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ARGOSY

SEPT. 5

WEEKLY

Bengal Fire

A Big New Novel of That Far Frontier "Where There Ain't No Ten Commandments"

by **L. G. Blochman**

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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

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Bengal Fire

By L. G. BLOCHMAN
Author of "Bombay Mail,"
"Afghan Trick," etc.

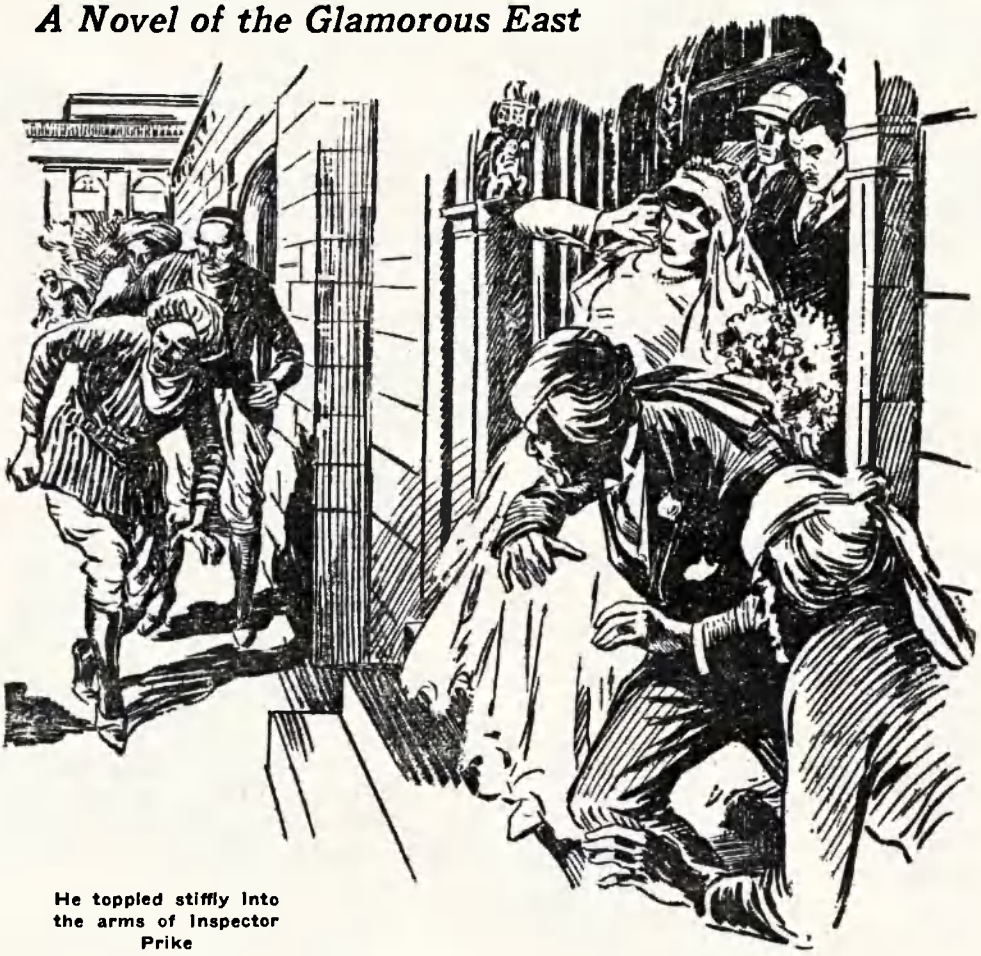
The East is a land of blazing sun and sweating heat—and the land where lies the high romance of all the ages. But to the white man who plays with its sly intrigue, the East is a terrible destroyer

CHAPTER I.

TIGER BUTTON.

NO one in Calcutta would think of writing a letter on any day of the week except Thursday, any more than a New Yorker would think of moving any day but October 1st. On Thursday the mail leaves for Europe and America via Bombay, and on Thursday only an insurance salesman would think of violating the warning *This is mail day* signs which go up in every office from Clive Street to the Maidan. Therefore the hubbub which boiled through the publicity offices of Harrison J. Hoyt on this particular Thursday was, to say the least, unusual. And to tall, placid Lee Marvin, who had hurried away from his own mail at Calcutta headquarters of Orfèvre, Ltd., it was positively

A Novel of the Glamorous East



He toppled stiffly into the arms of Inspector Prike

alarming. He didn't like it at all.

As Marvin announced himself to Babu Gundranesh Dutt, the rotund Bengali clerk who guarded Hoyt's outer portals, he heard tempestuous sounds of an altercation approaching a climax on the other side of the partition. One voice, which Marvin did not know, swelled and sputtered with rage; the other—Hoyt's—answered in a sarcastic monotone. Marvin could not distinguish words. He sat down between two other men waiting in Hoyt's outer office.

Marvin knew both the men by sight. One was Henry Kobayashi, a lynx-eyed, Hawaiian-born Japanese, with an aggressive American manner and a job of flooding India with the cheap product of Osaka cotton mills. The other, a light-skinned Hindu with an almond-green turban piled high on his scornful head, was Chitterji Rao, household officer for the Maharajah of Jharnpur. . . .

Chitterji Rao was returning Marvin's glance with cold disdain when the door to Hoyt's inner office burst open and huge, sanguine-faced Kurt Julius stormed forth, choking with indignation. Julius, Marvin knew, was a wild-animal merchant. He waddled

past without a glance. With a savage tug he opened the collar of his high, Dutch-style white jacket, as though to make room for the choleric expansion of his florid throat. A small silver button popped off the jacket and rolled along the floor to Marvin's feet. As Julius stamped from the room, Marvin picked up the button and examined it idly. It was of a common type of detachable button made in imitation of the old-time Siamese *tical,* but in execution it was decidedly uncommon. The convex surface of the silver was intricately carved in the shape of a tiger's head. Marvin put the button in his pocket.

