education and intelligence," she said, scornfully. "To pull a kid trick like that! What sort of example are you to the men?"

"Am I supposed to be an example?" Ferrol wanted to know. "It hadn't occurred to me. I'll jump right off the building here and now so they'll see how folly comes to a bad end—"

To his amazement she turned gray, lead gray, and her fingers dug into his arm like small steel claws. "How can you even *talk* about such a thing?" she gasped, and winked back a rush of tears.

"For the luvva Mike, don't do that . . ." Ferrol breathed. He dared not draw her to him up here on this bird cage of a platform. But he thought he knew and his exultation was enormous.

She took him down a peg at once.

"Look . . ." she said, quickly, in a stifled voice. She dug her hand into a deep pocket of her yellow sports skirt and brought out a small object. She handed it to him and as he took it he felt the deathly chill of her slim fingers.

It was a small flat tile about two inches square and a quarter of an inch in thickness.

Ferrol whistled low. "Another?" he said curtly.

She nodded. "This is the seventh," she said. "Father says they stopped coming for several years, then started again. He seems to think this one is particularly significant — that it's meant to foreshadow the worst calamity of all. . . ."

"Why?"

"Because it's the best done. I mean, the most perfect piece of work from an artistic point of view. The first were crude, improving as the years went by. But this one's immeasurably better than the last. Look at it."

Ferrol examined the tile closely.

On one highly glazed surface of the tile was a colored imprint, minute, admirably executed. It was in the likeness of a gargoyle, that mythical demon of medieval architecture first seen in French Gothic structures about 1220 A. D.

It was flawless and hideous beyond description. The grinning longish head of the demon was scaled in greenish blue, with small pointed ears laid flat against the lozenge shaped skull, and leering, malignant eyes deep set under drawn brows. A long sensitive scarlet tongue was outthrust and split almost to the roots.

Ferrol looked at the thing with strong aversion and, in spite of himself, a twinge of superstitious awe. Its mates had been associated with several of the most frightful accidents on the Trost projects, turning up without apparent reason on the eve of each of them. True, they had been missing in several cases, but that made it seem the more probable that there was some mysterious and malicious agency involved. Some of them must have been purely accidental. But plainly, some were not.

He dropped the gargoyle into his side pocket and took Melitsa's arm to guide her into the elevator.

"Where'd you get the thing?" he asked, casually.

She made an effort to shake off the weight of apprehension.

"Mikha—he brought it up from the car and gave it to me just as you started your tight rope walk," she said flippantly. "Very neat, I thought."

"Mikha," said Ferrol, reflectively. "That laughing hyena. It was in the car, you say?"

They were dropping away from the transfer platform at considerable speed. The girl nodded. "It was on the seat of the car, Mikha said. Planted, I suppose. Mark—" Her young eyes were dark with a still, deep fear. "Mark, there must be something to this curse business. I hate to admit it. But pop may have enemies in the old country—"

"In Montenegro?" said Ferrol. "But he hasn't been back there for thirty years, and he's sent money home over and over again for town improvements—waterworks, sanitation—he ought to be a kind of tin god on wheels in Galichnik."

"He is, of course. But that's just it. Doesn't jealousy usually crop up in such cases? I don't know. I just feel as if someone hated him and were trying to hound him to death. I've often thought of writing to Uncle Urosh—"

Ferrol's lean jaw hardened. Uncle Urosh. Uncle Urosh again!

Talk about gods! . . . Uncle Urosh was, according to Melitsa, the *deux ex machina* who, like the god in the machine in Greek tragedies, had only to pop over a fence to set everything aright forever and ever.

"Why stir up Uncle Urosh?" Ferrol said lightly, as the elevator car stopped at the twentieth floor and they stepped out to cross the half completed level to another car. "Isn't he sick or something?"

"Of course. But he's so darned wise . . ." said Melitsa reverently.

"Isn't your father jealous of Uncle Urosh?" asked Ferrol. "I am. Oh, nothing personal, you understand. But Uncle Urosh can't possibly be as big a guy as you make him out. Your father is kind of fond of you. I should think it would burn him up to hear you rave on and on about Uncle Urosh."

"Uncle Urosh," said Melitsa simply, "is the greatest man in the world."

"Oh, come, now!" remonstrated Ferrol. "The greatest artist perhaps. The greatest sculptor, rather. But you're pretty good, yourself. Some day you may run him out of business."

ON the ground floor, in the cool dimness of the great building's vitals, they found Mikha waiting for Melitsa, Mikha impeccable in his blue and patent leather chauffeur's uniform, with a cigarette pasted to his lip. He tossed it away as Melitsa came towards him and greeted her with his odd dry chuckle. Mikha Ilitch prefaced every remark with that stuttering chuckle, a nervous affectation that had made Ferrol dub him the "laughing hyena." Mikha was a gaunt, tall Montenegrin who had been in the employ of Boss Trost for many years, having started out beside the older man as fellow stone mason.

It was something Ferrol found hard to stomach, this relatively menial position to a man who has once been a fellow laborer. It was not characteristic of Montenegrins as Ferrol had known them in the limestone quarries of Indiana and in the mining lands. Montenegrins did not work for each other in any such personal capacity. It was a point of national pride. But this Mikha seemed well content with his soft sinecure.

"Where's father?" asked Melitsa sharply.

"He's gone up to the mosaic job on

the third floor. Miss Melitsa," said Mikha, grinning. "But some of the fellas from the new level came down and I hear them talking by the new elevator shaft. I'll go up the stairs and tell him. . . ." Mikha went off two steps at a time.

Ferrol listened. There were voices, all right. He heard Trost's harsh, acrimonious tones, complaining about something, then a rich rumble that sounded like Glenconnor. Was Trost tackling Glenconnor now? Not wise. The Irishman was still half drunk and in that condition he disliked rebuke from his boss, to put it mildly.

Ferrol touched Melitsa's arm lightly. "Why don't you wait for your father in the car?" he suggested quickly. "I'll go up—"

"No," said Melitsa. "I'll go, too."

"I wouldn't—"

But the words died in Ferrol's throat. He heard a sharp oath and a scuffle above. The sound came clearly down the open elevator shaft. For some inexplicable reason he wondered if the door on the third floor was properly closed. They were temporary doors, sometimes left half open by hurrying men who knew their way around.

Melitsa's voice recalled him sharply. It was shrill, high.

"Mark—let's go up there! There's something—I'm afraid—"

"Don't be sil—*Lord!*" said Ferrol, hoarsely.

There was an instant of silence, then a queer knocking sound, a padded thud as of a heavy body striking the sides of a narrow tunnel. Then silence, broken by a long drawn scream, mounting, frightful, from the girl.

"The elevator shaft!" she shrieked. "Dad—Dad—!"

She could not have known, of course. It was sheer intuition. But when Ferrol dragged open the door of the shaft on the ground floor, it was Vuk Trost's broken form that lay there in a grotesque huddle.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN IN THE CORRIDOR

MELITSA was wholly unconscious when Ferrol lifted her and carried her out to the car. The doctor nodded in answer to his look of inquiry. "Better for her to come out of it somewhere else," he said. "Anywhere but here. Get her head down. When she comes out of it, make her cry. It'll be hard. She's that type."

Ferrol felt a trifle mad as he sat in the tonneau of Vuk Trost's car and drove up Second Avenue behind Mikha's immovable back, holding the unconscious form of Vuk Trost's daughter in his arms.

His own emotions were not complicated. He knew that he loved the smooth dark head that lay against his heart. He knew that he had loved the old man who lay broken and dead on the table in the gray pile of buildings behind them. He knew that somebody had done that thing and that he would find out who it was and tear his heart out with bare hands.

There was nothing complex about that. The enormous simplicity of it lulled him so that he almost dozed, until the big car swept sleekly up to the big apartment house on Park Avenue where Vuk Trost's home awaited the master who would not return.

The girl stirred slightly against Ferrol's heart. Then she sat erect, composed, calm. She said, softly:

"Here we are, Mark. Look. That building. Our home. This car—Mikha, there, in livery, and in the study up-

stairs a wall safe with sheaves of bonds, of European currency, jewels, jades . . . And a will that makes me heiress to eighteen million dollars . . ."

Her voice was very low, rapt, as if she were bewitched. Ferrol did not speak. A curious chill fell upon him. Naturally she would speak of such things—why not? They were a phenomenon to be remarked upon at the death of such a man as Vuk Trost. And yet he wished she had waited a little.

But a swift pang of shame struck through him at her next words. How could he have failed to understand her? She said, still raptly:

"All those things, Mark—and yet my father could barely read and write. When I was a little girl, Mark, we lived in a shack on the edge of a limestone quarry in Indiana. My father carved solid rock with those great rough workman's hands of his by day, and by night rocked me to sleep in his big arms and sang to me the old folk songs of Montenegro. Mark—" There was a shrillness in her tone now; hoarse with strain her voice was hardly familiar. "Mark—I wish I had died then—then. . . ."

"I know," said Ferrol.

Her slim fingers dug into his arm as if a spasm of unbearable pain gripped her. Then she relaxed.

IT was the last sign of mourning Mark Ferrol was to see in Vuk Trost's daughter for a long, long time, for from that moment on she took the highroad of vengeance side by side with Ferrol, and there were no tears in her dark eyes. Only a fever that burned and burned, now smouldering, now raging fiercely as the strange events of the next few weeks carried them nearer to their justice or their doom—at no time were they certain of what the end would be. At no time did either of them particularly care.

All that night Mark Ferrol and Vuk Trost's daughter spent in going through the old man's papers in the room that was by courtesy called his study. It was a cold room, but a costly one. It was lined with delicate panels of fine marbles that in some instances were intricately carved and in others relied for ornamental effect upon the natural tints of *rosso levantino,* rose alabaster, *africano* and *verde antico* in their subtle range of greens and reds.

The floors were tiled in a Byzantine magnificence the like of which was not to be seen anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere. Old Trost had been a "stone man," dedicated to his medium with fanatical ardor. Descendant of the ancient guild of stone workers that had fled five centuries ago from the invading Turk into the bleak mountain fastnesses of the interior of Old Serbia, Vuk Trost had preserved that ancient heritage with lofty pride. He disliked wood and abominated steel, but his genius for construction dominated his prejudices and he used whatever materials best served the purpose of his gargantuan designs.

Yet at the end Vuk Trost had been still, as his daughter said, a simple man, unlettered, calculating his millions with a glassful of bright pebbles.

He had permitted Ferrol's stewardship with half sullen good humor. Ferrol did the real calculating, but old Trost's pebbles got the credit. And the blame, too, when there was any, for Trost had been a just man, if a hard one.

Ferrol was familiar with the documents he handled tonight. He had

handled them all before. All, that is to say, except the contents of a small green metal dispatch box which Vuk Trost had kept locked and stowed in the darkest recesses of his wall safe. This box Melitsa opened tonight with the aid of a strong screwdriver and a light hammer. She did it dexterously; Ferrol watched her clever, firm young hands without comment. It would have been absurd to offer assistance; but it gave him an odd turn to watch her. He smiled grimly, thinking how little, perhaps, she would have need of him. If ever a young woman seemed competent to attend to her own affairs, that young woman was Melitsa.

Yet she was full of contradictions. No sooner had the lock yielded to her determined attack than she pushed the box towards Ferrol with a little sob. "You open it," she said tremulously. "It looks strange."

Oddly, he felt the same way about it. As if its contents were best left undiscovered. But he opened it and weighed the packet it contained experimentally. "Hard, and heavy," he remarked. "A bit of stone, too, probably. Something he picked up on his travels. A lucky piece, perhaps . . ."

"Open it," said Melitsa.

Ferrol took out his penknife and slit the long, tight stitches. He stripped the canvas from the packet, but there was another, almost identical, underneath. Ferrol applied the point of his blade to that one, as well. "They used to put one like this in the toe of my stocking at Christmas, when I was a kid," he said lightly. "Ten layers of wrappings, usually, and at the end of all, a lump of coal—"

SUDDENLY he paused, his knife point poised, and listened intently. The place was still, cool, dimly lighted except for the shaded radius of strong light cast by a lamp over a draughting table. From the avenue far below came the rhythmic *clop-clop* of a milk wagon horse and the chime of bottles. Then he saw that the rooftops across the way were already penciled with the scarlet and gold of sunrise. He noted that absently. He was still, listening acutely.

"What is it?" whispered Melitsa. "Mark—what is it?"

He put up his hand, enjoining silence. His lean, tanned profile was strained and expressionless as an Indian's. Then he snapped the knife shut and slipped it and the canvas packet into a side pocket of his coat, along with the gargoyle tile. For the life of him he could not tell afterward why he did that. But he did.

And instantly he forgot that he had done so—for the sounds that had caught his ear were more pronounced now. A faint, slithering sound as of a heavy body dragging itself along a stone corridor. But that was not all. There were harsh, broken sounds of labored breathing, choked and guttural, as if some desperately wounded thing were fighting with lungs filled with blood.

The girl heard it now. Her face was like parchment. In her staring eyes Ferrol saw superstitious horror, inevitable in the circumstances. It seemed, actually, as if old Trost must have dragged his broken body home to die again. . . .

"Hold on!" Ferrol warned her. "Somebody's in trouble, all right. . . . In Heaven's name, keep your head, kid. We'll see what it is. . . ."

He reached the study door in four long strides and flung it open.

Across the threshold a limp form sprawled suddenly as if it had been

propped there. A man dressed in dark fine cloth, immaculately tailored. He lay face down. Ferrol stooped and with a sickening rush of repulsion that somehow had little pity in it, he rolled the man over on his back. He lay thus, inert, like a huge soft doll.

His eyes were closed—but with frightful bruises, swollen, blackened. His battered face was scarcely recognizable, but presently it became apparent that this was Mikha Ilitch, unconscious, blood pouring from nose and mouth so that for the second time tonight he was bereft of his characteristic giggle.

"Mikha!" Melitsa cried. "Oh, poor Mikha . . ." She fell on her knees beside him and would have lifted his head and stopped the flood of blood. But Ferrol, for some still inexplicable reason, held her back.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Let's see this—what has he got here?"

He pried open Mikha's clenched fingers. The girl fell back with a gasping cry. In Mikha Ilitch's bruised hand was a small square tile that bore the imprint of a gargoyle's head, flat, ugly, leering, thrusting out a split red tongue.

Ferrol whistled soft, low and long.

"Leave it there," he ordered. "I'll phone for a doctor."

"No, I will," said Melitsa, quietly, her small face ashen.

She stepped back into the room, lifted the phone from its cradle and dialed a number coolly. But her hand shook.

While she spoke to the doctor whom she had first aroused, Ferrol turned his attention once more to Mikha Ilitch. He saw a narrow edge of white protruding from Mikha's closely buttoned tunic, and drew it forth carefully. It was a letter, addressed in a fine angular hand to Vuk Trost. It bore a foreign stamp.

Ferrol glanced at the girl's half averted face and turned the envelope. On the reverse side he saw the name of Urosh Trost and beneath it his address in Galichnick, Yugoslavia. Ferrol's jaw tightened. He tapped the letter twice on an open palm, then casually, deliberately, he put it away in an inside breast pocket of his coat.

Uncle Urosh, eh? The celebrated Uncle Urosh, "wisest man in the world." Uncle Urosh who could always be relied upon to solve any problem, like the god-of-the-machine in ancient Greek tragedy. To the devil with Uncle Urosh. Let him wait.

The girl turned back from the phone. Her face was stony. Her eyes swerved away from Mikha's frightfully battered face. She said, quietly, her voice knife-edged with certainty:

"Glenconnor did that, Mark. You know that, of course?"

Ferrol started violently.

"I don't," he said. "But it's entirely possible."

"I know it," said Melitsa. "He has hated Mikha for years. And—all of us. Ever since his brother was killed. Mark—I may be wrong, I may be cruelly unjust—but I believe that Sean Glenconnor—killed my—"

"Wait a moment," said Ferrol sternly. "Go easy, youngster. I wouldn't advise you to say that unless you have some sound reason. Have you?"

She raised clasped hands and pressed them against lips that trembled suddenly. She shook her head. "But it's what I believe," she said, stubbornly. "I'm going to find out, Mark."

"Sure," said Ferrol. "So am I." Unconsciously his hand went to the breast pocket of his coat and gently, abstract-

edly, he patted the hidden letter from Uncle Urosh Trost. But he did not produce it even then.

CHAPTER III

DAUGHTER OF THE BLACK MOUNTAIN

THE letter was still in Ferrol's pocket, unopened, when he left Melitsa Trost's apartment that morning in the full glare of July sunlight. The heat was intolerable. Ferrol was haggard from strain and loss of sleep, his brain hammering away at a fixed idea like a rivet gun.

Uncle Urosh. Uncle Urosh. Uncle Urosh . . .

What the devil, Ferrol thought, as he shot aloft in the elevator to the temporary office on the thirty-sixth floor of the job. What on earth had given him the notion that Uncle Urosh in distant Yugoslavia could possibly be a link in the chain of events that had terminated in the brutal death of his half-brother, Vuk?

But *had* it terminated? Was old Vuk's death the end of that fantastic scheme of things? Ferrol thought not. He was obsessed by the idea that some principle of extermination was involved—that the gargoyle would not be content until Melitsa also was crushed out of existence. The idea might be baseless, absurd, born of panic; but Ferrol hugged it close.

For example, Mikha, recovering consciousness under Dr. Roerich's ministrations, had obstinately refused to name his assailant. At least, Ferrol so interpreted the big Montenegrin's stubborn insistence upon the feeble yarn that he had been set upon by lush workers in the foyer of the apartment building, and had been beaten up in pure spite because he had no money or valuables on his person.

Mikha's first gesture on being aroused had been to paw the front of his uniform for some object which he was obviously shocked and worried to find missing. But he did not mention the letter from Urosh Trost.

Ferrol had waited for that. He had even asked Mikha what he was looking for—what he had lost? But Mikha had replied thickly with a renascent giggle, "Nothing, nothing at all."

Mikha could hardly have forgotten such a letter at such a time. Uncle Urosh was a personage.

Ferrol had left Melitsa preparing to rest under the influence of a mild sedative and had taken the letter with him without mentioning it to her. Somehow he wanted time to revolve the whole business in his mind. He bolstered himself above a twinge of guilt by reminding himself that Vuk Trost had trusted him completely, even to the extent of naming him executor of his will.

When Ferrol arrived home, his Korean houseboy was yammering with indignation, the gist of it being that a person of "much feet" was awaiting his employer in the living room.

The feet were all Ferrol saw of Glenconnor at first glance. The big steelpusher was ensconced behind Ferrol's library desk in the cool embrasure of the open window. He had taken off his shoes in order not to mar the desk, perhaps. His giant feet were cocked high before him, wreathed in the smoke of an ancient pipe.

"Hi," said Glenconnor, hospitably, when Ferrol entered.

"Hi," responded Ferrol, with a grin. "I've been calling on you, Sean."

"I was not at home," stated Glenconnor. "Was I?"

"No," affirmed Ferrol. "Have a drink."

"Not on your life," said Glenconnor, his heavy features writhing horribly. "Never speak to me of the stuff again. You've kept me waitin'," he added somberly.

Ferrol did not reply. He was looking at Glenconnor's right fist gripping the pipe bowl. The broad knuckles were raw and swollen.

Glenconnor followed his eyes and concealed these evidences of violence in quick chagrin, shaking out his pipe on the windowsill.

"That's a fine seasoned pipe you've got," said Ferrol, smoothly. "It guided me home. I was a dozen blocks away when the fumes of it first hit me, and when I came in sight of my own building I thought of turning in an alarm, the smoke of it was rolling out of the window in such dense clouds."

"You're a flowery talker," said Glenconnor.

FERROL left it there. He stripped off his coat and shirt. They were soaked through. Then, in his undershirt, he sat down on the other side of the window with a scotch and soda tinkling pleasantly in his cooling hand.

Glenconnor watched him warily, heavily. Ferrol said:

"Did you kill him, Sean?"

"Which wan?" asked Glenconnor.

Ferrol shrugged. He was too done up to go on fencing with this heavy-footed Behemoth.

"Have it your own way," he snapped. "But I hoped you might loosen up. After all, you've worked on the old man's jobs for a good many years."

"That's true," said Glenconnor, heavily. "And was it for that you thought I killed him?"

Ferrol looked at him thoughtfully, studying the involved tenses. It seemed plain enough in Glenconnor's direct, though bloodshot, gaze that he had not killed his boss. But Ferrol was inclined to take matters more slowly. He said:

"More on account of your brother, perhaps. As I understand it, his death was a kind of mystery never satisfactorily cleared up?"

"Faith, then, you don't understand it at all," said Glenconnor. "But there has been a good many since that needs clearin' up."

"You know just what happened to your brother?"

"I do. He told me, himself."

Ferrol looked at that for a moment. "Your brother told you just how he was killed," he reflected, without undue surprise. "Now, how did he manage to do that?"

"He comes back," said Glenconnor. "now and again. It's against me faith, but it happens—when I'm drunk. Or I think it does, which is the same thing."

"Well I'm damned," said Ferrol. Here, then, was the explanation of Glenconnor's oddly irreverent annual binges on the date of his brother's death. When drunk, Glenconnor saw things! Heard them too, evidently. Ferrol surrendered momentarily to a trickle of ice down his spine. But he did not smile. Instead he said, matter-of-factly:

"Well, that's an angle. I've heard of such things. When did you see him last, Sean?"

"About two hours ago," said Glenconnor. "That's why I'm here. It was a warnin' he was after passin' on. Said he, 'Sean, me lad, tell Mr. Ferrol to quit muckin' around in this. 'Tis none of his affair,' said my brother. 'Tell him to leave it alone!'"

"Thanks," said Ferrol dryly. "Tell

him I'm much obliged. I'm sorry it'll take a year to do it, however. Or will you be seeing him before that?"

"No," said Glenconnor, somberly. If he was impressed by Ferrol's sarcasm he did not betray it.

"Did he tell you to wipe up the deck with Mikha Ilitch?" Ferrol pursued ironically.

Glenconnor opened his mouth, but closed it again with a snap when the telephone jangled sharply, insistently. Ferrol, with a shrug of exasperation, answered it. But Ferrol's expression altered instantly to one of solicitude, then to a look of bald, outraged disapproval.

The voice that came across the wires was Melitsa's. Cool, self contained, a little forbidding.

"Mark?" she said, quickly. "Could you come over? I want to see you, if possible. I'm going to do something very odd and I'm afraid it will leave a burden on your shoulders. But I feel I must."

"Anything, of course," said Ferrol promptly. His brow furrowed. "What are you going to do, Melitsa?"

"I'm going to leave all arrangements for my father's funeral in your hands and I want it to take place tomorrow, if possible. I'm sailing day after tomorrow at dawn for Montenegro."

"You're *what—?*" gasped Ferrol.

"I'm going to Montenegro, to my uncle."

"Listen," Ferrol said, dry lipped. "I'll be over—"

"If you think you can change my mind for me," said Melitsa, "you're mistaken. I know what I want to do, Mark. I have excellent reasons. My uncle is a sick man, living alone in the wilds of a desolate country—"

"That," said Ferrol, "is exactly what I have in mind. You can't do this without thinking it over, Melitsa. You have no idea what you may run into. He doesn't expect you—"

"Yes, he does," said Melitsa calmly. "I've just been talking to him on long distance, from Kotor. He invited me. He's simply prostrated by the news. He wouldn't listen to a refusal. He told me to take the first boat. That's what I'm doing."

FOR a long moment Ferrol was speechless. His eyes, glaring at Glenconnor unwittingly, narrowed and hardened. Glenconnor's followed suit, as if he had heard both sides of the conversation, and his big fists closed under cover of the desk. He nodded slightly, unconsciously, as Ferrol said:

"Listen, kid—I'll be right over. You're cuckoo. You—"

She interrupted him impatiently: "Don't argue, Mark. I know what I'm doing. And listen—phone the job for me, will you, and see if you can get anybody to go up to father's office and find a letter from Uncle Urosh that must have come within the last day or two. Uncle Urosh particularly asked me to look for it. There's something in it about Dad's will—"

"Oh, yeah?" breathed Ferrol rapturously. "I'll take a look at it personally!"

"At it?" she repeated, puzzled. "For it, you mean?"

"Both," said Ferrol. "How are you making out?" His tone was tender now, placating, deplorably diplomatic. He did care, tremendously—but above all he wanted to steer her off the subject of Uncle Urosh's letter. Later, off the whole subject of Uncle Urosh, he hoped.

He hoped in vain.

"I imagine I'll live through the day," said Melitsa. "What's the matter with you, Mark? You sound—well, guilty. I tell you, if you think you can change my plans, you're mistaken."

"Well," said Ferrol hopelessly. "I can go along."

"Mark, are you insane?"

"I'll be right over," repeated Ferrol. He turned from the phone and looked at Glenconnor once more, with a wry, informative grimace. Somehow, now Glenconnor seemed an ally and a close, confidential friend. "She's going to Montenegro," he said. "What the devil."

"What else did she say?" said Glenconnor quickly. "Fer instance, how's her health? I heard ye ask that—"

"She says she'll live through the day," said Ferrol.

Glenconnor snorted. "Ye're not serious?" he protested. "Ye'll not go along with her?"

"Do you suppose I'd let her go alone?" said Ferrol. "Forget it, Sean. We're imagining things. If not, we'll find out, sooner or later. I'm glad you came up today. We'll leave Mikha in your charge. Take care of him!"

Glenconnor disdained to smile. "An' d'ye think ye'll shake that rat so easy?" he said. "When you unpack yer bag on the boat ye'll find him inside."

TWO days later Melitsa Trost sailed on the *Principe Boncampagna.*

She was not alone. But she was not on speaking terms with her escort, Mark Ferrol.

She was accompanied—tourist class—by her father's chauffeur, Mikha Ilitch, still ornamented by the scars of injuries received at the hands of assailants he resolutely refused to identify. It appeared probable that there had been, as he reluctantly affirmed, more than one. But his peculiar snickering laugh had survived the ordeal and might be heard above the chatter of the crowded tourist decks as the ship entered smooth waters toward the close of the voyage.

One moonlit night when Ferrol stood smoking not twenty paces from Melitsa's rigidly aloof presence, this queer laugh of Mikha Ilitch's rose loudly, vacantly on the moon-misted air.

Ferrol, watching, saw the girl start slightly. She seemed so lonely, so slight and young, standing there alone in her slim white frock, facing the dark future. Ferrol flung his cigarette over the rail and went to her.

"Melitsa," he said gently. "Let's call a truce. Maybe I shouldn't have come along; but I'm here. Give me a break. I—I thought I was doing right. Your father . . ."

She whirled about, facing him. Her face was small and pale in the moonlight, her dark eyes deep in shadow, but he thought he saw the bright gleam of tears.

"Mark—I've been beastly. I know. But you shouldn't have come. You shouldn't—" Her voice broke. She came and gave him a warm little hand. He clasped it gratefully, raised it briefly to his lips. "Mark, I'm so lonely. But I know what I'm doing! There's something waiting for me in Montenegro—I know it. Something I had to come for . . ."

"Do you know what it is?" asked Ferrol, quietly.

She shivered. "No. I was afraid you'd ask me that. That's why I've kept away from you, pretending I was angry, all this long, miserable voy-

age. But Mark—father didn't just fall, you know. You—know that?"

"I have a notion," said Ferrol, quietly still.

"Father was killed," said Melitsa. "And when I thought and thought about it—remembered things I haven't told you—well, I knew that the secret of his death wasn't in America at all. For a while I thought it was Glenconnor—but then I saw that it couldn't be, really. Mark, I think Glenconnor's brother, Terry, was killed by mistake—I think it was meant to be Dad, even then. Eighteen years ago. Mark—?"

"I'm sure of it. So's Glenconnor."

"Mark! Did he tell you so? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You haven't exactly invited my confidences," Ferrol reminded her. "Confound that Bohunk!" he added, as once again Mikha's silly bray sounded over the laughter and music of an accordion on the deck below. "Why did you have to drag him along?"

She froze instantly. "Really, Mark. I'm a Bohunk, myself. What possible objection can you have to Mikha's returning to his native land after all these years?"

"None," Ferrol admitted. "It's none of my business. Unless, of course, he has too much ambition."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked curiously.

But Ferrol would not enlighten her. He meant that it was not altogether improbable that the big Montenegrin might have permitted his eyes to dwell on his dead boss's daughter. After all, Mikha considered himself one of the *yunaki*, the song and storied warriors of the Black Mountain. What would be more natural than that he should feel that the Slav blood which Melitsa so proudly claimed might be stirred in response, especially on the shores of his native land, which was also the land of her fathers. Nothing fantastic about that. But Ferrol didn't care to be the one to put the notion into her head!

He watched her white skirt flutter for a second as she stepped into the companionway and disappeared. He did not see the figure that withdrew into the shadows as he strolled along the deck. A crouching form that moved smoothly and rapidly without standing erect, then, when Ferrol paused in the shelter of a cabin door to light a cigarette, froze into complete immobility not six feet away.

But that form unfolded suddenly, a swiftly spreading stain of black against the moon-paled sky, then launched itself straight at Ferrol's knees in a crude yet efficacious tackle that brought him down like a sack of potatoes.

AT that instant the ship was rising slightly on a gentle swell. The lifting deck connected with Ferrol's skull with a resounding crack. The sound of it was slightly sickening. But Ferrol could not hear it, and the man who bent over him now did not appear concerned either with Ferrol's heart action or his respiration. He seemed interested only in the contents of his victim's inner pockets.

He passed over Ferrol's wallet and ignored the excellent pearl studs in his shirt front, however, and relieved his unconscious figure only of a small packet wrapped in sail cloth. This he stowed away in his own shirt front; then he lingered for an instant in plain hesitancy.

At last, stooping, he took Ferrol under the arms, lifted him like a child

and bore him toward the high rail beyond which the gently moving seas lifted and fell smoothly, glittering in the moonlight like a coat of mail. Like the meshes of steel mail the waters parted with a metallic whisper as they fled along the ship's hull.

Ferrol groaned faintly. His inert body twitched slightly as it changed position in the powerful arms that lifted him. But he remained unconscious.

Far down the deck a steward's voice sounded, deadened by the wind.

The man who held Mark Ferrol over the bone white ribbon of the rail paused and drew back, lowering him cautiously to the deck.

Ferrol's arm was outflung, the hand exposed to the moonlight. The man kicked that back into shadow with a vicious drive of his right foot. Then, muttering, he turned about sharply and, climbing over the railing, let himself down to the deck below. There wind and shadow swallowed him.

The steward came zigzagging forward, peering into the shadows of the boats, calling: "*Signor* Feroli . . . *Signor* Feroli . . .?"

But he passed Ferrol's unconscious form without seeing it. He returned along the course he had come, still calling plaintively.

Finally he rejoined a girl who stood at the bulletin board in the companionway. He reported deferentially that the gentleman was not immediately available.

Melitsa frowned. Her level dark brows nearly met across the bridge of her delicate nose. Something stirred her to apprehension. Nothing tangible —nothing sensible. Just a feeling that all was not well.

But she was primarily an intelligent girl, so she went below, to bed.

Also because she was intelligent, she did not go to sleep. She couldn't. She was possessed by that prodding evanescent devil known as a hunch.

For a long time her powers of reason, her common sense, battled with that hunch; but eventually, it was the hunch that won.

She got up again and dressed quickly, telling herself that she wanted —something. A Tom Collins, maybe? Anyhow, something. And where was Mark Ferrol, anyway? It wasn't such a large ship. And Mark had ears like a lynx. It was odd he hadn't heard himself paged.

She slipped into a woolly white coat and, tucking her hair behind her ears, went on deck again. The wind was coming up and she bent her slim body against it and the rising run of the sea. The decks were deserted. It must be late—very late, for the moon was so high now that it did not shine into the promenade deck at all.

Long rows of chairs, empty. The taste of salt was cold on her lips and an occasional gust of spray stung her cheeks. She circled the ship twice before she ventured to go up to the boat deck again. It would be dark up there, very. And certainly too chilly for comfort now. Surely Ferrol wouldn't be up there still—?

She ducked her head against a swift drive of wet wind—and so ran headlong into the burly form of a man who had swung out of the shadows under the boat deck ladder.

She gasped a startled apology, but it died on her lips as she looked up into a grease-stained, weathered face that frowned down upon her dourly.

"Glenconnor . . ." she whispered. "What are you—"

But Glenconnor did not pause to explain. He touched the brim of his cap

and pushed past her, striding off down the sloping deck with a sure, catlike tread curiously light for so heavy a frame. She watched him go. Then a clear, sharp cry broke from her.

"Mark . . . Mark! Where are you —where *are* you—?"

CHAPTER IV

MIKHA CHANGES CLOTHES

NEARLY the last thing in Ferrol's memory had been the sound of Mikha's high pitched, uncertain, seemingly pointless laughter, heard from the crowded tourist deck of the *Principe Boncampagna.* In the days that followed, the sound of that laughter haunted his delirium.

Ferrol had bad dreams. Very bad. The mildest of his torments was the sensation of being torn limb from limb by torturers in a vaulted medieval chamber, his bones crushed and his tendons stretched on numerous mechanisms of fiendish design, the whole business presided over by Uncle Urosh.

When he came back to complete consciousness he had a well developed theory that embraced every aspect of his situation except one—he didn't know where he was.

He lay on a hospital bed in a large bare room smelling of iodoform. A hospital room, certainly. His head ached and his hands, as he examined them, were very white and clean. He must have been pretty sick, over a considerable period of time . . . Possibly weeks. He lay still, waiting. He had very little ambition left in him.

Presently a woman entered the room, closing the door behind her. She came and bent over him. She looked remarkably like a mule. Ferrol grinned at her and she grinned back with yellow teeth that were extremely clean and polished. She wore a crisp uniform and an odd cap, rather like a nun's coif. She had big brown hands with which she touched the bandage on his head lightly and told him to keep still. He knew that she was telling him to keep still, although she spoke a language he did not understand. He recognized it vaguely as Italian.

He asked her, in English, where he was and she replied in Italian that he was in Trieste. This demonstrated plainly how excellent a nurse she must be, knowing both questions and answers in their logical sequence although evidently she did not speak English. He respected her judgment and lay still.

But worry began to roll dark clouds across his numbed brain. Melitsa! Where was she? What was he sick about? Who had hit him. and why? And how near dead was he, anyway?

He sat up quickly, then fell back with a groan. The nurse flew at him like a startled pigeon and beat him back against his pillows with rustling gestures. She spoke liberally and rapidly.

"Okay," Ferrol said wearily. A red sea surged about him, the horizon tipping smoothly, like a giant top whirling slightly off center. He watched it behind closed lids.

When he opened his eyes again the nurse was gone; but there was a man standing beside his bed. A large man gripping a gray felt hat by both edges of the brim, as if he were shielding his stomach. Huge hands, hairy. Ferrol's gaze traveled slowly up the buttons of the vest of a very new gray suit, hesitated at a violent green necktie, and progressed to the shaven jowls

and evasive, anxious, perennially bloodshot gaze of Sean Glenconnor.

"Hi," said Ferrol, weakly. Then he lowered his eyes, embarrassed by the sudden glisten in Glenconnor's.

"Hi, kid," said Glenconnor hoarsely. "Listen. I ain't got but a minute. They wouldn't let me in before, see. I got a drag with this here whatisit that's spoonin' yer food to ye. . . ." Glenconnor blushed.

Ferrol managed a faint chuckle.

"The devil," said Glenconnor. "I ain't proud of it. Listen—"

Ferrol said: "Yep. Shoot the piece."

"The girl and Mikha—they're packin' up to take the boat tonight for Kotor. Uncle Urosh is fer leavin' you behind on account of you ain't fit to travel, and that's a fact. . . ."

"Uncle Urosh? Is he here?" barked Ferrol. "Then I didn't dream it—"

"Sure you did," said Glenconnor. "You ain't seen him. He ain't been out of his hotel rooms since we got here ten days ago. You been here in this room since you was moved from the boat. The girl's been here every day, but Uncle Urosh don't get around much. Anyhow, he wants to get along back home now, and she's goin' to go with him and Mikha. She'll be along any minute now and tell ye herself, I guess. But I thought I'd beat her to it, on account of you'd be worried."

"WHAT was the idea? You wanted to worry me first?" objected Ferrol. "I don't know what you're doing here, Sean. But don't get in my way. If she goes, I go too, see." He lifted himself cautiously on one elbow. Over the edge of the bed he saw a suitcase, strapped, at Glenconnor's feet. It was Ferrol's own. He looked up inquiringly.

"I got it off Mule-face," said Glenconnor. "I got yer ticket, too. Uncle Urosh is all fer leavin' you behind, and I figured I could handle him meself. But then I gets to thinkin' about it, and I says to meself, Glenconnor, ye're the guy derrick and big as ye are, ye can't move yerself around fast enough. What this needs, I sez to meself, is a jinniwink—"

"Jinniwink—comin' up . . ." said Ferrol, promptly. He swung his legs out of bed and stared at them, shocked at their blanched thinness.

"Get back there, ye thick gossoon," whispered Glenconnor. "Here comes the doctor."

The door opened and a bearded surgeon entered briskly. He touched Ferrol with light, sure fingers, scrutinized him shrewdly.

"Ha. Another week, Mr. Ferrol, and we shall have you on your feet again," he said then, pleasantly. "A bad affair, this. You have given us a great deal of trouble."

"Sorry," said Ferrol. "Who's been paying for it?"

"Mr. Trost. Everything is adjusted. Do not preoccupy yourself with that aspect of it. Your friends will pay you a call before leaving—they are sailing tonight on an Adriatic ship for Kotor, I believe."

"So am I," said Ferrol.

"Ridiculous," replied the doctor. He smiled brilliantly, reassuringly. "A matter of a week, Mr. Ferrol, and you may join them. But I have advised Mr. Trost and his niece to go on ahead. Mr. Trost is something of an invalid, you know, and the dampness here disagrees with him. He is an eagle, used to great altitude, you know. . . ." The doctor laughed. It was a smooth laugh, well polished—well gilded, Ferrol thought grimly. Some-

body has crossed his palm with gold to keep me here!

He turned his head and sought Glenconnor's eyes. But they eluded his.

The doctor looked at the big Irishman sharply. "Mr. Ferrol should have no visitors for a few days," he said brusquely.

Glenconnor, apparently stricken dumb by embarrassment, creaked heavily out of the room, carrying Ferrol's suitcase.

Ferrol said, quietly: "Thanks for bringing me around, Doctor. But it's imperative that I leave tonight with —with the Trosts. I am Miss Trost's —well, advisor. Her father's executor, and what not. . . ."

The doctor interrupted him smoothly. "But Miss Trost's in her uncle's charge now, Mr. Ferrol. Surely you can be spared until you recover. I have been requested to advise them in Galichnik when you are yourself again. . . ."

"Thanks," said Ferrol, shortly. "That's who I am now." He raised himself once more, only to be pressed back by the surgeon's long, incisive forefinger. No more was required. The surgeon said levelly, significantly:

"You will remain where you are, Mr. Ferrol, or we shall find means to persuade you."