Harrison Hoyt appeared on the threshold of his office door. Henry Kobayashi and Chitterji Rao arose expectantly. Hoyt beckoned to Marvin. The Hindu and the Japanese glared at the late arrival who was being accorded special favors.

"I got your chit," said Marvin, when the door closed behind him, "and I came right over. Is the Bosa pearl finally—?"

"No!" Hoyt interrupted with a quick, apprehensive gesture for silence. He looked uneasily toward the door to the outer office, then continued in a low voice: "As a matter of fact, I will have news for you on that matter some time today. But I can't talk about it now. I sent for you because I want you to do me a personal favor."

Hoyt tossed over a salmon-colored telegraph form.

"I want you to meet the Burma Mail steamer today," he said, "and take care of a girl for me."

Marvin's expression changed as he read the signature on the radiogram:

ARRIVING CALCUTTA S.S. BANGALORE THURSDAY LOVE
EVELYN

HE said nothing as he folded the paper and handed it back, but there was reluctance in the gesture with which he smoothed his red hair—a deep red, the color of polished mahogany. There was reluctance, too, in his frank blue eyes, the blueness of which was accentuated by the healthy tan of his face. It was a strong, clean-cut face, softened a little by the good humor of his M-shaped mouth, but still virile—so virile that the vertical indentation in his chin could not be called a dimple.

"You're going to do it for me, aren't you, Lee?" said Hoyt, smiling across his desk. With that prop smile of his, Hoyt could be the most charmingly disagreeable person in Calcutta. Usually the sight of it made Lee Marvin contemplate doing violence to the gleaming octave of perfect Hoyt teeth. But today there was something tragic about the insincerity of the smile, something that reminded Marvin of the pitiful bravado of a condemned man afraid to die.

"Be reasonable, Harry," said Marvin. "This is no job for anyone but yourself."

"You used to say you owed me your life," said Hoyt. His smile was more ingratiating than ever, yet Marvin could not rid himself of the impression that it was merely a futile mask for some great, unspoken fear. "Now you won't even meet a boat for me."

Lee Marvin shifted uneasily in his chair. He frowned.

"Harry, I don't like tears—and you'll have to face them sooner or later. After all, this is your mess. The girl's not engaged to me."

"To me either," said Harrison J. Hoyt.

"She must think she is," protested

Marvin. "You always said you were going to bring her to India when you had the money."

"That was two years ago," said Hoyt. "After two years you'd think any girl would have sense enough to know how things stood."

Marvin gave a noncommittal shrug. "Then why is she coming to India?"

"To make trouble," Hoyt declared, tapping the telegraph form. "Why didn't she write she was coming? Or at least send me a cable from Singapore, where she changed ships. Or from Penang. Instead she sends a last minute radiogram from the ship, figuring I won't have time to hide out on her."

"Listen, Harry, if there's going to be any trouble—"

"You've got to do it, Lee." Hoyt leaned across the desk to grasp Marvin's wrists with tight, desperate fingers. "You've got to meet Evelyn —and keep her from coming up here. I can't leave my office this afternoon, Lee. It's a matter of life and death. If it weren't so damned important I wouldn't ask you to do this. . . . The *Bangalore* is due at three-thirty. You'd better start for the Kidderpore docks."

THE haggard despair in Hoyt's face, despair that defied all his efforts to be gaily nonchalant, finally decided Marvin. With a tremendous sigh he capitulated.

"All right," he said, "I'll do the dirty work. What's Evelyn's last name?"

"Branch."

"And what does Evelyn Branch look like?"

"Oh, she has gray-green eyes," said Hoyt, trying unsuccessfully to be casual. "That's about all I remember."

"Don't be so damned off-hand," said Marvin, "or I'm liable to get a black eye for accosting the wrong woman. Where's that picture you used to have on your desk until Antoinette came romping into your life last year?"

Hoyt opened the bottom drawer of his desk, pushed aside a loaded revolver and lifted out a leather frame. Marvin noticed that the frame was mouldy, as was all leather that had been neglected during the monsoon, but that the revolver was freshly oiled. He reached for the photograph and with his thumb wiped off the greenish tropical fungus clouding the glass, until he could make out the features of a rather pretty girl.

Her hair was of some vague light color that the photographer had made decidedly blond in spots by tricks in lighting and focus. There were also luscious high-lights on the lips, not at all compatible with the outline of the mouth, which was young and trusting, nor with the big, wondering eyes. The girl was not a babe in arms, however. Marvin drew this conclusion from the poise of her head, which was sure, proud, almost imperious. He was glad of that.

"You'd better get going, Lee." Hoyt reached for the photograph. "Good luck with Evelyn."

"Thanks," said Marvin with a wry grin. "What shall I tell her?"

"Anything you want."

"Shall I be very blunt and tell her that you're getting married tomorrow?"

"May as well. She'll have to find out."

Marvin still hesitated.

"And what shall I do with her, after I've broken the news?"

"Oh, yes." Hoyt peeled off a fifty-

rupee note from a fat bankroll. "Better take her to the Grand Hotel and put her up. But keep her away from me—at least until after the wedding."

"I'll try," said Marvin. "But if—"

"No 'ifs'," interrupted Hoyt, smiling with all his teeth, while his eyes grew even darker with hopeless horror. "Hurry, or you'll miss the boat. Don't forget my bachelor dinner's at nine."

Without listening to Marvin's answer, Hoyt pushed him toward the door. Marvin went out. As he crossed the outer office, he acknowledged with a preoccupied nod the beaming salutation of Babu Gundranesh Dutt. He also nodded, on general principles, to Henry Kobayashi and to Chitterji Rao. The latter sat uneasily in a rattan armchair and fidgeted with the line of jet buttons that bisected the front of his long, high collared, black coat. The household officer of His Highness did not change the impersonal expression of his bulging eyes, the whites of which were as blue as skimmed milk.

The Hindu's stare gave Marvin a queer sensation of cold at the pit of his stomach, as he hurried downstairs. Whether it was the eyes of Chitterji Rao, the sly smirk of Henry Kobayashi, the crimson rage of Kurt Julius, or the ill-concealed terror of Hoyt himself, Marvin left the office with the definite impression that Harrison Hoyt was at last being sucked down into the quicksands he had so cleverly skirted for so long.

At the curb Marvin hailed a dilapidated taxi. "Kidderpore docks," told the driver, a Sikh with a square black beard.

The cab lurched forward.

CHAPTER II.

BRAVE GIRL.

A SOFT, hot rain was falling as Marvin's taxi honked its way along Chowringhee to Sir James Outram's statue, then cut across the Maidan to Red Road. It was the last of the Monsoon rains and would be followed, after a few steamy autumn weeks characterized chiefly by the annual invasion of green flies, by the period known technically as the "cold weather" because the temperature sometimes fell below seventy at night. Elsewhere in Calcutta people were hailing the end of the Monsoon with considerable enthusiasm, because practically the entire social calendar of the Second City of the Empire is crowded into the three months between the advent of the green flies and the arrival of the first burning days of February. Lee Marvin, however, was occupied with less pleasant thoughts. As the rain pattered on his white topee, he was meditating upon the disagreeable nature of the mission before him. He was also cursing his predicament of being under obligations to a man whom he thoroughly disliked and yet pitied as well.

Cursing, of course, was futile. The fact remained that Marvin *had* gone swimming in the surf at Puri, nearly a year ago, and he *had* been drinking champagne, and he *had* got a cramp, and Harrison Hoyt *had* pulled him out to safety. There was nothing particularly heroic in Hoyt's action, since the surf was rather quiet that night. But there was no denying that if Hoyt hadn't done what he did, Lee Marvin would probably have drowned. And after all, a man can't refuse to do a favor for a person who has saved his life, even a fairly obnoxious per-

son. At least, a man like Lee Marvin couldn't refuse. And Harrison Hoyt knew it and took advantage of it.

Harrison Hoyt was a shrewd, curly-haired New Yorker with no humor in his dark eyes, but a great propensity for getting his long, sharp nose into other people's affairs. He had been a press agent; even after the birth of that glorified creature, the Public Relations Counsel, Hoyt had still remained a press agent—which shows how little dignity he possessed. But what he lacked in dignity, he made up in enterprise. He had come to India as ghost-writer for Kurt Julius, the buyer of wild animals. Julius, finding himself practically the only important middleman in elephants and tigers who had neither a book nor a movie to his credit, had hired Hoyt to put him into literature. That was two years ago. Hoyt had come out with Kurt Julius on his annual cold-weather visit, and had not gone back since.

CALCUTTA, Hoyt found, was fertile field for a bright young advertising man. Publicity in India was in its infancy. The British in the East had too great an Emersonian confidence in the quality of their mousetraps. They needed someone like Hoyt to pave that path through the woods and set up large neon signs along the way. So Hoyt opened a publicity office of his own.

He built up a strange and wonderful clientele. Julius, of course, was still his client when he came each winter. Then there were a few Rajahs, anxious to improve their questionable relations with the British *raj* by favorable press notices; a Parsi promoter, a few rich Bengali race-horse owners, and, strangely enough, Britishers, men and women, who retained him professionally while despising him socially—he might just as well have been in trade, for all he was ever invited to a Government House garden party. It was even rumored over the tea-cups at Firpo's and Peliti's and the Tollygunj Gymkhana, that Hoyt must be indulging in petty blackmail to secure some of his clients. Lee Marvin could not verify these rumors, but he was ready to believe them, in view of the financial advantage to which Hoyt was turning Marvin's own sense of gratitude. Only last week Hoyt had asked to borrow another thousand rupees.

"Look here," Marvin had protested, "you're already into me for seven thousand dibs, and you keep on spending money as if you hadn't a debt in the world. You're living in a grand manner that I couldn't afford myself. . . ."

"That's just swank for business reasons," said Hoyt. "Anyhow, saving your life is worth more than seven thousand rupees, isn't it?"

"Of course, if you put it on that basis. I thought you were asking for a loan. Apparently I'm paying salvage fees on my own carcass."

"Not at all. You're making a down payment on the Bosa pearl."

"The Bosa pearl?"

"I see you know it."

"Naturally. The Maharajah of Jharnpur's—?"

"What's it worth?"

"Let's see. . . ." Marvin made mental calculations. The Bosa pearl was at least a hundred-grainer. . . . "Roughly, about ten thousand sterling," he said.

"If you're discreet—and play ball with me—I can get it for you for five."

Marvin had smiled. The Bosa pearl for five thousand sterling, and he could practically write his own ticket with

Orfèvre, Ltd.: The well-upholstered executive chair he had been vaguely promised in the Paris branch, at least; possibly even a boost to New York.

But he was not counting on it, despite Hoyt's relations with the Maharajah of Jharnpur. Very likely, Hoyt was merely talking an extra thousand rupees out of the good-natured Marvin. The Bosa pearl was probably a figment of his active imagination, Marvin mused, while this girl he was on his way to meet was a real problem. . . .

Marvin's taxi arrived at the Kidderpore docks just as the *Bangalore* was churning fresh mud from the bottom of the brown Hooghly, preparatory to warping alongside her pier. Marvin hurried through the customs sheds and reached the bulkhead in time to see Evelyn Branch standing at the rail of the incoming ship. He recognized her from the photograph—the same proud carriage of her blond head; a little more so, even. From a distance the outlines of her full lips seemed less young and trusting, too. The girl had evidently grown up some since Hoyt's picture was taken. She seemed capable of sharp answers. Marvin was glad of that. He would rather have curses than tears.

EVELYN BRANCH was scanning the faces of the small crowd on the pier, obviously looking for Harrison Hoyt. She leaned her elbows on the rail, her white bouclé dress moulded against her by the wind that swept the river.

The gangplank was hoisted aboard. In a few minutes she came down.

Marvin touched her arm.

"Welcome to India, Miss Branch," he said.