Ferrol nipped the inner casing of his lip between his teeth. Why argue? He tried to look resigned, and closed his eyes. What was the use? He could howl, and demand the presence of the American consul; he could invoke all kinds of authority. But Melitsa and her uncle would sail tonight and he would not, because red tape was, as he well knew, just about the last thing to unreel when you wanted to do something in a hurry. He lay still. When Melitsa came he'd argue with her about it. . . . Now he felt very weak.

He fell asleep waiting for her.

BY nightfall he understood that she had not come and would not. But she had sent him a note and a carton of American cigarettes.

The note was written on thin, foreign paper enclosed in a tissue lined envelope, addressed in Melitsa's free, artistic hand. Ferrol opened it quickly with an odd sense of its significance. But it said little of importance. She was leaving without coming to see him, then. His disappointment was bitter, passionate, almost childish.

As he put the folded sheet back into the envelope he saw that a common pin had been thrust through the tissue lining.

Curious, he drew it out. An ordinary pin. Yet there was a tremor in his hand and a chill dew of weakness and excitement on his forehead.

He put the pin in the lapel of his sleeping suit and took out the letter once more, reread it:

MARK, DEAR:

I'm so glad you're better. I wish I might have seen you for a moment, but there simply isn't time. We are sailing this evening for Kotor. Uncle Urosh suffers great pain here in the lowlands, because of the dampness.

Hurry and get well. We both hope you will come to Galichnik for a visit, but don't make any plans until you hear from me again. Uncle Urosh and I may go to Switzerland for a while. However, I'll keep in touch with you.

Be good.

Affectionately,

MELITSA

P.S. You should see Mikha in his Montenegrin costume. Awe inspiring, really. So like Dad. But perhaps you will see him when he delivers this. I'm completely insane about my native land; I'm terribly afraid I'll never want to leave it again.

Smoking over the allusions to Mikha in his picturesque attire, Ferrol could see little or no point in Melitsa's enthusiasm. But as he cooled slightly he began to realize that this note did not sound like Melitsa. Not in the least. Melitsa did not rave. Melitsa disliked superlatives. Melitsa was highly economical of words. She was very fond indeed of quoting the Chinese proverb: "One picture is worth a hundred thousand words."

Had she been mildly drunk when she wrote that note? And why was she rushing off with Uncle Urosh without paying him a farewell call, in common decency? On the whole, this letter from Melitsa was strained and unnatural—and very oddly furnished with a pin stuck in the tisue paper lining.

Where, then, Ferrol asked himself, lay the answer to all this?

But the answer was not with the riddle. Ferrol shook his head and folded the note again to replace it in the envelope.

As he did so a slight roughness in the paper attracted his attention. Minute pinpricks . . .?"

He sat up with a lurch and held the paper up to the light of the window. Of course. Ten perforations. Ten words indicated. But would they make sense? . . .

He formed them soundlessly with his lips, then lay back against the pillows dripping from head to foot with a weak perspiration, shaking. He, the defender of beauty in distress! What the devil was he going to do about this?

Glenconnor—he must get hold of Glenconnor! Must tell him to go on ahead, until he, Ferrol, could get on his feet. For the pricked words in Melitsa's letter had made sense—they were the reason for the whole strained overwritten note. They were:

> Hurry . . . come to Galichnik . . . Mikha completely insane . . . I'm terribly afraid . . .

WHY had she had to do that? Under what compulsion? Sick with apprehension, Ferrol cursed softly, frantically. She was sailing tonight alone on a small Adriatic steamer under the Jugoslavian flag, in company with an embittered, pain-racked cripple—Uncle Urosh. Ferrol had been sure enough that with Uncle Urosh Melitsa would not be altogether safe. He had been playing with the idea that Uncle Urosh was a sadistic nut capable of killing off a good many men in a clumsy attempt to avenge himself against his powerful, virile half-brother, Vuk. Subconsciously Ferrol had rather relied upon Mikha to protect her in his absence! . . .

But now he saw. He understood that Mikha Ilitch, the open-faced, smooth-spoken chauffeur in broadcloth and patent leather, could have carried many a pinprick in heart and vanity during the long years of menial servitude. Mikha, it was, who might prove the graver menace. . . .

Helpless, Ferrol heard again in memory that high, uncertain, aimless, snicker; the toneless, animal laughter of a hyena—or a madman.

With a subdued groan Ferrol got out of bed. Thank Heaven for pants! He was wearing one of his own pajama suits. Maybe he wouldn't get far. But he was going to make a try, anyhow. Glenconnor. He had to connect with Glenconnor.

He tottered to the window and stood there drawing in great gulps of fresh air. Below was a quiet street, a straight drop of three stories. No go.

He turned back. He made his way around the bed to the door and opened it a crack. A long corridor and far at the end of it the sound of china and cutlery. Trays. They were setting up trays for supper.

He drew a long, quivering breath and stripped the bandages from his head. Then he opened the door and let himself into the corridor, closing it behind him. He squared his shoulders and walked steadily down the hall. Suppose they did stop him, what of it? A patient could be animated by a sudden desire to take a bath or whatever, couldn't he?

His cracked skull felt like a pumpkin filled with swirling gray matter. He staggered against the stair rail as he went down.

He did not look back. He dared not. It was all he could do to walk. And so he did not see that he was followed at twenty or so paces by a tall, burly form in a gray suit and fedora, carrying a suitcase. Glenconnor.

On the first floor a young student nurse passed Ferrol in the hallway, glanced at him. He smiled at her dizzily. Maybe she'd think he was crazy —delirious—and run . . .!

She did. She ran, screaming.

Ferrol cleared the front hall in one leap and shot out the front door with Glenconnor hardly a jump behind him.

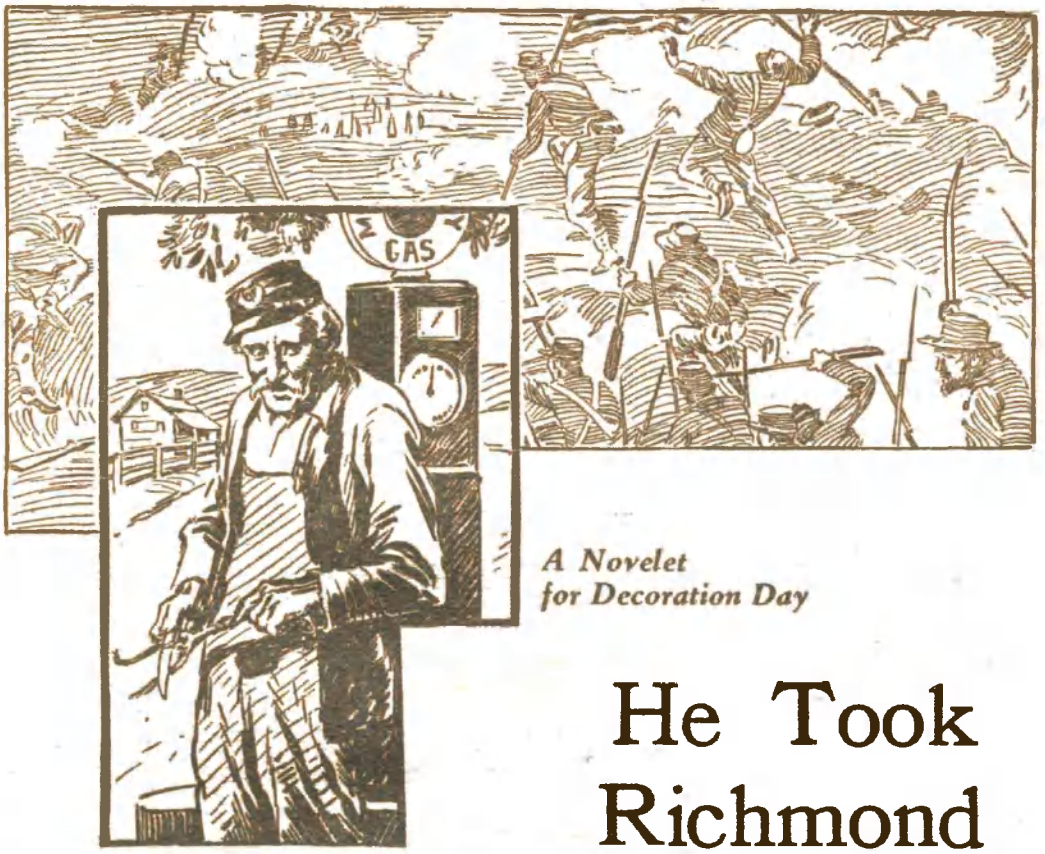
A horse-drawn victoria ambled half a block away but Ferrol did not venture a whistle. He ran for it, his bare feet stinging on the rough pavement. He reached it, stumbled and fell across the small rubber-covered step. His tortured breath came now in long, hoarse, broken gasps of pure weakness. But Glenconnor set iron arms under his and lifted him into the carriage like a child, then flung the suitcase and himself in, too. He roared at the astounded coachman:

"Step on it, ye big baboon! Step on it—!"

And the tone of Glenconnor's roar and the glare of his eye being the same in any language, the driver laid on whip and tongue until a maze of Trieste's byways lay between them and the place from which they had come. Then he slowed down for further orders.

But this decision rested wholly upon Glenconnor, for Ferrol had fainted. "Wait a minute," said Glenconnor. "Till I make up me mind."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



A Novelet for Decoration Day

He Took Richmond

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "All Noisy on the Spanish Front," "Red-Headed Dancing Girl," etc.

I

FOUR CORNERS may not be as big as New York, but it has as much civic pride. The sign beyond the bridge says *Watch Us Grow* and the trout fishing down by Peterson's Mill is the sort that lures even the tall hats from Broadway. Come off-season it's pretty quiet, but we have our doings—barn dances over at the Grange, husking bees, meetings at Legion Hall over Clapp's Feed Store to see about someday erecting a monument to the boys who went Over There. There's the Armistice Day celebration at Brockton, and ten of our boys parade, and the whole town goes over with them to see them do it—I mean, the *whole* town. You can understand, then, how a place as public spirited as Four Corners would feel about an embarrassment like Anecdote Jones.

"Disgrace, that's what he is."

"Public nuisance. Oughta someone take him in hand."

"Sits there right where all the toorists goin' by can't help but see him. T'bacca juice a-runnin', on th' bench there whittlin' an' tellin' that loony yarn of his'n—"

"Dunno why Lem ever took him on at th' garage. Reckon he just walked in on Lem one day, an' Lem hadn't got the courage to turn th' poor old critter out."

"They do say he's kinda *a*-gile with a repair kit, 'f he'd ever stop whittlin'

an' keep his mind on what he's doin'. Lem don't pay him nothin'. Look, he's over there now—"

The old man paused to drive a squirt of brown juice ten feet to mid-road where it bounced on the dusty concrete. His eyes—cups of blue evening mist in a face as stained and weathered as aged vellum—did not see the highroad or the red front of Clapp's Feed Store across the way or the far frost-tinted hills of Vermont that kept Canada out of the valley. Neither were they aware of this garage-front setting—*Let Lem Fix It*—the Mocony gasoline pump, the oil-splotched driveway under the spreading chestnut tree, or the group standing close around.

"I c'n see him now, just like it was yest'd'y. Standin' right in front of me, no farther'n *that*. Yes, sir, with his beard an' his old slouch hat an' his cigar puffin' away like a trench mortar in the wilderness, 'Jonesey,' he says to me—he allus called me Jonesey, just like him an' me was equals—'Jonesey,' he says, 'I want you should take some boys up to that'ere pine knoll, an' hang onter it,' he says. 'Hang onter it like a bulldog to a rott,' he says chewin' th' cigar 'tween his teeth, ashes goin' all down his coat, 'because if th' Johnny Rebs drive you off'n that knoll they may get a rider through to Johnston's Army in North Caroliny, an' Johnston'll come a-runnin' to join Lee an' we'll never take Richmond,' he says. 'It's just like one link in a big chain, Jonesey,' he says, 'but it's a mighty im-*portant* link. You hold that pine knoll tonight, an' it means we're in Richmond tomorrow,' he says. 'You do that, Jonesey, an' it'll be just like you took Richmond yourself,' he says."

The old man nodded to himself in memory; eased his position on the bench, and shaved a delicate curl from the latest one of the endless series of big forked sticks he's always whittling as he talks.

"That piney hilltop," his voice quavered on, "that knoll up there was just about like an island settin' up above a hull sea of Rebs. Be a big fight to hold it, I c'd see that. 'But I'll try,' I says. 'You want it held, Gen'ral; I'll sure make a try.' And do you know what Grant done then? Put his hand on my shoulder, he did. Right on my shoulder! Gen'ral *Grant!* 'Jonesey,' he says, 'try *hell!* You *gotta* hold that knoll till morning,' he says. 'Don't you wanta some day be able to say that you was the man who took Richmond—' "

THE old man jammed the forked stick he'd been whittling into a lumpy hip pocket, and gently placed his hand on his left shoulder while his eyes bleared and dreamed. High in the afternoon sky some geese were honking.

Jim Hardy snickered and nudged Mule Lickett. Charlie Rambow chuckled. But Andrew Dobbs grunted impatiently and looked in embarrassment at the city man standing near the gas pump. This city feller would think Four Corners was a hick town, the sort of place where they were still talking about the Civil War. It was especially annoying when all the boys were in their new Legion uniforms—Bowd Post—for the parade and field day over at Brockton. Jim and Mule and Andrew had even been in the A.E.F. They looked pretty nifty in their new outfits — chromium trench helmets, orange tunics, horizon blue britches with scarlet braid. Andrew tried to think of something to say to the city man. Only Johnny Lane, the kid in brown overalls, tinkering at the engine of the city man's big olive sedan,

straightened up and turned to listen.

"It was 1865," the old man was going on, "an' I'll never fergit it, Grant puttin' his hand on my shoulder, sayin', 'Jonesey, you gotta hold that knoll—' "

"And did you hold it?" the city man said with a yawn.

"We ain't got to that yet," the old man said, and there was a trace of querulous asperity in his creaking voice. He was worrying a slab of cut plug, and a little trickle of tobacco juice was leaking down through the white quills on his trembling chin. "But I and the boys"—transferring the stain from chin to wrist—"I and the boys got up there on th' knoll, an' you could plumb see th' rooftops o' Richmond from there, too. Well, it's quiet as you please for a spell, an' just about sundown I'm thinkin' maybe them Rebs ain't gonna make a try to break through. Then next thing you know there's a bay'net charge. Charge? Twenty of us boys up there, at th' start of that first attack. Ten of us when it's over. Them Rebels got close enough, b'gee, to put a bay'net clean through my hat. I got th' hat"—the old man eyed his audience hopefully—"to prove it."

No one asked him to prove it. Andrew Dobbs snapped at him, "Listen, Anecdote! Go tell Lem we're waitin' for him out here, an' to jump into it or we'll be late for th' parade!"

The old man didn't hear. He went on dreamily, "That wasn't th' only attack. Them Rebs kept a-comin' an' a-comin'. Finally there's only five of us boys left. Then three. Then just me an' a youngster no more'n a kid. But we'd give them Johnny Rebs somethin' to chaw on, too. Moon come up, an' we held 'em off. Snipin'. Shot plenty them gray Secessionists. Reckon' they figger we got an army up there, so they give us everything they got. All th' sudden—*bang!* Like that! Grape. Cannister. Lead. Minnie ball. Bullets an' roundshot flyin' like a blizzard, till th' thunder like to split your skull!"

Charlie Rambow rolled a little flim-flam on the snare drum attached to his belt. Charlie's the Bowd Post drummer, and he's a wit, too. *Rat-ta-tat-tat.* Softly. He grinned, "Was it loud as that, Anecdote?"

"Louder," the old man snapped. "Like to make your nose bleed from th' roar."

"And did you take Richmond?" the city man asked, idly.

"I run outa bullets," the old man husked. "Boy with me was killed, an' I run clean outa bullets."

"But you held the piney knoll?" the city man smiled, amused. He was a smooth-looking man in a belted camel's hair topcoat, derby hat, butter-colored pigskin gloves. Suggestive of fast cars and horses. Enviously, Andrew Dobbs would have liked to talk with him.

"Honest, mister," he interrupted with an irritated gesture. "Don't let old Anecdote bother you. He'd gab here for th' next six hours." Andrew tapped his forehead and winked suggestively. The city man grinned.

"Go ahead, Pop," the city man reminded. "You're out of bullets, surrounded, alone on the knoll. How'd you make out?"

"I held 'em off," the old man panted. "The Rebs kept comin', but I held 'em off. All alone in them pine on the hill. Last man left. Every one o' my comrades was killed."

"Tenting tonight on the old camp ground," Jim Hardy snickered.

"He was outa bullets, but he held 'em off," Mule nodded.

"And he didn't get no reinforcements

from Grant, neither," Andrew Dobbs put in with mock gravity, seeing that the city man was entertained.

"Yes, sir, that's how it was!" Old Anecdote's hands were trembling excitedly on his thin knees. "No reinforcements, 'cause th' Rebs were attackin' down th' rest of th' battle field. An' there I was isolated, marooned-like. Me agin' all them gray devils. Moon was up, an' I see 'em comin' uphill through th' bushes, scattered out, jumpin' from bush to bush. One after another they're comin'. But I think of what Gen'ral Grant says to me, I think of how he put his hand right on my shoulder, I—well, I just *had* t'hold that knoll."

"But how did you hold it?" the city man wanted to know.

"Eh?"

"You were out of bullets. Surrounded. How did you hold the hill?"

A puzzled wrinkle creased the old vellum forehead. The watery eyes, coming back into focus with the present, surveyed the audience in dismay. The old man fumbled at his chin, looking about helplessly.

"How did I— How did I *hold* the hill—?"

A ROAR of laughter convulsed Jim Hardy and Mule Lickett. Charlie Rambow whistled *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, The Boys Are Marching.* Only Johnny Lane, looking up from the unhooded engine, called, "Aw, why don'tya leave him alone?" and then the doors slammed wide open in the garage front, and Lem came out in his captain's uniform, dusting his sleeves. Businesslike and in a hurry, Lem was.

"Sorry," he told the city man. "I can't find the part to fit your carburetor on that make of car. Garage at Brockton hasn't got one either. Afraid you'll just have to wait till Johnny can make you a piece. Hustle it up for th' gentleman, Johnny. All right, boys" —pointing to the flivver parked at road's edge—"rest of th' town will have got there ahead of us. Let's go."

Uniforms jingling, they piled into the Model T.

"G'bye, Anecdote!" Charlie Rambow played a roll on the snare drum. "Sounded just like you was in a real war, eh, Anecdote?"

"Real war?" the old man creaked to his feet; shook an impotent fist at the grinning faces. "Listen, you dang whipper-snappers in yer dang soldier suits. Think y're all a'mighty smart, don't you! Lemme tell you, soldiers back in *my* day didn't have no time fer wearin' fancy clothes. Hand to hand, we had to fight in *my* day. You fellers just sat around all dressed up in yer trenches, hidin' behind a lotta bob wire—"

"Ever hear of gas, an' airyplanes, an' machine-guns, Anecdote?"

"We fought with our hands," the old man shrilled windily.

"We didn't hunker down behind a lotta gol dang machinery, waitin' scairt green fer some gun fifty miles away to blow us to pieces. We *seen* the men we was fightin'! Hand to hand, my day. Use yer head, too. In-*dividuals,* not a gol-dern *mass!* Tell a man to hold a hill, he held it—!"

"Tell us sometime how you took Richmond, Anecdote!"

The flivver, having caught St. Vitus, was starting off. Old Anecdote waved outraged fists at the taunting occupants. "G'wan," he shrilled. "G'wan to yer pee-rade! Think y're such dang good fightin' men these days—whyn't you rid th' country of these hoodlums like that Joe Gravatti kidnaper runnin' loose everywhere with his gang?" Doddering to the road edge, he

screeched after the departing car, "Yaah—you spent more time with yer wonderful shootin' irons, an' less time paradin' over to Brockton in yer bright pants, our country'd be a sight better off!"

Airyplanes! Gas! Machine-guns! Eyes glazed with indignation, Old Anecdote trudged shakily, mutteringly, into the dim seclusion of the garage; blundered up the steep flight of steps to the loft above, where charity had awarded his years with an iron cot, a spittoon, a nail to hang his belongings on, and a job that consisted of gluing patches on worn-out inner tubes.

He slammed the trap door as angrily as he could; teetered through a rubbish of old tires, tubes, nuts, bolts, dead storage batteries and other bits of junk discarded by an extravagant motor industry; and opened the tight little window, hardly wide enough for a pigeon to get through, that overlooked driveway and gas pump below.

Late sunlight sifted into the darkness around him; he pulled up a cracker box, picked up an inner tube to start a patch. But he sat with the tube forgotten in wrinkled hands, his eyes fixed wistfully on an old slouch hat, a cobwebby ghost of a hat on the wall above him.

"Soldiers!" he snapped *"Them!"*

II

AFTER a while his embittered glance shifted to the window, looked down on the driveway below, the big sedan down there, the gas pump. Johnny Lane was having a hard time repairing the big sedan's engine. Johnny Lane, the old man reflected, was all right. Respectful to an old man.

Johnny Lane's voice drifted up in the cooling dusk.

"That's Anecdote Jones, yes, sir. Oh, yes, sir, harmless—must be ninety years old, pretty near. Ain't no one in the village can remember when he came here—they like to kid him, y'see, but I kinda feel sorry for an old man; his mind goes like that. Allus thinkin' he took Richmond like he says, an' then when you ask him *how,* he can't never quite remember. All the time I've known him, I've never yet heard th' end of that yarn—allus gets that far, an' stops. Sort of—" The voice broke off. "Say, lookit that car comin' up th' road!"

The thin, fine roar of a high-powered motor drilled through the valley stillness. *Zzzzmmmmmmm!* Coming from the east and coming fast. Old Anecdote craned from the window and saw the car flash across the bridge. Durn fool, drivin' into a village like that! Lucky everybody'd gone t' Brockton, they might git run down — 'cept th' constable oughta be here to arrest such joy riders. Old Anecdote jerked back his head. "Criminy!"

The car had come roaring like a cannon ball, slewed dangerously into the driveway, brake-shrieked to a halt beside the Mocony gas pump. A sleek black touring sedan with New York plates. Men were piling from the car, a great fat man, two thin men, a short dark man, and a woman in a purple sweater with a floppy hat pulled way over one eye. Golly, the woman was smoking a cigar! There was somebody sick, too—a young girl about twelve with infantile, it looked— No, they had to lift her out of the car because her feet and hands—Anecdote stared in astonishment—were tied! And the fat man was holding a queer sort of gun that looked like a cross between a rifle and a big pistol. The short man was holding a shotgun. The woman

had a revolver. The two thin men were half carrying the young girl, who seemed to have fainted. They all ran around the gas pump toward the city man who was standing there.

The fat man barked at the city man, "All set, Julius?"

The city man said, "All set."

Johnny Lane ran around from the front of the city man's car. He stopped in surprise at sight of the guns. "Say, what is this?"

"This is what," said the city man. Something metallic glinted in his grip; he struck out hard and hit Johnny Lane between the eyes. Johnny Lane dropped and writhed on the gravel, then drew up one knee and turned over on his side with his arms over his eyes.

"There ain't a man left in the village," the city man was saying. "They all went to that hick affair over at Brockton. I snipped the phone service. You put up those *Road Closed* signs at the fork?" He pointed a thumb at the highway.

"Yeah, and there ain't a bull on our trail," the fat man yelled. "Let's go! Into the garage!" Boots pounded in the dusk. They were carrying the girl in. Old Anecdote swung from the window and ran on funny legs to the stairway going down from the loft. A thin man poked a head through the trap opening, and pointed a short-barreled rifle.

"Stick 'em up, Methusalem! I got you covered!"

OLD Anecdote didn't know when he'd been so insulted. He couldn't understand why the young girl was tied up like that, or why the city man had hit Johnny Lane like that or why they'd tied Johnny up and propped him in a corner of the repair room with the girl. When he started to ask a question, the thin man who'd made him come down from the loft, poked him in the ribs with the gun and told him to shut-up-Methusalem.

Everything was queer. All these people seemed angry and hurried; everybody was excited, making quick jerky movements. The fat man was trotting all around the garage, poking his odd gun into doorways and peering into corners. The woman, all the while smoking that cigar, shamelessly peeled off her sweater and climbed into a black dress. Outside, the short dark man was bringing an armload of suitcases from the New York sedan. Everybody was swearing and hustling.

Old Anecdote was frightened and confused. He'd thought at first these people must be hunters—certain times of year there were lots of city folks turned up with rifles and shotguns—but he could recall no hunting party like this one. What dang queer names, for example. The fat man they called Chief or Boss. Julius was all right for the city sharper, but the thin man who'd bullied him down the steps was named Gum-boils, and the second thin man was Skull. The swarthy short man's name was Dynamite, and the woman with the cigar was Toots. Old Anecdote couldn't understand their language, either.

When old Anecdote reached the ground floor, the skinny man behind him yelled, "Look what I found in the attic!"

Jumping around, gun aimed, the fat man snarled, "What t'hell!"

"Don't worry about him, Boss," the city man said. "He ain't there. He's lost some of his buttons."

Not there? Lost some of his buttons? The old man's eyes wandered in bewilderment. "Wha—what're you

doin' here in Lem's ga-rage? Lem won't like it if—"

"Frisk him!" the fat man barked.

Old Anecdote received another poke. Too outraged for speech, he stood trembling in anger while Gum-boils slapped at his pockets and rummaged in his threadbare coat. "Nuts," the thin man grinned, bringing a handful of rusty nuts, washers and bolts out of one ragtag pocket. "Yeah, an' screwy, too. This mummy ain't packin' no rod."

"What's that on his hip?"

It was only one of the forked sticks he'd been whittling. The thin man returned it contemptuously, as an adult might give back to a child his top, but found and took away the jackknife. "That's mine." The old man grabbed.

"You might cut yourself." Gum-boils pushed him off. "Okay, Chief, he's laundered. What you want done with him?"

"I know what I'd do with him," the woman with the cigar growled. Her lips pursed and went, "Pop!" ejecting a little burst of smoke.

The fat man's eyeballs, gooseberries set in cups of sour milk, surveyed old Anecdote suspiciously. "You!" he jabbed out. "Whatcha doin' here? Whatsa you' name?"

Old Anecdote squared his shoulders stiffly. "So ye don't know about it, eh? I guess maybe y'ain't never read about it, then. I'll tell you who I am, mister. I'm th' man who took Richmond!"

"Took who?" The fat eyelids squinted.

"He hasn't any roof," the city man advised the fat man. "He's a dim bulb, Chief. He ain't got any memory. Th' grease monkey was tellin' me. He can't remember nothing past the Civil War."

"Grant" — Old Anecdote nodded brightly—"Grant put his hand right on my shoulder, Yes, sir! *Gen'ral* Grant!"

"General Grant, phooey!" The fat man put his own hand on old Anecdote's shoulder; shoved him rudely against the wall.

Old Anecdote protested, "Here, that's no way to talk about—"

"You," the gooseberry eyes glared, "can the chatter!"

"Think I'm afraid of ye?" the old man shrilled, aware now of open hostility. "Think a man who stood off a hull batch o' Johnny Rebs an' held onter a pine knoll all night, same's if I took Richmond all by myself—think I'm afraid o' one of ye?"

"Shut up!" The meat reddened dangerously on the beefy forehead. "Shut up, you, or I'll blow you away!"

"I ain't afraid of yer goldang modern guns an' war gadgets, mister. I know ye," the old man squealed. "Y're one o' this here smart young gen'ration think y're a heap better'n they was in my day. Just 'cause y're totin' that new-fangled shootin' iron o' yourn. Lemme tell you, mister—"

"*Madonna!* I am to be told something by this clinking sack of bones!"

The woman with the cigar in her teeth was sliding shut the sheetiron doors at the garage entry. She snarled over her shoulder, "Aw, give him a dose of tin, Chief." With the doors closed it was almost dark in the garage.

"I ain't afraid!" Old Anecdote's teeth were chattering on all six. "I wasn't afraid that night front o' Richmond, neither. Grant says, 'Jonesey, you gotta hold that there hill; don't let nobody break through.' I held 'er, too. Surrounded. My comrades lyin' shot dead. All by myself, I was, an' I I c'd see them gray Rebs a-comin' up —me up there outa bullets—"

"Only the pity of heaven," the fat man said, "keeps me right now from seeing that you are not out of bullets!"

"I ain't scairt a mite," old Anecdote panted. "Not of your kind, I ain't. Just gimme a comp'ny of Federals, that's all—gimme *one* Federal—he'd knock th' tarnation daylights outa such as you—"

"Federals!" the word and the fat man's breath hit old Anecdote's face like a gust from a gas main. "Federals, is it?" Eyes glittering, he jabbed the snub-nosed gun into the old man's wishbone, fastening him against the brick wall. "You talk of the G's, huh? To me! *Corpo di corpo!* for this I kill you where you stand. No, but I should waste ammunition that later may be handy for these G's. Did you think I'd be afraid of any Federal men? No, it is they who are afraid of me! Bah! For you, maybe this will teach you to talk to me of your lousy Federal men—!"

Old Anecdote had wanted to ask about a lot of things. Why the other men in the party had started stripping their coats, shirts, changing their clothes like volunteer firemen on a call. Why they'd bound Johnny Lane and left him in a corner behind a pile of Goodstone tires. Who the young girl was they'd brought in. But the fat man's blasphemous outburst left old Anecdote lockjawed with indignation, and the fat man never gave him a chance to speak.

Crack! Whipping upward with the Tommy gun, the fat man slashed the snubbed barrel across the side of old Anecdote's chin.

The gooseberry eyes glared down. "Tie up the old goat," he told Gumboils. "Then look in that loft up there to see there ain't not gats or weapons about, This idiot, I leave him up there since no one would give one damn if we took him with us or not for hostage. Yes, the garage mechanic will serve for that. And slap some tape across this old fool's mouth. *Corpo!* I am to be threatened with the Federals by an idiot! For that perhaps we burn the garage when we go. That will teach him to talk to me of Feds. Who" —he glared at the man, Julius—"is this General Grant?"

OLD Anecdote wondered where he was. For what seemed a long time—the clock is slow for the old—he lay there in the stuffy dark, breathing heavily through his nose, blinking the pain from his eyelids, unable to rise because a huge hand seemed pressed across his mouth and his joints wouldn't work. A familiarity about his shadowed surroundings was reassuring, but somewhere something was wrong, everything had gone awry. His face ached; his wrists and ankles throbbed; his head felt as if it were on fire; yet his main feeling on waking had been one of red rage — rage against something — some insult — what?

Presently, moving his eyes, he saw the little front window; recognized his loft. He was lying on the floor beside the iron cot. The shoulder of a great yellow moon was framed in an upper corner of the window, like the Hallowe'en pumpkin some of the village boys had had once poked up there on a clothes-pole, and a streak of chrome splashed the inside wall under the eaves and touched with color the tarnished cord of an old blue cobwebby hat hanging there. His campaign hat!

Somehow sight of the hat brought a fresh upsurge of rage; he tried to open his mouth, couldn't move his jaws, lay back panting, miserable, confused. Voices under the floor, murmurous, guttural—Lem and the boys must be having a harangue—no, Lem and the

boys had gone to Brockton— He turned his head painfully and saw a cone of yellow light spearing up through a knothole in the floor.

"Did ya get it, Skull?" a voice was asking.

There came the sound of the sheet-iron garage door being shut, then a hoarse voice saying, "Sure, we got it. Dynamite didn't even have to blow the can. Crazy old safe you could've opened with a musical saw. Next door, that dairy place, the stuff was in a cash box yuh wouldn't leave a counterfeit dime in."

"I don't like it," a woman's voice said harshly. "Takin' time out to clean a crossroads like this for th' sake of carfare."

"Three hundred an' eight bucks," a basso voice said, "may come in handy, if we have to lay over a long time."

The greasy guttural voice said. "That all you got, Dynamite?"

"That's all, Boss. Most of it in that feed store. Not much, but I only hadda reach for it. Julius had the low down, all right, there ain't a farmer left in th' neighborhood. Only one old woman in that red farmhouse up the hill."

"And she's deaf an' blind," a voice explained. "It's like I told you, Chief. The whole county goes over to that Brockton field day."

"Yeah, but when do they come back?" the woman's voice asked.

"Not till after the torchlight parade and the barbecue," the first speaker declared. "I tell you, this is a hick burg, Toots. Three barns an' a church. They leave their doors open at night."

Vague memory struggled in old Anecdote's aching head. Toots! He'd heard that name before. Straining his ears, he kept his eyes on the lighted knothole.

The woman's voice, complaining, came up from below. "Well, I don't like it. Why do we wait here, instead of a cabin in the woods or—"

"Corpo!" said the guttural. "Must I explain fifty times? The field behind this cursed garage is the only one in these hills where the Duke could come over from Brockton an' land his plane ain't it?"

"Why ain't he here?"

"Keep your shirt on!" the guttural changed to a snarl. "He does that night-flyin' stunt over to the field day, see? That's his excuse for bringin' his plane up here. He couldn't just lam off without no alibi. They think he's goin' back to Newark after the show, but he cuts for here, lands in the dark, picks us up with the kid an' we scram for Canada."

"Suppose he don't come."

"My own brother? Huh! He knows. I would cut him up to spaghetti. But the job is soft. Soft as a dead puppy. By plane, Canada is ten minutes. Over the border, we drop off in parachutes when we get above that farm, and then we"—the voice blurred, came back—"hold the kid there with this garage mechanic here as hostage in case they get tough. The Duke flies back to Newark—in the night. Who knows anything?"

"But if they trail us?"

"They won't. Them *'Road Closed'* signs will keep off traffic, tonight anyhow. They're lookin' for a black sedan. We fill that with soup, run it into the bridge, blow up the car and bridge with it—they think we're in the river. Skull and Gum-boils pull out in Julius's car, doublin' back. Decoy 'em south, see? Got that extra carburetor fixed, Julius?"

"Ready to roll, Chief."

"It ain't that I'm melting," the woman's voice was sullen. "It's only—well, I ain't never had the heat put on me by the Feds."

The guttural voice cursed contemptuously.

Old Anecdote sat upright in the blue darkness, choking. Something was fastening his jaws; his hands, he suddenly realized, were bound behind his back; his feet were tied. He'd been shut up here in the loft like a shock of grain; and those strangers down below were holding Lem's garage with guns. Maybe Lem had told them to come there, maybe the village boys had told them to shut him up like this—guns or not, old Anecdote didn't care! That fat man wasn't going to talk about Grant like he had. Old Anecdote set his six teeth; began to twist and strain at his ropes. That fat varmint couldn't get away with it. Wasn't nobody around this village going to speak that way of the Federals! Not in front of a man who'd took Richmond!

ILLUSIONS were something Johnny Lane could understand. Long as he lived—and that particular evening he didn't think it was going to be very long—he'd never forget the tricks his eyes began to play him. First, the girl. They were lying together on the cement floor behind a stack of tires, her face not five inches away. Opening one pain-dazed eye, he thought he was looking at a front page photograph in a newspaper. Girl's face under big blurred headlines. Seen it somewhere before. Pale little face under blonde ringlets. Seemed to be asleep, something frightening about it, the headlines—

Johnny Lane opened both eyes, stared. His mind cried the name, "Mary Clementridge!" In Lem's Garage—! Then he heard, somewhere near, men's voices; saw shadows with guns trooping across candle light on the wall. He'd been working on an olive sedan—a black car had stopped at the gas pump —a fat man— *Joe Gravatti!* The thought strained sweat beads through the skin on his forehead. Mary Clementridge. The Gravatti Mob. Two hundred thousand dollars ransom—and the whole village over to Brockton!

Fainting is funny. Maybe you're out thirty seconds, maybe an hour. When he opened his eyes again, he suffered another shock. By turning his head a trifle, he could see through a peep hole in the tire stack. Seen from that perspective, in candle light, the garage was a shadow-peopled cavern, everything tilted and at queer angles. Walls and floor tipped, blurred, came back into ghostly focus; he saw a candle set on a work bench; a greenish-faced fat man sitting near in Lem's old Morris chair, a machine gun rifle across his knees. A woman in black stood beside the chair, lighting a cigar. A stunted man and a thin man paced back and forth the length of the closed garage doors, and another skinny man sat on the steps leading up to old Anecdote's loft, rifle in the crotch of his arm. The city man who'd been stalled out front was bending over a suitcase; but when he straightened up, he had a beard and a mustache.

Johnny Lane heard him say, "How's that?" and the woman growled, "Well, I hope anyhow you'll take it off at night."

Johnny Lane knew they were waitin for someone, because the fat man kept looking at his watch. Another queer thing: All except two of the party were wearing short leather jackets and odd bundles like Boy Scout knapsacks were strapped to their backs. A choking fear gripped his throat. The girl lying against the wall wore one of these funny knapsacks too. He tried to ease his shoulders, and found they'd strapped one on him!

"See if the hick garage mechanic's woke up," the fat man said suddenly. "If he has, give him the needle like you give the girl. Not too much, or it'll croak him."

He saw the woman start across the floor, a shiny little tube in her fingers. He didn't know, then, whether he fainted or not; he seemed to hear the woman's growl: "Still out!" When he opened his eyes the third time, the illusion was stranger still. Someone was watching him!

Johnny Lane's scalp crawled. Someone was watching him, but it wasn't anyone in that repair room. Those gunmen were pacing around the floor like caged tigers, all except the thin man who sat on the loft steps, swearing, arguing together, paying him no attention. The girl beside him slept. Yet —the flesh pinched on Johnny Lane's neck—he could seventh-sense himself as the center of some secret gaze, some intent scrutiny, the same feeling he'd had up in the Maine woods when he'd turned around once and seen a bear—ready to pounce at him—

AN eye! His startled gaze, drawn as if by hypnotism, looked up. Breath froze in his lungs. He could have sworn he'd seen it. Now there was nothing but a little black hole in the boards, a little black hole with wisps of smoke from the woman's cigar sucked up through on a draught from somewhere. No! There it was again. An eye! Pale blue, shiny as a marble, glittering and angry as the Eye of Jehovah, looking straight down at him from the ceiling. Even had his lips been untaped, Johnny Lane could have uttered no sound. He could see the eye gleaming fixedly down at him, then letting its awful gaze roam around the garage; focussing on the thin man who guarded the steps to the loft, settling finally in bright malevolence on the fat foreigner in the Morris chair. Johnny Lane lay ossified, hardly daring to breathe. He would not have been surprised to see the fat man vanish in a spiral of greasy smoke, like vaseline under the focus of a burning glass. The ferocity of that eye in the ceiling would have intimidated a tiger. They read the Bible in Four Corners, and Johnny Lane had never been quite as frightened in his life.

A shiver galloped through him.

Sweat clouded his own vision; when he once more dared to open his lids, the eye had gone. He'd dreamed it then. If only he was dreaming the rest of this! No, those voices, the scuffle of pacing shoes, the smell of cigar smoke, the glimpse of faces and guns seen through chinks in the tire stack —all that was only too real. This girl lying here asleep—twelve years old, the papers had said—how strangely quiet she was—her small face wan and colorless—her mud-spattered dress—not at all like a Boston heiress hunted for by all the police of New England. In mounting panic he wondered if she was dead. But she was breathing, he saw. Faintly. Irregularly. The way sick people breathe.

The fat man's voice come to his ears. "Okay, Dynamite, it's your move."

The short man's basso answered. "Time to blast th' bridge?"

"The Duke oughta be flyin' over here in twenty minutes. He's puttin' on his air show now. Be sure there's enough nitro to blow up that bridge, see? Steer the car straight for the bridge-head and run like hell. I want plenty of soup in that sedan, so by the time they dredge all th' pieces of junk outa the river and find we ain't in the car, we'll be already three weeks in Canada. Catch on?"

"There's enough soup in that car to lift Brooklyn Bridge."

"Then make it snappy. I don't wanta give no early sleepers a chance t' get back here from Brockton before we take off. Th' explosion is Duke's signal to come. With that bridge gone, there can't nobody reach the village from that direction without goin' a thirty mile detour to cross th' river. An' they won't be comin' from the east, since we blocked t' road."

Sickness squashed Johnny Lane's chest where his heart had been. If they blew up that bridge, no-one could reach the village from Brockton way for hours. And they had the east road blocked. They were taking an airplane—

"Be in Canada in no time," the fat man was saying. "Never find us there. An' get back here quick, Dynamite, I wantcha to fire this garage. We're burning her up when we leave, an' that old man up there'll learn to hold his gabby tongue."

Stiff in terror, Johnny Lane saw the short man open the sheet-iron door a foot; squeeze out into the moonlight. His dark face grinned back through the opening, "I won't be five minutes, Boss. Listen for the smack." The door closed stealthily. Johnny Lane moaned soundlessly; began a desperate struggling at his bonds. Ropes binding his wrists behind his back might have been made of steel. His shoes couldn't budge.

His numbed mind was repeating, "They're flying the girl to Canada, an' me with her. They're going to blow up the bridge an' come back an' burn up old Anecdote alive. Oh, God, don't let them do it—don't let them do it!"

It was not until some minutes later that he realized nothing had happened. Or—to put it the other way around—something had!

WATCH in hand, rocking slowly, the fat man was swearing in thick, sulphurous Sicilian, glaring at the dial as if *it* were at fault. On the steps to the loft, Gum-boils shifted his seat uneasily. Julius was petting his beard and staring at the floor; Toots sauntered up and down, chewing her cigar and rubbing her elbows.

She halted abruptly and snapped out. "Has anybody *heard* anything?"

Julius looked up startled. "Not a thing."

"I tell you," the one called Skull took his ear away from the front door, and turned his head to drawl, "I didn't even hear him start th' car. We had it parked alongside the feed store across th' way, pointed toward th' bridge for a quick take-off."

"Can't you see it from here, if you open them doors a crack?"

"Nah. Gas pump and that chestnut tree cuts off the view. Can't see out to the road from here."

"You keep opening those doors," the fat man warned viciously, "an' some punk motorist the other side the valley will see our lights an' start comin' acrost the bridge for gas. We can't blow up everybody we—"

"From all th' noise around here," the woman growled, "we can't even seem to blow up a bridge. Or am I going deaf? I ain't heard a sound out there since Dynamite left."

"He's had time enough," Gum-boils put in, "to blow up Sing Sing!"

Skull's forehead worried, "I didn't even hear him start the—"

The fat man sprang up ragefully. "Madonna! Are you trying to give me the jitters? Dynamite can't start the sedan. Julius, you tear your pants goin' across that road an' find out what's wrong. The Duke can't loop the loop all night, waitin' for that signal."

It was quiet in the garage after Julius left. Nobody moved. Tense, his pores dripping icewater, Johnny Lane lay helpless on the floor behind the tire stack staring at the ceiling where a moment ago he was sure there'd been an eye. It wasn't there now. It had vanished the moment that man Julius had started to open the doors.

Johnny Lane moaned in thought, "I'm dreaming—it's all a horrible dream." It was like a nightmare, too, this waiting and waiting—and nothing happening. Ears aching at the strain, Johnny listened for the crash that would cut him off from all help—his face screwed up as if he was watching someone blow more and more air in a balloon—the silence deepened.

Then, little by little—he knew he wasn't dreaming this—the silence was disturbed. First, the creak of rockers under the Morris chair, squeaking faster and faster. Then the scuff of the woman's high heels pacing up and down.

"Boss, I ain't heard a thing yet," the man on the loft steps said plaintively.

Moving his head to peep, Johnny Lane saw the fat man's face going purple. The little gooseberry eyes were glittering, and the forehead seemed to sizzle. The fat man pocketed his timepiece and sprang up suddenly, gripping that Tommy gun as if he wanted to shoot somebody. "Who can hear anything," he screamed at the woman, "with *you* tramping up and down the room? Sit down! Sit down, do you hear?"

She whirled, snatching out the cigar. "Tell me why he don't come back! Why ain't either of them come back? They've taken a run-out powder, that's why! I could be across that road an' back in half a minute an'—"

"Then get across it," the gooseberry eyes gave a knife-thrust stare. "Maybe they're tryin' to start the car. Maybe they're playin' dice. Whatever it is, tell 'em I want that bridge blown out in three minutes, or I'll be over there an' shoot them into strawberry jam! Get out," he screamed at the woman, "an' be back here in just one minute. Don't stay. I wanta know why the stall. I'll knock you dead if you ain't back here in just one minute!"

III

NOTHING happened. The woman had a revolver in her hand as she went out. Skull closed the door behind her; leaned there loosely, staring down at his grounded rifle. Gum-boils shifted on the steps; spat. The fat man folded his hands across his stomach as if he was afraid someone might steal it, and leaned back, his eyes narrowed at the doors, Tommy gun balanced across his knees. Stiff on the floor, Johnny Lane was staring in mounting terror at the ceiling where he was certain, for a third time, he'd seen the eye.

But it was gone again—there was no sound anywhere—presently the rockers were going under the fat man's chair. Suddenly the man on the loft steps blurted:

"I'd think them guys was knocked off, but we'd 'a' heard the shots."

"There ain't been a sound out there," Skull turned from the doors to whisper. Sweat twinkled all over his face as he whispered. "Chief, you don't think the G's—"

"No!"

"Then they've ditched us. Lammed. Left us holding the bag."

"The woman," came the guttural snarl, "she's late. It's your job, Gum-boils."

"Boss," the thin man on the steps

said huskily, "dontcha think Skull better go with me?"

"There's too many out there now."

"But, Chief—!"

The fat man whipped to his feet. Panted: "Go out there! Kill her! Find out what's happened to Dynamite and Julius! Come back!"

Yellow-green pallor crawled up Gumboils' jawbones. He stood up shakily, rifle in elbow. His eyes, shaded by a cap brim, moved from side to side. He said in a queer, coughing way, "I know. It's a trap. You've got one of the boys planted out there with a knife. You greasy slob, you're one by one tryin' to knock us off." The man's eyes began to cry. "I know you, Joe. You wanta keep the snatch for yourself, an' you're tryin' to knock us off!" The thin man shook there on the loft steps, coughing and crying.

In the fat man's hands the Tommy gun jerked and smoked. *Dud-dud-dud-dud!* Arms flying out, legs doing the splits, the thin man seemed to splatter all over the steps. The fat man sat down in the Morris chair, and said, "I'll make some noise around here!" looking at Skull.

Skull eyed the red heap on the steps dreamily. Smoke dissolved in flitting candle light and silence. Skull rubbed a wet cheekbone with an elbow and murmured, "Maybe that'll bring 'em back."

They waited. "Okay, Chief," the man at the doors said after a minute, "I'll go. Only I wish I knew what was out there."

The fat man whispered, "Dynamite goes an' don't come back. Julius goes to find Dynamite, an' don't come back. That dame goes to find the first two, an' don't come back—!" He was on his feet, face-flesh twitching, pig-eyes flickering between slitted lids. "What is this? I'd think it was the Feds, only they'd be in *here* by now. *Corpo!* are they trying to cross Joe Gravatti? Skull, you stick by me and I'll split the ransom. You find out where those rats have gone, and I'll split with you!"

"Can I have a bronze coffin like you gave Mugs O'Flannigan, Chief?"

"You've gotta come back," was the guttural whisper. "You can't leave me here alone. I've give you more than one break, Skull. *Maria!* if you lam on me, I'm cooked. We still got a chance. Open them doors. I'll watch you as far as the road. If they get you, they get me, too. Let's go!"

Johnny Lane could see it all. The red mess on the loft steps. The fat man mushroomed down beside the Morris chair, clutching the Tommy gun. The one called Skull shoving open, inch by inch, the sheetiron doors. Moonlight slanted in through the widening entryway; outside there was a silver-etched picture of the driveway and Mocony pump, the chestnut tree beyond—silence and no one there.

Then Skull was outside, a running shadow, crossing the open gravel in five quick bounds, stooped low and leaping zigzag so as not to be caught from behind. But it wasn't the fat man's Tommy gun that stopped him. Johnny Lane would never forget that as long as he lived. The way Skull fled past the chestnut tree, stopped up short in his tracks, jumped back, whirled with a yell.

"Chief! They're out there in the—*Ow!*"

There wasn't a shot. As far as Johnny Lane's terrified glimpse could see, there wasn't anything. Skull dropped his rifle, put hands to face and stumbled forward, fell as if dead in the moon-washed driveway.

Johnny Lane would never forget what

happened after that, either. How the fat man swore. Spun around. Sprang straight for the corner where the boy lay helpless beside the unconscious little girl.

Then he bent down—only it was more of a swoop, quick and savage and hateful—and struck in at them with his hands spread to grab.

The feel of those sweaty squat arms clutching him up, dragging him across the floor, would curdle Johnny's blood for many a day. The sewerish puffs of garlic breath in his face. The way, hugged against the fat man's chest, he was rushed to the door and impelled out into the moonlight as a shield. His adhesive-taped mouth made the soundless shrieks of nightmare, and his strength turned to water in the Sicilian's savage grip. Johnny could not so much as squirm.

They might have reached the olive sedan the other side of the Mocony pump, if the fat man hadn't stopped that split second to see what was out there in the road. Three bodies lined up on the moon-yellowed concrete like corpses after battle— Dynamite, Julius and Toots, three in a row; and Skull stretched out in similar pose under the chestnut tree. Involuntarily the fat man halted, rolled his little eyes in terror at the night; gasped, *"Madonna!"* and shifted his grip on the Tommy gun. Johnny Lane's stomach was a stone going down for the last time. There was, in the night out there, no sign of what had felled those four—no sign of anything.

Then, *ping!*

TO Johnny Lane it sounded like an invisible banjo string snapping in mid air. Something flashed in moonlight across his line of vision, and the rear window smashed in the olive sedan. It hadn't come from the direction of the road. Overhead, in the moony night above them, there was a shrill and spectral cry.

"Missed!"

Whirled about-face in his captor's grip, Johnny Lane felt his eyes and hair go up at the same time.

Framed in the little window of the loft above the garage—in moonshine as dim and faded as a time-bleached oil painting—a ghost! The ghost of a Civil War veteran in tarnished brass buttons and moth-eaten blue—a face of shriveled parchment under the fragments of a campaign hat, acorns bobbing on frayed cord, gold threads peeling from the shoulder tabs—portrait of one of the Boys in Blue painted in moonbeams and cobweb; a mirage from the dust blown off a history book—something a mere breath of wind would whisk away. Only the eyes were alive. Squirrel-bright pins of cobalt—two fierce old lights in the shriveled parchmenty face.

Johnny's throat screamed, "Anecdote!" as he recognized the eye.

He was a little surprised and a good deal relieved to discover that it hadn't been Jehovah after all.

The fat man squalled up, "It's the idiot!"

"Learn ye an' all y're dirty kind to laugh at us Federals!" came shrilling from the phantom face. "Goin' to burn up th' soldier who took Richmond, was ye? Thought a man as knew Gen'ral Grant would turn an' run from yer new-fangled shootin' irons? I'll learn ye su'thin about us Yankee Federals—!"

Johnny Lane saw it all. He saw the head come out of that lofted window in the garage front like a cuckoo popping out of a clock. He saw a whittled forked stick in the old man's knotty

fist; saw him cock back his left arm as one pulls a bow and arrow; saw that blazing, tiger-fierce eyeball squinting aim through the forked stick's *Y*. *Ping!*

Metal whistled overhead as the fat man hurled himself and Johnny Lane to the gravel. The olive sedan's spare tire whammed like an exploding shell. Corkscrewed on the ground, Johnny saw the Tommy gun jerking and smoking in the fat man's sausage-like hands—*dud-dud-dud-dud!* The head had popped back into that upper window like a crazy cuckoo clock striking one.

Johnny ground his cheek in the driveway as the fat man knelt over him and cleaned the little window above with fusillade after fusillade, riddling the sill, peppering the clapboards underneath, cutting chunks from the roofline. Splinters flew and scattered; a tin drain pipe fell; a shutter came crashing down. Impossible for any living target to have survived such a machine-gunning, but the gunman's blast was answered by a yell from the loft, an eerie battle whoop that drowned the bombardment echoes with defiance, and wrung from the Sicilian's neck a raging squall.

"Corpo di Corpo!"

The man's bull voice rose, and hung trembling in the air.

Gun hugged to belly, the fat man went for the garage door like a swollen ferret for a squirrel's nest, shoes beating across the ground like little hoofs. Johnny Lane never knew what came over him. Somehow he was no longer afraid. All he knew was that he had to stop that murderer before he reached the loft up there. Bound, gagged, helpless though he was, the boy rolled and twisted and dragged himself in clumsy pursuit; and got there in time to see the end.

In time to see the fat man start up that steep flight of steps. In time to see the trap fly open at the top and old Anecdote standing there in the dimness, his boots braced across the opening, knees bent, weapon aimed, and under the brim of the old slouch hat that brilliant and ferocious eye glaring down.

"Halt, in th' name o' the Republic!"

So the Armies of the North might have cried down at Rebellion. So Thomas might have stood at Chickamauga or Meade at Gettysburg or Grant against Disunion. Or David might have stood so, confronting Goliath. Only David wasn't ninety and facing a Thompson machine gun.

On the other hand, Goliath didn't have to run up wet steps. The fat man slipped on Gum-boils; fell upstairs. Old Anecdote charged down, shouting. Collision! The Tommy gun firing every which way. Smoke, livid flame-bursts, Sicilian oaths and Yankee battle cry, old soldier and gangster and dead man coming down all in a heap.

For a moment, the three bodies all interlocked in a writhing, twisted tangle, like one of those rolling, cyclone-formed mêlées that movie cartoonists denote by a swirl of lines with asterisks and exclamation points shooting out of them at impossible angles.

Johnny Lane got into it somehow, arching his trussed shoulders and kicking with locked feet. The fat man, tangled with dead man, bound man and history, went somersaulting on the floor. Johnny jammed his legs between the fat man's knees and tackled him flat. But such reinforcements didn't count. It was the old man's fight after all.

Old Anecdote stood upright on the bottom step, arm cocked, eyeball blazing through the forked stick's *Y*, at the

moment the fat man gained his feet not a jump away. Looking up from the floor, Johnny saw the Tommy gun squirt a burst of flame; simultaneously something metallic whizzed *zing!* through his line of vision. Old Anecdote's wail was echoed as he fell. The fat man's face might have caught a thunderbolt. Blood flashed from the socket where a gooseberry eye had been; in a splash of scarlet the body squatted down.

When the smoke and terror cleared away, Johnny Lane lay crying by himself. Far across the valley the echoes of the Tommy gun were clattering, and on the road the other side of the river droned the sound of a car coming fast.

OLD ANECDOTE, when they reached him, was still alive. Andrew Dobbs, despite the stains on his brand new uniform, put an arm around the pinched old shoulders to ease them up; and Lem's hands were gently hunting the asked-for chaw of tobacco; while Charlie Rambow and the others stood there silently weeping—

"Grant says, 'Jonesey,' he says, puttin' his hand right on my shoulder, 'Jonesey,' he says, 'you gotta hold that hill. You hold that hill an' don't let the Rebels get through, an' it's just like you took Richmond all by yourself,' he says—"

"Sure, Anecdote. Sure!"

"I was up there alone, y'see? Marooned-like. Outa bullets. No reinforcements. Them Rebels come up again, but I held 'em off—"

"You sure did, soldier. All by yourself and out of bullets, too."

The old man opened his eyes and gazed in cloudy apprehension at the faces looking down. "Dontcha wanta know *how* I held 'em off—*how*—?"

"Don't make no difference, soldier. We believe you. We sure do."

They stood there, shifting on their feet, clearing their throats, looking down at him and not knowing what to say to him at all.

The dimming eyes wandered in vague bewilderment; fixed suddenly on something lying on the garage floor; kindled and cleared and shone in happy triumph.

"Why, o' course!" the voice was jubilant, piping strong. "That's how I held off them Johnny Rebs that night. When I was alone an' outa bullets, an' seen 'em a-comin' up th' hill. That's how I held 'em off. With *that!*"

At first appearance the whittled forked stick, lying there in a scatter of ring-bolts, rusty nuts and scrap-bits, meant nothing. Johnny Lane had to show them the long strip of inner tube that was fastened to the prongs of the stick.

"That's how I took Richmond," the old man was whispering. "Yessir, that's how I done it. Clumb a tree, when I saw them Rebs was a-comin', an' made me one of those! That's how I held that hill. With a sling-shot—!"

Afterwards, Mule Lickett said in a voice of awe, "They do say they're awful strong—"

But Andrew Dobbs thought the real miracle was the old man's getting loose to begin with. Human strength of any power couldn't have broken those ropes like that. You could see the parted strands of hemp on old Anecdote's ankles and wrists.

It wasn't until the State Police got there to pick up the gangsters who'd only been knocked unconscious, to revive the little Clementridge girl and send her to the hospital, to dispatch an officer to arrest the Duke, and to clean up the mess—it wasn't until they ex-

amined Joe Gravatti's fat corpse that Four Corners learned the answer. A rusty piece of file—discarded by Lem to the old man's junk heap in the loft—must have cut the old man's bonds before it had been slung-shot like a thunderbolt into the fat man's gooseberry eye.

*

Four Corners may not be as big as New York, but it has as much civic pride. Take the Decoration Day parade, and the whole town turns out—I mean, the *whole* town. There's the Protective Volunteer Fire Company, the Girl Scouts, the children from District School Number Nine, and two hay wagons loaded with geraniums. Led by the boys of the Legion—Bowd Post—Mule Lickett, Andrew Dobbs and the others—all looking pretty fine in their new uniforms, and Charlie Rambow showing them how it's done on a snare drum. March? They come across the river bridge with more flags flying than you'd expect, and they march right up to a halt between Clapp's Feed Store and Lem's Garage, and stand at attention before the monument.

No, Four Corners may not be very big, but they'll tell you that monument is as fine a piece of Vermont marble as ever was erected anywhere. Right beside the highway it stands, where the traffic can't help but see it, a tall white cenotaph of simple stateliness, simply inscribed.

He Took Richmond

If you ask the folks around Four Corners about it, they'll surprise you by talking about the Mary Clementridge kidnaping—remember?— and the old man who, single-handed, captured the Gravatti gang. Ask about Richmond and you'll get a cold Yankee stare and perhaps sharp advice to go read your history. That's what they told me when I first moved there, and I pored over the village records a long musty time before I found any reference to the old soldier in question. Then it had little to do with the Civil War.

He'd been turned down at the recruiting bureau in 1861 because, on applying for enlistment, he'd told the officers how—single-handed and out of bullets, I'll warrant—he'd held off the British for one whole night—and won the Battle of Lexington!

The Smoking Land

By GEORGE CHALLIS

IT was an explosion—a terrible, smashing one that ripped a mountain wide open—that sent Smoky Cassidy to Alaska on his weird quest for the Smoking Land. None of the old-timers he talked to had ever heard of such a place—the Esquimaux, even in their oldest legends, did not know it. Cassidy's was the strangest trek the great white North had ever seen, and the thing behind it was stranger and unholier still.

Dr. Cleve Darrell had been killed in that terrifying explosion—and Dr. Darrell was Smoky Cassidy's friend. In his mountaintop laboratory, he had been working toward the production of a ray whose impact upon a certain gas at a certain temperature would bring about that long dreamed-of goal of scientists—the dissolution of the atom.

THE work is going forward in the greatest secrecy. Not even Dr. Franklin, eminent mathematician and Dr. Darrell's colleague, knows exactly what is being done, but he is worried and distressed, considering the experiments a usurpation of a power that belongs only to the Almighty. Others, unnamed, are worried, too. So worried that they are trying either to halt Darrell's work or to destroy him before it is completed. *They* have contacted Dr. Franklin, and, as he himself admits, have nearly tempted him . . .

So because he is essentially honest and because in his heart he is afraid of what *they* might do, Dr. Franklin calls on Smoky Cassidy to stand guard outside the thick steel doors of Darrell's steel-walled laboratory as the crucial moment arrives.

Smoky, who is telling the story, sees what Darrell has so far accomplished when the scientist releases a man-made thunderbolt that rips across the valley and reduces the canyon wall to a shower of cascading sparks.

This story began in last week's Argosy

"Isn't that enough for one night?" he demands of Darrell. "Haven't you done enough, man? What more do you want?"

Darrell only shrugs. "In the name of mankind," he says, very quietly, "I have to make my try before morning. For years, I have waited for this one night—for this one moment . . ."

He returns to his laboratory, leaving Smoky outside with instructions to shoot down anyone—anyone at all—who tries to enter. Surprisingly enough, the only one who does is Dr. Franklin, looking tense and sick with dread. But when Smoky points a gun at him, Franklin creeps away.

And then, without warning, the explosion bursts loose . . .

After a while the world forgets Cleve Darrell. But Smoky Cassidy cannot. One day a piece of wood that is not quite a piece of wood, but wood with some unknown chemical added to it so that it is hard as stone, is found in British Columbia. There is writing on it—a fragmentary message:

Bound north of Alaska for the smoking land

And strangest of all, that writing, Smoky knows, is in Cleve Darrell's handwriting—not his adult penmanship, but the childish scrawl of his and Smoky's schooldays. Yet as far as Smoky can discover, Cleve had never been in British Columbia.

The "smoking land," the queer piece of wood, obsess Smoky. They come between him and everything he thinks or does. So at last he sells his dude ranch and after a frantic study of Alaskan legend and Esquimau lore, leaves for the great white North.

His quest is as tireless as it is futile. He is a standing joke among the old-timers. Nothing matters until one day a strange Esquimau who seems to be at least partly white comes to Cassidy's campfire and begs for food. He is wearing a parka of rare otter furs, and his dog is not like any Cassidy has ever seen on all his wanderings. When Cassidy puts sugar in the stranger's tea, it seems to make him almost drunk. He points out over the ice-locked sea, and says his homeland is out there . . . beyond . . .

Cassidy's Esquimau bearer shrieks with laughter and half-wittedly suggests, "Maybe he come from Smoking Land!"

The stranger completely loses control of himself. He sets his brute of a dog on the bearer, and rushes at Cassidy with his knife drawn. Cassidy fires two shots, pointblank. Both enter the stranger's chest. But he does not drop. Instead he laughs with murderous fury and springs for Cassidy with his arm strained back for the finishing stroke of the knife.

CHAPTER VII

THE FRIGHTENED LIAR

THERE are not many things that one can trust in this world, and I had always known it, but I made an exception in favor of Judge Colt. I had worn him next to my heart for a good many years, and if I treated him with proper care and precaution, he never failed me—never! Until then.

And it looked to be the last moment that anything on earth could be of interest to me. It was not quick thinking that gave me a moment of respite, but by a natural gesture, I threw up my gun hand to ward away that devilish knife.

There I had my first touch of luck, for the long, heavy barrel of the gun *whanged* the knife-hand of the Esquimau right across his mittened fingers. He brought his hand down, and it thumped me on the breast where he had intended to drive the knife home. But there was no steel in his grip; the knife had slipped out of his nerveless fingers and dropped into the crusted snow, where it stuck upright, trembling, and gleaming.

In the meantime, I grabbed him, only to find that I had embraced a round of boiler plate, so to speak. I understood, in the same flash, why neither of my bullets had gone home. Bullets are intended to bump their soft lead noses into still softer flesh, and this rascal from nowhere was wearing armor of some sort under his furs.

I might as well have embraced a barrel; but his first hug nearly broke my back. It sent a bursting rush of blood up behind my eyes so that I saw everything through a red swirl, and leaping through the crimson haze came the man-hunting dog. Oh, he meant business, let me tell you, with his beady little eyes almost blotted out by a wolfish grin, and his fangs looking almost as long as his master's knife.

I struck at him with a half-arm stroke and whacked him right between those beady eyes; the weight of his charge crashed blindly against his master and me, and sent us toppling over in the snow.

I was underneath the man, and the Esquimau got my throat in one hand and picked his knife out of the snow with the other, as calmly as any lady would pick a needle out of a big white pin cushion. All of his teeth were showing through his beard, too. And then I smashed him in the face with the barrel of my gun.

A Colt is the handiest short club in the world. The Esquimau turned into jelly and I crawled out from under the quivering, jerking mass of it to find the white dog running in short circles, holding his head down and trying to shake the cobwebs out of it.

I drew a bead on him, but I didn't shoot. Something came between my trigger finger and the trigger to stop me, because I remembered that a dog is only what training makes it, and that this fellow's savagery wasn't really anything he was responsible for.

The dog's wits cleared, almost at the same instant, and he sat down and canted his head to one side, and looked at me and at the gun in the canniest way imaginable, as though he were saying, "This is not in the book. I have to study this lesson before I can recite."

When I turned my back on him, he failed to budge, so I gathered that I was free from danger from him, at least; and a mighty weight it was off my mind, for I would rather have faced another pair of men in armor than that swerving, ponderous, lightning-fast body, with its knifelike, jagged teeth ready to snap and tear at me.

I gave my attention, now, to the outlander, and since he was still muttering and groaning, quite unconscious, I opened his furs at the chest and my fingers rubbed against wood, or something that felt like it.

However, wood does not turn a bullet fired pointblank from a Colt .45. So I opened his furs wider and saw something that was a thunderclap in my brain.

For I was looking down on the same stuff upon which the message had been scratched—*"Bound north of Alaska to the smoking land and . . ."*

Yes, the same texture of wood, the look of wood, the brownish-gray color of wood —and the substance of the hardest steel! I rapped the butt of the gun as hard as I could on the face of that cuirass, and a hollow sound came back to me, but I could not see that it made the smallest dent on the surface!

But, hard as the stuff was, totally impenetrable as it seemed, I saw that small holes had been bored in it and through these holes passed a lacing of strong gut by which the armor could be taken on and off.

I UNTIED the string, pulled it loose, and then, with a strong pull, I turned Mr. Esquimau out of his enchanted armor. When he tumbled on his face in the snow, he came to himself with a start and got up, staggering, pulling the furs about his open breast again, to keep out the stabbing knives of the cold.

In the meantime, I put away my Colt and took up the fallen knife. It was a beautiful piece of bluish-gray steel with a blade that tapered like the dripping point of an icicle. It was supple as the wind, and as penetrating as a fork of lightning. With that in my hand—and with the white dog still neutral—I stepped up close to the man from the North and said to him, in something as near his own dialect as I could manage, that if he attempted to run away, I would stick him right through his middle.

He blinked at me and said nothing, but I knew that he had understood.

"Now," said I, "you speak to me with a tongue that cannot say the thing that is not. Where did you get this thing?"

I pointed to the armor on the snow.

"I found it down by the shore, washing back and forth in the driftwood. I had gone to pick up driftwood for a fire. And I found this."

"You have spoken, already, a thing that is not," I said. "A man does not pick up wet driftwood to make a fire. Where it is awash, there is a lot more of it safe and dry on the beach. Now try again, and tell me where you got this thing?"

"It is clear that you are one of the wise ones," said he. "It is true that I did not pick it up among the driftwood on the beach. But I worked one summer unloading a ship at Point Barrow. And I found this thing in the ship, and I took it away with me."

Take him all in all, he was a good liar of the hearty, natural school, one of the kind that looks you fairly in the eye and speaks out simply and bluntly—and knows not the truth at all.

There was a raging fire in me. I began to know that my strange trail was not ending in nothing. I could not put all the pieces of evidence together, but I was willing to swear, now, that there was, somewhere, a Smoking Land.

"Twice you have told me the thing that is not," I said. "The third time if you do so, I shall run your own knife through your heart and leave you for the wolves to eat. Yes, or my own dogs may have you before you are dead. And that white fellow, yonder, may enjoy a taste of you. Tell me the truth. You brought this from the Smoking Land!"

He grew smaller in a sudden jerk, as his knees sagged.

"You brought it from the Smoking Land," said I. "Tell me the truth."

"I know nothing," said he.

But his eyes were unsteady, and when a man cannot meet your glance, he is fighting a battle already more than half lost.

"You came from the Smoking Land," said I. "That's why you tried to kill my friend. That's why you wanted to murder me. Because you don't want the thing known."

"He laughed at me," said he. "That is why I tried to kill him."

"*I* didn't laugh at you," said I.

"I was already in the madness, when I ran at you," said he. Yes, he had talent, great though unimproved talent. He was never without a word of answer.

SO I took the long blade and laid its needle point on his breast, and as he winced, I knew that the burning finger was sinking through his skin, drawing out a trickle of blood.

"You are less to me than a mad dog," said I. "So now I am going to kill you, because I have promised to do so. But I give you one more chance to live. You came from the Smoking Land!"

There was a brightness and a shadow in his eyes, in quick succession, as he decided to throw himself at me, and then as he changed his mind, deciding that the knife was much too close to his heart.

And, after that, his face, his whole body loosened and weakened. He wavered as a rag sways in a light wind, a wet, heavy rag that dangles freshly soaked on the line.

I waited, for I saw that speech of any kind was impossible to him, just then.

Finally he said, "Yes, I am from the Smoking Land! The wizards and the devils have told you! The witches have whispered it in your ear."

This was what he said that almost stopped my heart. The agony with which he spoke made me sure that he was not lying, this time. And my thought jumped back to the laboratory, and the dreadful night of the explosion, and that moment seemed to be only ten seconds, and not a whole year, before this.

And I was robed with a new strength, because it seemed to me that now I could not fail. One always feels that way when, after following a dim idea, new and sudden light strikes across the trail and shows you even a small part of truth in what you have been dreaming.

I was not through with the Esquimau. I started to pump him some more; of course I wanted to rush at once to questions about Cleve Darrell, in that mysterious northern country, wherever it might be. But I found that I had reached a stumbling block.

"I have said too much for fear of death," said the Esquimau. "But already I am dying. I can feel their hands on me, and their fire. Kill me when you please; because I shall be ready to die. To die by a bullet or the stroke of a knife is sweetness and a pleasure compared to what they

will do! They will cut me in ten thousand pieces, and each separate piece shall die a separate death!"

CHAPTER VIII

LUCK AND A RIFLE

IT was time, of course, to hold my horses. The man had more than he could stand; he was literally full to the lips with icy fear, so I stopped bearing down on him.

I secured him by tying his hands behind him with all of the knots I could devise.

For now there were the signs of an approaching blizzard, and I set to work making a snow house against the blow. I got it roughed out and completed fairly before the real weight of the wind struck us, and washed over us like a tide of freezing water. One of those northern storms has such power that to stand against the wind is really like wading through the shooting tide that races down a flume. And when I got inside the shelter, and the Esquimau with me, I was fairly contented.

If the blizzard lasted a few days, I cared not a straw. I had food enough to last both me and my dogs; I was not far from Point Barrow to get new supplies later on, and in short, I felt that I was a master of circumstances—for the moment.

My captive did not complain. He lay down and turned his face to the wall and slept.

It was like the sleep of an unhappy dog, for during hours and hours, his body would be twitching, and whimperings and moanings would come out of his throat.

Once he sat bolt upright and stared about him with nightmare eyes, his face covered with sweat. When he saw me, the fear seemed to go out of him again; he lay down and slept once more.

In the morning I would put such screws on him as never had been put on a man before. I reasoned in this way: That he was a murderer—that he had shown the will to murder and tried a very good hand with me at the game; that therefore I was at liberty to do as I pleased with him, as with a creature whose own life was forfeit. In short, though this does not make good reading, I had determined to get his secret out of him, if steel could tear it, or fire burn it free!

So I sat up and watched him, until sleep began to overpower me. Then, at last, I put the knife under my body. The revolver I hung under the pit of my arm. I lay down and slept.

When I wakened, I sat up with a yawn, not very much refreshed, for the air is pretty dead inside an ice-house. And outside it, where I should have to go soon to feed the dogs, the blizzard was screaming with a stronger voice than ever. I shook my head.

And then the memory of the day before, and the thought of the Smoking Land, and poor Cleve Darrell, came rushing over me and roused me in earnest. The aches and the pains went out of me, and I turned to find my captive.

He was gone!

AFTER the first shudder, I made up my mind that he would presently return. Nothing could face that blast, and few living things would care to even creep before it. He, being desperate to get away, might have tried, but a very few minutes would convince him of his foolishness. I was prepared to smile when he came struggling in again, half frozen. I thought, too, of my poor bearer—wondered what had happened to him after he had fled from the dog's vicious rush, and if he had suffered much before the snow and wind and cold finally did for him.

I sat down and waited for another hour, and by the end of that time, I knew that I had lost my outlander. Wherever he was outside of the house, unless he had managed to free his hands, he was dead by this time!

There was no remorse in me for his sake, or very little. Because I told myself that whatever or wherever the Smoking Land might be, it was a place from which this rascal had fled in order to escape from *them*, whoever *they* might be. That was why he had been so desperately eager to

go south, that was why he was willing to take such low wages and throw in the services of his man-hunting dog. Yes, there must be crime behind him, a crime of such proportions that it had hounded him out of my hut and made him throw himself away in the storm.

But how I cursed myself that I had not managed to tear his secrets out of his unwilling mouth. I knew now that there *was* a Smoking Land to be reached. And nothing more.

So far as I knew there were merely some islands to the north, none of them a Smoking Land, and the rest of the wide waste stretching to the Pole was sea-ice. What fool would adventure blindly out on that ice, on that shifting, cruel trail?

The blizzard lasted another full day. When it ended, I went out and found, first and foremost, two of my dogs dead and half eaten; and near one of the carcasses, with the telltale red stain still about its muzzle and breast, was the man-hunting dog of the lost Esquimau.

I got out my gun, but at the sight of it the big dog simply ran a little distance and then stopped.

I almost laughed, angry and fierce as I was at the dog's idiotic notion that a gun could not kill at that short distance. But while I hesitated, it came back, whining, and then turned away and jogged off in the direction it had taken before, plainly asking me to follow. So, after fastening on my snow shoes, I trekked along behind him.

I guessed what the trail would be, and when the direction continued straight south, I knew that it was after the Esquimau that we were voyaging.

We went two or three miles before the dog stopped and scratched at the snow. There I started digging, and a yard under the frozen upper crust, I found the man from Smoking Land lying peacefully asleep, and forever.

There was no pain in his face, but a dreary, blurred, frozen expression.

There was nothing that I could do except to examine his clothes and find what I could that might help me afterwards. But I found nothing at all— There was only that magnificent suit of furs.

So I took those furs.

I'm afraid that it sounds ghoulish, but before me was a trail the mere thought of which stopped my heart. And if this man had come from the Smoking Land, probably I would need just such body covering to keep me from freezing on the way. I took the furs, therefore, and when I had stripped him, I found, exactly in the center of his breast, a mark that looked like a rudely shaped M.

It was not a very old scar. It was puckered blue, but it had the look of a cut that had been made within a few months at the outside. And I took to wondering what that letter could stand for.

M could stand for *month*, or *merry*, or a lot of other things. But in English speech it would generally stand for *murder*.

And that fitted in with my own guesses about him.

So I went back to my team gloomy and grim. My problem was beginning to be more and more complicated. Had this man been branded for a crime—and driven out from the Smoking Land to perish? Was it only by chance that he had managed to make the mainland?

But, if that was so, what manner of people were they in the Smoking Land—who practiced the use of the alphabet as civilized people know it?

It was another puzzler, and perhaps because it came on top of so much other mystery, it seemed to me the most confusing and heartbreaking problem of all.

FROM where I was, it was about three days to Point Barrow. I harnessed up and marched, making a dangerous experiment by using the white dog in the lead. It was no good. As a leader, he was a marvel. He was swift and tireless, and could read the snow in a marvelous way. But he could not be worked with other dogs. I watched him like a hawk every moment I was awake, but on each of the first two halts, he killed a dog. It was no longer a question of hunger but plainly

and solely because he was a fighter—and a killer.

I saw his second murder, though not the first. I was sound asleep, when a great outbreak of noise brought me to my feet and out of the shelter tent. There I saw Murder, as I began to call him, running about the rest of the team. The big huskies stood tail to tail in a close circle, their teeth ready for him; but in spite of them, and before I could shout, the white snake leaped in, struck with an odd whip-lash motion of his head, and dodged back again with his teeth deep in a writhing dog. The others followed, but when he dropped his victim and showed his teeth again, back they went into their huddle.

When I got to the spot, the husky—my best wheeler—was kicking the snow for the last time; his throat had been torn open.

Still I persisted in trying to tame him. But I got into Point Barrow minus four dogs, minus the white-skinned Esquimau, minus my original bearer, and plus nothing but the strange cuirass of the dead man, and one touch of maddening hope—that the Smoking Land might be out there north, in the ice.

One thing at least I had learned; I did not speak of the Smoking Land any more. I had made myself a joke for too long, and now I simply wanted to get the best advice as to where an island, a considerable island, must lie out there to the north.

The moment I adopted this tack, I got results, and cursed myself for not having done it before. I found that every whaler in those troubled waters firmly believed in the existence of a large body of land somewhere towards the Ice Pole. I found that even meteorologists were apt to explain certain peculiarities of the wind by supposing a mass of land—either one island or several—in the same direction. Why had I not learned this many, many months before? Simply because the enchanted and infernal phrase, *Smoking Land* had always been in my mouth.

Well, since my encounter with the white Esquimau, I was convinced of the existence of that land; now I simply wanted to know where it was and how to get there.

I have to explain about the *Ice Pole* to some of you, perhaps. The true North Pole, the North Pole of Amundsen and Peary, lies about a thousand miles north of Point Barrow. But that is not the hardest point for an explorer to reach. The center of difficulty, when it comes to travel, lies in another direction. It is west of north and about eight hundred miles from the Point. What makes it difficult to get at is the sweep of ice jams that surround it; the true Pole is much nearer—nearer by two hundred miles—to the outer rim of this center of difficulty.

I learned most of these things—at least, I learned them in the most convincing fashion—from Scanderov, the great Norwegian explorer, who was at Point Barrow during my stay. And I opened my heart to him and told him that I had a reason for wanting to risk my neck, if necessary, but that I would like to get across the ice to find that far-off land, the most inaccessible in the world, if it existed at all.