The girl turned, her lips parted with joyous expectancy. She was ready to fall into his arms. When she saw him, her eyes clouded with puzzled disappointment. They were the same big wondering eyes of the photograph. Marvin gallantly risked sunstroke and took off his topee.

"Did you just speak to me?" asked Evelyn Branch.

"I did, Miss Branch."

"But . . . do I know you?"

"You do not, Miss Branch. But if you'll come over this way, so that I may help you clear the customs, I'll explain."

"I'm sorry. I was expecting—"

"I know, Miss Branch." Marvin put on his topee and took the girl's arm. "You see, I'm a friend of Harrison Hoyt."

"Where — ?" The girl stopped dead in her tracks. There was anguish in her voice. She was afraid to finish her question.

"He was unable to come, Miss Branch," said Marvin. He didn't look at her. He started her walking again. They had reached the hot gloom of the customs shed before she said sharply: "Why?"

"Temporarily incapacitated," said Marvin. "Nothing serious, of course. One of the many minor but annoying visitations which we in the tropics—"

"Please tell me the truth," interrupted the girl, a little breathless.

"Do you mean to tell me to my face that I'm not a convincing liar?" It was positively wicked, being facetious on the threshold of a tragic moment, but Marvin couldn't help it. It was the only way he could keep himself from suddenly running out on the whole disagreeable business.

"Well?" Evelyn was growing impatient. "Is this one of Harrison's little jokes?"

"It's no joke, I assure you." Be brutal, Marvin was telling himself; that's the kindest way. "You see, Hoyt is getting married tomorrow."

Evelyn Branch started to smile, as though to say, then he did get my radiogram after all, and he's rushing marriage preparations. . . . The smile did not materialize. A peculiar blank expression came over her face.

Quick Marvin, the *coup de grâce*. . . .

"He's marrying," he said, "a rather unpleasant person named Antoinette Vrai."

EVELYN BRANCH did not gasp, sway, or burst into tears. With her unfinished smile still on the ends of her lips, she looked right through Marvin into another world, a faraway world peopled by friends and hopes and ambitions, cut off from her by the seven seas. She was completely oblivious to the bustle of stewards, Eurasian customs inspectors marking luggage with chalk hieroglyphics, unsanitary Ooria coolies struggling with bags and boxes, hotel runners, helpless passengers. Evelyn seemed suddenly very much alone, yet she was not forlorn. She seemed to Marvin very brave and charmingly determined.

Then she began to laugh—not hysterically or sardonically, but softly, just as though her tragic, futile trip halfway around the earth to marry a man who belonged to another woman was a tremendous joke on her.

"I guess I'm just a damned fool," she said at last.

From that moment, Marvin ceased to act for Harrison Hoyt. He was no longer making the best of an unpleasant duty. He was sympathetically and sincerely interested in the personal problem of an engaging, if too trusting, young woman, when he said:

"I wouldn't say that. You're not a mind reader. You didn't know he was marrying someone else, did you?"

"Of course not. Why do you suppose I came out?"

"Did you have any inkling that . . . I mean, did Harrison Hoyt tell you not to come to India?" Marvin asked.

The girl hesitated an instant. She gave Marvin a quick, sharp glance, as though she were seeing him as a person for the first time, making a split-second appraisal, weighing his motives.

"No," she said, almost immediately.

"Then you'd better go right back home—brutal as it may sound."

"Home?" Evelyn Branch laughed nervously. "I can't—unless steamer tickets grow on trees in this lush climate. It took all my hard-earned cash to get out here. I was so confident that—"

Her voice failed. For the first time the hopeless pathos of her predicament seemed to touch her.

"I'll stake you to a ticket," said Marvin impetuously.

"No, thanks." Pathetic? Cold as ice, now. Haughty. A little indignant, even. "Don't think for a moment that I'd accept money from Harrison Hoyt. Tell him he doesn't have to buy me off; I won't start trouble. And I don't want pity money."

"I wasn't speaking for Hoyt. I was speaking for myself."

"Oh." Again that quick, sharp glance. "Then you're a little premature. I don't rebound quite that quickly. . . ."

"Thank you," said Marvin, "for overestimating my seductive enterprise. But I really never imagined my manly appeal to be quite so instantaneously infallible."

"I'll apologize," said the girl, "if you'll explain why a perfect stranger

would make such a generous proposal —without strings. . . ."

"In the first place," Marvin began, "I'm not perfect. . . ."

Then he stopped. Why indeed? It was difficult to analyze the reasons behind his impulsive offer. He would have to explain what the clean, subtle charm of a girl fresh from the temperate zone could do to a man who for years had seen youth only in brown women, or in pale, washed-out white women who had been made listless by the tropics and vain by the exaggerated adulation of a five-to-one preponderance of males. He would have to explain how the mere sight of her had stirred in him the hungry interplay of starved emotions, the urge of forgotten chivalry.

Before he could do any explaining at all, Evelyn Branch said:

"If you'll excuse me—I think my baggage is all ashore."

"Yes, of course." Marvin made an abrupt descent into reality. Unbidden, he helped the girl through the customs formalities.

SHE was locking her trunks when a fellow passenger approached her — a bronzed, square-jawed, stockily built man who wore crisp khaki and carried a swagger stick. While he was shaking hands with Evelyn Branch his insolent gray eyes were calmly cataloguing the details of Lee Marvin's appearance.

"Mr. Hoyt show up?" he asked, still looking at Marvin.

"No," said Evelyn without wincing.

"Are you looking for Mr. Hoyt?" Marvin asked.

"Not particularly," said the man with the square jaw. "I guess I know where to find him. Are you going to the Grand, Miss Branch?"

"She is," said Marvin, scowling. He had taken an instant and instinctive dislike to the girl's shipboard friend.

"Oh, Colonel Linnet," the girl interposed, "may I present Mr.—Mr.—"

"Marvin. Lee Marvin."

"Howdy," said Colonel Linnet without shaking hands. He turned immediately to the girl. "Well, I've got to rush off. See you later, sister."