But Scanderov had an ugly nature, in a sense. He had a wide, thin-lipped mouth and a blunt jaw, and little, grim eyes, and when I told him my desire and asked for his advice and opinion, he simply said, "You'll break your neck if you try, but you'll never reach the Ice Pole!"

That was discouraging. But then, I had lived rubbing elbows with discouragement for more than a year and a half, with a dream of Cleveland Darrell always in the back of my brain. Despair can become a neighbor so familiar that at length it will be despised. And so it was by me, at this time. To the man of many disappointments, one grain of the least encouragement is a wine that lasts for years; and I had had my encouragement from the dead man!

I never would have had any luck with Scanderov had it not been for Murder. It was on account of Murder that he had wasted any time on me in the beginning, for he was a fellow who never threw away his time on strangers. But the look of the

white dog interested him, and he wanted to know where I had got Murder from. It was a thing about which I did not like to talk. I naturally did not want to tell about the death of a man whose hands I had tied behind his back; so I just touched lightly on the story and said that I had traded the dog for two of my own.

As I say, it was Murder that first gained me the wise ear of Scanderov; and it was Murder again who finally made Scanderov open the book of his mind to me. It happened in this way.

I kept the white dog muzzled while I was about the Point. There was something about him—either his look or bulk, or the fishy scent of him, perhaps, that made the rest of his kind steer clear of him. Scanderov even suggested that he was not really a dog at all, but a new vulpine species that closely resembled a dog. He went on talking about the teeth, but got into such a language about molars, dentals, canines, and such that I could not follow him.

But one day the strap of the muzzle broke while Murder was at my heels, and before I knew what he was up to, he was a good fifty yards off, attacking the pet dog of a half-breed Indian.

The breed emptied his rifle at Murder, and I more than half hoped that he would kill him, but shooting at Murder in flight, was like shooting at a snipe in full flight down the wind. The breed missed every shot, gave his dead dog a look, and then decided to take it out on me.

He made a swift dash at me, his knife out and descending just as I was getting ready to use my fists. I grabbed the handle of my own knife and jerked it out, but the breed's blade struck swiftly down at my breast.

Except for a thing I had forgotten, I was a dead man. I felt death with my eyes, I tell you, when I saw the blurred flash of the steel driving home. But it crashed to bits with a shivering sound like breaking glass, and there stood the breed with the useless hilt of the knife in his hand. It had burst to bits against the cuirass I was still wearing—wearing not for protection, but to keep it out of idle, envious hands, and from the path of gossip.

So I tickled the hollow of the breed's throat with the point of my knife, and told him to quiet down and behave.

THERE were two things about this that interested Scanderov, who happened to be standing by. He wanted desperately to know what I was wearing that had turned the tempered point of that breed's knife; and he wanted to know something about the origin of my own weapon—the one I had taken from the white Esquimau.

When he came at me with the questions, I said, "Here's the knife. Take a look for yourself."

His eyes fairly devoured it. "Where did you get it?"

"Look here, Scanderov," said I, "you want to know why I wear a charmed life, and—"

"I don't give a rap about your life."

"You want to know what I'm wearing under my furs, and about the dog, and about the knife. Well, Scanderov, I want to learn everything that you know about the Ice Pole, and how to get there."

He stared at me with a sort of fierce contempt in his eyes; as though I had asked a poet to teach me how to write the most beautiful lyric in the world, or the greatest epic. Finally he said, "All right, I'll exchange information with you."

"You'll owe me some boot, then. Buy me dinner and a bottle of whiskey, and I'll do most of the talking."

We talked until long after midnight. I told him the whole incredible story, beginning with Cleveland Darrell, and the explosion . . .

There is a sort of blood relationship among scientists, and I can't tell you how Scanderov's ears pricked up when he heard Darrell's name.

I carried straight through with the weird night in the laboratory and I wound up with the halfbreed Esquimau—if that was what he was—lying frozen, face down in the snow, and that mark on his chest.

Scanderov gave me his undivided atten-

tion. He picked up the knife, for the fortieth time, and turned from that to the cuirass, which I had unbuckled and laid on the table before him.

Then he said, as he flicked the thin, tapering knife blade with his thumb and forefinger, and let it jerk free and vibrate with a waspish hum:

"There's no other piece of wood like this, except the bit in the Smithsonian. There's no other bit of steel like this, either. Not in the entire world. I know something about metallurgy. No place, that is to say, except perhaps in your Smoking Land."

"You don't believe in such a place?" said I.

"Disbelief and belief, I try to rule out of my mind," said Scanderov.

"However," said I, "now I'll listen to your part of the bargain. How am I to get to the Ice Pole?"

"Take dogs and travel," said Scanderov.

I controlled my temper. "I want special information, about the journey," said I. "How am I to try to make it?"

"With luck," said Scanderov.

That got me fighting mad, but after all, he was a gentleman and did live up to our agreement. He simply meant that he considered the journey impossible, even for himself; how, then, could a crude new hand like me accomplish anything? That was logical, on his part. But beyond that point of logic, he went on to tell me everything that he could.

In the first place, he chilled my blood by saying that I would have to travel alone, for the good reason that I should never be able to get anyone to go with me. In the second place, he told me just what my outfit should consist of, and he broached the idea with which Stefansson had startled the world some time back—that a man with a good rifle and a touch of skill never need to starve when he's on Arctic ice. For there is plenty of life in that water to support whole shoals of fish, and the fish support wide-scattered armies of seals, and wherever seals hunt, they have to come to the ice holes to breathe and be killed, or lie on the ice basking—and be killed.

That, in short, was the plan which Scanderov evolved for me: a rifle, a light sled-boat, ammunition—and luck! And then perhaps if by a miracle I survived—the Ice Pole.

CHAPTER IX

SEA JOURNEY

FROM the first, Scanderov told me that I was, plainly, a fool. He said that a picked crew of about five men, and perhaps thirty of the finest dogs, perfect equipment, and so on would have one chance in twenty of reaching the goal; or of making a safe return. One man alone could never turn the trick.

"Well, so far as I know," I said, "one man made the trip from the Smoking Land to Alaska. So one man ought to be able to return."

He looked at me and said nothing, but his eyes were considering me, gravely.

Then he remarked, "I'm not sorry for fellows like you. You get a lifetime of fun out of the craziest sort of an adventure, and the fun lasts up to the death struggle. So what's the loss to you? When I say that one man has no chance I simply mean—well, a sprained ankle can make a whole party of seven or eight limp; but a sprained ankle is death to a single man."

"I won't sprain my ankle, then."

He grinned at me with feal friendship. And he argued no more, but gave me all the help he could.

I contributed one idea of my own. I was to be single-handed; and therefore I might as well work with a single dog, and a one-dog sled-boat! It would save trouble in the care of the dogs, it would save ammunition that would otherwise be used up in shooting food for the animals. And I had in Murder a dog as strong as three, with an instinct for all northern difficulties of the trail.

Scanderov thought it might be difficult to work out a sled-boat light enough to handle and yet big enough to hold a man

and a dog. But we proved that the thing could be done.

I spent a solid month making preparations. Everything was worked out by hand; I don't think that I took with me a single ready-made article except a rifle and the ammunition for it. That was one place where I had to be extravagant, for as Scanderov said, it would be easy to starve without bullets for the gun; whereas if I were overloaded, I could simply throw away a part of the load at any time. If the rifle finally used up its last shot, then I could fall to with a harpoon, Esquimau fashion.

The Esquimaux laughed when they saw the size of the sled. And in other ways, it was the strangest sled ever made, I dare say, because the material of which it was composed was almost entirely whalebone. Whalebone and best sinew, welded and compounded until maximum strength and minimum weight were attained. When the sled was finished, I could handle it with one hand. I could throw it about, and no matter how it struck, it neither dented nor broke!

The heaviest item was the canvas which was to be my tent, my bed wrapping, and the skin to fit over the sled, and turn it into a canoe! My skis, fitted in crisscross at the center of the sled, would distend the sides and give me a craft, when occasion rose, capable of transporting a very considerable weight of provisions or other necessities.

But there were few other necessities. A knife, a gun, ammunition, the sled, the oil-soaked canvas, the dog. That was about all.

Then the time came to march out onto the sea ice.

I HIRED a pair of packers to get me over the ridge of ice thrown up by the winter jams; we labored most of the day, and then I found myself out on the smoother ice of the open sea. There I said goodbye to the Esquimaux, and to Scanderov. We didn't waste many words, but my heart was turned to water by an odd thing. One of the natives began to laugh. I don't know what had struck him so funny. An Esquimau will laugh at anything, if it happens to hit him in the right way. At any rate, that fool followed me with his loon laughter for a long distance, and for days and weeks afterwards the throb and the weird wailing of the sound hung in my ears, and got somehow into my blood.

I was started, however. At the last moment I would have turned back, because my knees were so literally unstrung that I had to go forward with short steps. But shame compelled me. Shame is a queer devil. The murderer who has made a mockery of shame by the shamelessness of his crime, yet may feel the shame of cowardice that turns him into a hero on the scaffold. I was playing the hero or fool out there on the open ice, realizing that to talk about a thing is very different from doing it.

But I don't want to talk about the ice. I could write hundreds of thousands of words about it, because those days are written into my memory with the sort of ink that traces a thousand words a minute and never fades out! But I have to get at what lay behind the ice. I have to get at the Smoking Land, since that is the shore I reached. Yes, I may as well throw away suspense, and put myself on that shore.

Yet I am almost irresistibly tempted to put in something for the eight months of my journey over the ice.

Why do I call it a journey at all? Why shouldn't I speak of my voyage? Because, during nearly every moment of that time, I was being carried by one current or another, drifting pretty steadily.

I should like to write at length, for instance, of how I found myself sailing on a fifty-acre island of ice, and how I kept on sailing on it for a month, sometimes seeing other ice lands in the distance, blue and gleaming, and sometimes, again, voyaging alone through an empty sea! That island was kind to me. It brought the seals to bask on its shore, fattening Murder and me. And above all, while I was

on it, the currents bore it almost steadily toward the North.

I remember the thrilling, pulsing, upwelling joy that kept my heart in my throat for four days, because during those days a powerful gale was striking that island, and making it tremble, and smashing it with ponderous waves—but all the while that gale hung due in the south, and drove me gloriously on my chosen way.

My white island split in two, divided, and re-divided, and at last, one day, I found that I was walking on a surface that had once been level, but which was now rapidly sloping to the side. I was amazed. There was no wind pressure, then, to account for the thing. It was as though some subterannean monster were thrusting up against my island from beneath, but as the angle increased, I realized at last that my iceberg was simply turning over! A trick the scoundrels have, I never knew why!

Well, I had, literally, exactly half an hour to get my stuff together, the canvas over the sled, and myself and Murder in it, before the island began to heel rapidly.

I pushed off, and suddenly the whole mass, as though waiting for that signal, turned bottom up.

I heard the upper part of the berg smite the water on the other side with a tremendous crashing, and in the meantime, not a yard from my boat, the bottom ice slid upward, endlessly, smooth, blue as though oiled, shining like the belly of a great fish.

And with its movement, it cast out shuddering waves, like those which wriggle out from the side of a great liner.

Those waves pushed me back to a safer distance. And now I sat in the sled-boat and looked gloomily back at my happy home—upside down!

It sounds funny, to say it, but it was *not* funny, at that moment. It was damned dismal, and there was not a solitary gleam of ice in any direction through that close, gray day, and the sea was choppy, tossing my feather of a boat about, and tossing in a gallon or so of water, now and then.

And Murder? He sat in the center of the boat, with his head pointing true as any compass needle a little west of north! Yes, I knew then, and I had guessed it before, that Murder had an instinct as sure as that of a bird winging home!

I had a bright idea, after a time. Although my island had turned over, it was still an island, though a smaller one. So I simply hauled to the leeward of it, and found a place where the cliff could be scaled, and landed again.

IT WAS not as comfortable as before, for the surface was sheer ice; whereas previously I had had a hard blanket of snow underfoot. However, the berg sailed on, upside down, and bore me eventually into a white hell, where all the devils were howling and smashing a crystal world about one another's ears. I mean, it brought me into a great ice jam.

I did about ten miles in ten days, going through that grinding inferno. And then it split away beneath me; and I drove for days in a terrible gale that kept me drenched with spray and put in my ears a worse sound than the loon-laughter of that half-witted Esquimau!

That was in the eighth month of my journey.

I think that I had given up any real hope about three or four months before, and the only thing that kept me going, paddling north through the iron-gray, icy water, or trekking overland with the might of Murder hauling at the traces, was a blind determination born out of the very years which I had already devoted to the quest. For long invested time is in itself a sort of capital which pays you an interest, after a while, and keeps your hands at your work.

But on this day, I made sure that I was passing to the end of the world and of my life, too, for the gale blew me from the southward towards a low-lying cloud. It was darker below, and lighter above. And suddenly even the nerve of Murder seemed to have deserted him, for he sat down and howled like the fiend that he was.

Was it this that cleared my tired eyes for me, and made me look again? At any rate, it was then that I knew I was blowing upon a lee shore!

CHAPTER X

THE RUNNING DOG

YES, it was what my heart had always known it would be—as like as a thing once actually seen, and remembered out of childhood—a vision that did not shrink at the touch of reality. Rather, it grew greater and greater, extending, heightening; sprang beyond my sight to the right hand and to the left, and lifted into iron peaks, from the broken top of the highest of which, half seen, a dark mist rolled forth upon the wind.

It was the Smoking Land!

Now, I am not ordinarily very emotional; and to this day I can hardly imagine myself doing what I know I did then. I dropped upon my knees, and put up my hands like a child, and thanked God. For there it was, clearer than my dream. And in it, I told myself, was Cleveland Darrell—"*bound north of Alaska for the Smoking Land and—*"

And—what?

Well, perhaps I should find that out, also, and what power or powers had snatched him away to this end of the world.

Now, at the very time that I saw the end of my long labor before me and the goal under the touch of my eye, at that very moment my thankfulness, my gratitude, my joy washed out of me in a single breath.

For I've mentioned that I was blown on a mere ragged fragment of ice, making with a swift current towards a lee shore.

To right and to left the cliffs came out, vast and sheer, gleaming and adrip with ice and the dull twilight. And to my right and left the cliffs stood forth, while I drove on my staggering sheet of ice straight into the hollow maw of a bay.

To have aimed at the solid wall of the cliffs would have been better, for the bay, like a savage, enormous mouth, was fitted with teeth matched to its size. Broken, jutting rocks received the rush of the waves, and the waters were turned to spray and spume that flung hundreds of feet upward, I swear, and then blew as level rain out of sight across the unknown land.

The longer sway of the open sea gave way to a sickening and irregular pitch, like the leaping of a bucking horse.

And now all was blotted out by the denseness of a passing squall; and when I looked again, the cliffs were changed and brought nearer and made more terrible by their white sheath of snow.

My heart was sinking, before. But now it lay like a stone in the bottom of the pit. I was too frightened to feel fear. I was too overwhelmed by the awesomeness of the sight, and by the majesty of the sound, though I knew that the next moment I would be plunged to death on the rocks.

And they seemed to me to move, the waves standing still, and the unspeakable granite jaws closing upon the verge of the sea and blowing it forth again like a white smoke.

We came down with a rush on a jutting point—and then swerving with an unexpected current a little to the side, I saw before me a dim and glimmering hope, for the rocks parted and what seemed a safe cove was revealed.

I say what seemed a safe cove, for I had only the merest glimpse of it through the thundering and the dashing of that moment, and then a great wave, a master wave of them all, picked us up—me and the sled and the great dog Murder, and the little ice island under us—and whirled us in the air as a child spins a top, and flung us forward like a stone.

I think the mere flight through the air was what knocked me out of . . . time!

FOR I remember that my wild impression was of being a youngster again and standing in a great shop, piled with crockery, and with fragile, beautiful glass vases all around, and the whole mass crashing with a sort of music about my ears.

Then I woke up, frozen, being choked by hands that worked on my throat.

It was Murder, who had me by the nape of the neck and was tugging back with all of his might, pulling me out of the freezing wash of the water along the shore.

I got up, as well as I could. I thought that my right hip was broken, where the revolver had jammed against it, but then I found that I could walk.

Yet still, I had no real consciousness of safety. No more safe than a man who has landed on the very shores of the region of death, so leaden-dark, and so filled with thunder was all of this land before me.

But then I saw a little distance ahead of me, my sled, lying unbroken, neither on its side nor on its back, but right side up, as though waiting to be used, and that sight, oddly enough, restored my courage and my wits in a single stroke.

What was in the sled was secure enough, having been lashed to the thwarts. I got out the harness, and with my stiff hands managed to fasten Murder in place. Then I made a weaving way among the rocks and up the slope and over the upstanding rim of cliffs which received the blast of the south wind.

Once over the hill, the yell of the storm grew less, and that was a help. A vast noise is to the brain like a blanket which stifles the mouth. It was an unbelievable relief when I found myself under shelter from the wind and from the racket. And then I found a small stream of water running down the hillside, issuing from the dark mouth of a cave.

It did not strike me as strange, at first, when I saw water *running*. But when I realized that that comparative trickle should have been frozen solidly across, long ago, I went to it staggered with amazement.

As I went nearer, I saw that it was just the darkness of the cave that clouded the sheen of the stream; there was actually a vapor rising thickly from its surface. The water was hot—so hot that I could hardly touch it!

It had been eight months since I had known anything warmer than the blood of a newly killed seal, or the horribly smoking flame of my primus stove, over which I cooked. And now here was heat actually flowing over the frozen ground of the Arctic!

I felt my forehead knot hard in a frown. I was greatly worried. I wanted to do something about it. I wanted to stop that stupid waste. There was enough water here to pipe through a whole town, and keep it snugly warm. Enough water running hot to have a large-scale commercial adaptation. I could not guess how many tons of coal per day would be necessary to heat so much water to such a temperature.

Then all of this problem dissolved, and left me laughing at my foolishness, for I realized that I was in the Smoking Land, some eight hundred miles as the bird flies from the nearest outpost of civilization—some eight months' journey lay behind me.

YES, I could realize, now, exactly what Scanderov had meant when he said that I would have to have unfailing luck with me, night and day. For luck and Murder had literally pulled me through by the nape of the neck!

Sometime I would have to face the ghastly impossibility of return, though I could hardly hope that luck like that would come twice to one man. At the moment, though, I could put that thought behind me. There was enough and more than enough in the present to fill my mind!

I was hungry, my furs and face were caked with ice; I was weak, and wobbly in the knees. The shock I had been through had been so great that I was still thawing out nervously, so to speak, inch by inch, and there still seemed to be yards of ice, so to speak, surrounding my heart.

So I got up there in the mouth of that cave from which the hot stream poured, and from the sled put out my supplies, put the seal fat into the primus stove, and lighted it with a match from my fold of oiled silk, and started cooking, and adding another layer of soot to the deep aggregate which had been settling on me throughout

these months. For I had long ago ceased being a white man. There was enough pure carbon on my hide to make a gross of lead pencils. I could have written an encyclopaedia, using myself for the inkpot, so to speak.

However, there I sat, shivering a little, only as uncomfortable, say, as a cat in a hail storm, and comforting a belly already filled with meat, with the heat, the fragrance and the black power of well boiled tea.

Murder had eaten, too, but instead of lying down and going to sleep with his bush of tail curled securely over the tender tip of his nose, he took to prowling back and forth across the mouth of the cave, leaping over the stream from side to side, pacing like a tiger behind the bars of its cage.

Eventually, while I watched him sleepily, contentedly, he went down into the mouth of the cave, and into the deep, dark throat behind the mouth.

He disappeared. He was gone for a long time on this prowling expedition. And then, eventually, he came by me without a sound—the terrible Murder, the brave Murder, the hero senseless to fear, scampering with his tail tucked between his legs, and running with such desperate effort that the wind of his passing fanned my face, and I saw the standing hair of his back thrown into waves by his efforts to go faster!

I laughed a little, at the sight of him, but nevertheless, I got out my Colt.

It was hardly likely that Murder had run away from nothing at all, and whatever he had seen, from the look of him, he thought was still flying at his heels.

Then I went to the verge of the cave and shouted, but the fleeing Murder, already a dim silhouette, quite faded into the rolling mist, and all my yelling did not bring him back.

It was the first time he had disobeyed me. I stopped laughing. There was not a smile in me, for I began to guess that there was more than smoke in the Smoking Land.

CHAPTER XI

CAVERN IN THE ROCK

I DARE say that no man can quite understand his past follies. Merely to be distant from our idiocies makes them seem more transparent. But I admit that I cannot at this time realize what induced me to stay like an inert bulk in that cavern from which even Murder had run away!

For I knew that he was no ordinary animal, and that he was not the sort to turn tail and flee from nothing at all. No, he was more likely to stand by and try his teeth on its throat. If he would venture to attack eight fierce huskies, each one of which was almost the equal of a wolf in single combat, what was it that had sent him scampering in this manner?

Yes, I actually asked myself those questions while I remained there in the cave. So the only way I can explain my stupidity in remaining there is by remembering that I had been rubbing shoulders for so many months with dangers so infinite that even the flight of Murder seemed inconsequential to me.

When I made out that Murder had gone for the time being, and gone both far and fast, I stood in the mouth of the cave and stared after him, heartily wishing him back.

I determined to explore the cave for myself. I did not know the charming possibilities of the Smoking Land and I did not expect to meet anything worse than a good-sized polar bear.

I returned to my stove and made a torch to light my way into the cave.

The torch was simple enough to fashion, for I found, close to the cave mouth, no doubt nursed and encouraged by the warmth with which the hot water thawed the winter from the ground, some low-growing shrubs which looked like a sort of willow.

I was amazed to see how the winds of the earth scatter seeds, so that every available crevice, even in this far-off, frozen land of mystery, could furnish a resting place for transported vegetation.

Well, I broke off a quantity of the willows—if that's what they were—and twisting them together into a strand, lighted the tips and found that they burned quite well, although of course with a good deal of smoke, and a light that was rather a glow than a flame. However, it was enough to show me my way among the boulders of the cave, and I went back where the throat of the place narrowed.

Suddenly I found myself stumbling no more over the irregularities of the surface, but walking easily upright. I stopped and blew on the glowing end of my torch until a few flames sprang out of it, and when I had this increased light, there was plenty for me to see.

I was in a regularly formed hall, about twenty feet or more in breadth and half again as high, and thirty or so paces in length. The stream ran through the center of the chamber and dropped down two or three separate levels, gathering into a pool at each before it passed on. The heat it gave out was perceptible to a degree, where the ice of the outer air was shut out, and I began to sweat as if I had been walking a long distance up hill.

A weird thing it was to walk into the bowels of an Arctic mountain and find there all the signs of civilized development. For that rock, as far as I could make out, was a sort of black granite, or diorite. It was hard as flint, and a great deal tougher, and even the feeble rays from my torch sent long glimmering streaks down the walls, as if across the surface of water.

I hurried over to the left side wall to see what mark of tools I could find. And there were none!

THAT stone surface was as smooth as plaster—as smooth as glass! Egyptians at the height of their skill had never polished rock any more carefully or skillfully than this, not even when they were fashioning monuments for their dead and deified monarchs.

I rubbed my hand across the glassy-smooth surface-plane, and found it a little damp from the vapors of the stream.

It was a miracle, all right. But not the sort of a miracle that made me want to follow the rousing example of Murder, and bolt.

In the first place, if the people who had carved such a chamber out of the heart of the mountain still existed, they were probably civilized enough to give me decent treatment. And what was more probable, those who had worked this marvel might have died long, long ago—hundreds, thousands of years ago. Otherwise, since it had once been made, why was no one here now!

I went on toward the end of the room, still shaking my head, half awed and half charmed. I began to turn in my head the problems which had been weighing me down up to this moment. I began to ask myself how Cleveland Darrell could have been brought to this place, and why?

Somewhere in this great, dark island, which looked like iron to the eye, there must be people capable of following the most difficult steps of science. Because I did not doubt that whoever had taken my friend had done so because of some interest in his work. That work was too advanced for me to even know what it was about. I had received from Dr. Franklin a description of it that was little more to me than a wordy jumble. And yet here in the Smoking Land there existed people who thoroughly appreciated what he was trying to do, it appeared.

How, from this remote world's end, could its inhabitants stretch out to the far southern land and learn what was happening there? How could they watch—unseen? How could they penetrate the six-inch steel of the doors of Cleveland Darrell's laboratory and observe him at his work? That was a neat little riddle.

Aeroplanes? Men who could hew this room out of granite would perhaps be able to construct an aeroplane if they wanted to. Anything of a mechanical nature must be within the grasp of their intelligence.

But then a more probable solution leaped across my mind. It seemed so reasonable that I accepted it for true.

What if a great nation, or an alliance of nations, had planned to contrive such means for war that, once perfected, the other countries would lie helpless at their feet?

The first thing for them to do would be to find a secret place for the execution of their designs. And where could secrecy be? Spies and spy systems penetrate everywhere. They had followed Cleveland Darrell to his far laboratory in the middle of the Western desert, and they had freely passed by his steel door to learn what was in his mind.

What was wanted would be a place which would not be reached because its existence was unknown. And what places on this globe are unknown? Only certain districts near the north and the south poles.

It seemed to me that I certainly had hit upon the truth. Darrell had been stolen simply because they wanted to force from him the secrets of which he was the master, and which, lodged in the hands of the war lords, would at a single *coup* enable them to master the planet!

This chamber would be simply one of the experiment rooms which had been carved out—one of the laboratory outhouses, one of the way stations, used for a time, and then abandoned.

But I was sobered by the knowledge that men who had done so much, and had adventured upon such a crime as that of stealing Darrell from his work, would not hesitate, now, to blot me out, if they caught me.

My torch was burning lower and lower, so I turned around to reach the outer chamber of the cave, its natural mouth of it, or what had looked like it when I had been in it; I hurried along at a good pace.

Even after I had left the chamber behind me, I was surprised that I saw no sign of daylight before me. But perhaps my eyes had been strained in the torchlight, or were dull from the smoke, or perhaps that northern sky had been overcast with heavier and lower sweeping clouds?

Then suddenly I bumped my nose straight into a solid wall!

I sat down with a thud, involuntarily; feeling exactly as if I'd been hit by a straight left to the face.

The torch fell out of my hand, and its loosened branches flared up to show me my sled and the primus stove, and the harness of Murder. Yes, I was at the entrance of the cave, well enough, but instead of a free passage to the out-of-doors, there lay across my path a smooth and gleaming wall of rock, exactly like the polished walls of the chamber I had just left behind me!

THAT was when I realized that I had been a fool, and my dog had been wise! Oh, yes, I could look back with a perfect hindsight and see that I should have taken the hint long ago from Murder and followed him when he saw fit to run with all his speed.

At once a sense of utter hopelessness and helplessness took hold of me. For how could I manage to resist powers that were able to raise sheer walls before me out of the earth?

I picked up a rock and tried to sound the thickness of that sheet of granite—if granite it was that gleamed like hard iron! But though I broke the heavy stone, finally, I could not detect any hollowness in the sound evoked by the hammering. I tried high and I tried low, but it was always the same. I seemed to be beating not against a wall but upon the solid chest of the mountain itself!

Yes, I judged that to give back such an unvaried note, the slab of stone must be three or four feet thick. Imagine, then, the amount of power necessary to lift a wall of that thickness across the front of a cave of that size, and manage the trick so silently that I, not very far away down a cave which must multiply noises like a telephone receiver held at the ear, had not heard even a whisper to startle me!

I moistened my dry lips, and finally got to my feet to make myself a new torch. And as I did that, ripping up more of the handy willows, I considered that perhaps that seemingly blank hall I had explored might in reality lead to all sorts of other chambers, from which it was separated not

by doors, but by thousand-ton lifting or dropping screens, exactly like this little trifle that had just come in my way!

I was depressed. I was frightened. But I think that I was more interested than either. I cast about in my head for the means by which the wall lifting could have been done. Steam made a noise even when the finest engine was working. Internal combustion machines had to sputter through their exhausts, and the only power that seemed to me likely to move so mightily and so silently was electricity, which will flow silently and coldly along a wire no larger than a thread, and deliver enough energy to hurl all the traffic of Manhattan as lightly as you please.

Yes, electricity must have done the trick. And now I was shut in more efficiently than ever beast was caged behind bars!

What would happen to me? Would I be kept here until I smothered? No, the chamber behind me was so huge that it seemed unlikely that I would die of strangling before I starved. Days, perhaps . . .

I tasted the water of the stream, sipping a few drops from the hollow of my hand. The taste was acrid, and there was a slight bouquet of sulphur, I thought. However I decided that I would be able to use that water to sustain life.

Next, I determined to make another exploration of the interior of the cave. So I made a larger torch and went straight back to the big chamber to see if there were any outlet through its polished walls.

BUT there was none that I could see. And if these walls were jointed, and capable of being lifted and lowered like that monstrous slab which closed the mouth of the cave, I could not see so much as a hair's breadth of division at the corners. And there was no way out of the place except the aperture, about a foot in diameter and perfectly round, out of which the water flowed. I tried to look through the upper part of the circle, but there was only thick darkness beyond, and the light of the torch was too feeble to penetrate very far.

So I went back to the outer cavern. For there was something much more depressing in the smooth perfection of those man-made walls than in the roughness of the cave. When I got to the entrance, I found the floor covered with water several inches deep. The stream had been dammed up by the closing of the entrance, of course, though I had not thought of that before. And now, as the hot water was spread out over a larger surface, all the inside was filled with a warm, choking mist.

In a sort of fury of despair, I was ready to throw myself face down in the few inches that were already under foot—one good inhalation of water directly into the lungs would be enough, I had heard.

It was only an impulse, quickly silenced by the will to live.

I began to see what I would do—stand there as the water rose and the hot fumes from its surface stifled me more and more, till it got to my chin, to my lips, and then straining on tiptoe, and then swimming for a little while on the surface, or clinging to rough projections on the wall like a poor beast.

Into the middle of my wretched musing came a bit of diversion—something moved and bumped my shins lightly—it was my sled, driven softly on by the light swirl of the current, where it turned backward from the wall. It came to my feet, I thought, like a good dog to comfort a despairing master, and what it promised was a boat that would support me with comfortable ease until the water actually filled the cavern to the brim!

In a very few seconds, I had the canvas worked on over the hull of the sled, and the skis in place holding it out to make a more secure float; I put my stuff into the canoe, too, and sitting down inside of it, I got ready for my voyage into darkness. The last of my willow strips had been burned short by this time, and after I was in the canoe, I put it out so that I could use it for a brief torch later on, in case of need.

There I sat through endless hours, as the cavern slowly filled, and the canoe, carried

by gentle currents, bumped time and again against the side of the wall. Every time it did my heart jumped like the foolish heart of a child, and I put out my hand to feel of the wall, as one feels for a doorknob in the confusion of darkness and sleep, and cannot find it until the light is turned on.

Well, I never found anything except little projections and knobs, and I'm ashamed to confess that I turned and pulled at some of these, as if I might find the magic button that would cause the barrier wall to drop again!

I had stripped off my clothes and sat naked and fairly comfortable, except that the hot mist continually congealed on my body and ran down my limbs in small, disagreeable trickles. But eventually the water came almost to the top of the cave, and there I entered a long agony. For perhaps it was because I was using up most of the oxygen in the small amount of air that remained, and perhaps it was simply that the fumes of the water gathered in more condensed form about me. At any rate, I passed what seemed to me endless hours with my mouth open, gasping.

FINALLY I found what I decided would have to be my death place. It was simply the point in the cave where the roof was highest, and I remained there while the water rose higher and higher.

And there I soon could hardly breathe. Somebody told me once that the word *agony* comes from a root meaning *to strangle*. I'm ready to believe that.

A roaring shattered my ears, and through it I heard what I thought was an illusion of ripping, tearing noise. And then, just above me, a shower of small stones and soil fell into my face.

I shrank away from it. I think I felt no added fear—simply because I couldn't. And then, just over me, while the shower of débris continued, came a glimmer, then a real gleam of light, followed by a downpour of rock and earth that hit me about the head and staggered the canoe under me. And I found myself looking up at feeble Arctic daylight.

There was something, though, to spoil the opening of that gate to salvation—for filling most of the hole were the head and the shoulders of a polar bear!

He could reach down and pick me out of that hole with one gesture of his supple forepaw, just as I've seen the brutes flick a fish out of water. And now his pig-eyes were glistening with hungry joy, and a drop of his saliva spattered on my forehead, and his nose glistened and worked as he scented me. It must have been pretty dark in that hollow, because it was his nose telling him about my presence, not his eyes. Otherwise he would have used his paw before I could move, but as it was, I got out that super-stiletto of a knife and rammed it right up his snoot.

He bumped the center of the sky with his back, he jumped so far and so fast, and then he departed, with roaring thunder streaming behind him and growing swiftly fainter. I pulled myself above the rim of the opening, and saw him galloping off.

CHAPTER XII

THE MEN APPEAR

I TOOK my pack apart, threw the contents out the hole, hitched the dog harness to the end of the sled-boat, held that in my hand while I climbed out of the hole, and then pulled the sled out after me. It was just possible to work it clear, after taking out the skis that distended the sides.

I sat down and took my head in my hands, as soon as I had got my clothes on.

I saw a trickle of water run down the side of the hill.

The cavern had filled to the uppermost lip, all right, and I could thank the chance that sent the bear hunting food on that hillside!

Then something else happened that was good news to me, for through the snow came a streak of yellow-white, and there was Murder racing around and around me, uttering that cross between a whine and a growl which was his nearest approach to a bark. He came close and stood panting

beside me, and I caressed him with voice and eye. There was no use patting him.

Now that we had staged our reunion, he went over and sniffed the water that was running freely down the hill, and as he sniffed, he growled deep in his throat, and I saw the hair lift in a big mane along his neck and back.

I rounded the side of the hill, with Murder hitched to the sled, and then I saw that the wall of the cave, from the outside, was exactly like that on the inside.

Well, I had seen enough of that part of the world, so I turned inland toward the great smoking mountain in the distance, and as I traveled, it grew greater and greater. From the distance, it seemed to have fellows well nigh as high, but as I drew closer to it, I saw that it must be at least ten thousand feet high—perhaps three miles of mountain lifting up there.

As I went along, I got a clearer idea of the geography of the end of the world. It appeared that the island, though rough-surfaced and with plenty of irregularities, was in general a high rim of cliffs presented to the sea all around, and big hills behind the cliffs, and then all of the center of the island was lower, turning into gentle plateaus, broken only by low-rolling hills.

NOW, as I went inland, until the roar of the sea against the cliffs died and then was lost behind me, I came upon what have to be called the meadows of the Smoking Land. Some of them were sheeted across with hard ice; some were deeply covered with snow; but there were thousands of acres only spotted with either ice or snow, and covered with dun-colored growths of herbage and grass.

And it was in a big field of this sort that I first saw the musk-oxen, though long before I had discovered their sign. There were about five hundred of them in the herd, I think, and I expected them at once to form their circle and stand with lowered heads waiting for me to charge. Those are their tactics—to make a wall of horns that will keep off the strongest polar bear in the world. And instinct has planted in their minds the ineradicable certainty that there is no other enemy in the world than things that kill with tooth and paw.

They are grand animals, and they are useful for a meat as good as beef ever was, or better, and they have a length of fine, woolly coat that makes even the sheep of western Scotland look like naked wretches. Besides that, they can be used for beasts of burden, I know.

So, altogether, it was a good sight to me, when I saw that fine, handsome herd. Five hundred—yes, there were more, many more, for when I came nearer, getting on a little eminence, I could see over the next low ridge another shallow valley dotted over with at least an equal number of the oxen!

It was a splendid sight, but it made me unlimber my rifle. I did not want to do random, reckless murder, but I wanted to get a good crack at some beef. The seals had been kind to me for eight months, I admit, and when a man is hungry, there is plenty of nourishment in the flesh and oil of a seal. Nevertheless, back on my molars and the root of my tongue there was a desire to get the taste of real beef, once more.

It was simple, of course. I walked up, and when, to my amazement, the musk-oxen did not get into their charmed ring, I went close to a fine, plump yearling, and gave it a bullet behind the shoulder.

The herd scattered at the explosion; and my yearling coughed blood, and dropped to its knees. Then it rolled over dead.

I took time to skin it. That much leather was not to be thrown away at the end of nowhere; I had an idea that I could cure it by the heat of a fire, perhaps. Then I cut up the carcass, and I had got about half way through that job when Murder, still harnessed to the sled, began to talk to me.

He had a style of conversation all his own, consisting of a series of whimpers, and whinings and muttering that ran up and down a long scale. I knew a lot of his words. I knew whole phrases of his as clearly as though he had spoken them.

Among other things, he could say distinctly, "Look out! Trouble ahead!"

And that was what he said now, as plain as day, "Bad Business! Let's run!"

I looked up and saw the reason why.

The musk-oxen, after the sound of the gun, had gone clumsily running, huddling over the next divide, and now, across the same low ridge, a dozen dogs came pouring, each one the twin of Murder.

WELL, they looked like his twin brothers, all right, but it was perfectly apparent that they also looked like trouble of the blackest sort to him!

The way those dogs ran, I guessed that, like their cousin Murder, they might have had some practice in running *men* for a game of blood to please their masters or themselves. Obviously, I couldn't run fast enough to get away from them, so I got Murder out of his traces in a twinkling, and prepared to use the rifle.

Old Murder played up true blue. First he danced sideward, saying clearly, "Come on! Let's go." But when he saw me standing still, he came skulking back and stood in front of me, and lowered his snaky head.

But the white devils who were charging us did not mind that. They came all the harder and faster, it seemed to me, until I got one of them firmly on a bead, and cracked him in the middle of the skull.

He jumped twenty feet into the air, and came down with a decisive flop and lay still, while the rest of the dogs split right and left and gave us a wide berth.

Murder, the rascal, turned his head and looked up to me with the biggest, widest, reddest laugh that I ever saw.

The white dogs, taking their distance, sat down on their haunches and lolled out their long red tongues, and obviously seemed to think that although I had the edge, now, their turn to laugh would come before long. I wondered whether I ought to drop a few more of them or not, but ammunition was precious—it was lifeblood to me, and I did not want to spend it uselessly. Finally, I decided that I would take the choice cuts of the dead musk-ox, and leave the remnants to draw off the dogs.

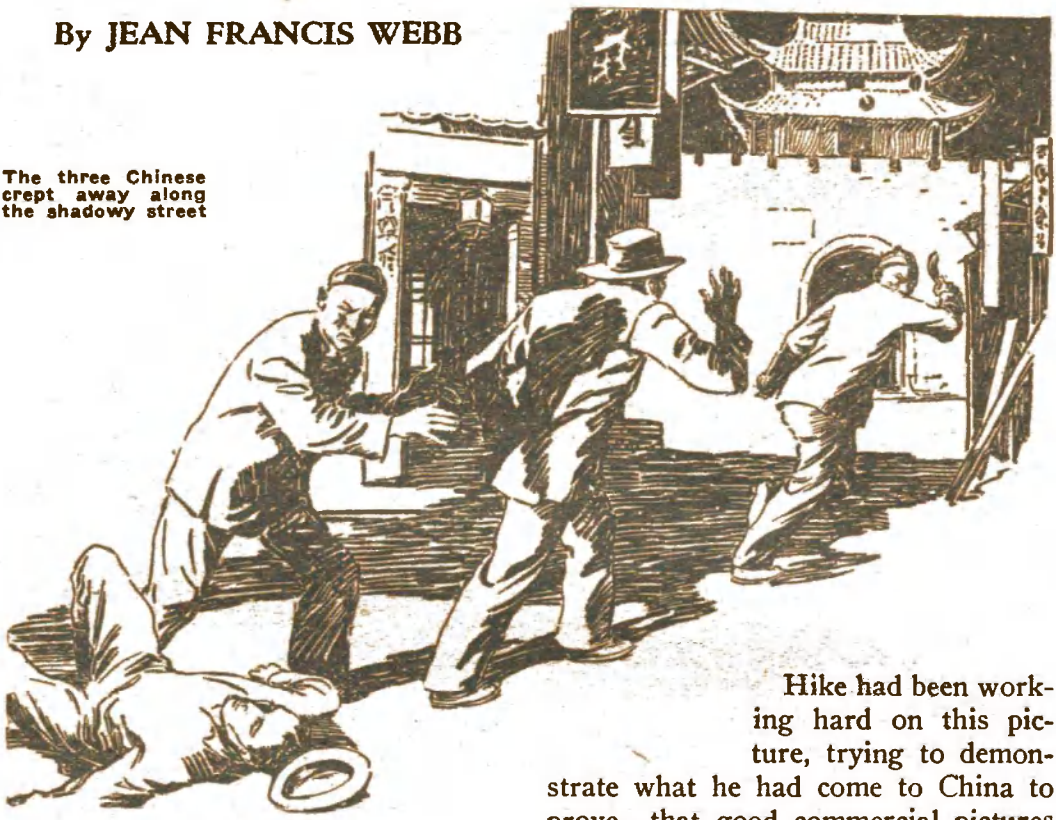
But when I was about to go on with my butchering, I saw something that stopped me short. It was a gleam of light over the rim of the hill, and the gleam grew upward into a tall spear, and beside the spear stood a big man well hooded and wrapped in furs. And off to his right and left, in exactly the same manner, grew up two more men. And as I turned, I saw others. A dozen of them, one as like the other as peas from the same pod, stood motionless in a great circle around me, posted on the higher ground.

They looked like business. They looked like bad business. Murder lay down and made himself as small as possible at my feet. And I had to cheer myself up by remembering, grimly, that I was carrying a repeating rifle!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Dragon's Shadow

By JEAN FRANCIS WEBB



The three Chinese crept away along the shadowy street

THAT flicker of movement in the darkness up ahead caught Hike Farrell's eye by sheerest accident.

He checked his stride, instinct warning him even before conscious thought could command his long legs. The lot ought to be empty at this time of night. He was the last man to leave.

The company had been dismissed a week ago. The finishing touches had been put on *China Doll* in the crude lab shed that Hollywood would have called the cutting room.

Now the first print of the film lay coiled in its tin container under Hike's arm, ready to be flown south at sun-up for inspection by the national censors at Shanghai.

Hike had been working hard on this picture, trying to demonstrate what he had come to China to prove—that good commercial pictures could be worked up from the rich material of Chinese national life despite the lack of technical facilities. Now that his first production was in the can, he was pretty tired.

But not groggy enough to have imagined that flash of deeper darkness, moving near the gates in the crude board fence which marked off his small, rented lot.

Hike ducked sideward toward the row of false fronts he had used for the street set in *China Doll.*

Maybe whoever it was up ahead hadn't seen him coming. He wanted to get close enough to find out what was going on up there. Back of the pagoda fronts, the wilderness of unfinished braces propping up the set was like a

very complicated, wooden spider's web.

Bent low to avoid a sudden collision with any of those slanting struts in the darkness, Hike sped forward. He could get within a few yards of the locked gates under cover of this row of fronts —unseen, he hoped.

His heart picked up a beat as he worked swiftly along the line, closer to the fence ahead. Only one more set of props to duck under now, and he would round the corner of the last make-believe pagoda. Whoever it was who had sneaked onto the lot, he didn't belong here. With the spool of film clamped snugly against his ribs, Hike flexed his big, hard-knuckled hands, as if in preparation.

Too late, he heard or perhaps merely sensed the soft *swish* behind him.

Before he could twist around in the cramped space—before his eye could catch the forward leap of another black shadow, a knife whizzed past his ear and thudded into the soft wood of a nearby prop.

While the ivory hilt of the ugly weapon still trembled from its flight, while Hike was still spinning around, a trio of shadowy figures pounced upon him.

The flat, circular can dropped earthward as Hike began swinging his fists.

The can landed on its edge, rolled wobbling toward the angle formed by one two-by-four prop with the bare earth, and came to a dead stop against the wood. Hike's fists went on flailing without much aim—just jabbing out with undiscriminating fury.

He had worked too hard for this foothold in China—even this modest beginning had promised too much—for him not to fight for it now. He didn't know what any of this was about but—

His right, hammering upward, landed glancingly on the jaw of the nearest of his assailants. The man, a slant-eyed Oriental, stumbled backward jabbering a curse and spitting a drool of blood.

But the others were closing in swiftly from both sides. It was impossible to face both ways at once. Hike picked the bigger, more dangerous-looking thug charging forward from his right. His arms drove piston-fast as he spun. But the yellow man was wary as well as swift. He ducked the flashing uppercuts, twisting with lightning speed so that each missed its target by the scant fraction of an inch.

Disastrous fractions of an inch for Farrell. Because before he could hit again, the man behind him had closed in. His lithe frame, leaving the ground in a bounding leap, landed catlike on Hike's muscular back.

The Oriental clung, spread-eagled like a bat on a barn door, clawed for Hike's arms.

The man's sudden, pressing weight made Hike stagger. But he braced his feet before the extra burden could throw him. He jerked his arms free and planted a broken, ineffectual jab on the Chinaman's shoulder as he lashed out to free himself.

NOW the first man, still spitting blood and teeth, almost like grape pips, was closing in again. The silence of the enclosure echoed to the sound of blows and guttural grunts as the struggle went on. Three against one.

But Hike had freed himself of the man astride him, and, in the cramped space offered between the false fronts, the thugs' attack was hampered. Hike's fists, raw and bloody where smashing bone had laid the flesh open, were pummeling out with mechanical efficiency.

Then it happened. Darting sideward, with a movement that carried his eyes and face clear of gouging fingernails

and put his left arm into position for a punishing blow, Hike's shins came into sudden contact with the slanting prop against which his can of film had stopped rolling.

He was moving too fast, and the wooden bar tripped him up like a foot stuck out in a field-runner's path.

Before his falling body could recover balance, he had fallen, and the three thugs had jumped on top of him.

Something hit across his skull with a crash that set a shower of red dots skyrocketing in a black wilderness. Then everything—the night, the deserted lot, the jiggling mass of grinning yellow faces above him—did a soft dissolve into nothingness. Black-out . . .

HE groaned and stirred. His eyelids, dragging open, seemed as heavy as tombstones. There was a throbbing torrent of pain circling inside his head.

He lay almost where he had fallen. The crude backs of the skeleton pagodas above him, fantastically, nightmarishly ornate. A lopsided moon sat on the curved tip of one of them, and seemed to teeter sickishly down toward him.

Gradually, while the jiggling orb of pale light settled in the sky, he remembered things. Three Chinamen had jumped him. Why? And what had they been after?

Money? The wallet in his breast pocket was untouched. A wrecking crew from a rival outfit in the Chinese movie industry? But here was the set, uninjured. Over yonder, the locked door to his office shanty stood unopened, clearly visible where the moonlight struck it slantingly—in the careless stroke of a silvery, ghostlike hand.

Hike lifted uncertain fingers to his throbbing head. Revenge, perhaps? Three weeks ago, he had been forced to discharge a native cameraman. Hollywood-trained but a born trouble-maker. Ping Yeh had all but disrupted the *China Doll* company with his violent anti-Japanese harangues. Yeh had deserved dismissal. But maybe he didn't think so.

There had been black hatred in his black eyes when he had signed for his last pay-check. He had been echoing the incendiary phrases of Chang Loo, the rebel war agitator of the northern provinces even as he walked off the lot, as stiff and pompous as a mechanical doll.

To get even, Yeh might have hired those three thugs to beat up Hike the first chance they got.

But there was still something missing—a piece of the outrageous puzzle that eluded the questing fingers of his bewilderment.

A frown cut his forehead.

Remembering recent newspaper accounts of the government's strict watch over Chang Loo and of the measures being taken to prevent his organization of a *coup d'etat* that would surely mean a disastrous war in the north, Hike found it hard to believe that Ping Yeh would be thinking of shabby, personal grievances at such a time.

A new thought pounced into Hike's mind. He sat up so swiftly that his head began pounding like the gunfire that Chang Loo would probably enjoy setting loose along China's northern frontier.

Swim as his senses might, Hike's eyes were still good.

That can of film—the first print of *China Doll* due in Shanghai tomorrow for censorship—was gone. The place where it had stopped rolling, against the base of the wooden prop, was empty.

HIKE hit the street outside the lot at a staggering run, lurched to the curb where Emmeline, his ancient touring car, was waiting in the darkness.

In his fist, as he slammed open the door, was clutched a stunted club of black wood. It was the first weapon that had come to his groping hand as he clawed along the meager prop shelf in his office shack. He dropped it onto the car seat, slid under the wheel.

Bounding into action like a malformed mountain goat, Emmeline careened down the twisting, narrow thoroughfare. The deep, secretive darkness of midnight blotted out the turns and corners. But Hike knew where he was going; and he was dragging no anchor.

So it had been the film they were after.

This was more than merely personal revenge. Ping Yeh would know that another print could be made from the negative of *China Doll* at little cost. He was settling no old scores, causing his onetime employer no real trouble, by stealing one print.

So it had to be something about the print itself that Chang Loo's henchman wanted if, as Farrell felt increasingly sure, Yeh really was mixed up in this.

The American jerked the wheel, took a new corner on two screaming tires.

Chang Loo had been operating through the southern section of the Khinghan district, when the government's officials had clamped down on him, cutting him off from communication with the population he had been haranguing.

He was, most likely, still at Khinghan. If Yeh was no longer at his hotel . . .

Ping Yeh had signed out a scant half hour before, bag and baggage, Hike was told by a bowing clerk.

Suspicion had become a certainty as Hike raced down the hotel steps, vaulted Emmeline's dented door. This time he headed for the railroad station. He made good time—a scant ten minutes from hotel desk to ticket window.

"Anything going north out of here tonight, Charlie?" He tossed the words through the grating in one long breath.

The owl-faced seller inside the cage blinked solemnly. "Manchuria Limited for Khinghan Mountains on track now. Nothing otherwise."

The slow clanging of a bell and the puff of steam getting up power blasted together across the open platform as Hike sprinted for the already moving train. He made a wild leap for the last car; caught on with only one hand, because the other was clutching that club from the property shelf.

His muscles knotted with the effort that pulled him above the singing rails.

THE Limited was hurtling across flat wet miles of rice fields. The inky darkness of the hours before sunrise had clamped down on the narrow rails. Only occasional dim lights inside the compartments themselves aided Hike's hasty examination of each as he passed swiftly through the cars.

Most of the compartments were dark. Hike passed on restlessly.

Behind a few of the slatted doors, lamps gleamed dimly, throwing strips of shadow against the dingy wall of the corridor.

But inside were no familiar faces. Never Mr. Ping Yeh, or any of the trio from the production lot. Maybe this was a wild goose chase.

Four cars. Five. He was getting close to the head of the train now. Still no results. Ahead, the slats of the next to last compartment showed yellow. Thin tendrils of smoke curled across the

bars of light. There was a low murmur of voices.

His shoulders flat to the corridor wall, Hike eased up to the shuttered partition. He leaned forward slowly. Then, soundlessly, he stiffened.

Facing each other on the compartment's narrow seats, four men squatted in relaxed positions. Their high-cheeked, slant-eyed faces were highlighted by the swaying overhead lamp. It wasn't a pretty sight.

And Yeh's—like an ugly yellow blossom, swaying gently, was one of them. Between his knees, held firmly, was the can that held the missing print of *China Doll.*

Hike's right arm was already elevating the club he had fetched from among his studio properties, when he felt that something was wrong. His eyes flashed down to the wooden weapon. He swore. He swore loudly and fluently and with a good deal of honest feeling.

"Of all the rotten luck! I might have known from the weight of it—"

He got no further. Into his side jammed something round and hard, stayed there. A clipped voice, without a trace of Asiatic sibilance, spoke in his ear.

"Inside, Comrade—quietly, please."

The door ahead of him moved inward as Hike's body shoved forward. The four Chinamen within leaped to their feet, noiselessly.

Leaped to their feet like lazy but very swift cats, and circled him in a solid wall of bone and flesh. He didn't stir.

Hike stood staring into Ping Yeh's hate-brightened eyes. But part of his mind was on that European weapon prodding his spine. He remembered reading somewhere that Chang Loo's chief aide was an exiled Russian, an adventurer named Vasaleff.

The silence of the little compartment seemed to crackle like a dynamo. Then Hike heard the light louvre door thud shut behind him.

Yeh showed his teeth in a slow grin. "Illustrious Mr. Farrell, eh? American who spit upon this humble servant's allegiance to the great Chang Loo!" The mad gleam of fanatacism blazed in his face. "You make pictures of China, illustrious Mr. Farrell. Great Loo makes her history! He makes death for Japanese! He avenges insult of greedy invasions!"

"Why did you steal that picture, Yeh?"

"Let us say borrow, Mr. Farrell. Traitors who rule my country will not act. They hold sword at Chang Loo's throat, instead of at invader's heart. He is hemmed in, helpless to communicate with widespread army that will rise at his call."

Hike Farrell's forehead ridged in a deep and dissatisfied frown.

"You're still ahead of me. A movie won't help him much."

"I tell you," Yeh purred, "only because you will not leave this compartment alive. Unworthy picture is not for Glorious Highness. It is for people of Khinghan. Of all Manchuria." His cold laughter made the flesh at the back of Hike's neck crawl. "For Ping Yeh it is simple. He knows motion picture making. He works beside illustrious American long enough to place ally in great street scene of *China Doll.* Ally stands in shadow of dragon banner, foreground of crowded shot."

"Sure. I remember the banner. But what—?"

"Ally makes sign of Chang Loo's illustrious dragon house. People of north see this scene, understand. While government cuts off communication from glorious Loo, word spreads

despite them. War of vengeance begins." Yeh's cruel, black eyes mocked him.

"A war you never live to see, Mr. Farrell. Censors at Shanghai possibly spot message, confiscate film. Therefore it must be shown all over province before stopped. This only done with American dead."

He made a sign that was meant for Vasaleff, at Hike's back. That gun nosing the American's spine had not let up for a second.

"Not too fast, Comrade Yeh." The Russian was chuckling coldly. "A shot brings the whole train about our ears, no? Some quieter way, perhaps?"

IT was then that the desperate plan sprang into Hike's racing brain. His one way out. His one slim chance.

He hoisted the club still clutched in his fist, brandishing it clumsily. At once the four Chinese were upon him. The muzzle from behind jabbed deep, held steady.

"Not so rough, Comrade!"

Flaying fists landed glancing blows on Hike's head and shoulders. He swayed but did not fall. When one of the thugs snatched for that studio weapon, he let go with a show of reluctance.

Vasaleff's voice lifted again. "See how simple? Make him unconscious with the club. Then we drop him between the cars, to the rails. A man with no head. An accident."

They grabbed him tightly then as if to make sure that he made no more unexpected moves. His arms were dragged behind him and held there tightly. One yellow hand clutched at his throat, very cleverly, thumb pressed adroitly against his Adam's apple. Another saffron paw grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked it achingly taut.

Yeh cackled viciously, grabbed for the club, brought it down with a murderous swipe. The wood splintered noisily across Hike's skull, the blow's force snapping the weapon in two.

As Hike slumped, moaning, to the floor, the cold metallic click of railends under the Limited's flying wheels seemed to grow louder in his ears.

Yeh's men lost no time. Every wasted moment spelled danger, with the American's body in their hands. One of the thugs grabbed Hike's feet. Another picked up his slack shoulders. Vasaleff, gun trailing but ready at his hip, moved along beside them as a guard. Yeh and the third thug pattered behind him. Out of the compartment the procession edged. Only the width of one section away, the swaying open platforms between two speeding cars lay dark and windswept.

"Work fast!" the Russian breathed. "Between the platforms with him. Before somebody comes!"

Yeh's thugs moved to obey. Vasaleff looked back across his shoulder, checking the empty corridor behind. His body blocked Yeh's vision. The sudden howl that blasted along the passageway came from the first thug.

The man at Hike's feet spun forward as heels, kicking upward without warning, landed full against the base of his spine. And Vasaleff, twisting too late, felt the automatic swish free of his slack fingers before they could tighten on it.

As Hike lurched upward, swaying with the momentum of the speeding train, the captured gun was belching lead in a hot, bright stream. The Russian gagged, slammed back against the wall of the narrow passageway as stiff as a bayonet. There was a neat black hole between his startled, staring eyes. As he began to sag, the muzzle of the

gun swerved slightly in Hike's fist. The thug from whose grasp Hike had freed his shoulders with that sudden wrench, howled in terror. Before he could realize what was coming, lead had swarmed against his left hip. He collapsed on the floor in a bellowing huddle.

Hike spun. Out on the open platform, the first thug had scrambled erect. But one glance into the smoke-filled passageway was all he wanted. Shrieking with fear, he dove for the railing and across it. The swaying platform, hurtling along between flat, swampy rice fields, was empty. Staggering for balance, Hike swung around again. But the brief battle had ended.

Ping Yeh, his features distorted in terror, was reaching for the train's low ceiling with trembling yellow hands. Behind him, the last of his men crouched, howling surrender. And there were still two bullets left in the gun.

Babbling voices filled the passageway as Hike stepped forward over Vasaleff's body. Passengers from all along the aisle were thrusting toward the melée near the front platform.

"What's going on?"

"What's happening here?"

Hike grinned tightly.

"Nothing much. I think I was supposed to do a death scene. But I made a slight change in the script."

Blubbering, Yeh still stared at Farrell with bulging eyes. "But I hit him myself! I break club across cursed skull! He cannot be alive!"

Hike pointed to the splintered end of the wooden bar that Yeh still clutched in shaking fingers. "I can guess about how you feel. I'd grabbed the first weapon I could find at the studio, you see. It wasn't until I got here I realized it was worse than useless." He laughed. "I thought you knew your movies, Yeh. That made it tough, because my one chance was to make you slug me with my weapon instead of your own. And mine was only a breakaway."

"A—a what?" The voice came from the crowd.

"A breakaway. One of those phoney clubs deliberately weakened to give way with one tap across the comic's head. It isn't any more harmful than a fly-swatter. Maybe I ought to use one in the scene to replace that dragon banner, Yeh, before *China Doll* goes to Shanghai. Those breakaways are good!"


MEN of DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
MISSOURI ESKIMO!
HIS IS THE MOST DRAMATIC STORY EVER TO COME OUT OF THE NORTH— 2000 MILES, ACROSS THE CONTINENT AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD— ALONE!
IN 1935, IRWIN, BORN IN SARCOXIE, MISSOURI, SIGNED TO ACCOMPANY THE GREAT REINDEER HERD BEING DRIVEN FROM SIBERIA TO THE EASTERN ARCTIC.
24 YEAR OLD
Dave Irwin
THE SLOW MOVEMENT OF THE HERD PROVED MONOTONOUS. HE DECIDED TO MUSH ACROSS ALONE—ACROSS THE TREACHEROUS BARREN LANDS, AN UNHEARD OF FEAT. FOR SIX MONTHS HE WAS WITHOUT SIGHT OF A HUMAN. A LONE TREK NEVER DUPLICATED BY WHITE MAN OR ESKIMO!
FACING STARVATION HE KILLED HIS DOGS. "IT WAS ME OR THE PUPS.... ONE BY ONE I HAD TO KILL THEM— WITH MY HANDS!" ON AND ON HE WENT.... THROUGH ICY MUSH.... HIS CLOTHES FROZE TO HIS BODY— ONE HAND USELESS, POISONED BY FROSTBITE!
HE CAUGHT A SEAL.... TORE THE FLESH FROM THE CARCASS WITH HIS HANDS AND FELL BACK POISONED BY THE FOOD! HE FOUND AN ESKIMO WOMAN, FROZEN WITH HER BABE IN HER ARMS. MUTE TESTIMONY THAT THE BROWN MEN HAD FLED BEFORE THE BLEAK WINTER!
FINALLY HE REACHED THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE CONTINENT.... WAS FOUND BY HUNTERS LYING HALF MAD IN AN IGLOO. A 24 YEAR OLD LAD HAD CONQUERED THE BARRENS!
RECENTLY, IRWIN PUT ON A EXHIBITION IN NEW YORK. HE IS NOW PLANNING A TREK TO THE NORTH POLE BY DOG TEAM!..... AND AGAIN HE WILL GO ALONE!

Red Snow at Darjeeling

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

THE great commercial empire which Alexander Blenn had ruthlessly builded in India was by no means tottering; but it was, to the mind of Alexander Blenn, in danger. Half the northern gateways to India, as he put it, were off their hinges. From the headquarters of the new Chinese Communist Armies, airplanes could cross Tibet in less than two hours; every Russian tea planter in Shimalghar—that independent state in the Himalayas north of Darjeeling, one of the "gateways to India"—was, in Blenn's opinion, an officer in the Soviet Army; and the German perfume consortium that had just sent men to Shimalghar to hunt the musk deer was likewise only a blind for a Nazi mission of diplomats and Air Force experts. In other words, somebody beside England was about to establish an air base in Shimalghar—the Nawab's agreement with England to the contrary—and from Shimalghar it was only two hours by bombing plane to Calcutta.

There remained but one thing for Alexander Blenn to do, in order to save India for the British, and particularly for himself: establish his own air base in Shimalghar, stocking it with his own planes. Fortunately, he already had a concession from the Nawab permitting him to do this; but unfortunately, the concession was due to expire within a week and the Nawab was hedging. But Blenn had come into possession of a negative which portrayed the Nawab in conference with foreign diplomats, and which the Nawab was most anxious should not fall into the hands of the British government. If Blenn could send a man to Darjeeling to arrange a trade of negative for concession, all would be well with Blenn and Britain.

That was why Blenn had called young Paul Woodring, British-American, to Calcutta.

"You talk, Mr. Blenn," said Woodring, "as though it will be a simple matter to get the extension of the concession. Will it?"

Alexander Blenn smiled a smug, defiant smile. "Yes," he said. "Very simple. And very dangerous."

But Woodring agreed to take the job.

BEFORE Woodring can even get out of Calcutta, he learns something of how dangerous the job is going to be. Hubertson, Blenn's chief engineer, and Basil Stiller, his general manager—Stiller is also engaged to pretty Ruth Ingram, Blenn's niece

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and heiress—are opposed to the plan. Stiller and his men even go so far as to waylay Woodring in a dark street and take from him the envelope that, supposedly but not actually, contains the negative and a copy of the old concession. Then Blenn gets a mysterious telegram, with something in it about "vengeance" and "Jericho," gets very frightened, and soon thereafter vanishes! He is next heard from in Santahar, which is on the route to Darjeeling.

And meanwhile Basil Stiller has been murdered and his apartment ransacked by someone hunting for the envelope he took from Woodring!

TO Inspector Leonidas M. Prike, C. I. D., the smallest matter is worthy of attention. He even listens to the plaint of the German botanist Feurmann, who, about to embark for Darjeeling, complains that his camera has been stolen and will be used against him in some mysterious way by the Nazis. When Deputy Inspector Robbins brings him word of the disappearance of Blenn, it is Prike who uncovers the murder, if not the murderer, of Basil Stiller.

Prike, having unearthed all the information he can in Calcutta, decides also to take the Darjeeling Mail. On the train he encounters once again Dr. Feurmann, and by a shrewd bit of questioning uncovers the fact that the learned doctor is neither a botanist nor an anti-Nazi.

WOODRING is, of course, on the same train. He has had a few further difficulties in Calcutta before entraining—among them the mysterious and supposedly intoxicated Henry Emmet-Tansley, who seems to have an affinity for him; to say nothing of Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram, the Tamil boy who insists upon serving as his bearer on the trip. Once on the train, and he finds further difficulty in the alluring but sinister person of Miss Leda Carmaine, who insists upon sharing the compartment with him.

Fortunately for Woodring's life, perhaps, Ruth Ingram has also decided to go to Darjeeling, and he escapes to her compartment. This does not stop Henry Emmet-Tansley from following him, on the plea that he has just caught Dr. Adolf Feurmann spying upon Woodring.

The trip is climaxed, when Woodring at last gets a compartment of his own, by the visit of one Count Vaznilko. He offers Woodring a hundred thousand rupees for the picture, and threatens bloodshed when Woodring refuses.

WOODRING has wisely sent the negative and the papers on to Darjeeling, addressed to John Mapleleaf, the pseudonym Blenn has told him to use in order to get in touch with the Nawab's representative, at the Himalayan Grand Hotel. But when Woodring arrives there to register (having also engaged a room under his own name at a boarding house) he finds that someone else has already registered as John Mapleleaf!

He manages nonetheless to extract the documents from the hotel clerk, when they arrive by the next mail. He hurriedly registers as R. Ingram. Then he goes to the room of the man who has signed himself as Mapleleaf, to pay him a call.

He finds there Dr. Adolf Feurmann—dead from a bullet wound in the abdomen!

CHAPTER XV

EYEWITNESS

INSPECTOR PRIKE and Deputy Inspector Robbins were walking briskly along the third floor corridor of the Mount Everest Hotel, when a door burst open in front of them. Stanley Hubertson came hurtling into the astonished embrace of the deputy inspector.

The white-haired engineer raised his hand quickly to keep his eyeglasses from falling off, mumbled a brief apology, and tried to brush past the two detectives.

"What's the hurry, Hubertson?" asked Prike, grasping his arm. "We were just coming to call."

Hubertson's well-lined face was of a ghastly pallor. Great drops of perspiration oozed from his high, white forehead, and his small, button-hole mouth quivered as though he were trying to stop his teeth from chattering.

"I—I didn't recognize you, Inspector," he stammered. "I'm so terribly upset! I was rushing off to get help! I'm afraid I've been witness to a tragedy. It's lucky you've come along, because—"

"What happened?"

"A man's been shot, Inspector. I—"

"Where?" Prike's voice was sharp.

"I—I can't tell you exactly, Inspector. I was on my way to summon the room clerk. I saw it from my window."

"Show me!" Prike ordered. He pushed the excited Hubertson back toward the room he had just left so precipitously.

Hubertson, his shoulders more stooped than ever, led the way to the window.

"You see," he explained, "this window is in the arm of an 'L' so that I can see all the rooms along that side of the hotel. I happened to be looking out, and saw a man standing in that window there—" He pointed a trembling finger— "the far one, just before the angle in the wall. The window was open. A few seconds later the man turned suddenly, as though startled by someone coming into the room behind him. At the same instant I heard a report. I'm certain it was the report of a pistol, although it was not very loud. It was muffled, in fact, as if something had been wrapped about the pistol to deaden the explosion. The man gave a little cry, and ran forward, away from the window. He seemed to stagger a little, as he disappeared from my line of vision. . . ."

"To the right or left?" Prike demanded, looking out the window.

"To *my* right," said Hubertson. "Then, a moment later, a woman came to the window, closed it, and pulled down the shade. That's all I saw, Inspector."

"And this just happened?"

"Well, no, Inspector. It was perhaps five minutes ago."

"Five minutes? And you waited all this time to—"

"But I was stark naked, Inspector!" Hubertson apologized. "I'd been taking my bath. I dressed as quickly as I could. After all, one can't go running through the hallway with nothing on. . . ."

Inspector Prike's teeth clicked. He strode from the room.

"You come along," said Robbins to Hubertson.

PRIKE paced down the corridor with precise, military stride. When he came to a jog in the hall, he stopped.

"This must be the room," he said to Hubertson. His knuckles beat a brisk tattoo on the door. When he got no answer, he took a silk handkerchief from his pocket, tried to turn the knob. The door was locked.

"Robbins, run down to the office and get a duplicate key to 329," Prike said. "And bring the desk clerk or someone from the management who can tell us about the occupant of this room. Hurry, Robbins."

When the deputy inspector had gone, Prike turned to Hubertson. The bespectacled black eyes were staring at the door, as though they dreaded to behold what lay behind it.

"Did you recognize this man at the window?" Prike demanded suddenly.

Hubertson jumped as though he had been immodestly prodded from the rear.

"Well, no," he said. "Hardly, without my glasses."

"Where were your glasses?"

"I broke them just after I came to the hotel," Hubertson said. "They slipped off as I was bending over to unpack my bags."

"They seem to have slipped back in perfect repair," said Prike coldly.

"I sent out to have them repaired," said Hubertson. "Luckily the Himalayan Optometrists, Ltd., had lenses to fit my prescription. I've been sitting in my room waiting for them, all afternoon. The *chaprassi* came with them only two or three minutes before you came, Inspector."

"Then how," Prike demanded, "could you tell it was a man in the window—if you didn't have your glasses?"

"I'm far-sighted, Inspector," Hubertson explained. "At that distance, my vision is fairly good. Not perfect, of course; outlines are blurred, so that I couldn't make out features; however, I could swear it was a man. He seemed to have his coat off."

"And the woman?" Prike was still a trifle incredulous.

"She was wearing a purple dress," Hubertson said. "A vivid purple. There was no mistaking that."

"But you didn't actually see the woman fire a shot: You didn't see the flash of the gun?"

"No, Inspector. I merely heard the shot —a muffled report—and saw the man walk away unsteadily, as though he were badly hurt."

Deputy Inspector Robbins came bustling down the hall with the reception clerk in tow. Prike took a bunch of keys from the clerk, opened the door to 329. Lying on the floor, just inside the threshold, was another key with a hotel tag attached.

"Look at that, Robbins," Prike said. "Door evidently locked from the inside. Keep these men outside for a moment, Robbins."

Both hands in his coat pockets, Inspector Prike advanced rapidly into the half-darkened room. His practiced glance was swinging rhythmically from side to side, doing double duty, taking inventory and seeking a possible ambush. He went directly to the far window, grasped the bottom of the shade through his handkerchief, raised it. He began to walk toward the sleeping alcove, stopped in his tracks. For a long moment he stared at the gruesome object on the bed, but his face remained as expressionless as carved stone. At length his head gestured curtly to his subordinate.

"Bring them here, Robbins," he said. "And don't let them touch anything."

As Robbins, Hubertson and the clerk approached, Prike at last took his eyes from the corpse to study the reactions of the three men.

The clerk made a strangled, gurgling sound in his throat. "My God! It's him!" he exclaimed. "It's Mr. Mapleleaf! And he's dead!"

"Mapleleaf?" Stanley Hubertson took three timid steps forward, peered over the foot of the bed, then shrank back. "How horrible!" he said, turning his head away.

DEPUTY Inspector Robbins was beaming with pleased professional interest. "Mapleleaf, my left tibia!" he exclaimed. "That's Doc Feurmann, the German plant-catcher!"

"He registered as John Mapleleaf, sir," said the clerk.

"Under what name did *you* know him, Hubertson?" Prike was concentrating on the engineer.

"I never saw the poor fellow before."

"Then why did you give such a start when you heard the name Mapleleaf?" Prike insisted.

"Well, I—the name seemed familiar," said Hubertson. "I once knew a man named Mapleleaf. But this isn't he."

"But it *is*, sir," protested the clerk.

"Step over here, please, Hubertson," said Prike, moving toward the window. "Show me where the dead man was standing when you saw him."

"Right here," Hubertson illustrated. "He turned, and staggered off in this direction."

"Then how would you explain, Hubertson," Prike demanded, "that there is no trace of blood between the window and the bed?"

Hubertson's thin hands made a bewildered gesture. "I shouldn't attempt to explain, Inspector," he said. "I'm not a physician. But I have heard that there is sometimes a few seconds' interval before a wound begins to bleed. Isn't it possible for the poor chap to have collapsed on the bed before the blood came?"

"It is possible," Prike admitted. "Now, where was this woman in purple when the shot was fired?"

"I didn't see the woman in purple, Inspector, until several seconds after I heard the pistol shot. Therefore she must have been out of my line of vision—perhaps slightly to the rear of where you are standing, Inspector."

Prike walked a few steps to the rear until he felt something soft under one heel. He turned, stooped, and examined a blanket which had been dropped carelessly to the floor. He laid back the loose folds, straightened up suddenly.

"Apparently your story holds water, Hubertson," he said. "This blanket was probably used to muffle the sound of the shot. There are powder burns. . . . Robbins, notify the Darjeeling police commissioner. Tell him to bring the civil surgeon. And hurry back, Robbins."

When Robbins left, Inspector Prike took another look at the corpse on the bed. He studied its position, noted that one arm dangled off the side of the mattress, that one leg was drawn up slightly. Yes, it was possible that Feurmann had collapsed on the bed before life had gushed from his bullet wound. . . .

Prike next turned his attention to the suitcase, open on the floor. Finding nothing of interest in Feurmann's personal belongings, he moved to the writing table. The muscles along his hard, aggressive jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, as he saw a sheet of paper lying on the blotter. The paper bore the letterhead of the hotel and a paragraph of peculiarly cramped handwriting. Without touching the paper with his fingers, Prike leaned closer to read:

MR. JOHN MAPLELEAF
Sir:

I am commanded by His Highness the Nawab to enter into negotiations with you at once. I shall come to your room at 4:30 o'clock this afternoon. Please leave your door unlocked.

. . . Q., DIWAN

Prike straightened up, beckoned to the reception clerk.

"Did you send any messages to Dr. Feurmann's room—to Mr. Mapleleaf's room, if you'd rather—since his arrival today?" the inspector asked.

"No, sir," said the clerk.

"Have a look at this chit," Prike insisted. "Are you sure this wasn't sent up through your desk?"

The clerk looked. "Quite sure, sir," he said. "That couldn't have been it, sir."

"Then there was a chit sent up?" The crisp intonation of Prike's question warned that no negative answer was expected.

"Well, not a chit exactly, sir," the clerk apologized. "It was a letter, rather. A bulky envelope that came in with the *dak* from Calcutta. Mr. Ingram took it up to Mr. Mapleleaf."

"*Mister* Ingram?" Prike echoed.

"Yes, sir, Mr. R. Ingram. The gentleman in 342 at the end of the hallway, sir."

The puzzled flicker in Prike's eyes gave way instantly to a faint gleam of amused comprehension. He even smiled when Robbins came in.

"The deputy commissioner of police is on his way over," said Robbins.

Prike nodded curtly to the clerk. "That's all," he said. "You may go, too, Hubertson. Don't touch the door as you go out." He was lost in thought for a moment before he resumed: "Robbins, here's another specimen for our collection of handwriting samples. Let the Darjeeling police have it for latent prints, of course, but make certain that we get a photostatic copy."

"Yes, sir. Anything else, Inspector?"

"Plenty," said Prike. "I want you to wait here for the deputy commissioner. Ask him for men to help run down certain details I'm going to tell you about." He walked slowly to the door, took an electric flash lamp from his pocket, snapped it on, brought the gleaming lens close to the outside keyhole. "According to the note on the writing table, Dr. Feurmann was to leave his door unlocked at four-thirty. When we arrived, it was locked. Since Feurmann was dead, it must have been locked from the outside, yet the hotel key was inside the room. I find small particles of wax clinging to the outside keyhole, Robbins, so I'm assuming that someone took an impression to have a duplicate key made. Have the Deputy Commissioner give you enough men to canvass every locksmith in Darjeeling—until we find the one who made the key. That clear, Robbins?"

"Quite clear, Inspector."

"Good. Next I want you to go to Himalayan Optometrists, Ltd. I believe they're on Auckland Road. Get me a copy of the prescription for the glasses Hubertson claims he had repaired. Also get me the exact time, if possible, that the spectacles were delivered to Hubertson at this hotel. On the way, of course, you might keep an eye peeled for a lady in purple—although she's probably changed her gown by this time."

"Very well, Inspector. And where will I find you?"

"I," said Inspector Prike, "will very like-

ly be in Room 342, visiting a gentleman who, for the moment, calls himself 'Mr. R. Ingram.'"

CHAPTER XVI

WOMAN IN PURPLE

WHEN Paul Woodring had recovered from the numbing shock of finding Dr. Adolph Feurmann's corpse in a welter of blood, he experienced a moment of panic. His first impulse was to get help, to summon the police, to let the clean light of day stream in upon the lugubrious half-darkness of the charnel house that was Room 329. He strode to the window to raise the shade, stopped himself before his hand had touched the bottom cross-bar.

His panic vanished as suddenly as it had come upon him. The instinct of self-preservation, the instinct of a trapped animal, brought back a sense of order to his disorganized mental processes. He was trapped, yes—trapped in a room with a dead man. But he couldn't be found there. Therefore he couldn't summon the police. It wasn't only the voice of Alexander Blenn saying, "Don't go to the police for any reason. . . ." It was the common-sense realization that calling the police would mean interminable questioning, suspicion, probably detention. And he couldn't afford to be detained now. He had to remain free to make contact with the Nawab's agent before the old concession expired.

The Nawab's agent! Woodring hadn't the faintest idea, now, how he would reach the Nawab's agent. Of course the interloping John Mapleleaf had been neatly, if violently, removed from the scene. Yet that had only complicated matters. There was still the problem of reëstablishing the personality for the Nawab's man to call upon. It should not be beyond human ingenuity, particularly as the Nawab's representative would probably make every effort to find the man who had the incriminating photograph. In fact—and the thought was distinctly uncomfortable—it was not impossible that the Nawab's representative had already made his contact. Woodring suppressed a shudder as he took a last look at the corpse of Adolf Feurmann. Then he made tracks toward the door.

Two steps from the threshold he paused to listen. He heard no sounds in the hall outside. Then he decided that he would have a better chance for freedom of action if he not only made a quick getaway, but also delayed the finding of Feurmann's body as long as possible. He whisked the hotel key from the inside lock, dropped it to the floor. Then he opened the door, stepped out quickly, drew it closed. With his duplicate key he locked the door from the outside.

When he turned he found himself face to face with Leda Carmaine.

Leda Carmaine was standing in an attitude of carefully posed nonchalance. Her left knee was slightly bent, so that the toe of one satin slipper barely touched the carpet. The classic effect of her gown of vivid, wine-purple silk was somehow distorted by skillful cutting to give a startling, if erroneous, impression of nudity. If the ultimate effect was Grecian, it was rather that of a generously-modeled Aphrodite. And the effect of the small beret which seemed to be composed of woven Parma violets fitted at a rakish angle on her blue-black hair, was not at all Grecian. Neither was the faint, disturbing fragrance which reached Woodring like an exciting fragment of music half heard in the night.