As he walked away, Marvin noticed that he wore a gray glove on his left hand, which hung motionless at his side as though it were artificial.

"I don't think you'd better go to the Grand after all," said Marvin, watching Linnet disappear. "The Great Eastern will be preferable."

"They're the best hotels in town?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm not going to either. Too expensive. I'm going to a boarding-house."

"You can't do that," Marvin protested. "The Europeans in India have a caste system that beats anything the Hindus ever invented. You've got to keep up—"

"Nonsense," said Evelyn Branch. "What's a decent boarding-house?"

"Well . . ." Marvin capitulated. "There's Mrs. Pereira's. At least that's clean."

"That's where I'm going. Taxi!"

"I'll see that you're settled," said Marvin.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not. Thanks, just the same, but I—I think I want to be alone."

"I understand. Perhaps you'll let me come to see you when you get established. I might be able to help you with your plans. . . ."

"My plans are all made," Evelyn declared. "I expect to be very busy. . . ."

"I hope I'm not inquisitive," said Marvin. "But you're not counting on getting a job, are you?"

"Why not? I'm a pretty good secretary. . . ."

"Secretary?" Marvin shook his head.

The Britisher has made admirable provisions for secretaries in India. In the odd moments of his youth he engenders Eurasian girls, who, by the time he is a pompous and gray-haired *burra sahib,* serve him as cheap and efficient secretaries. They're a glut on the market. "Secretaries," said Marvin, "are eight annas a dozen in Calcutta. You'll starve to death."

"I won't starve," said Evelyn. "I have—other plans. Thank you for the nice, sanitary way you've done Harry Hoyt's dirty work. Good-by."

Marvin gave the Sikh taxi driver the address of Mrs. Pereira's *pension.* He stood a moment, watching the taxi jerk into gear and rattle off in a cloud of hot dust. He could see the girl's little Bangkok hat above the back of the seat. Her head was still tilted at a proud, self-confident angle. It would be, he surmised, for another minute or so. She would wait until she was quite out of sight before giving way to her tears. . . .

CHAPTER III.

THE LADY LAUGHS.

LEE MARVIN, free, red-headed, and thirty-one, had come to India originally as a hunter of buried treasure. He had not come bearing a secret map, a story of long-dead pirates, and a pick and shovel. His equipment consisted of an education in mineralogy and a letter-of-credit from the hard-headed, long-armed firm of Orfèvre, Ltd., international jewelers of London, Paris, Amsterdam and New York. His treasure quest was some of the three billion dollars' worth of gold which India has swallowed up in past generations.

The Indian peasant shuns banks and puts his savings into gold bracelets, anklets, nose ornaments, toe rings, and ear studs. When his anatomy provides no more room for his portable wealth, he buys gold and buries it. When half the world began to slide off the gold standard and the price of the yellow metal started climbing, gold began to come out of the ground in India. And Orfèvre, Ltd., had sent Lee Marvin out to buy it.

Marvin also had his eye out for fine examples of native craftsmanship—the artistic product of the skilled jewelers of Bhutan and the filigree gold of Cuttack. He made occasional trips to the bazaars of Delhi and Jaipur to buy champlevé enamel, and once a year he went south to cross Adam's Bridge into Ceylon for moonstones, cat's-eyes, and star sapphires. His headquarters, however, were in Calcutta, where he was known not so much for his shrewd knowledge of gems and precious metals, as for an unusual capacity for minding his own business. It was therefore something of an event when Marvin abandoned his life-long policy of *laissez-faire* to take an active and voluntary hand in the case of Harrison J. Hoyt and Evelyn Branch.

Hardly had Evelyn disappeared from view of the Kidderpore docks, than Marvin jumped in a taxi and had himself taken to the Grand Hotel. Antoinette Vrai was stopping there with her father until after the wedding.

It is doubtful whether Antoinette

was more surprised to see Marvin standing outside the door of her suite than Marvin was to be there. There had never been any love lost between the two, and there was a tacit mutual acknowledgment of the antipathy.

"*Tiens!*" said Antoinette. "It is the Carrot-top. Come in."

Antoinette Vrai was wearing a flame-colored negligée that needed cleaning. She was a small, bulbous person with curly black hair that radiated from her head like the coiffure of a Zulu queen. She was attractive in a fortright, physical way: Coarse, eager lips; high, pale cheekbones; narrow, half-moon eyes that alternately flashed with quick passion or dulled to an apathetic gray under eyebrows plucked and resketched into diabolic upward curves. There was something violently female about Antoinette, something at once repellent and fascinating, something elemental and obvious that would appeal to a man like Harrison J. Hoyt, but not, Marvin believed even at this late date, to the point of marriage. It wasn't necessary to marry Antoinette. Why, then, was he marrying her . . .?

"Sit down, Carrot-top," said Antoinette, as she closed the door.

MARVIN complied. As he did so, he could see into an adjoining room, where Jacques Vrai, Antoinette's father, lay asleep under a fan, clad only in a pair of drill trousers that were cut high enough to serve as cummerbund. He was lying with his head toward Marvin, who noted that the close-cropped hair was black except for a touch of steel at the temples. The man must have married young to be Antoinette's father, for he could not be more than forty-two or three, despite his thin, hard-bitten features which added ten years to his appearance.

"Well?" said Antoinette. She sat down opposite Marvin, inserted a long Russian cigarette in a longer holder, and lit it. She crossed her hands behind her head and leaned back. The loose sleeves of her negligée fell away from her plump white arms, disclosing luxuriant axillary darkness. "Why are you here? Maybe you would like to stop the wedding, yes?"

"I would," said Marvin, speaking for the first time.

Antoinette threw back her head and laughed out tenuous clouds of smoke. There was nothing reserved or dainty about her laugh. In the next room, Jacques Vrai stirred in his sleep.

"I believe you are jealous, Carrot-top," said Antoinette with a sidelong, teasing glance. "After all, you knew me before Harry. *Tiens,* you introduced us; no?"