"Evening, Mr. Woodring," she said, looking at him through her long dark lashes. "You'd better hurry."

"Hurry?" Woodring tried to grin, but the muscles of his face seemed frozen. "Why hurry?"

"Because I just saw Inspector Prike walking down the hall with his Man Friday," said Leda Carmaine.

"And is that news supposed to make me break out in violent perspiration?" bantered Woodring.

"I should think it would," said Leda.

"Why?"

"You were a little slow closing that door," said Leda. "I could see inside."

"Yes? See anything interesting?"

"You know very well what I saw," said Leda.

WOODRING didn't; he wished very much that he did know what she had seen—and how much. But he seemed content to let the matter drop. He managed a laugh, as he slipped the duplicate key into his pocket. Then he took Leda's arm.

"Shall we," he asked lightly, "indulge in the barbarous American custom of drinking cocktails before dinner?"

"Sorry," was the reply. "But I have a previous engagement."

Under Woodring's gentle but insistent guidance she was walking down the hall.

"With Count Vaznilko?" Woodring asked.

Leda Carmaine stopped walking. Her long lashes lifted in an innocent stare.

"Who's he?" she asked.

Woodring started her walking again. "I'd like very much to know," he said. "And I think you might help me."

"What makes you think so?" Leda drawled.

"You were talking to Count Vaznilko at Ranaghat station last night," Woodring said.

Leda gave him a quick side glance, then lapsed into silence.

They were downstairs before either of them spoke.

"Shall we sit by the fire to have our cocktail?" Woodring asked.

"I really have an engagement," said Leda. She lengthened her easy, swinging stride as she crossed the lobby. Woodring followed as she went through the door and signalled to a motor car outside. She held out her hand.

"Goodnight," she said. "Thank you for your invitation."

Woodring helped her into the car. Without a word he got in beside her. If she was surprised, she did not show it.

"May I give you a lift?" she asked languidly.

"You may."

The car moved off, the headlights glowing pallidly in the murky dusk.

"Where?" asked Leda, not looking at Woodring.

"Wherever you're going."

"I'm going home," said Leda, still looking straight ahead.

"No, you're not. You're registered at the Himalayan."

"I checked out this afternoon," Leda said. "I didn't like the room they gave me. I'm staying at Runjit Cottage now."

"That's where I'm going," said Woodring.

At last Leda turned to look at him. Her face was a pale blur in the darkness.

"You've changed your tactics since last night," she said.

"Certainly," Woodring admitted. "A good general always alters his strategy to meet conditions of terrain or maneuvers by the enemy."

"And am I the enemy?" Leda's voice was faintly bored.

"What do you think?" Woodring countered.

Leda Carmaine did not think. Or if she did, she kept her thoughts to herself. She lit one of her miniature cigarettes, and the perfumed smoke drifted past Woodring's nostrils. The car purred over the steep winding roads of Darjeeling, stopped with a jerk.

Woodring helped Leda out. "I can only come in for a minute," he said.

Leda shrugged. "Suit yourself," she said. "I told you I had an engagement."

WOODRING followed her into a dim, musty-smelling hall cluttered with dingy red plush furniture and a mirrored hatrack. Halfway down the hall she took a key from her purse and opened a door. Woodring could see a globe-covered clock on an imitation marble mantelpiece. There were lace antimacassars on two high-backed chairs. The room exuded a shabby odor which might have been scrupulously imported, many years ago, from some third-class boarding house in Victorian England.

"I must confess," said Woodring, as he closed the door behind him, "that I ex-

pected to find you in slightly more glamorous surroundings."

Leda Carmaine removed her beret of Parma violets, tossed it carelessly to a dusty dressing table.

"I didn't force you to come here, you know," she said. "If your aesthetic sense is offended, the door isn't locked."

The door, in fact, opened at that moment. The lame, goat-bearded Moslem who was Leda's bearer entered.

"At least," said Woodring, "we can have that cocktail before I go. Bearer! *Idhar ao!*"

"There's no bar here," said Leda. "I don't think Runjit Cottage has a spirits license."

"At least we can get a mixed vermouth," suggested Woodring.

Leda did not comment at once. She was sitting in front of the dressing table mirror, retouching the crimson contours of her lips.

"Sherry," she said, when she unpursed her mouth.

"Bring us a bottle of pale dry sherry," said Woodring, tossing a banknote to the deformed bearer.

"Thairo!" Leda turned from the mirror, halted the bearer. She smiled at Woodring. "Do you mind if he brings Olorso," she said. "I don't like dry sherry."

"I'll write it out for him," said Woodring.

"It's not necessary," said Leda, resuming her cosmetic artistry. "Achmed knows my tastes in sherry."

The door closed. Woodring sat down in a chair, which pressed worn springs unevenly against his gluteal muscles. He hung his *terai* hat on one knee, crooked over the arm of the chair.

"We can save time," he said, "if we begin talking before the sherry comes."

"Well? I'm listening." Leda was busy with a powder puff.

"And I'm waiting," said Woodring, "for you to tell me about Count Vaznilko."

"I told you I didn't know him." Leda got up quickly from before the mirror. She lit one of her tiny, amber-scented cigarettes, and came over to stand in front of Woodring.

"Yes, I know all that," Woodring said. "I'm not interested in your personal relations with the count. I only want to know who he—and you—are working for."

Leda sat down suddenly on one arm of Woodring's chair. She smiled—a little wistfully, a little breathlessly, a little expectantly.

"You're a funny boy," she said in her warm contralto.

"You should laugh heartily when you say that," was Woodring's comment.

THERE was a knock on the door. Leda got up quickly, opened the door a crack, then pulled it wide. Achmed the twisted Moslem, came in with a tray bearing a bottle and two glasses. Leda picked up the bottle, held it to the light, handed it back to the bearer.

"Kholo!" she said.

The Moslem pulled the cork, filled the two glasses with deep brown wine.

"Mud in your eye," said Leda Carmaine, raising her glass.

Woodring raised his glass in polite response.

"Did Count Vaznilko kill Dr. Feurmann?" he asked.

Leda downed her sherry at one gulp. She took the bottle from her bearer and said: *"Bahir jao! Jeldi!"*

When the turbaned gnome had disappeared, she refilled the two glasses. She resumed her seat on the arm of Woodring's chair. She clinked the rim of her glass against his.

"Do you still think I was in your compartment on the Mail last night—by design?" she asked.

"Yes," said Woodring curtly.

"Why?"

"For the same reason that you brought me here tonight," said Woodring.

"I brought *you* here?" Leda gave a soft, throaty laugh. "But I didn't want you to come here. I told you I had an engagement."

"That," said Woodring, "is the oldest

and surest technique known to woman. Eve herself must have invented the trick of saying 'No' loud enough and long enough so that Adam would feel it essential to his masculine pride to prove she was wrong."

"But what reason would I have for bringing you here?" Leda protested.

"You brought me here," said Woodring slowly, "to blackmail me. You brought me here to dictate the price I will have to pay to prevent your telling Inspector Prike you saw me leaving Room 329 at the Himalayan this evening. Well, what are the terms? Or do you have to consult with Count Vaznilko first?"

Leda again emptied her glass. She reached for the bottle. "You're not drinking," she said.

"I'm drinking," Woodring replied, "slowly and with proper appreciation. This is a good solera sherry."

Leda Carmaine leaned gently toward Woodring. She let the long olive fingers of one hand rest lightly on his knee as she looked up at him over the brim of her glass.

"I know what you're thinking, Paul," she said.

"Yes?"

"You're wondering if you should kiss me."

Woodring did not reply, but he could not help looking at Leda. He couldn't help noticing that her big, dark eyes were not mysterious now; they were liquid, appealing, luminous. Even the cocksure worldliness of the full, ripe lips was lost for an instant in childlike wistfulness. It was difficult to subtract 50 per cent for *mofussil* susceptibility at a moment like this. It was hard even to remember that this seemingly delightful person was playing with him, bending him to her own ends. . . .

"You do want to kiss me, don't you, Paul?" she repeated.

Woodring lifted his glass to his lips. "Of course," he said. "I imagine most men want to kiss you. You're built that way."

"Then why don't you, Paul?"

Woodring's fingers were toying nervously with the stem of his sherry glass. He could hear his own breathing.

"Because it wouldn't mean anything," he said brusquely.

"Does it have to mean something, Paul?"

"I'd rather it did," said Woodring, trying to keep the huskiness out of his voice. "I've had more than my share of empty dalliances in the years since I've come to the East. I'm getting old enough to look for the novelty of something serious. . . ."

HE DIDN'T move. Leda continued to look at him, her lips parted. Why the hell shouldn't he kiss her, he asked himself. As long as he knew she was merely playing a game, why shouldn't he take the bait and stay clear of the hook? His head bent forward slightly. . . .

Somewhere in the house a clock was striking.

Suddenly Leda Carmaine stiffened. The blurr of abandon vanished from her eyes. She curled one leg under her, looked down. Woodring, too, looked down. He saw the glitter of rose diamonds in a tiny watch fastened to her silken ankle. It was so small he could barely see the hands. . . .

"You'll have to go now, Paul," she said, almost coldly.

"I'm not going," Woodring replied. The roseate vapor cleared. Suddenly.

"You must. I told you I had an engagement."

"I know. That's why I'm staying. I want to have it out with Count Vaznilko tonight. You two are going to hound the life out of me until next week, so we may as well settle the whole matter right now."

Leda shrugged. She got up, walked across the room. When she came back, she had one of her miniature cigarettes between her lips.

"Give me a light, Paul," she said.

Woodring struck a match. Lela leaned forward. The flame wavered. He cupped his hand to protect it. At the same moment he felt something hard and cold jammed against his ribs. He didn't have to look down to know what it was.

"Now you'll go, Paul," Leda said in her same, bored monotone. "And you'd better keep your hands raised."

The match went out. The sherry glass smashed to the floor. Woodring chuckled sardonically as he marched out, with the muzzle of a gun poked into his back.

"Not to the left, Paul. To the right," said Leda, as she pulled the door open. "You'll leave by the back way."

Woodring walked down the musty corridor. He knew by the smell of cocoanut oil that he was passing the kitchen. The back door opened, and a breath of rain spattered in.

"Good night, Paul," drawled the woman behind him.

"Good night," said Woodring. "And thanks for a lovely evening. Do you mind if I take my hands down now?"

There was no answer. Woodring lowered his arms, walked a step.

"Paul!"

He turned. Leda Carmaine stepped out of the doorway, thrust something into his hands.

"Take this, Paul," she said hurriedly. "You'll need it."

Woodring stared down at a .38 caliber revolver she had left in his grasp.

The door closed. Woodring remained standing in the darkness, insensitive to the chill caress of a fine, driving rain that swept upon him from the Himalayan night.

CHAPTER XVII

POST-MORTEM REPORT

GLISTENING rivulets trickled down Inspector Prike's raincoat as he walked into the hotel room and nodded briefly to Deputy Inspector Robbins and the two Darjeeling police officials sitting there. The brisk, rhythmic precision with which he removed his outer garments suggested the ratchet-release of tightly-wound clockwork. Robbins was used to the continuous high-tension under which Prike would work without relaxation until he had reached the solution of his case, but tonight the deputy inspector thought he detected an extra galvanic impulse, an added undercurrent of energy in Prike's well-ordered nervous vigor. In all likelihood, Robbins surmised, Prike had just welded a new and important link into his chain of evidence, but he knew better than to ask for information before Prike was ready to volunteer it. He merely said:

"Here's brandy, Inspector."

Tiny, pleasant wrinkles appeared at the corners of Inspector Prike's eyes as he picked up the bottle. Otherwise his facial muscles remained taut.

"Nice detective work, Robbins," he said. "Where did you run down a clue to 1912 Armagnac in Darjeeling?"

Robbins gestured with his thumb. "Compliments of the deputy police commissioner," he said. "He's been drinking it himself ever since you cracked the Bombay Mail murders. Seems that Captain Worthing is stationed at Jalapahar Cantonment now, and told him that you said Armagnac stimulated the deductive brain centers."

Prike smiled as he poured an inch of the golden brandy into a small, tulip-shaped glass. Slipping the stem between his first and second fingers, he warmed the bowl of the glass with the palms of his hand and breathed the heady fragrance.

"Anything new, Robbins?" he asked.

"I checked with Himalayan Optometrists," Robbins replied. "Here's the prescription for Hubertson's spectacles."

Prike took a sip of the brandy as he studied the square of paper. "Convex lenses," he mused. "Spectacles to correct hypermetropia. Evidently Hubertson was telling the truth when he said he was farsighted. Anything else, Robbins?"

"Yes," the Deputy replied. "I checked on the delivery time. The glasses were brought to the hotel at ten minutes to five. I talked to the *chaprassi* who delivered them, and he said that Hubertson was half undressed when he opened the door. So his story stands up, all right. Doesn't it, Inspector?"

"Apparently," said Prike, again wetting his lips with the mellow brandy. "What else, Robbins?"

"Cablegram from Scotland Yard, Inspector."

Prike put down his brandy glass. "In regard to Jericho?"

"Yes, sir. I'll read it to you: 'Whereabouts Christopher Jericho still undetermined. Unable yet to confirm theory departure England.' "

"And nothing from Calcutta on Jericho?" Prike asked.

"Nothing, Inspector. Apparently Jenkins hasn't been able to turn him up, as yet."

"Jenkins wouldn't," said Prike. He sat down, passed his hand over his bald head.

"But there's a report from the Civil Surgeon," said Robbins. "He finished the autopsy on Doc Feurmann."

"And found, no doubt, that Dr. Fuermann died of gunshot wounds?"

"He was shot proper, all right," said Robbins. "It was a *pukka*-done job. The surgeon says the bullet clipped the liver and stomach, perforated the intestine fifteen times, smashed two lumbar vertebrae—"

"Two vertebrae?" Inspector Prike's teeth clicked. He sat forward in his chair.

"Two lumbar vertebrae," Robbins repeated, "and then ricocheted back and stuck in the left kidney."

PRIKE got up, walked across the room, absently lighted a cheroot, walked back. He stood for a full minute in front of Robbins, drawing steadily on the cheroot. He looked squarely at Robbins, but his eyes were unseeing, focused on the abstract.

"Then the surgeon found the bullet, Robbins?" he asked at last. His glance was still fixed on infinity.

"Yes, Inspector. It was pretty badly smashed, but the deputy commissioner says there's no doubt it was thirty-eight caliber."

"Thirty-eight?" Prike descended abruptly to earth. "That's the same caliber bullet that killed Basil Stiller."

"How's that, sir? Stiller was killed with a thirty-two."

Prike shook his head. "No, Robbins, The empty cartridge we found in Stiller's flat was a thirty-two; but the bullet dug out of Stiller's body was a thirty-eight. I thought you knew that, Robbins."

"I didn't," said Robbins. "Then how do you explain the thirty-two cartridge, Inspector?"

"I can't explain it," said Prike. Then he added: "Yet."

"We haven't finished our canvass of the locksmiths," Robbins apologized. "Most of the shops were closed already, and we may not get the whole story before morning. But I've got one other thing to report. There's three women stopping at this hotel with purple dresses. Anyhow, there were three this afternoon. I can get two of them right now, if you want Hubertson to try to identify them. The third woman checked out this afternoon, but the deputy commissioner says he'll find her for me by morning. There's no train leaving Darjeeling before the Express at ten-twenty A.M. tomorrow, and the cart road is being watched. The woman's name is Leda Carmaine."

Deputy Inspector Robbins made the final announcement with just a suggestion of triumph over work well done. But his triumph was short lived.

"Yes, I know," said Inspector Prike, flicking the ash from his cheroot. "I meant to tell you about Miss Carmaine, Robbins. While you were at the Himalayan Optometrists this evening, I had a telegram from Calcutta. The tracer on the candid camera with the Schnell-Ultra f/1:5 lens, No. 25534 has borne results. The camera was purchased two months ago by Miss Leda Carmaine."

"By Miss—? Strike me cross-eyed!" exclaimed Robbins. "Then it wasn't Doc Feurmann's camera after all?"

"Of course not," Prike said. "I've suspected for days that Feurmann never owned a camera. But he was keenly aware of the existence of this particular one, and the use to which it had been put. His visits to us were merely designed to implant the idea that any photograph taken by this camera was fraudulently contrived to . . .

well, to use an American term, to frame him; to discredit him in his false role of Nazi refugee."

"I'm afraid I don't quite see, Inspector . . ."

"To put it plainly, then," Prike said, "the Nazi Government was aware that a photograph existed, showing a German diplomat in conference with the Nawab of Shimalghar, who has solemnly engaged to negotiate with no foreign power except Great Britain. It was therefore the mission of the secret agent of the Nazi Government, the late Dr. Adolf Feurmann, to secure the original of that photograph, or, failing that, to cast all possible doubts upon its authenticity."

"But the photo is authentic?"

"I rather think so," said Prike.

"Then shouldn't we notify New Delhi? Shouldn't the Foreign Office have a copy of the photo?"

"Not for the moment," said Prike. "The Indian Foreign Office is not quite as inept as the Nawab of Shimalghar imagines."

"But are you sure, Inspector, that this camera—what's the number . . . 25534?—is the one that took the picture of the Nawab?"

"POSITIVE," announced Prike. "There is a slight defect in the photograph: A streak of light-fog across the top. Even before we left Calcutta I determined that there was a tiny pinhole in the bellows of the camera which would cause this defect."

"But if this camera belonged to Leda Carmaine," protested the puzzled Robbins, "how did it get inside Alexander Blenn's desk in Calcutta?"

"That, Robbins," said Prike, "is for you and me to find out. I believe we'll find that the explanation is monetary; and that the sum changing hands was rather considerable, judging from what I have been able to learn of Leda Carmaine by telephone this evening."

"Has she got a record, Inspector?"

"Of sorts," Prike replied. "She left Bangkok hurriedly last month, one day ahead of deportation proceedings that were being prepared by the Siamese Government at the request of the German Legation. It seems some young German attaché had been somewhat indiscreet."

"Strike me cross-eyed!" said Robbins.

"Moreover," Prike continued, "I'm inclined to think Miss Carmaine is the same person as the Carmen de Leda mentioned in the court-martial proceedings against the naval engineer connected with the floating drydock at Singapore last year. Although Miss Carmaine—or Miss de Leda—had left the Straits Settlements shortly before the trial."

"Why would she want to kill Doc Fuermann?" Robbins asked.

"I don't know," Prike answered simply. "I'm not even certain she did kill him."

"But Hubertson saw a woman in purple—"

"The human eye, Robbins," Prike interrupted, "is very often mistaken—particularly a hypermetropic eye. And the human mind is not much better. For instance, this morning I discoursed at some length on a theory which I must now acknowledge was mistaken. Alexander Blenn has not been murdered. At least he hadn't been up to a few hours ago."

"He's in Darjeeling, then?"

"He's within a dozen miles of Darjeeling."

"Did you see him, Inspector?"

"I'm very much afraid," Prike answered, "that he saw me first. I'll explain, Robbins. Shimalghar, as you probably know, is a state dominated by Lamaism. And since religion and lay power are closely linked in the Lama mind, Lamas play important roles in the Nawab's government. Therefore it occurred to me that I might do worse than pay visits to several Buddhist abbots of Darjeeling monasteries, who are friends of mine. I learned, among other things, that a Lama dignitary from Shimalghar has been on a pilgrimage to this district. His name is Quombi La, and he has been roving from monastery to monastery. I didn't succeed in reaching Mr. Quombi La tonight, but I did find, in a little monastery on the Lebong Road, a topi with the

name 'Alexander Blenn' stamped into the inner band. The topi was wet with rain, so I could safely assume that Mr. Blenn had come in shortly before I did, as the rain had started only twenty minutes before. And the fact that the topi had been abandoned indicates, of course, that Mr. Blenn had made a hasty departure."

Robbins was on his feet instantly. "Shall I find him for you, Inspector?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes," said Inspector Prike, walking thoughtfully toward the bottle of brandy.

Robbins already had one arm in his raincoat. He pulled on the other sleeve, clapped on his topi, verified the twisted spikes of his blond mustache with an appraising forefinger.

"I'll have him here in two shakes of a *bhain's* tail, Inspector," he declared.

"Just a moment, Robbins." Prike poured another inch of brandy into the tulip-shaped glass, held it up to the light to admire the color. "When I've finished this excellent Armagnac, I shall decide whether I want you to bring him here, or merely keep him shadowed. Here's luck, Robbins."

Prike raised the glass to his lips.

CHAPTER XVIII

WORD FROM BLENN

FOR nearly an hour Paul Woodring lurked in the terraced gardens of Runjit Cottage, waiting for Leda Carmaine to leave, or the object of her engagement to arrive. His coat collar turned up against the chilling drizzle, he stalked through the shrubbery like a marauder, until he found a place from which he could watch both the front and the back of the house. He was intent on confronting Count Vaznilko —for he was sure it was Vaznilko Leda was expecting.

He had a long wait. The wind-bent bushes rubbed their wet leaves against him, and the fine drizzle beaded his eyelashes. He had plenty of leisure to wonder about the strange behavior of Leda Carmaine. She baffled him completely. She was perfectly transparent, of course, up until the last three minutes. Her routine followed the expected pattern until she had poked the gun against his ribs. He had even expected that—but he was thrown completely off when she did not immediately bargain for possession of the photographic film. And when she drove him out of the house, only to present him with her revolver . . . well, he couldn't understand it.

When Leda did not leave the house, and no one entered, Woodring decided to give up his vigil. After all, he had more important things to do tonight. He had to find some way of making contact with the Nawab's representative. He started across town, plodding through the light mud.

The proud conifers lining the hillside road moaned in protest as they bowed humbly before the rain-laden wind. The drizzle, instead of falling, seemed to billow up from the immense depths, veiling the night with changing tones of gray as fresh gusts scattered or thickened it, blurring the gloomy silhouettes of the dark, pointed trees. From beyond the Bazaar came snatches of barbaric sound, the clash of cymbals, the blare of the thighbone trumpet, the long mournful howl of the *ra-dong,* the deep-voiced note of a gong. The weird medley, carried by the wind from some Lama shrine, did little to soothe the already jangled nerves of Woodring. He thrust his hands into his pockets and hurried his steps.

Fifteen minutes later he was knocking at the door of Ruth Ingram's room at the Woodlands.

The door opened promptly. The girl seemed surprised to see him—or was she disappointed?

"Oh, it's you," she said.

Woodring entered without waiting for an invitation.

"Were you expecting someone else?" he asked.

"Yes," Ruth said. "Mr. Hubertson. He sent me a rather frantic chit, saying—"

"How did Hubertson know you were staying here?" Woodring demanded.

"Why, I—I didn't think of that. But it's simple, now that I do think of it. He was

standing near me at the station, when I gave my luggage to the station porter for this hotel. . . . But you're dripping wet! You'd better hang your coat on this chair to dry. I'll light the fire. It seems strange, having to light a fire, when only last night we were gasping for breath in the awful heat in Calcutta. . . ."

"What is Hubertson coming here for?" Woodring asked abruptly.

"I don't know," Ruth said. "He said in his chit that something tragic had happened to upset the plans Uncle Alex made, and that he had no longer any way of getting in touch with you, according to the prearrangement. He thought perhaps I might be able to help. What happened, Mr. Woodring?"

"Better call me 'Paul,' " Woodring said. "There's no telling what I'll be calling you before the evening is over."

The girl started to smile, but the dimples flickered only for an instant.

"You look simply furious with me," she said. "What have I done?"

"That," said Woodring, "is what I've come to find out. Did you ever hear the name John Mapleleaf?"

"No, never."

"You're positive you never heard your uncle mention the name Mapleleaf in connection with my trip to Darjeeling?"

"Positive. Who is John Mapleleaf?"

"That's the name I was to have used in my negotiations here," Woodring said. "But it was misappropriated by a German who called himself Dr. Adolf Feurmann. And the German Mapleleaf was murdered this afternoon at the Himalayan."

RUTH INGRAM paled. Her blue eyes widened. She sat down weakly. "How dreadful!" she exclaimed after a pause. "Then—I suppose that is what Mr. Hubertson meant in his note."

"Very likely. The news of the murder is probably all over Darjeeling by this time. But what I want to know is how this supposedly confidential *nom de guerre* got into Dr. Feurmann's possession."

"I should think," said Ruth very slowly, "that you'd be very thankful that the name did leak out. Otherwise *you* might have been the John Mapleleaf to be murdered."

"Then you do think," said Woodring, "that you might have let the name drop inadvertently . . . in conversation, somewhere?"

"No, of course not. How could I? I've told you before I didn't know the name."

"I know," said Woodring. "But I'd like to hear you say it again."

"I see." The girl's shoulders squared, and her pert nose went up half an inch. "You want me to say it again—so you can watch for any change of expression, any hesitation, any telltale lowering of the eyelids. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it."

"In other words, you don't believe me!"

"I'd like very much to believe you," said Woodring, "but I've done quite a little walking around in the rain tonight, and I've had time to think. One result of this thinking is the realization that you haven't been quite frank with me until now."

"In what way haven't I been frank?" Ruth demanded indignantly.

"You haven't told me the real reason for your presence in Darjeeling," Woodring said bluntly.

"But I have!" the girl protested. "I told you—"

"I remember. Don't prompt me!" Woodring broke in. "You told me on the train last night that you were going to Darjeeling because you felt your Uncle Alex was in serious trouble and you thought you might be of help. That's not true. At least, it's not the whole truth."

An unfamiliar light blazed in the girl's blue eyes, but she struggled to keep the anger out of her voice. "Then I suppose," she said, "you want me to say that I came to Darjeeling because I fell madly in love with you at first sight, and couldn't bear the thought of your being nearly four hundred miles away. Is that it?"

"No," said Woodring solemnly, "because that wouldn't be true, either."

"Then what is the truth?"

"Listen to me," said Woodring. "You

may be a spoiled brat. You may have been raised under all the disadvantages of having too much money. But I refuse to believe that you are quite as stupidly conceited as you make yourself out when you say you've come here to help your uncle. Why, you're a young, inexperienced slip of a girl, a year out of finishing school—"

"Two years, nearly," Ruth corrected him. "And as for being inexperienced—"

"You're a babe in arms," Woodring insisted. "You're not in a fashionable *pension* now. You're in the East, a land that a white man can't understand in a dozen lifetimes. You're in a country where intrigues were invented, and you're indirectly involved in a nasty little game which is evidently being played by past masters at intrigue. You're a spunky girl, you're fairly intelligent, and you have an extensive, if superficial knowledge of your uncle's business. But your uncle is at present involved with cutthroats and murderers. If he needs help in Darjeeling, he has Hubertson, who has spent years in the East and certainly knows the Blenn business better than you do. And he has Woodring, who, correctly or not, is supposed to have broad shoulders, a strong arm, and a tough neck. In the face of this, you can't expect me to believe that you came here just to be generally helpful. You came for some specific purpose. What is it?"

RUTH INGRAM stared at Woodring for a long, speechless moment. Slowly the color mounted to her cheeks—just a faint tinge, like the first flush of dawn. It was very becoming to her, Woodring thought.

"Give me a cigarette, Paul," she said in a strained voice.

Woodring watched her as he held out the match. All the resentment he had managed to work up against the girl seemed to vanish with the flame. He found himself comparing her to Leda Carmaine—perhaps because when he had held a match for Leda, she had jabbed a gun into his ribs. And of the two . . . ?

"I hate you for what you've just said," Ruth Ingram declared at last. "And at the same time I . . . well, I admire you for it, too. I hate being caught in a half-fib, but I'd hate it, too, if you were obtuse enough not to see through me . . . particularly if you're going to work for me some day."

"Well, what's the answer?" asked Woodring impatiently.

Ruth tried unsuccessfully to blow a smoke ring. "Christopher Jericho," she said.

Woodring straightened up in his chair. "Then you did know about Jericho?"

"Not when you first asked me," the girl replied. "But I made it a point to find out about him before I called the police yesterday morning. I went through all of Uncle Alex's papers. I thought it would be better if all the Jericho evidence were kept out of sight until I knew exactly what it meant."

"Well, what does it mean?"

"There were just the assignments of a dozen of Jericho's patents to the Blenn interests. Then there were the letters of administration, or whatever you call them —the appointment of Alexander Blenn as guardian and trustee of Jericho's share in the partnership, after he was declared insane."

"Did you destroy these papers?"

"No. I wanted to ask Uncle Alex about them first. That's really why I came to Darjeeling."

Woodring got up and walked to the fireplace. "You told me last night that you trusted me," he said. "Why did you hold out this business about Jericho?"

The girl gave a queer little laugh. "I honestly don't know," she said. "Perhaps it's because I'm a Blenn, after all, and wanted to keep back something that might give me the upper hand. . . ."

"You didn't find any papers, did you?" Woodring pursued, "that might indicate that the funds supposedly held in trust for Mr. Jericho had been used in the recent expansion of the Blenn enterprises?"

Ruth shook her head. "Only Basil Stiller would know about that," she said. "And he—" She stopped, suddenly aghast at the

possible significance of what she had just said. "No, I'm sure it's not that," she added quickly. "It couldn't be that."

"Somehow I wish you'd turned those papers over to the police," Woodring said. "However, I didn't come here to discuss ethics. I came to—" He paused. There was a timid knock at the door.

"That's Mr. Hubertson," Ruth said. She opened the door only a few inches, which was sufficient for Woodring to see that the caller was not Stanley Hubertson—unless that gentleman had whimsically decided to don black-face for the evening. Almost simultaneously he recognized the familiar voice of Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram asking for him. He was at the door in three strides.

"Salaam, Sahib," said Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram. The lean Tamil youth held a limp, damp envelope in his black hand, and he himself was fully as damp and limp as the envelope. A rain-drenched lock of ebon hair straggled forlornly from under his astrakhan cap to drip water upon his nose. His wet clothes clung to his thin limbs.

"You're shivering, Clemenceau," Woodring said. "What's the matter?"

"Am Southern boy, *Sahib,"* said the Tamil. "Am therefore unused to rigid climates of North. Here is chit for you, *Sahib."*

WOODRING took the wet envelope. "How did you know where to find me?" he demanded.

"Simplicity herself," replied Georges Clemenceau Malaswaram, "India having many facilities for transmitting information by underground grape-wine telegraph."

"Grape-*vine,"* corrected Ruth Ingram.

"Wine," insisted the Tamil. "Place in question being small but selected toddy-shop near bazaar." He bowed to Ruth. "This lady's bearer, who was quaffing small cup of mountain beverage thereat, informed of *Sahib's* whereabouts."

Woodring opened the envelope. His eyebrows raised as he carefully unfolded the damp paper. He passed it to Ruth.

"This your uncle's handwriting?"

"Yes," the girl replied without hesitation.

"No doubt about it?"

"None. Uncle Alex wrote this."

"Where did you get this chit, Clemenceau?" Woodring demanded.

"Small *chokra* brought same to Cotton-tree Lodge," said the bearer.

"Where did the *chokra* come from?"

"Did not ascertain, *Sahib,"* said the Tamil. "Inquired if reply was wanted, but was informed negative. Curiosity therefore ceased. Am again in error, *Sahib?"*

Woodring made an impatient gesture. "You'd better go home and get some dry clothes on, Clemenceau," he said.

"Quite, *Sahib.* Has *Sahib* yet determined where he will be spending night?"

"Are the police still watching the Lodge?" Woodring asked.

"No, *Sahib.* Espionage discontinued two hours previous."

"Then I'll be home. But if there is anyone hanging around looking for me, come out and head me off, won't you, Clemenceau?"

"Without failure, *Sahib,"* the black youth assured him. *"Salaam."*

When the door had closed, Woodring demanded of Ruth: "How the devil did your uncle know how to reach me at Cotton-tree Lodge?"

"Uncle Alex is nobody's fool," the girl replied. "His success wasn't all due to luck."

"Are you sure you didn't tell him where I was?"

"I haven't seen or heard from Uncle Alex. This is the first sign I've had that he was actually in Darjeeling."

Woodring walked up very close to the girl, looked into her eyes from a distance of only a few inches.

"I swear it!" Ruth added fervently.

After a moment, Woodring said: "Let me see that note again."

He sat down, spread the limp paper on one knee. The ink was a little blurred by the damp, but he had no trouble reading:

DEAR WOODRING:

Have just learned of miscarriage of Himalayan Grand scheme. Broken contact will be remedied if you go to Buddhist shrine on Observatory Hill at daybreak tomorrow, and wait for Lama by the name of Quombi La.

B.

Ruth came up behind Woodring. Her fingers brushed his arm lightly as she leaned over his shoulder to re-read the note.

"You're going, of course," she said.

"Yes."

"I'm going with you."

Woodring stood up, faced the girl. "No, you're not," he said.

"How are you going to stop me?" She raised her chin in a gesture of defiance.

Or was it defiance? For Woodring it was an opportunity to admire the smooth, satiny curve of her young throat. Yes he had been too long in the *mofussil.* He would have to raise his protective percentage to seventy-five at least, if he was to remember Blenn's admonition: Never listen to a woman; any woman. . . .

"Now, see here!" Woodring clasped the girl's shoulders in his powerful hands, as though he were about to give her a disciplinary shaking. "Don't get the idea that I'm a chivalrous knight, waiting to be wound around the little finger of the first lady Guinevere that comes along. I've got a job to do, and if you try to meddle in it, you're going to get hurt. Do I make myself plain?"

Ruth did not reply. Her shoulders stirred slightly in his grasp. The glow of the firelight behind her edged her curly hair with a flickering blur of living gold.

WOODRING heard a low sound, turned. Stanley Hubertson had opened the door unobserved, was standing on the threshold. For an instant his stooped figure seemed particularly solitary, tragic. His face, despite his black eyebrows and the keen glitter of his eyes behind the spectacles, seemed hopelessly old. Then the impression was dispelled by a sly grin.

"I was sure I'd find you here, Woodring," he said, as he closed the door.

"Mr. Woodring came on business," said Ruth quickly.

"Don't apologize, Miss Ingram." Hubertson shook a roguish forefinger. "I was once young myself. I understand these things."

"I thought Mr. Blenn gave instructions," said Woodring, "that you and I weren't to be seen together until after the concession was negotiated, Mr. Hubertson."

"I know, I know," Hubertson agreed. "But I didn't know how to reach you after— Why, haven't you heard what happened to . . . to our Mr. Mapleleaf?"

"Yes, I've heard," said Woodring. "Apparently the secret of the name wasn't very well kept."

"I hope I didn't give the show away to Inspector Prike," said Hubertson. "I'm afraid I gave quite a start when I heard the dead man called Mapleleaf."

"You've seen Prike, then?"

"I was with him when he found the body," said Hubertson. "I saw the man shot. I happened to be looking through my window—"

"Who shot him?" Woodring demanded.

"I couldn't swear to that," Hubertson replied. "I didn't see the shot fired. But I know there was a woman in the room at the time, a woman in a purple dress."

"Purple—?" Woodring sat down. Many things became suddenly very clear. He threw back his head and gave a short, ironic laugh.

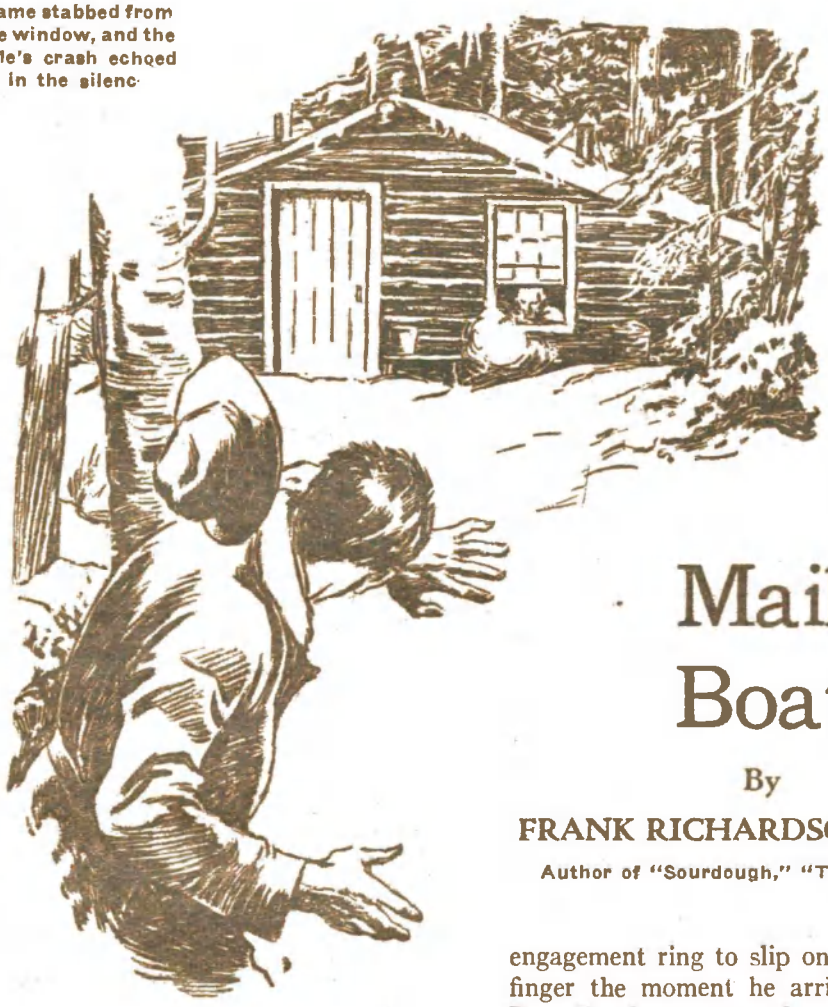
"What's the joke?" Ruth Ingram asked.

"I was just thinking," said Woodring grimly, "how funny it would be if Inspector Prike should walk in on us at this instant."

"I don't see anything funny in that," said Hubertson. "Prike struck me as being singularly without humor."

"It would be funny, all right," Woodring insisted, "because I think he'd find that the gun which killed Feurmann is in my pocket."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Flame stabbed from the window, and the rifle's crash echoed in the silenc·

Mail Boat

By

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Sourdough," "The Limit," etc.

IT seemed incredible to Rupe Gordon that one man could have so much happiness. He was afraid even to think about it for fear something would happen to break the spell. His superstitious streak warned him that a man had so much good luck, then so much bad luck.

Rupe paced the deck with increasing impatience as the Alaskan liner pushed her way northward through the inland passage. Streams gushed from snowfields far above timberline; salmon leaped from the icy waters and ducks lifted in clouds as the steamer sped past some almost hidden bay.

Everything about Rupe was brand new. He had bought his new suit in Seattle and it perfectly fitted his broad shoulders and flat stomach. In his pocket he carried an engagement ring to slip on Verna Denny's finger the moment he arrived at Mallard Bay. In the same pocket was a wedding ring set with several small diamonds. Within twenty-four hours after he placed the engagement ring on Verna's finger he hoped to add the wedding ring.