"Yes, unfortunately," said Marvin. He had met Antoinette three years ago at Chandernagore, that anachronistic enclave, the last vestige of ancient French power in Bengal, twenty miles up the river from Calcutta. Jacques Vrai ran the Hôtel Dupleix et de l'Univers at Chandernagore.

At least, he was the nominal manager. He did keep a suspicious eye on the accounts, but his tight-lipped, monosyllabic personality was a detriment to the hotel, rather than an asset. It was the loud and effusive gaiety of Antoinette which had always dominated the Hôtel Dupleix et de l'Univers. It was Antoinette who attracted week-end guests from Calcutta, Antoinette who kept the bar, and Antoinette who taught the Bengali cook how to make *Poulet Marengo* and *Haricot*

de Mouton Bretonne. And it was the *Poulet Marengo,* rather than Antoinette, which had started Lee Marvin staying at Chandernagore when he was on a tour of gold-buying in up-river villages.

"Does Harry Hoyt know you came to see me now?" asked Antoinette.

"He does not. He wouldn't understand my motive. But I think you will—because you are, after all, a woman. Did you know that Harrison Hoyt had a fiancée in the States?"

Antoinette filled her lungs with smoke before she replied.

"I think I remember some silly story like that," she said carelessly. "Puppy-love. Long ago and far away."

"The story is not silly," said Marvin soberly. "The girl is in Calcutta —now!"

ANTOINETTE quickly unclasped her hands. She snatched the cigarette holder from between her teeth. She stood up.

"When she arrived?" she demanded.

"This afternoon. Her name is Evelyn Branch, and—"

"And you think I should stand aside, give up Harry, make way for this silly girl from America?"

"It would be the decent thing to do. This girl has a prior claim on Hoyt. She came here only because he let her believe he still loved her and was going to marry her. She—"

Antoinette exploded into loud laughter. Clutching the yawning front edges of her flame-colored negligée, she laughed until she had to sit down. It was not stage laughter, either. It was good, hearty, sadistic laughter that came from a deep-seated enjoyment of the plight of this girl who had come all the way to India to find her marriage broken. It was laughter that caused tears to roll down her cheeks. She gasped for breath, showing plainly the wide space between her upper front teeth. She laughed until Jacques Vrai came in from the next room, complaining under his breath.

"Écoute, Papa," gasped Antoinette. *"Il est trop rigolo, ce monsieur. Il me raconte . . . il me raconte. . . ."*

And she started to laugh again.

Jacques Vrai stared suspiciously at Marvin for a moment, scratching his bare and perspiring stomach. He had been sleeping on one forearm, and the pressure of his wrist had left a vivid red mark across his scaly, grub-white face. His lips, too, were bloodless. The end of his nose was beet colored.

Vrai grunted something that sounded like *"Bonjour,"* and turned his back on Marvin. From a table he picked up a package of woolly French tobacco and started rolling a cigarette.

Marvin waited until Antoinette's laughter had subsided. Then he said:

"I see I am wasting my time."

"Not at all," said Antoinette. "I enjoy you immensely. But you cannot expect me to give up Harry. What does Harry say?"

"You know very well what Hoyt would say. What sort of hold have you got on him, anyhow?"

"Hold? Only that he loves me."

"Nonsense. Hoyt doesn't love anyone but himself."

"That is not nice to say. Of course Harry loves me. He thinks I can kiss better than anyone in the world. What do you think, Carrot-top?"

Marvin picked up his topee.

"Then you don't want to see Miss Branch?" he asked.

"Miss Branch? Who is Miss

Branch? Oh, yes, of course. Harry's ex-fiancée. How stupid. Why, of course I would like to see her. Why don't you bring her to the wedding?"

"Good-by," said Marvin.

He slammed the door as he went out.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PACKAGE.

HARRISON HOYT'S bachelor dinner was held in one of Peliti's upstairs rooms, with planks set on horses in the anteroom as a private bar. There was such a crowd in front of the bar by the time Lee Marvin arrived, that he could barely see the red turbans of the four dusky, bewhiskered barmen who were busily setting up the *chota wallas*. Marvin stood looking a moment at the motley collection of dinner clothes—white trousers with black jackets, white mess jackets with black trousers, a few white serge tuxedos.

As he elbowed his way through them, he caught sight of Hoyt at the opposite end of the bar. He started toward him, but stopped when he noticed that Hoyt was drinking with a man whose bronzed, square-jawed, sweat-spangled face was vaguely familiar. Where had he—? Of course. Colonel Linnet, who had spoken to Evelyn Branch in the customs shed that afternoon.

Hoyt and Linnet were drinking gin and bitters. They downed two rounds before Hoyt saw Marvin and came over.

"Howdy," said Hoyt. "Is Ahmed Ali Ganymede taking care of you?"

"Plenty," Marvin replied. "Who's the chap you were just drinking with?"

"That's George Linnet," said Hoyt.

"I know his name. But what's he doing here?"

"Oh, he sort of invited himself."

"Invited himself? Don't you know him, then?"

"I've corresponded with him," said Hoyt. "He's a client of mine, in a way. I—I had to let him come. Do you know him?"

Marvin looked up to see Linnet staring at him with the same cocksure insolence he had noted that afternoon, so Marvin did a little staring on his own account. With frank curiosity he studied the determined outlines of Linnet's face, the straight nose, the firm, ruthless mouth. It was an outdoor face, yet queer little lines at the corners of his eyes baffled Marvin. They gave Linnet a cruel, relentless expression. Marvin found it difficult to keep his eyes from focusing on Linnet's gray glove and the wooden immobility of the left hand. At last he turned back to Hoyt.

"I've met Linnet," said Marvin at last. "He came in on the same boat with Evelyn Branch this afternoon."

Hoyt gave a short laugh.

"I'd forgotten to ask you about Evelyn," he said. "How is she?"

"She's charming," said Marvin.

"Was she . . . did she make a fuss?"

"No," said Marvin. "She's a lady."

"That's good. I'm glad she didn't make a fuss," said Hoyt. "Where is she? The Grand?"

"No," said Marvin. "Mrs. Pereira's boarding house on Guru's Lane."

Hoyt seemed suddenly to lose all interest in the subject of Evelyn Branch. He leaned toward Marvin and began earnestly:

"Listen, Lee. I want you to do

something for me. Will you—" He stopped. He was staring across the room. Without moving his head, and almost without moving his lips, he murmured: "Not now, Lee. Later."

Marvin's eyes followed Hoyt's. Halfway across the room, resplendent in a turban of Benares gold cloth, stood Chitterji Rao, his upper lip curled slightly, his bulging eyes watching Harrison Hoyt with sinister insistence.

"That's another guy that shouldn't be here," murmured Hoyt in Marvin's ear. Then he moved away.

MARVIN ordered another gin and bitters. The guests were downing drinks at such a rate that one sensed a fear that the liquor might run out. One sensed another sort of fear, too. A strange, intangible, vague sort of fear that everybody would have denied, but which everybody seemed to feel. The guests were getting noisier as they emptied the stock of gin and vermouth and whiskey, but they were not getting jovial. Voices were raised, but they were strained voices. Something was strangling the usual conviviality of a bachelor's farewell to single blessedness. What was it?

The people, Marvin thought. They were a strange lot. There was Linnet, for instance, again drinking gin and bitters with Hoyt; and there was Henry Kobayashi, the Hawaiian-born Japanese, a little flushed, hovering in the background waiting to buttonhole someone to listen to his limericks. Marvin didn't know many of the other guests. He knew Kurt Julius, of course: the plump, red-faced wild-animal buyer, who made most of his deals in the Grand Hotel bar but who talked like a mighty hunter. And he knew Rufus Dormer, the scrawny, sharp-eyed, bitter-tongued sub-editor of the *Anglo-Bengal Times*, the champion sneerer of Calcutta. Of the others, he knew vaguely that they were bookmakers, a jockey or two, a retail liquor dealer, a Paris theatrical manager, a manufacturer of artificial pearls.

On the tables in the adjoining room were place-cards for more stodgily respectable guests who had also been invited. Fenwick, the jute broker, for instance; Major Cotton, and Mr. Justice Hope. Marvin knew they would not come. It was worth a man's membership in the Bengal Club to be seen at a dinner like this.

The dinner itself was an insult to no man's palate. There was sherry with the soup, a dry Rhine wine with the fish, and a very decent Bordeaux with the fowl. There was also the first onslaught of the green flies, massing for an attack on the lights, and dropping to the table in unwelcome numbers. And, with the serving of the third course, there was an odd interruption.

A *khidmatgar* leaned over Harrison Hoyt's shoulder and said something in Hindustani. Without an apology, Hoyt arose quickly, walked from the room. From his own seat at the table, Marvin could see Hoyt pass the bar and pause at the top of the stairway to talk to someone. The man talking to Hoyt remained half-hidden in the stairway. For an instant, Marvin thought he recognized him as Jacques Vrai, father of the bride, but he couldn't be sure from the one fleeting glimpse. Almost immediately afterward, Hoyt returned to the dining room. Marvin thought he was pale.

Hoyt, instead of going to his own

place, came directly to Marvin's. Standing very close to him, he leaned over his shoulder and whispered:

"Put your hand under the table, Lee, and take the package I'm holding. Keep it out of sight. Put it in your pocket when you get a chance. And for God's sake don't let it get away from you. Can't tell you any more now. Meet me at my flat at midnight."

MARVIN opened his mouth to protest, but Hoyt shoved a thin flat parcel between his knees and went back to his chair across the table. Marvin felt the other guests looking at him: Kurt Julius, belligerently; George Linnet, curiously; Chitterji Rao, stonily; Rufus Dormer, cynically. Henry Kobayashi winked.

Under the table, Marvin reached for the package. It had hard corners, like a small box. He lifted it under cover of his napkin, pretended to wipe his mouth, and slipped the box into his breast pocket. Eyes were still on him. He had fooled no one, he was sure. What the dickens was in that box, anyway? The Bosa pearl? Not the right shape. What was Hoyt getting him into now? For the second time that day, Marvin wished fervently that he did not owe his life to Harrison Hoyt. . . .

The dinner progressed. There was frozen punch and salad and dessert. The guests were getting boisterous. Champagne corks popped. George Linnet was leading an impromptu quartet at his end of the table. Men were leaving their seats to move about. Henry Kobayashi was being very American. A tipsy jockey crowned Rufus Dormer with a wreath of table decorations. The turbaned *khidmatgars* bustled through a haze of tobacco smoke, removing dishes, pouring champagne. Someone was saying something in a thick voice. Who was it? Marvin craned his neck.

Kurt Julius, the animal buyer, had risen to his feet. His normally florid face was scarlet with food and drink. He held a goblet in his hand.

"A toast," he was saying, "to the groom. We wish him—"

He stopped suddenly, staring toward the center of the table. Marvin stared, too. The groom was gone! Harrison Hoyt's chair was empty. Marvin had not seen him slip out.

"The groom," Kurt Julius continued, "seems to have escaped. We'll drink to him anyhow. To the groom."

He raised his goblet. The guests struggled to their feet. Someone started singing, "For he's a jolly good fellow. . . ."

Lee Marvin raised his hand to his breast to feel through his coat the corners of the box Hoyt had given him. He wondered where Hoyt had gone. . . .