Rupe had bought himself a new traveling bag, and a new watch, too. The only old thing about him was the silver deputy-marshal's badge on his vest. It had been his father's, and now he was trying to hold up the reputation his father had made for himself in a district where maintaining law and order was a man-sized job. It would be no cinch to fill old Al Gordon's shoes, but with Verna's help, Rupe was going to do it or bust.

"When do we arrive at Mallard Bay?" he asked the captain as he came down from the bridge.

"Why did you ever leave that girl in the first place?" the captain asked. "You've been away from her just a month and a man would think you hadn't seen her in fifty years. Look at me—two days after I got married I went to sea and didn't get back for a year."

"Maybe, but that doesn't help me any," Rupe said, grinning.

"We're going into Chinook Harbor and unload cans for the salmon cannery," the captain answered. "That'll take forty-eight hours. Then we'll take on a load of salmon so we won't have to make another trip. Then we go over to the saltery and take on herring—"

"That's enough," Rupe groaned. He shot a glance at a snow-choked pass. "For two cents I'd mush over that pass, build a raft and shoot Mineral River to Mallard Bay. By the time you finish your loading and unloading and steam around the peninsula, I'll have a long pink beard."

The captain snorted. "Shoot the Mineral River just to see a girl! Huh! I thought you had some sense. Only two men have ever shot that stream and lived to tell about it."

"I'm not serious," Rupe said. "Just impatient."

The skipper paused and squinted at a long canoe. It carried a spread of soiled sails, leaned dangerously, but was cutting swiftly through the water. It was well inshore, but the captain knew it had come from the open sea through some pretty nasty weather. The canoe had the Mallard Bay Indian markings. The captain started to wonder, aloud, what was wrong up at the Bay, but decided not to. It would just make Rupe jumpier and cause him additional worry and impatience. But only an emergency could have sent that canoe out in bad weather.

RUPE was on deck when the captain returned from breakfast. The Chinook Harbor cannery lay a mile ahead. The steamer's whistle suddenly blasted, and buildings and cabins ashore began to empty. Men, women, children and dogs hurried down to the wharf. Rupe could almost hear them yell, "Mail boat!" as they ran.

The scene might have been something called up from his earliest memory. He could see now his mother's eager, flushed face as she carried him down to the wharf —twenty years ago. The year's first steamer always meant more than just mail. It meant fresh provisions after the long winter; fresh faces, too. Frequently old friends who had wintered outside. A man, he reflected, would have to winter "in" to know what the first steamer meant. Rupe Gordon's rugged face was warm and lit with an amused, half-rueful sympathy as he watched the people running towards the wharf.

"And within a week," he said, "Verna will come running down the trail to meet me. Her dad is probably in from his claim. So he'll be there, too. He promised to come in and help us get married if it was the last thing he ever did."

The Indian canoe landed near the wharf and a lean figure made its way to the landing.

"After we're married," Rupe mused, "we'll talk old Tim into staying with us. He's too old to spend months on end prospecting alone."

Rather grimly Rupe shook his head. Once a prospector, always a prospector, and it was hard to make them quit. Tim Denny, he recalled, lived in terror because the years were passing so swiftly and he still hadn't made his big strike. Rupe knew old Tim's bitter fear of becoming a burden to his daughter, or of being sent to a pioneer's home. "And he wanted money to give us a wedding present, too," Rupe mused.

The steamer slipped alongside the wharf, its lines shot out, and a Mallard Bay Indian scrambled up the gangplank soon as it was out. He handed the captain an envelope. "Wait," the skipper ordered. "There may be an answer."

"We no take answer back," the native replied. "Big storm. We wait! Go back with you."

The captain glanced over the single sheet of paper in the envelope, then asked Rupe to come into his cabin. "Bad news, Rupe," he said. "Tim Denny's gone crazy!"

"Crazy!" Rupe gasped.

"Yes. Not actually surprised, are you? Look at the years he's spent alone. Got him finally, I guess—and something in his head slipped," the captain said. "Verna sent word to me by the Indians. She knew if you weren't aboard I might know where you were."

"Where is he?" Rupe asked. "I helped my father bring out insane prospectors so many times I suppose she felt I'd know exactly what to do."

"I suppose so," the captain said. "Here's the letter. Tim has holed up in Tremper's cabin, on the edge of town, and he thinks the world is trying to jump his claim."

Rupe read the note hastily. "Good Lord," he groaned, "he's already wounded two men. They're talking of dynamiting the cabin before he starts killing people."

"I suppose somehow he believes that the ground around Tremper's cabin is actually the mining claim he's been hunting so long," the captain suggested.

"It must be pretty real to him," Rupe said. "Poor old Tim. I've got to get there in a hurry. Captain, could you skip those other ports and—"

"We got United States mail aboard, Rupe, and a schedule to follow," the captain answered. "I'm sorry." He wondered how Rupe would trap the insane man without killing him. And then he wondered how Verna could ever marry the man who killed her father, even in the line of duty.

THE captain was a fair man, but hard. Yet for all his hardness he hated to think of such things. He knew Rupe couldn't hire the Indians to take him back. In the old days when the northern Indians had raided Puget Sound and brought back slaves, they hadn't been afraid of anything. But these Indians of today weren't of much account—not nearly as hard, skilled, or experienced with storms at sea. "He'll try Mineral River," the skipper reflected. "It's his only way out. If he waits it may be too late. Hell! I feel sorry for Verna Denny."

Rupe returned to his cabin and opened up his bags. One was filled with clothes that Verna had ordered—pretty dresses, hats, shoes. Rupe knew just how she would look in them, and knew how thrilled she'd be to get them. And they were the right size, too, because he had taken some of her old things with him, and the dressmakers had taken measurements from them. "I'll leave 'em aboard," he reflected. "I can't pack the extra weight. Besides, they'll be safer." He swore and pulled his big, firm lips down into a disgusted curve. What a hell of a homecoming!

Rupe repacked his bags, placing Verna's things in the new one. He carried it to the captain. "Deliver this for me, will you?" he asked. "Verna may not feel like speaking to me when you arrive. I've got to take old Tim alive—if I can. But if I can't—well I've got to take him *some* way. That's my job."

"It's a tough job any time," the skipper replied, "but sometimes it's tougher. Good luck in your run down the Mineral."

"You guessed?" Rupe said.

"The Mineral is the only answer to your problem, son," the skipper said. "About old Tim, Rupe—I've hauled a lot of insane in my time. You've helped your father with them on so many occasions, there's probably nothing you need to know that I can tell you." He tugged thoughtfully at his square chin. "But there's one thing he used to say, Rupe. 'Humans are like other animals—creatures of habit. And habits are strong. Even insane men follow them. It's instinctive. And sometimes if a marshal is on his toes, he can cash in on a habit!' " The skipper looked hopefully at Rupe. "Is that any help?"

Rupe nodded. "All the help in the world. Gives me an idea. Do you remember the old *Lydia P* that used to run on the Yukon? She had a pretty deep-throated whistle for so small a boat. It was like finding some five foot shrimp with a big bass voice."

"How could I forget the *Lydia P?*" the skipper wanted to know. "Wasn't I a deckhand on her for two seasons? We'd go down behind the ice and we'd always be the first boat in with mail. The miners and trappers would come for miles around and—"

"And I'd toddle along behind my father," Rupe cut in. "The first time I saw Verna, she was a baby in old Tim's arms. They were waiting for the *Lydia P.* He'd trotted nearly two miles. All out of breath he was . . . Well, here's what I'd like you to do. I know it's a crazy plan, but—" His voice grew low, confident and had an eagerness in it now that almost drove out the bitter, hopeless note that had crept into it.

"But Mallard Bay is such a long way from the Yukon," the skipper said, when Rupe had finished, "and the flagship of the Alaskan fleet could carry the old *Lydia* on her deck. Besides nearly twenty years have passed, and you can forget a lot in twenty years."

"But, Captain," Rup said quickly, "isn't this a case of—any old port in a storm?"

RUPE GORDON, bent under the weight of his heavy pack, pushed through the mountain pass and dropped down to the headwaters of Mineral River. He shed his snowshoes and took to one of the ice-coated creeks. When the ice grew thin, he followed the bank to a point where stout willows grew thickly. He shed the pack and spent several hours cutting willows. He constructed the framework of a boat, which he bolted and wired together. He covered the frame with a canvas tarp; he melted paraffin, rubbed it into the canvas, making it just about waterproof. He found a heavy chunk of wood which he placed in the bow, to weight it down, then he pushed off and climbed in. Sitting crouched in the stern, he steered the craft with the heavy wooden paddle he'd packed over the summit.

Hour after hour the light craft spun on down the swift current. Side streams, frothing from their swift descent, tumbled into the river and increased its volume. The timber on the banks grew heavier, the game thicker.

He plunged into a canyon, with dark, dripping, towering walls, where the water ran swift and piled up in the center. He fought desperately to keep on top of the wave, and only the lightness of the boat saved him from the current's crushing force.

Ahead, he saw a break in the wall and a side stream gushing from a nameless valley. Rupe started to swing clear, then suddenly changed his mind. Ten feet of rope, frayed badly at the end, hung from a timber wedged into a split in the wall. The rope was almost new. Rupe swung over to the wall, grasped the rope and held it. It was like trying to check the rush of a plunging horse. His shoulder muscles swelled and tugged, and conquered. The light boat lost its momentum, slowed . . . stopped.

"I've heard a hundred prospectors say they'd like to pan gravel in the creek that empties into this canyon," Rupe said, "but Tim Denny was the only miner who ever made up his mind to try it."

Rupe's probing thoughts returned to an evening when Tim had declared that a man with nerve might come down the canyon, drive his craft into the wall and make it fast to a rocky outcropping. If he wrecked his boat he would drown, Tim had admitted. But if he didn't, he could pay out enough line to reach the break in the wall, and perhaps work his way up the creek.

"Maybe this is where he went, last spring," Rupe reflected. He tied a line to the loose end and let his canvas craft drift downstream. Working his way into the break in the wall, he landed. A faint trail followed the creek bank. Rupe was pressed for time, but if Tim Denny had staked ground, he wanted to know it.

A mile from the canyon, the creek widened and there was evidence of an ancient channel. He saw a brush camp, a pile of recently cut wood, and a heap of stones marking the corner monument of a claim. He kicked the stones aside and unearthed

a tin can containing a ground location notice signed by Tim Denny.

Rupe pushed through a thicket to another part of the claim. Other monuments stood beyond, and between them a sluice box constructed of whip-sawed lumber, and a big tailings dump. "The old man struck it sure as hell, or he wouldn't have left a dump like that," Tim exclaimed. "He was too old a hand to waste time on hungry ground."

Several square yards of gravel remained in the unwashed dump. He found a rusty shovel in the brush camp, returned and shoveled the remaining dirt into the box, then shut off the water. A dollar's worth of coarse gold lay in the first riffle. And he knew there was more in the second and third.

He examined monuments on the adjoining claims. One claim had been staked in Verna's name, the other in his own. "Wedding present," Rupe muttered. "He once said he guessed he'd have to strike gold and stake a claim for us, as he didn't have anything else to give as a wedding present. And he struck it! Hell!" Rupe returned the spade to the brush camp. "Chances are he thinks it's this claim the jumpers are after."

RUPE returned to his boat and continued down the river. The big canyon that struck terror to so many hearts seemed of little importance when compared to Rupe's big problem. The stream hurled its froth and waves at him. It piled up against the wall and bounced back, drenching him with spray and dumping a barrel of water into the boat, but Rupe was too worried over old Tim to be particularly impressed.

He shot into wider, calmer water and landed on a gravel bar. Rupe emptied his boat and launched it again. "Twelve more hours," he said, "and I'll be there."

He drifted downstream during the night, alternately paddling and dozing. At eight o'clock the following morning he rounded a bend and saw the blue waters of Mallard Bay. He landed a quarter of a mile above the old Tremper cabin and pushed cautiously through the brush.

The cabin stood in a clearing two hundred yards away. He saw smoke in the woods beyond and knew that men were on guard. Smoke trailed lazily from the cabin chimney and the odor of bacon came faintly on the lazy morning air.

Brush cracked sharply to his left. As the brush moved, a rifle in the cabin roared, and swift lead cut branches from trees nearby. "Damned old fool!" a man growled. "They'd oughter blow him to hell and be done with it. But what you goin' to do with Verna cryin' around and askin' us to wait until Rupe gets back. What'll Rupe do when he does *get* back?"

"I haven't quite decided," Rupe said, loud and clear. The thicket ahead was still for several tense seconds, then a man, running low, appeared.

"Rupe!" he shouted. "How'd you get there? The main boat ain't in yet and—"

"Indians brought me word," Rupe answered, "and I came over the pass and down Mineral River. I just landed."

"You came down in that thing?" the other demanded, staring at the boat drawn up on the bank.

"Yeah, and landed here because it wouldn't be visible from the cabin," Rupe explained. "Tim's in pretty bad shape isn't he?"

"Yeah. Crazier'n a loon! He raved about folks tryin' to get his daughter's weddin' present from him," the other explained. "We got Verna up here. She walked right into the open. She said acting natural was the best way. But it didn't work. Tim cut loose with his rifle and kicked the dirt up in front of her feet. She hunted cover."

"Did—she cry?"

"Sometimes folks feel too bad to cry," the other said. "It might've helped Verna some if she could have bawled a little. She was just white-faced, with the muscles around her mouth working and her eyes bulgin' with fright. I never saw her scared before. It hurt some of us like hell. That's why we held off dynamitin' the place." He shook his head. "You're in a kinda tough

place, Rupe. You're deputy marshal, and Verna's promised to marry you. Well, you're here. What're you goin' to do?"

"I'm going to see Verna, first," Rupe answered. "Isn't Tim beginning to play out? He's got to have some sleep, you know. He can't watch day and night."

"His dog's with him. The dog barks every time anybody moves. When the brush stirs, Tim fires a slug of lead. Two of the boys got hit with spent bullets yesterday. That makes four wounded all told."

"Tell everybody I'm back," Rupe directed, "and to keep under cover. If there's any dynamiting to do, I'll do it. I'm going down to see Verna."

THE girl's normally happy, healthy face was worried and drawn. She heard Rupe's step on the porch and was in his arms even before he'd knocked on the door. "I knew you'd come, Rupe," she cried, "somehow . . . some way."

He held her a little away from him then and told her what he had found. "Your father struck it! He hit it big, at last. I saw a piece of rope hanging on the canyon wall. I was looking for signs, naturally. So I started scouting around. I found his monuments, Verna. He'd staked claims for the three of us."

"Poor dad," she half sobbed. "He got our wedding present and then . . . !" She shuddered. "What could have happened?"

"Nervous breakdown," Rupe guessed. "Brought on by strain and overwork. He probably punched a dozen holes to bedrock before he hit real pay. Then he worked like a horse to make a clean-up before the snow began to fly. The size of the tailings dump floored me."

"What do you intend to do about—him?" she asked, and her eyes looked worried. "I'm going to crawl up to the cabin tonight, after dark, and talk to him. His mind is in the past, and I'm going to tell him my father's in a jam, and that I've come for help," Rupe explained.

"I understand," the girl said slowly.

He nodded. "It's our only chance, Verna. Look at it that way. We'll go back twenty years. If I can just play my part right, disarm his suspicions and get to him, I really do think we'll straighten things out in his mind."

"And once you get him out of that cabin," she said dejectedly, "it'll be the same old story of the miner who went prospecting one too many times—a jury of six, then committal to the asylum, bewilderment, vacant eyes and—all the rest."

"Maybe not," he argued. "It doesn't always end that way. It doesn't have to. He may snap out of it."

She shook her head. "No. No false hopes, Rupe." She laid her hand on his arm. "You will be careful of—yourself, won't you?" she said. "Don't hurt him and don't let him hurt you.—I couldn't stand it to lose you both . . ."

"I've figured it all out," he replied.

Rupe Gordon fished in his pocket and brought out the engagement ring and slipped it on her finger. They hadn't exactly planned it like this, but he felt the ring might help her forget her father's trouble—at least for a moment or so. She regarded the ring with eyes swimming with tears, tried to speak, then kissed him.

"I've got the other one, too," he said. "The wedding ring. But you won't see that until the parson tells me to put it on your finger. And I've got a suitcase filled with new duds for you on the steamer."

"Have you, Rupe?" she tried to sound cheerfully interested. "What're they like?"

"Well—er—" he blurted, "the prettiest dress has gadgets around the neck and some more thingumbobs along the bottom."

"Gadgets? What kind?"

"Oh—just gadgets. I don't know what you call them," he said.

He kept talking about his trip "out" all day, not saying anything important but trying to keep her mind off of old Tim at bay in the cabin. He was repeating himself toward evening. Then as the sun's rays paled, all crimson and gold on the clouds, he held her very close to his chest—so close he could feel her trembling.

At dusk he started for the Tremper

cabin alone. The vague shadows of the men on guard moved cautiously against the darker shadows of the surrounding timber.

Rupe stood a moment in the thicket nearest the cabin and was conscious of the tenseness in the air. "Tim!" he yelled. "Tim!" He tried to make his voice sound as it did when he was fifteen years old. "Tim! They're jumping Pa's claim! Tim! Mr. Denny!" He broke from cover and ran toward the door. "Tim! Quick! Claim jumpers are killing Pa! Hurry!"

FLAME stabbed from a rifle muzzle protruding from the window, and the tense silence was broken by its echoing crash. Rupe crumpled and lay still. Again the night was silent for several seconds, then Verna's sobbing cry wailed out.

"Don't go out there!" a man warned. "Don't go out there, Miss Verna, or you'll be killed!"

Rupe heard the sounds of a brief struggle as the men fought with Verna to hold her back. Rupe crawled slowly towards the thicket, expecting a blast of lead any moment. Strong hands reached out and hauled him to safety. "Are you bad hurt, Rupe?" someone asked.

"No, I'm all right. I saw his head and shoulders lift up in front of the window and I knew my trick wasn't working," Rupe answered. "I dropped a split second before he fired."

"You saw his head and shoulders?" the other queried. "Then you could've killed him!"

"Yes."

"You're a blasted fool that you didn't."

"Shut up! Verna's coming!" Rupe hurried to meet the girl. "I'm all right," he said. "I didn't dare tell you while I was out there—afraid he'd give it to me again."

"It was a desperate plan," she said wearily.

"My dad tried it once on a crazy man," Rupe answered. "The poor devil had gone back twenty years. Dad made him think that his partner was in a jam and when he came running out of his cabin, they jumped him."

A group of miners joined them. "We'd like to talk to you alone, Rupe," one of them said.

"All right. Excuse me, honey." He squeezed her hand. He knew what was coming, and was prepared.

"We waited until you got here," the leader said. "Verna was sure you'd be able to handle the old man. Well, you've failed. It took nerve to do what you just did, but . . . old Tim is still in that cabin. Most of us know him. We feel sorry for him and sorrier for Verna. But after all we have our own lives to think of. Rupe, you've got to dynamite that cabin!"

Rupe Gordon's jaw set. "I'll dynamite it a week from tomorrow!" he said.

"A week from tomorrow?" the leader gasped.

"I'm deputy marshal, in command of this area," Rupe said, "and I'm going to handle this in my own way. And take the responsibility," he added. "I'll appoint a couple of men to watch the cabin. Everybody else must keep out of range."

"No, it isn't all," the leader cut in. "We'll send a report out on the next steamer."

"That's your privilege," Rupe answered. "When I left her, the skipper said he'd arrive a week from today."

RUPE GORDON called most of the miners together a week later at nine o'clock in the morning. The previous night's rain had ended and the clouds were breaking up. Mists rolled through the timber and shafts of sunlight sifted through cloudbreaks and brightened the land. Rupe talked to them briefly, and the crowd separated.

The morning dragged, the clouds rolled away, leaving the air sharp and blue. The mountains were a dazzling white against the sky; the waters of the bay a deep blue. Gulls wheeled lazily, and eagles soared in the higher levels. Just before noon, the peaceful silence was ended abruptly by a steamer's deep-throated whistle sounding down the inlet. A timbered point concealed her from view.

A miner yelled, "Steamboat! Steamboat!" His neighbor yelled, "Mail boat!"

The cabins emptied as by magic. Miners and their families ran toward the wharf. "It's the *Lydia P,*" one man yelled. "I'd know her whistle anywheres. First steamer in with mail."

The boat whistled again. She was a long time in appearing, it seemed. Rupe Gordon crouched in a thicket near the Tremper cabin and watched.

Again the steamer's whistle stirred the echoes. Rupe saw the door knob turn slowly, then the door opened. Verna, beside him, tensed and clutched his hand. "He—he's coming out!" she half sobbed.

Tim Denny stepped out into the open and shaded his faded blue eyes with a gnarled hand. His snowy hair fell to his shoulders; a white beard covered his face and his clothing was ragged. Rupe noticed that he wore moccasins. The hand pressed against his forehead as if to force back the confusion that gripped his brain. The steamer whistled again and abruptly the old man straightened his bent figure. "It's the *Lydia P,*" he yelled. "Come on, Kenai!" He turned to the dog at his heels. "Come on, we're going down and get the mail! Mail boat!"

He hurried as he had hurried twenty years before. Excitedly he joined the crowd on the wharf. "Hello, Tim," an old miner said, casually, as if nothing had happened. "How're things?"

"Fair to middlin'!" Tim answered. "We all seem to be gettin' old fast. We all—" The steamer rounded the point. It wasn't the old *Lydia P,* but the largest, fastest liner on the Alaskan run. "That ain't—" Tim faltered. "There's something wrong!" He pressed his hand against his eyes and forehead again—pressed hard. "I'm all mixed up. All mixed up!"

Verna touched her father's arm. "Hello, Dad," she said. "Come on, take me home. I'm tired."

"Sure, I'll take you home, Verna," he said, quietly—confidently.

Rupe called several of the miners to him. "The old man has struck it rich. I'm pretty sure he left a poke at the Tremper cabin. We'll square things with the folks he wounded with his gun. He won't make any more trouble. I'll see you later."

He strode quickly to old Tim's cabin. The old prospector was shaking his head gloomily. "Everything is all wrong," he was muttering. "It seems like I struck ground for your weddin' present—the first big strike I ever made. Then claim jumpers tried to kill me before I got to the recorder's office. I fought 'em off. Then I heard the old *Lydia P's* whistle blowin' and I knew spring had come. I ran down to the river landin', but things weren't right. Everybody was old, and it weren't the *Lydia.* You two were standin' there and all at once the whole business seemed like a dream."

"It wasn't all dream, Tim," Rupe assured him. "I came down the Mineral, went up the creek and found your claims. I made out duplicate location notices and mailed them to the United States Commissioner's office. So we've got our wedding present from you after all. We're going to be married and take you with us. What you need is a good long rest. After that, you can boss the development work on the claims. I'm going down to the steamer now and pick up the duds I bought for Verna."

Verna followed him to the door. "I know any Alaskan can recognize the different steamers by their whistle," she said, "but how did the old *Lydia's* whistle happen to be on a deep-sea steamer?"

"It wasn't," Rupe answered. "A whistle's pitch can be regulated," he explained. "Before I left the steamer I asked the skipper to duplicate the *Lydia's* whistle if possible. This morning I laid the cards on the table and asked the folks in camp to turn out a hundred percent when they heard the whistle. I knew if the *Lydia's* old blast couldn't break through the fog around Tim's brain and bring him out of the cabin —nothing could."

Hocus Pocus

By LESTER DENT

ALL is not well with the New Apostles. At least such is the conviction of the pretty brown-haired girl who founded the evangelical sect, and who calls herself Saint Neeta. She is sure that one of her apostles, a dark-eyed ruffian named Harry Curot, is using her organization to cover up some skullduggery of his own.

So she engages a pair of veteran detectives, friends of her family, to investigate. Smith and his partner T. Packer Derm haven't solved a big case in years, and feeling that getting to the bottom of the New Apostles' difficulties will re-establish their waning reputations, they refuse to take the police into their confidence.

Which turns out to have been not very wise of them. Since they don't dare approach Curot themselves, they engage a down-on-his-luck young tank-town magician, the Marvelous Merton, to join the New Apostles and report on Curot's activities. Only they neglect to tell Cal Merton what really is up.

LIFE for Merton and his partner, Imagination Daly, thereupon ceases to be calm. All sorts of unpleasant things happen to them. And Merton feels, though he cannot prove it, that Curot is at the bottom of most of them. Learning that Smith and Derm have not been quite frank with him, he would quit the job, except that the brown eyes of Saint Neeta do rather disturbing things to his heart.

A man named Tucker Cragg, who works in a nearby watch factory, is offered a private mind-reading by Curot. Later, Merton finds Cragg wandering about the countryside, dazed and deathly sick at his stomach.

It soon becomes apparent that Curot is a big-time crook, and that somehow the Cragg mind-reading episode is connected with whatever he is planning. It must have something to do with the watch factory, but Merton can't imagine what it could be. Neither can Smith or Derm when he reports to them.

Merton buys a gun. It is stolen from him. He is drugged and wakes up feeling ill. Has the same thing happened to him that happened to Cragg? Has he been questioned, while unconscious, under the influence of a truth serum? Is Curot on to him?

SAINT NEETA can't—or won't—answer his questions. Because she is frightened of something that Curot has in a large wooden box that looks like a coffin. Smith and Derm won't talk, either.

Then Smith is murdered at the watch factory, and Merton is framed for the killing. Imagination Daly helps him escape from jail. They make their way to Curot's trailer, pick the padlock on the door and enter. The first thing Cal sees is Curot's wooden, coffinlike box.

Imagination looks at it and says, on a note of hope,

"Maybe it's empty, Cal." Imagination isn't much help in a crisis. He scares too easily.

"Maybe it is," Cal agrees. There is only one way to find out. Cal throws back the box lid. Imagination's eyes pop at the object inside the box.

"Urrk," Imagination squawls. "A corpse!"

This story began in the Argosy for May 22

CHAPTER XI

MANHUNT

ONCE again, Imagination Daly gulped, "*Urrrk!* A corpse!" And backed hastily away.

Merton ran his fingers through his upstanding shock of white hair and wished to high heaven that he had taken an easy job, such as loading anvils, or a comparatively safe one, like parachute jumping, instead of this New Apostles hocus pocus.

There was one bright spot in the pervading murk. He had something to grasp, a thread that might show him why Neeta was so terrified of Harry Curot. Here before him stood the mysterious box, open, with a human body inside.

Cal turned out the lights in the trailer. "Get hold of yourself," he told Imagination Daly. "Use some common sense."

"That's what I'm doing when I say let's clear out of here," Imagination mumbled. "If that ain't common sense, what is it?"

Cal said, "We're in it too deep to run," and listened. The night was black and still. Cal put his head out of the trailer door and listened in the direction of the New Apostle camp, situated in a grove of trees about half a mile down the road. But nothing alarming in the way of noise came from that direction.

"Curot may come back any minute," Imagination muttered. "Remember I told you I spotted the trailer because he'd been visiting it."

"We'd better be doing something," Cal agreed, and felt his way back to the little folding table at the rear of the trailer. He'd seen a flashlight lying there, and his fingers located it. He poked the beam into the box.

The man inside lay doubled up and still. He was dressed in plain coarse dark cloth—a suit that had black buttons and was too big for him and was one of the New Apostle uniforms. The man was long, with a thinly aesthetic face, high forehead, a lean thin mouth. A grim kind of a mouth. The eyes were brown, open, staring; they were weird eyes—glassy and fixed. The man's skin was remarkably pale.

But he didn't quite look dead.

"Hey, there!" Cal said. There was no response. Only the faint stirring of his chest gave any sign of life.

Cal reached down and took the man's left arm; it did not feel cold, but warm, almost feverish.

"What's wrong with you, mister?" Cal asked.

Again, no answer. Cal held the man's wrist, then put it down. "There's a pulse," he said.

"You mean—he's alive?"

"Up to now." Cal grasped the stringy flesh of the forearm of the man and pinched it; there was no sign of any kind that the man felt the pain of it.

"He must be in a trance," Imagination offered.

"There's no such thing as a trance."

"There's such a thing as Curot coming back here and getting us, though," muttered Imagination uneasily.

Cal continued to work over the man, lifting him out of the box and spreading him out on the berth constructed across the front of the trailer. There was not, as far as Cal could determine, a wound on his body.

"Ever see him before?" Imagination asked.

"No. Wonder who he is?"

There was nothing in the man's pockets. Cal tried the pulse again, and it was weak; then he picked up one of the legs and let it fall, and it fell as slackly as so much meat on a butcher-shop block.

An idea occurred to Cal, and he searched the trailer, poking the flashlight beam into lockers and galley drawers. Presently he found what he expected—a shiny hypodermic needle and a small bottle.

"Doped," Cal said. "Loaded full of this drug."

Imagination said, "And we'll be loaded full of lead if—"

"—if Curot comes back and catches us. I know," Cal said. "You ride in here and watch our sleeping prize."

"Me ride—hey! What're you going to do?"

"Make off with the coupé, this trailer, and the drugged man," Cal explained.

"But—"

"Whoever this man is, he'll wake up sooner or later, and he may be able to tell the police enough to clear us."

"That's an idea," Imagination admitted.

They went to the door of the trailer, then froze there, for there was sound in the night, very close. Cal clamped a hand on Imagination's arm, and they eased silently out of the trailer, and sidled away. The short meadow grass made no sound underfoot; after a score of paces they paused and listened.

"Come outa there with your hands up," a voice ordered close to the trailer.

Cal breathed, "It's Derm."

THERE was no doubt about it being Derm. His voice sounded strained, nervous; he must have crept close after seeing the flashlight winking inside, thinking the trailer was occupied.

Cal lay prone on the grass and considered the advisability of joining T. Packer Derm. Being a private detective and Smith's partner, Derm was in a position to corroborate Cal's innocence. And he, too, was on the trail of Curot, at Neeta's request.

"Derm!" Cal called.

Flashlight glare leaped over them, and Derm came striding toward them, holding a revolver in his free hand. Derm, certainly. That head, beginning calmly enough at the top and widening out in innumerable amazing chins, was unmistakable. Derm seemed startled to see them there.

"The damn magicians," he said. Cal started to get to his feet. "Stay down!" Derm rapped.

"Eh?" Cal squinted into the flashlight beam.

"Get your hands up!" ordered Derm.

"But—"

"Smith is dead," Derm said harshly. "Smith, my partner. They told me so in town." He moved his gun menacingly. "And they told me who done it."

Cal exploded, "You don't believe—?"

"Why not?" Derm said grimly.

"But you must be crazy to think that! *You* hired us to spy on Curot!"

"You two could have switched over to Curot," Derm said doggedly. "I'm not sure you didn't!"

Cal thought of many things to say, but they all stuck in his throat. He'd counted on Derm's aid, and it had not occurred to him the man would be thick-headed enough to believe that Cal and Imagination might be guilty. Somewhat tardily he remembered that Derm had never hit it off any too well with them, and that the man did not share the liking which his unlucky partner, Smith, had entertained for the Marvelous Merton.

Cal lost his patience. "Listen, you hammer-headed Sherlock, this isn't funny! Put that gun away, and let's get to work clearing this mess up!"

"Yuh-yes," Imagination quavered. "Put the gug-gun away, Derm."

Derm said, "Keep your hands up! Get in the trailer."

In the fat man's voice was a quality that hinted it might be a good idea to obey him. Derm was distraught. Smith's death had hit him so hard that he was in anything but a reasonable mood. He waggled the gun insistently. So Cal offered no further objections, and went to the trailer, climbed inside and followed orders to lie on the floor. Imagination Daly did the same, pale and trembling.

Derm popped his small eyes at the drugged man from the box. "Chris Roberts!" he exploded.

Cal stared at the private detective. "Good grief, Derm, do you know him?"

"I ought to," Derm growled. "I've gone fishing with him enough, down around Lake of the Ozarks."

"Who is he?"

Derm opened his mouth to answer, caught himself, and scowled wisely at Cal. "So!" he growled. "Trying to find out how much I know about this thing, huh?"

"And why not?" Cal demanded. "I never have made any bones about not being able to make heads or tails of this crazy mess. It's you who have been going around keeping everything to yourself. You and Smith, the poor devil. If you had come out with the truth, Smith might be alive now."

"You pipe down," ordered Derm indignantly. "I don't trust you, and I ain't going to be talked out of that." He fumbled around in the lockers and came up with a strong rope used for towing. He tossed this to Cal. "Tie your pal up with that," he said flatly.

Cal took the rope and bound Imagination, who grunted and complained about the tightness of the knots, the skepticism of Derm, and the unkindness of the world in general.

Derm himself then tied Cal, doing a careful job, and afterward testing all the lashings until he was satisfied with their efficiency.

"I'm going back to that Apostle camp and arrest Curot," Derm said grimly, and ducked out.

HE climbed into the coupé, starting the motor, and driving out of the pasture, then turning down the road. Cal and Imagination Daly lay on the floor, moving only as the motion of the trailer threw them about. Cal thought about Chris Roberts. The drugged man—Chris Roberts, Derm had called him. Derm knew him. But then, Derm and Smith knew Neeta and several of the other apostles from vacations spent near the Righteous Land, the New Apostles' headquarters near Lake of the Ozarks. Who, though, was Chris Roberts? And why had Curot been keeping him drugged in a box?

The trailer stopped and Derm came back to squint at them fiercely and tell them, "We're near the New Apostle camp, and I'll go get Curot." Then he departed. Cal thought of Derm after the man left, and not very complimentary thoughts. He did not suspect the man of anything except greedy stupidity. The fellow was an old time private detective who had been having hard times, and he wanted to solve this mystery, get a flock of newspaper headlines, and cash in on the free advertising. That had been his attitude throughout. Why didn't he go to the police? The idiot. He was old, fat enough to be in a circus, and manifestly incompetent. Going to arrest Curot, was he? It wouldn't surprise Cal any if he got his fat head shot off. Following that, Curot might well find this trailer. And that was a possibility that didn't intrigue Cal at all. He saw no sense of lying here bound when he didn't really have to. So he kicked his heels on the floor.

Then Imagination calmly took his hands out of the rope with which Cal had bound them, at Derm's orders. Imagination then removed his gag. He muttered, "Lucky that fat boy never heard of Chinese rope tricks."*

Imagination untied Cal, chuckling sourly over the break Derm had unwittingly given them in forcing one of them to tie the other first, thus giving them a chance to employ a trick knot known to almost all performing magicians.

"Grab Chris Roberts' heels," Cal directed. "We're taking him along."

"Grab *whose* heels?"

Cal seized hold of the drugged man. "Didn't you hear Derm call this bird Chris Roberts? Grab a root and growl, my friend. We're taking him into the brush."

"Then what?" Imagination wanted to know.

"Then we'll tip off the police where to find him," Cal explained. "Eventually, he's bound to come out from under the effects of this drug, and when he does, he'll have a story to tell. If his story clears me, swell. Then I can give myself up. If it don't clear me, well, I'm still running around loose."

"Wait," Chris Roberts said feebly. "Wait." And his eyes fluttered open.

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*The term "Chinese rope trick" is general and applied by magicians to knot tricks with ropes. Innumerable are these rope tricks, many of which revolve around a knot apparently solid, but really no knot at all.

CHAPTER XII

OZARK TRAIL

CAL MERTON went back on his heels, astonished at the drugged man's show of life, faint though it was. He sank down beside him, kneaded his wrist, then gave him liquor from a square bottle they found in the galley, which was considerably more effective.

"Maybe I can move—in time," the man said haltingly. His voice was hardly understandable, but he managed to clear his throat weakly several times, and to move his head a little.

"Why were they holding you?" Cal asked.

"I'm—Chris—Roberts," he replied.

The name didn't mean a thing to Cal; and it was no answer to his question. He said so.

"I am—Neeta's—uncle."

"Huh? Neeta's—"

"Her mother's—brother," Roberts said, spacing his words.

Cal gusted out a sigh of relief. Considering that so far he hadn't accomplished a thing toward clearing himself, he felt remarkably pleased, almost elated. Neeta's refusal to talk had been more of a rock in his pack of troubles than he had admitted to himself. It had worried him. But now her silence was understandable, and he didn't blame her much—Curot had simply told her that if she talked, he would kill her uncle. That was why Chris Roberts had been a drugged prisoner.

"Why was I being—held—drugged?" Chris Roberts asked.

"Eh?" Cal peered at him. "Don't you know?"

"No," said Roberts weakly. "I never—saw you—before. Why should you—hold me prisoner?"

"Me?" Cal poked his own chest. "Me—holding you? You think it was *me?*"

"Yours—is the first face I've seen—since I was struck down in the darkness near—the New Apostle camp," Chris Roberts mumbled. "Wasn't it—you—who did it?"

Cal stood up. He looked at Imagination Daly, then licked his lips and swallowed.

"So," said Imagination, "this is the guy you thought was going to clear you."

Cal shrugged. It was another step into the morass of accusations from which it was beginning to seem he would never clear himself. After a swimmer has been pushed under the water, it makes no great difference to him whether he is one foot below the surface or ten. But Cal hadn't expected Chris Roberts not to know who had seized him. Curot, of course. The man would know that much, Cal had thought. But apparently he didn't.

All of which had Cal in no mood to cheer when he heard T. Packer Derm running toward the trailer. Such lumbering, thumping footsteps, and steam-engine breathing could only belong to Derm. Derm dived into the trailer. It was dark and he did not see that they were free.

"Curot has skipped!" Derm gulped. "Took all his men." Cal had been afraid of something like that. "Curot took Neeta."

Derm sounded frantic, and Cal felt a little less annoyed with him—until he remembered that Neeta had called on Derm for aid, and he had tried to run things so that the entire credit for the solution of the New Apostles mystery would go to himself and Smith. Derm should have called in the police. He, acting independently, had done Neeta no good, and perhaps a great deal of harm. Cal remembered that, as he wrapped a handkerchief tightly around his right fist, stepped silently over to the door, and let Derm have a haymaker on the jaw. Derm fell, and both Cal and Imagination jumped on top of him and disarmed him.

DERM wriggled around on the floor, made strange small sounds in his throat, and presently recovered his wits. He came to his feet with a roar and sent both Cal and Imagination staggering. Resisting his attack was like trying to shove a bull around. But when Derm realized they had his gun, and that it was pointed

at him, he grew quiet, muttering angrily that now he *knew* that Cal was one of Curot's hirelings.

"Lay off that," Cal advised him angrily. "I've had enough of your bone-headedness."

Derm muttered something about fixing Cal if it was the last thing he did, should anything happen to Neeta.

"All right," Cal told him. "That's one thing in your favor. We're both worried about the same person. Now how about doing something about it? You start off by telling me what Neeta hired you to investigate about Curot?"

"T'hell with you," said Derm. "You're trying to pump me."

Cal's face convulsed with anger. He sprang upon Derm, grabbed his ears and crashed his head against the side of the trailer. Derm squawked and sagged. Cal kneeled down on top of him, cocked the revolver and stuck its snout into Derm's left eye.

"Cal!" Imagination exploded anxiously. "That gun may go off!"

Cal muttered hoarsely, "There finally comes a point where I go nuts. Derm, where—what's behind this? Come on! Talk, will you?"

Derm's other eye converged on the gun. Whatever his other shortcomings, he didn't scare easily and he remained calmer now than Cal thought any man could under the circumstances.

"For a plain fact," he said levelly, "I can't tell you a thing you don't already know."

"What?"

"You heard me. It's the truth."

Cal abruptly released him and stepped back. "Derm, is that straight?"

"Look, magician," Derm said. "Here's what happened. The gospel, so help me. Neeta came to poor Smith and me because we were the only detectives she knew, and there was something that had first come up back East that she wanted looked into. While this unit of the apostles was camped at some town—I can't remember its name but it had an airplane factory—Neeta noticed Curot acting queer and overheard him telling his runty sidekick that they had better be more careful or Neeta might get wise to them. Of course after that, Neeta kept her eye on Curot and she noticed that in some towns—not in every town, mind you—but in some towns Curot acted pretty queer, and Neeta got the idea he was pulling something shady in different places around the country where they camped. You see?"

Derm was back in his usual form, using those interminable sentences that were sometimes so long that it was practically impossible to follow them.

"Well," he continued, "a week ago, about, Curot got wise to Neeta's checking up on him. He asked her what was the idea, and she thought she would throw a bluff, and so she let on she knew more than she did, and what do you think happened? Why, Curot grabbed Neeta's uncle, drugged him, and told her Chris would be killed if she didn't sit tight, keep her mouth shut, and say nothing to nobody. Well, Neeta took a chance and called poor Smith and me, but Curot knew us by sight, so we advertised to get two mind-readers to spy on Curot for us, and you two magicians answered."

"That the size of it?"

"That's the size of it."

"But that doesn't tell us a thing," Imagination complained.

Cal scowled. "Listen, Derm. Before Smith was killed, he came to me and told me he thought Curot was after something that was in that watch plant. How did he know that?"

"We were watching Curot. We saw him scouting the watch plant. And you remember he doped a watch factory employee with truth serum, and got some kind of information out of him. We put two and two together."

Cal strained his white hair with his fingers. "This isn't getting us anywhere. It doesn't clear me of that framed charge of murdering Smith after I trailed Curot to the watch factory. And Curot has Neeta."

DERM nodded and said, "We're pretty well stumped."

"Yes. Sure; we're left with only one thing to do."

"What?"

"You are going to the police, Derm, and tell them what you know. As for me, I'm going to get on a telephone and call the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Kidnaping is a federal charge, and Curot has kidnaped Neeta. He also kidnaped Chris Roberts. With the G-men on the job, we'll get some action."

On the trailer floor, Chris Roberts sat up feebly and coughed. "I've been thinking about something that might help," he said.

Cal turned on the lights in the trailer. "Eh?"

"While I was a prisoner, I seemed to come half awake a time or two, and overhear them talk," Roberts muttered. "I didn't recognize the voices. But I do know they were agreeing that if things went wrong, they were all going to grab Neeta and skip down to the Righteous Land, near Lake of the Ozarks."

"You sure about that?" Cal demanded.

Chris Roberts nodded. "Positive. If we go down there, we may locate them and get my niece out of their hands."

"Yes, and if we call the police, they can do more than we could," Cal declared.

"Curot — will — kill Neeta — perhaps," Roberts whispered.

"Roberts is right," Derm growled. "Curot will shut the girl up at the first sign of police interference."

Imagination Daly said, "And, Cal, as soon as you call the cops, they'll clap you back in the calaboose."

All of which was true. There was just one course they could take; they finally agreed to proceed to the Righteous Land and look for Curot there. If they found him, they could get help to make the arrest from the local authorities. And if Curot was not there, Cal would still be out of jail, and Neeta would not have been placed in greater danger than that which menaced her already.

So they headed south for the Ozarks.

CHAPTER XIII

ISLAND

THE next afternoon, an hour before sundown, they were driving through Ozark country—hills furred with timber, most of the growth runt red oak stuff, with a few evergreens and now and then a walnut tree. The underbrush grew thick, but low, and off to the right, hills rose up more sharply. On the left, the terrain sloped down to water, a great lot of water for the state of Missouri—Lake of the Ozarks, an inland sea with hundreds of miles of shoreline, created by the Bagnell Dam power project.

"This road," explained Chris Roberts, "leads to the Righteous Land."

"How far?"

"Two miles more, about."

Soon the coupé rolled off the road, stopped, and they got out.

"Righteous Land is just over the hill," Roberts explained. "And it's so close now to darkness that we'd better wait a while. After dark, it'll be safer looking for Curot and his men."

Just before sunset, Cal climbed a tree to inspect the Righteous Land and saw a mile-wide valley sloping down gently to the edge of the lake—a valley cultivated in small plots planted to truck crops instead of the usual Missouri corn, oats and wheat. Across the middle of it, the road ran, and on one side of this road, almost in the center of the valley, stood a circle of small huts—a circle about two hundred yards in diameter. The houses were shaped like small boxcars, and painted gray. Centrally located in the circle stood a larger building—a great aeroplane hangar of a structure, also painted gray.

This was the Righteous Land, and numerous apostles could be seen around the buildings or coming in from work in the fields.

With darkness, Cal, Imagination, Derm and Chris Roberts cautiously approached the Righteous Land. Roberts, knowing the layout of the place, went ahead. He became more tense as they drew near the

place, and finally halted. This was close enough.

"You stay here and watch Merton and Daly!" Derm directed Roberts.

"I think they're all right," Roberts said.

"Don't take any chances with 'em!"

"Oh, well, if you insist." But when Derm had gone on in the night, Roberts said, "Derm is silly. I'm going to scout some myself." And he, too, moved away.

Meanwhile, Derm advanced cautiously. He remembered the layout of the Righteous Land pretty well. The night was intensely dark; heavy clouds covered the moon, but they were moving slowly aside, and there probably would be brilliant moonlight in half an hour or so. Derm crept first toward a group of trailers which were parked near the circle of buildings. It was his belief that if Curot had arrived here during the daytime, the man would remain around the Righteous Land, pretending complete innocence.

Drawing close to one trailer that showed a light in the window, he listened. Voices inside. Derm strained his ears. Curot's voice. Not the slightest doubt.

Hearing Curot had a remarkable effect on Derm. It filled him with a reckless resolve—he would seize Curot single-handed. So he advanced to the trailer door and took hold of the handle, and he still had hold of it when a club fell on his head, knocking him senseless.

Harry Curot, hearing the sound of Derm's fall, instantly appeared in the trailer door, holding a gun.

"Search the place!" he said. "Get the two magicians." And to someone behind him, he ordered, "Take the girl to the island. This fat pest, too."

IMAGINATION DALY stood a little apart from Cal Merton. He had been trying to figure out how he and Cal were to clear themselves if they couldn't convince Derm, and it had dawned on him that Derm's testimony really wouldn't be worth much even if he did believe them, in court.

Imagination felt confused, worried. He stroked his red hair with his fingers, feeling of its tangible reality. His brain was not analytical; when he tried to see beyond the obvious, it was like groping in a muddy pool for fish, and if a fish did not come to his hand immediately, he became confused, inclined to wonder if the water was really muddy because fish were stirring it up. Suddenly, hands took hold of him—several hands—and his mouth opened to let out a yell, but cloth crushed against his lips, was shoved into his mouth, stopping the noise. He kicked. Arms held his feet. He was heaved off the ground. Absence of that solid made him feel grotesquely helpless.

Then Cal slammed into the fight, striking out furiously. One fist connected. It caused a curse—a fall. A flashlight came on. Cal kicked it. The light flew away, its bulb remaining lit—a crazy comet arching. Then the attackers yelled for help, and more men ran toward the fray.

Cal got Imagination free. "Beat it!" he yelped. They ran in different directions. In the noise and the darkness, they could not possibly have kept track of each other.

Powder noises began coming out of guns. The bullets missed their mark which was natural because of the darkness. More men yelled, ran, cursed. Farther away, a voice whooped. It was Curot commanding:

"Get the girl away." Cal heard. He stopped. The girl—the girl! It must be Neeta! He raced back toward the voice, silently, straining his eyes, and shortly he saw a light flash, disclosing a dark-clad man carrying a bound feminine figure across the road toward the lake.

"Put out that damn light!" roared the man who was carrying the girl.

The lights went out. Turmoil, shouting, excitement were rampant. The apostles came rushing out of their huts. Cal's ears told him the man with the girl was running south. He pursued them.

Gaining, he got close and kicked fiercely at the runner's legs. The man fell. Cal stooped, hammered with both fists. His opponent cried out, rolled, leaped to his feet—and did the unexpected. Ran.

To get himself and Neeta clear of the melée was Cal's main thought, so he groped and found the bound figure, then picked it up and ran himself, leaving the immediate vicinity of the Righteous Land.

TWO hours later, Cal Merton dropped beside Neeta in a brush clump at the edge of the valley of the Righteous Land. The moonlight was brilliant now; Cal had been looking around, returning to the girl on all fours, crawling through the rows of corn. Around the buildings in the center of the valley, lights glowed brightly and dark-clad apostles moved around aimlessly, to be stopped occasionally and questioned by a man wearing a shiny star and a blue revolver in a tan leather holster.

"My uncle—what became of him?" Neeta asked anxiously.

"Chris Roberts? Gone." Cal spread his hands. "Curot took him. Curot took Imagination, too. At least, there's not hide or hair of either Imagination or your Uncle around the Righteous Land. I looked. That is, I looked around until the sheriff came." He frowned darkly. "I'm here to say that those apostles are either very smooth liars, or they don't have the slightest idea of what's been going on."

"Of course they don't know," Neeta defended loyally. "Only a few apostles are working with Curot. The rest are honest."

"Any idea where Curot could have gone?"

Neeta put a hand on his arm. "They said something about an island, Cal."

"But there's a number of islands in Lake of the Ozarks."

Neeta was silent for a while, then she said, "I remember now that Curot used to go fishing frequently on the lake, and I think he visited an island about three miles south, and not very far from shore."

Cal thought it might be a good idea to have a look at the island and find out if Curot had perhaps gone there now; and he studied the sky, deciding that it would be foolish to venture out on the lake while the moonlight was so brilliant. Neeta told him there was a boathouse on the lake, and they went to it, investigated it and found a canoe. Cal stood in the shadow beside the boathouse and watched the brilliant lake surface. He could see the silver flash of a jumping fish more than a hundred yards away.

"We'll have to wait," he said grimly. "Too much light. If Curot has the prisoners on the island, we've got to locate them quietly. Otherwise Curot might kill them. He would do that. And another thing. If we appeal to the police before we have anything definite, they'll just lock me up, and Curot will stand a better chance of getting away."

Neeta touched his arm again. "I'm sorry that I never did tell you the truth," she said contritely. "But Curot said he would kill Uncle Chris if I didn't keep still." She suddenly raised her chin. "And that is even more astounding than it sounds. Because I really didn't know anything incriminating. I still don't."

"What do you think Curot is doing?" Cal asked.

"I—I don't know," Neeta said wearily. "The apostles were holding a meeting in a small aeroplane-manufacturing town in the East when I overheard Curot and one of his men talking. Curot was telling the other man to be more careful, or I might find out what they were doing. Naturally" —the girl's voice turned grim—"naturally, after that, I kept a close watch on Curot. He *was* doing something. But I couldn't tell what. Curot or some of his men would frequently slip away from camp at night. I don't know what they were doing."

"Committing robberies?" Cal suggested.

"Maybe. But I think this thing Curot is doing is much more important than just stealing."

"Curot undoubtedly robbed that watch factory in Fort Madison."

"What did he get?"

"That's the catch, Neeta. The manager of the factory wouldn't say what had been stolen. Isn't that crazy?"

"It's all mad, Cal. Utterly mad. It seems so impossible that Curot would go to all of that trouble just to keep me from tell-

ing anyone that I suspected he was doing something out of the way."

"You didn't give him the idea you knew more than you did?"

"I bluffed a little," Neeta sighed. "That must have scared him."

"*Something* scared him."

WHILE they waited for the arrival of darkness deep enough to make it safe to venture out on the lake, the Marvelous Merton for the first time found himself with an opportunity to get really acquainted with the Saint Neeta. Neeta was a remarkably pretty girl and she had impressed him as no other girl had ever done; in fact, when he had first seen her, he'd promptly decided that, unless there was a big mistake, here was what he had been waiting for.

The girl had a quiet, spiritual quality to her courage that Cal admired. Her calm soothed Cal; and made him feel more hopeful than he had since the start of this insane business. The thing was, after all, simple in its essentials. Curot was engaged in some dubious activity—Cal hadn't quite found out what, yet. Being discovered, he had tried to do away with everyone who suspected him—and had nearly succeeded too. And now he might be on that island, holding Derm, Imagination and Roberts.

In the final summing up, the only real puzzle was—what was Curot's game? Curot visited different parts of the country with the traveling units of the New Apostles. That seemed to indicate that his operations were not confined to one locality. Neeta had first become suspicious while the apostles' unit was in an airplane manufacturing town. Airplanes—but in Fort Madison, it had been a watch factory. What was the connection? Aeroplanes and watches—he couldn't think of any link between aeroplanes and watches to explain the mystery. But it must be something that, in Curot's estimation at least, was worth the risks of abduction and murder to keep covered up.

Abruptly another thought hit him. In Fort Madison, Curot had doped one of the watch factory employees with truth serum, under the guise of giving him a private mind-reading. That, plainly, had been for the purpose of securing information from him. So Cal questioned Neeta closely about other private mind-readings which Curot had given during the course of their travels. She told him that Curot had often given such private readings. In what towns? Well—Neeta thought deeply—there had been more than one such mind-reading in Norfolk, Virginia. Several, in fact. With what type of people? Why, ship-builders. Norfolk was a ship-building town. So was Charleston, South Carolina, where Curot had also given private readings pretty freely. And in Washington, D. C., the apostles had held a month-long meeting. But Curot's subjects for private readings there were just plain people. Government employees, Neeta supposed. Didn't almost everyone in Washington work for the government?

Too, now that Neeta recalled it, there had been an occasion or two when those who had received Curot's private readings had afterwards complained of dozing off in his trailer, and of waking up pretty sick at their stomachs. That, to Cal, was ample explanation, for he and Imagination Daly had gone through the same experience and had reason to believe that they were first put out with an anaesthetic, in gas form, and then fed the truth serum.

CAL saw, as dawn approached, that a dense fog was settling over the lake, its gray mists trailing low over the rippled water.

"We're getting a break," Cal breathed. "That fog will keep them from seeing us."

A few minutes later they were in the canoe and Cal was paddling out upon the lake.

"Better get above the island," he said, "and let the wind carry us down. There's not much breeze but I think we can make it."

The lonely island, when they sighted it, looked vaguely like a half-submerged greenback turtle floating on the lake. They

could see it only as a hump, then even that outline disappeared, for as the wind died, the fog thickened like a coating of gray lather, seeming to pour out of the sky and fill the whole valley. Cal stopped paddling, placed the paddle under the seat amidships, and crouched beside Neeta.

"I was an idiot to let you come," he said softly. "I should have left you ashore. Will you stay on the mainland if I take you back now? I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you would."

He was very close to her, and she did not answer, but just looked at him. He could feel the warmth of her breath coming regularly against his cheek. The pleasant urge of impulse grew suddenly intense in his chest and arms, and most of all in his mind.

"Please do," Neeta said unexpectedly.

Cal took her slowly in his arms, his hands going out gently to bring her soft warmness close. She did not resist, and her lips answered his, and there was an easy naturalness about it all that was almost startling. . . .

He held her pressed close, with the fine fragrance of her hair heavy around his lips, and her hand moving quietly against his cheek.

Waves washing on the island brought him out of heaven. It was a rocky beach, and he seized the paddle and held the canoe offshore and listened, hearing nothing. It was, of course, impossible to see any sign of the prisoners or of Curot.

Cal eased in to the shore, then dragged the canoe out of sight between two boulders. Cal still heard nothing—at least, no sound of danger. He crouched beside the canoe, where it was hidden. Neeta stood about twenty feet away on the narrow rocky beach.

Then, unexpectedly, Neeta called out. And not to Cal—

"All right, Curot. Come and get this fool," she called. And rock-faced Apostle Harry Curot came out of the island brush. The hound-voiced little runt and his other aides were with Curot. They carried rifles, and looked very pleased.

CHAPTER XIV

HARD ON THE HEART

THE sun had scarcely broken through the fog. The figures of Curot and his men were shadowy phantoms. The mist kept rolling over the island, cold and damp as horror would probably be if horror was something that could be seen and felt. The wind flapped the loose sections of his clothing damply against skin; and to the right of Curot and his men and Neeta, the waves lapped on the stones with sobbing audibility. Cal stayed crouched by the canoe, frozen by astonishment.

Curot came toward Neeta. He seemed taller, his long face more severe, his eyes more piercing. And his big bony hands moved around nervously, changing the gun from one to the other, as he stood scowling at the girl.

The truth stunned Cal, beating his mind to insensibility. Neeta had turned on him . . . turned on *him*. . . . He could hardly believe it. He couldn't think that she had calmly wrecked all chances of rescuing her uncle and Derm and Imagination. She had seemed so sincerely worried out there in the canoe. And then, to turn upon him the instant Curot appeared— It couldn't be so. Couldn't be. But it was. . . .

But then he saw that Neeta was moving toward Curot—moving rapidly, heading him off! Cal felt a skyrocket surge to the heights. So that was it! Curot had seen her, but hadn't seen Cal.

"Did you come out here alone?" Curot growled.

"Of course," Neeta said. "That makes me a fool, doesn't it?" Neeta swung her shoulders carelessly. "I'm tired of all this trouble. It just struck me that we might make a deal."

"Deal?" Curot scowled.

"Yes, deal. You must have something pretty good lined up. I thought maybe there'd be a chance of cutting in on it."

Curot's suspicion ebbed. "Maybe I've been underestimating you."

"Maybe we have both made mistakes," Neeta said, and smiled.

"Huh?" Curot squinted at her. He swabbed his thick lips with a yellowish tongue. "Maybe I have. If you'd have behaved sensible sooner— We'll go into this later."

Cal eased away from the canoe, got under a bush, crawled to a safe distance. That was what Neeta had meant him to do. He could hear her moving off with Curot's men. They believed she had come to the island alone. There would be no search for Cal. She had given him the break he needed.

Cal's heart lifted. His stride grew springier, and confidence flooded back into him. He walked on until he found a safe place; then crouched down in the brush and thought things over. The fundamental things to be done were plain, of course— get Neeta, Derm and Imagination out of Curot's hands, find out what Curot was doing, then get Curot arrested in some fashion. But first, he must find where they were staying on the island.

He could hear Curot's party moving southward, toward the interior of the island. Cal listened, then decided to follow. He was very careful about it, although the shuffling of leaves in the wind and the thick driving fog made it unlikely that he would be sighted. He got into a thicket of blackberry bushes, came out of the thorns scratched and with his fingers torn, and crept on. Then a door banged somewhere ahead, and he knew Curot had entered some kind of house. And soon he saw it.

It was a cabin built of lap-board siding that looked exactly like logs without bark. It fronted the hillside, with its rear propped on posts three or four feet above the slope. There was a long porch on the downhill side, a fireplace chimney at the south end of the house, a stack of firewood in front of the cabin, and brush all around.

CAL watched the cabin intently, straining his eyes in the fog. He could hear voices inside, but they were faint, and later a man opened the door, spat a jet of tobacco juice, and closed the door again. Some sort of a conference seemed to be going on inside. And Cal felt that he had to overhear.

He crawled along, got to the rear of the house, turned sharply, and was soon beneath the raised end of the cabin. The rocky ground dug at his knees, and perspiration came out all over him. If they found him— The voices above were calm enough, almost hushed, and he had to crush an ear to a crack in the floor before he heard satisfactorily.

Neeta was saying, "—and it would have saved a lot of trouble, Curot, if you had come to me and offered a split of the proceeds. Instead of that, you tried to use the New Apostles without my knowledge. Did you think I would feel like taking that?"

"I thought of cutting you in," Curot said sourly. "But I knew your reputation for straightness. I figured it would be no dice if we put it up to you, but plenty of trouble."

"Well, it's tough we didn't get together," Neeta told him calmly. "What now?"

"It's gone too far to cover up any more."

"How so?"

"The magician, Merton."

"What about him?" Neeta demanded. "He doesn't know anything."

Curot growled, "Where is he?"

"I don't know, Curot. We separated."

Curot complained, "Damn, but it's a mess. I don't know whether we can quiet it down and go on with it, or not. It's a shame. We had the sweetest racket going."

"Just what was the set-up?" Neeta asked.

There, reflected Cal, was a pertinent question. He listened until his eardrums hurt.

After a while Curot said, "I think I'll tell you, at that."

Another voice said, "She may be pumping you, Harry."

Curot grunted. "Sure. She may be. But before she's through with this, she won't be in a position to cross us up."

"What do you mean?" Neeta asked sharply.

"Later," Curot said. "Later, sister. You want to know what we've been pulling. Here, take a look at this. Wait a minute and I'll unwrap it."

Cal, vastly puzzled, heard the sound of paper being removed from something in the room above. He heard the paper drop to the floor, almost over him. Then there was quiet. . . .

"What on earth is it?" Neeta demanded.

"Read this cablegram," Curot responded. "That is, read the translation of the code below it."

The girl read, but indistinctly, and Cal caught only some of it.

"—American government—watch plant in Fort Madison, Iowa—twenty-five thousand—on delivery." Then Neeta said, "Twenty-five thousand dollars, for getting this thing from that watch factory?"

"Nice, eh?" Curot growled.

"But what is it?"

"That thing," said Curot, "is a newly invented torpedo-director. It works on a sound principle, the way I understand it. The mechanism directs a torpedo toward the propellers of an enemy ship. The American government was having it manufactured in that watch factory. You know that watch plants usually make the timing devices for torpedoes and shells and that sort of thing. Anyhow, this thing is pretty valuable."

"What's it worth?" Neeta asked wonderingly.

"To a private individual, nothing," Curot chuckled. "To the representative of the foreign government that sent that cablegram, twenty-five thousand dollars. Read it again. Twenty-five thousand." He sounded well pleased with himself.

"Oh," Neeta said. "So that's what it is."

"That, sister, is what it is."

"Is this the—first time?"

"The first time— No." Curot laughed grimly. "We've been doing it for months. I used to be in the espionage service, see. After the war, I gave it up, and finally joined the Apostles. And one day an old pal looked me up. He suggested this layout—using the Apostles as a front. The Apostles travel around, and nobody would ever suspect a bunch of Evangelists. Nobody would think *they* were spies. And that mind-reading angle, and especially the private readings after the show!" Curot whacked his thigh with his hand. "It was sweet. For the private readings, I always picked somebody who had information we wanted, left him alone in my trailer, gave him a little gas on the sly, then shot him full of truth serum. Sweet, I tell you. It almost always worked. Why, from a navy man in Norfolk, we got all the dope on the new gun-sighting and control system. In the Charleston shipyard, we got the plans of the new cruisers. It worked every time."

Neeta said, "I first suspected you when we were holding a meeting in a town where they manufactured airplanes."

"Army planes," Curot nodded. "That thing they call the flying fortress. We got ten thousand for the dope on that. We'd have gotten more, only we missed some of the plans."

CAL pushed out his lips thoughtfully. Espionage. Spies! An organized gang stealing military secrets and selling them. The thing was fantastic. But it must be the truth. That watch factory manager had refused to say what had been stolen, and that was understandable now. The torpedo controlling device was being manufactured secretly in his plant and he had evidently been under government orders to say nothing about it, no matter what happened.

"You see that machine gun lying over there?" Curot asked, above.

"Y-yes," Neeta said hesitantly.

"That's a new type," chuckled Curot. "It comes from an arms plant up in Connecticut. There'll be a man through here in a few days to pick it up and carry it abroad."

"I—see."

"You see a lot by now, sister," Curot told her. "You see the whole thing. That's all right if you're square. But if you're not, it isn't so good. And I knew that before I

started. So now you're going to jump into it with us, whether you want to or not. You want to jump, don't you?"

"I—yes. Yes, of course."

"Swell," Curot declared. "Get that magician, fellows."

Cal jumped, instinctively, thinking Curot was talking about him. Then he realized they must mean Imagination. He was alive, then! Cal had been afraid. . . . Yes, Imagination was alive, and they were dragging him across the floor toward the door.

"Come on," Curot said to Neeta.

"What—but what—"

"This magician and that fat detective have got to be disposed of," Curot told her. "You realize that, don't you?"

"Well—of course."

"We couldn't have 'em talking on us."

"No. Certainly not."

"And we can't keep them around."

"Well—we might—"

"No; we couldn't do that. And anyway, you might be lying to me."

"I—lying—"

"Yes," Curot said, decisively. "And just to be sure you're not, and to get you into this as deep as we are, *you're* going to shoot this magician. We'll take him up on the hill. . . ."

Neeta said nothing. She must be speechless with horror. Cal had wondered why Curot was talking so freely, and now he knew. Curot was taking one simple, foolproof measure to make sure that Neeta would never betray him.

Neeta, Curot and the men stamped out of the cabin, dragging Imagination with them. Imagination was making mewing, nasal noises. Cal clenched his fists and swore. Imagination was in an awful tough spot.

They hauled him off up the hill.

CAL waited until he was sure they were out of sight, then scrambled out from under the cabin. He was taking a chance, but this was no time for caution. He walked boldly to the door, shoved it open and entered, depending on surprise to give him an advantage should anyone be inside.

Derm was tied to the post which supported the roof. The ropes which held him were so tight that in some places they were buried in his flesh. His curly brown hair was down over his forehead, dripping with perspiration that had oozed greasily from his brow. His thick-lipped mouth puckered like a baby's.

Cal saw no sign of any of Curot's men, nor of Chris Roberts.

Cal got Derm untied, and Derm managed to stir his enormous bulk only with difficulty. Finally he fell down on all fours, too stiff to move.

"Keep shifting around to loosen those muscles," Cal instructed. Derm nodded, and pinched and kneaded his fat legs and arms.

Cal, casting about for a weapon, saw only a wooden box standing open on the table, and chairs, a couch, and the open door. Beyond it was a kitchen and another room, a bedroom, but nowhere any sign of a weapon.

Coming back to the wooden box, Cal glanced into it at the two machines. One was an intricate affair of clockwork, and must be the controlling mechanism for torpedoes which Curot had stolen from the watch factory. It was shiny under a coat of protective cellophane and grease. The second item was a machine gun. Cal lifted it out. And by that time Derm was taking a tentative step or two and mumbling:

"I think I can walk."

"Can you handle this machine gun?"

Derm came over. "I cut my teeth on 'em," he said. "That one's newfangled, but I'll bet I can make her percolate."

Cal picked up a circular magazine resembling a can of motion picture film.

"That's the food for this baby," Derm said, taking hold of the ammo drum, squinting at it, then clipping it into the rapid firer.

Whatever Derm's other shortcomings might be, he certainly had plenty of nerve, and Cal was newly inclined to forgive Derm for a lot.

They went outside, Cal carrying the machine gun.

Cal and Derm crept up toward the rise of the island. Cal listened, and before long heard voices—Curot trying to force Neeta to shoot Imagination.

The fog had lifted a little, and shortly they glimpsed the Curot crowd, gathered in an open space. The men stood in a rough circle, and two or three had rifles or shotguns tucked under their arms, while others carried revolvers in their hands. They numbered, Cal noted with growing uneasiness, almost a dozen all told. He had not expected so many. Fortunately, their attention was all on Neeta, who was standing with her back to a tree, flatly refusing to shoot Imagination, who was flung out on the ground at her feet.

Cal located a convenient boulder, placed the machine gun across it and looked at Derm questioningly.

Derm wheezed, "Hold that thing, buddy. Hold it tight. Those babies walk around when they start talking."

Cal grabbed the gun tight.

"Not the barrel," Derm warned. "I've seen them get red hot."

Changing his grip, Cal got set. "Curot! Drop those guns!" he roared.

Curot was the only man who did drop his weapon. His men all whirled, frowning.

Derm was ready. The machine gun let out a roar, shook, and squirted empty cartridges from one end, lead from the other. Cal was deafened; powder fumes stung his eyes; hot cartridge cases scorched him. He struggled to hold the vibrating iron devil. Then it went silent.

"Drop those guns!" Cal yelled again, blindly.

The *whack* of a rifle answered. Then the machine gun gobbled a short burst. It almost got away from Cal. A man screamed. Derm squinted calmly. And Cal envied him such control. Then Cal got the powder fumes out of his eyes, looked, and was astonished at their success. Neeta was behind a tree. One of Curot's men was down, his legs leaking a slow red flow. The others were throwing away their guns and lifting their arms.

"Now back up away from those guns!" Cal roared.

They backed up. They didn't look like the cold killers Cal knew them to be. He advanced and got their weapons, tossing them toward the boulder where Derm still held the machine gun. He slapped his hands over the prisoners to make sure they carried no hidden guns. He found a few knives and pistols, threw them toward Derm. The captives glowered, and Curot swore furiously.

Cal reached over and cut Imagination free. Imagination was disheveled, and one side of his face wore a red welt and he seemed unsteady on his feet. He kept pressing his palm over the bloody side of his face.

"Hurt bad?" Cal asked.

"Practically butchered," Imagination groaned. "Listen, they were gonna *kill* me! They—"

He fell silent, turning white. For there was a crashing of the underbrush nearby. Cal held one of the revolvers he had appropriated; and as an afterthought, kept it behind his back where it was not visible.

CHRIS ROBERTS came bounding out of the brush. He stopped. His eyes seemed about to pop from his head. His mouth opened and shut. And finally he managed a grin.

"I heard shots," he said unsteadily.

"Yes," Cal agreed. "You probably did."

"Uh—yes." Chris Roberts swallowed. "I—uh—I was afraid one of you had been shot. I—I was rushing to your assistance. Yes. Rushing to your aid."

"I see," Cal said. "That's right nice of you."

"Uh—yes—I mean, I'll help you get those guns back where they can't reach them," Chris Roberts said. He started for the weapons.

"Whoa," Cal said.

Chris Roberts kept going for the guns. "Hold it!" Cal rapped.

Roberts looked at him. "What—"

"How come you're running around loose, Roberts?"

"Why," Roberts said, "I escaped. Yes, I escaped."

"I see. You escaped. Yesterday morning, up in Iowa, we were about to go to the police and you suddenly remembered you had heard where Curot was going. You offered to guide us there. And you took us to the Righteous Land. Then you left us at the Righteous Land, and first thing we knew, a trap had been sprung on us. And now, you were walking around loose on this island. Quite a coincidence, don't you think?"

"Why, no. Not a coincidence at all," Roberts said uncertainly. "It—I escaped—"

Cal took a step forward and threw his words. "You're not putting that across. You're with Curot."

Behind Cal, Neeta gave a little cry of surprise.

Chris Roberts sprang for the guns which Cal had taken from Curot's men. Cal pitched forward to head him off. They crashed together, struggled. Roberts was stronger than Cal had thought he could be. Cal shoved him violently, and they staggered back into the knot of Curot's men, upsetting one. That gave them their chance.

Curot himself came at Cal, feet first. Cal leaped aside. He hit Curot, tripped him. He used his fist on another man. Then he himself got knocked flat. Dazed, he realized somebody was trying to wrench the gun out of his fingers. They rolled over and over. Another man joined the struggle for the gun—Chris Roberts. An instant later, the machine gun blared briefly.

Derm yelled, "Get clear! Fools! Get clear! Let me use this on 'em!"

Nobody paid any attention. Cal pulled a large fistful of hair out of a head. He got a firmer grip, knocked the head against a rock with his left hand. His right still held the revolver. Then Roberts had it. Roberts leaped straight up and clear of the melée.

Derm's machine gun rattled. And Chris Roberts suddenly hinged, doubling up from the middle of his spine. He went down, all ragged and wet and red around his middle.

And presently it was all over, except for the cavortings of Imagination Daly who had suddenly recovered his courage from somewhere and was bouncing around like a madman, howling, "Come on and fight, darn you! We're ready for you. . . ."

WHEN everything had quieted down, Imagination went ashore to send for the government men, since Curot's misdeeds were plainly their affair. He returned late in the afternoon, standing triumphantly in the prow of a big speedboat, surrounded by three spruce young gentlemen in civilian clothes—federal agents who had sped from St. Louis by fast government plane.

It was almost dusk before it was all satisfactorily straightened out. The federal men were not too easy to convince, but, backed by Derm and Neeta, Cal and his assistant managed finally to clear themselves of suspicion. Derm, it appeared, held a deputy sheriff's commission, and since he had engaged Cal and Imagination, that made them deputies in a sort of unorthodox way.

Neeta was pretty badly shaken up. She was worried lest the authorities order her to disband the New Apostles, and the shock of the discovery of her uncle's guilt had been a pretty nasty blow.

One of the federal men told Cal privately that Roberts showed every indication of long addiction to the narcotics.

"He'd worked up a sort of immunity. That was why it wasn't so dangerous for him to permit Curot to keep him heavily drugged for long periods. Made a neat alibi, too. And helped to keep the girl quiet once her suspicions had been aroused."

And then at last it was all over. Curot and Roberts and their gang had been led away, and Imagination and Derm were arguing vociferously about something or other, and Cal and Neeta managed to slip down to the pebbly beach, alone. The dusk

tinged the air with deep lavender, and the breeze that blew out from the mainland was mild and soft. Cal's strong young fingers closed around Neeta's hand, and they stood for a moment without speaking.

Then, stammering pretty badly and completely lacking in the glib assurance that he could display during his performances, Cal asked Neeta to marry him.

She smiled. "I'll read your mind, darling. You'll never be able to fool me about a single thing. Will you like that, do you think?"

"Not much, prob'ly," Cal said with a quick grin. "But there'll be compensations, I guess." They were sampling one of the compensations when Imagination tramped into view, carrying an armload of rifles and revolvers.

"Souvenirs," he explained.

"I thought you were scared of guns," Cal said.

"Not me, pal. Not any more. Guns are my friends."

Cal looked at Neeta. "Must be some more around somewhere. Suppose you could find 'em—if you looked hard enough?"

Imagination swung away, but paused at the edge of the beach.

"You two aren't the only mind-readers around here," he said.

THE END

SENOR VULTURE

The news that Marcos Palma was riding down El Camino Real sent a shiver of apprehension over the somnolent Old California mission town. For where Palma, black of dress and blacker of heart, passed, he left a trail of disaster, desolation —and sometimes death. It was for this that men called him *Señor Vulture* and crossed themselves when they spoke his name. Beginning a new novel of sword-flashing adventure, by

JOHNSTON McCULLEY

MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS

There were two of them—wild boys of the road—riding the freights by night. Les had quit the farm to see the world. Hot-shot's idea was to get all the excitement he could and to keep on going. They were young and human, and when trouble took a pass at them, they fought right back. A complete novelet, by

W. RYERSON JOHNSON

BOTTLE IN THE SEA

The big liner was sinking, going down by the head—and going down fast. One man saw a chance to reach the lifeboats and safety, but he sold that chance to get what he really wanted. The story of a stubborn dreamer, by

MAX BRAND

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JUNE 12th

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

THIS is the week when the new ARGOSY should speak for itself. We're very pleased with the looks of her, and we think you'll feel the same. Beyond that, anything we might say would be superfluous; so we didn't even save the space for it. Right off the bat, we're ready to listen to the pleasing words of

JOE M. RINK

Until the last few months, ARGOSY was to me a magazine with a good story occasionally; now, almost all of every issue is most interesting reading. I hope ARGOSY keeps up this good policy. I think ARGOSY's authors are out-doing themselves more every week. Merely as a suggestion, would like to offer two more excellent writers, to wit: Robert R. Mills and Wm. J. Makin.

I very seldom read Foreign Legion stories, but don't say leave them out, because I know they appeal to many others. What is one man's meat is another's poison. I rate A. Hyatt Merritt the most entertaining of modern writers, and know many of your readers read with regret that he is too busy to write another of his intensely interesting tales.

Would like very much to see a quarterly or semi-annual ARGOSY put together containing only the best of former year's stories. We all hear the old-timers mention by-gone tales which leave a "watery" taste in our mouth for more.

Washington, Ind.

AND speaking of the old-timers, here is a man who really is an old-time reader from 'way back when. Says

S. F. McCANDLESS

Was telling some men the other day that I bought the ARGOSY in 1885, but that I thought it had a different name at that time, that it was printed in pamphlet form about 8" by 12" with 6 or 8 pages about same size as the "Diamond Dick" and cost 5c each. The ARGOSY changed to a larger size more like 12" by 18", then came out in magazine form like it is now.

Believe "The Youth's Companion" was published at that time.

A good many years for a person to stick to the same magazine, but I am still reading same and can truthfully say I like it because it has always been a good clean magazine good for either man or boy to read.

Please advise if my memory is correct as to the above points and what name it was first published under.

Toronto, Ont., Canada

READER McCANDLESS' memory, as others of you will doubtless agree, is essentially correct. ARGOSY first appeared on December 9, 1882 as GOLDEN ARGOSY. It then contained eight pages, was about 12" x 18" in size.

Now for word from a newcomer—

HOWARD RAINEY CASTLE

Just a word of appreciation of your magazine. I have been reading the "slicks" for too many years, and growing more and more disgusted with them. Then, recently, I picked up a copy of ARGOSY—and I have read every one published since. Your writers have been outside New York, and do not insult all of us who live in other places, calling us "corney" and naming our hometown "Corn Center."

Give my respects to H. Bedford-Jones, please. He knows his business. I enjoy every word of his stories.

If you are interested in information as to the likes of one reader, I prefer stories that are complete in one issue. The illusion is broken when you say: "Continued in our next issue." Edgar Allen Poe's principle is still good. A story should be finished at one sitting, to preserve the unity of effect.

Santa Barbara, Calif.

THIS leaves us room (we hope) to mention that three ARGOSY stories you'll soon have a chance to see enacted on the screen of your neighborhood playhouse are: *Annapolis, Ahoy, Carnival Queen* and *Doomed Liner*.

SWELL NEWS!

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Eat 3 cakes of Fleischmann's Yeast *daily* for 21 days. *Save the label from each cake.* Paste these on the *free* Fleischmann Dance Card your grocer will give you.

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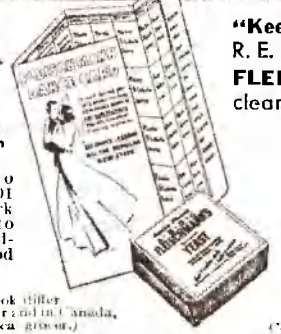
Send your labels to Fleischmann's Yeast, 701 Washington St., New York City. And don't forget to include *your* name and address. (This offer holds good until August 31, 1937.)

(Terms of securing Dance Book differ slightly in states west of Denver and in Canada, see newspapers, or ask your local grocer.)



"Keep eating it regularly," says Dr. R. E. Lee, well-known physician, "and **FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST** will help clear up **ADOLESCENT PIMPLES."**

● After the start of adolescence important glands develop, causing disturbances throughout the system. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin. Pimples break through.

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