MRS. PEREIRA'S boarding-house for European Ladies and Gentlemen was a three-story house of a rather nauseous pink stucco, with faded green shutters. It was located on Guru's Lane, which runs between Elliots Road and Ripon Street—a neighborhood in Calcutta in which threadbare European respectability struggles valiantly to keep its head above the encroaching orientalism of squalid, lop-sided native *bhustees*. To what extent Mrs. Pereira's boarders were full-blooded European ladies and gentlemen was beyond the unpracticed eye of Evelyn Branch to detect. For 120 rupees a month, Mrs. Pereira would not discriminate between a country-born son

of a country-born Scottish railway engineer and a Eurasian stenographer —provided the Eurasian had a European name and was not too dark. And all Evelyn Branch could tell about her companions at the dinner table was that they seemed a particularly undernourished lot of swarthy young men and dark, scrawny young women, all of whom spoke English incessantly with a peculiar sing-song intonation and a sometimes startling pronunciation. They were a uniformly dismal group, and Evelyn wished, for a moment while she was toying with a dessert that had the consistency and flavor of library paste, that she had listened to Lee Marvin and gone to a hotel. Immediately after dinner she went to her room.

"A nice, cheerful room," Mrs. Pereira had assured her, yet for the moment nothing could be more utterly lonely, more drearily barren of all cheer. The floor was a mosaic of broken porcelain imbedded in cement. A ceiling fan—five rupees per month supplement—droned mournfully as it stirred up feeble eddies of sticky, warm air. The mosquito bar draped above the white iron bedstead reminded her painfully of a discarded wedding veil. A chameleon made small clucking noises as it ran along the picture molding, stalking the cloud of green flies swirling about the wan and sickly light globe. Outside the window a hundred huge black crows were settling for the night in a tree, with much uneasy, lugubrious cawing. Evelyn flung herself on the bed and wept for sheer loneliness.

How long she lay on the bed she did not know. She was finally aroused, not because by any Pollyana formula she had lifted herself from the bitter depths of despair, but because she was primarily a realist. She knew that the problems of life were not solved by tears, however sincere, however spectacular. And weeping would not wash out the fact that she was face to face with a problem.

She stepped into the musty-smelling bathroom, dipped some cold water from the tall Java bath jar, and washed her smarting eyes. Then she busied herself unpacking. She had hung away most of her wardrobe, when she discovered, at the bottom of her trunk, two books she did not remember were there. What unrealized premonition had caused her to bring *Advanced Stenography* and *Manual of Speed Practice* to India with her, she did not know. But she was glad she had brought them. She might be looking for a job pretty soon. Unless . . .

That was a big "unless." Would she have the courage to go to Harry Hoyt in a few days, after she was used to the idea of his being married —to someone else? If she was the practical person she thought she was, she would not hesitate. After all, there were more sides to her friendship with Harry Hoyt than the sentimental. She was, in a way, a business associate. Would she be able to put the whole thing on that basis, forget her pride, the emotional numbness that had followed the first painful shock?

She fumbled in her suitcase for a packet of Hoyt's letters, read through them hurriedly, searching for the ones in which he spoke of his schemes for making them both very wealthy. . . .

Suddenly she looked up, startled. She seized her hand bag, stuffed the bundle of letters into it. Someone had knocked on her door—or had she dreamed it? She glanced at her wrist-

watch. Nearly midnight. Who could be calling on her at this hour?

THE knock was repeated. Evelyn stood up, hesitant. She thought she knew who stood outside the door. It must be the tall, serious-faced red-head who had met her at the dock—Lee Marvin. Because he was a friend of Harrison Hoyt's she did not want to see him again—yet. But because of something in his steady blue eyes, something friendly here amongst the hostile sound and clutter of a strange city, she did want to see him. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to talk to anyone—merely to hear the sound of her own voice.

"Come in," she said.

The door swung open. Evelyn felt her knees grow weak, her heart beat violently in her throat. Harrison J. Hoyt stood in the doorway.

Evelyn stared, her lips parted. Hoyt stepped across the threshold, closed the door behind him. His weak chin jutted forward in a semblance of strength. His dark eyes glowered with a queer, mad desperation. His black curly hair was plastered flat by perspiration.

"So you didn't trust me?" he blurted with incredible venom. "So you couldn't wait until I sent for you? You had to come out and see what I was doing, if I was still true to you. Is that it?"

Evelyn said nothing. She stood on the same spot, in the same posture, as when he had opened the door. She was unable to move, or to speak.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied!" he shouted, almost in her face. "It serves you right."

Then Evelyn smiled. She saw suddenly that all this bluster and antagonism was the defense of a terribly weak and terribly guilty ego that sought self-justification.

"Sit down, Harry," she said.

Instantly all aggressiveness went out of Harrison Hoyt's face. He collapsed, rather than sat, on the edge of the bed. He ran his short, stubby fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry, Ev," he said abjectly into his hands. "I didn't come here to yell at you. I came to tell you that I've . . . that I'm sorry."

Evelyn moved at last. She approached Hoyt, stretched out her hand to touch his bowed shoulders, then instinctively drew back her fingers. She smiled again, wistfully.

"That's all right, Harry," she said. "I had a nice trip out, anyhow."

HARRISON HOYT raised his head to look at her. The hot, thick silence seemed to swirl about him, like the air stirred faintly by the whining fan. The chameleon scurried across the ceiling, with a series of tiny chirping sounds. And the feeling of agonized self-pity dropped from Evelyn Branch's shoulders like an outworn cape. For she knew then, with a sudden sense of shock and relief, that she was glad, very glad, that she was not going to marry Harrison Hoyt.

The sight of her ex-fiancé completely cured her heartache. She did not love him. She could not love a perfect stranger, and this Harrison Hoyt was an entirely different person from the boy she had come out to marry. He was a stranger, yet a stranger with whom she had a mutual friend—a Harrison Hoyt who was young, breezy, clever, and pleasantly irresponsible—quite unlike this crass, smug and brutally vulgar Harrison Hoyt, whose soul seemed to

have died in him. He was a stranger for whom she had the utmost sympathy and pity, because he was supremely unhappy. Her woman's eyes knew at once that he had not come here tonight to apologize; he had come to unburden himself to an old friend, perhaps to ask a favor.

"Harry," she said softly, "you're in trouble."

All the abjectness went out of Hoyt's face. His lips stiffened. His eyes were again suspicious and hostile.

"I'm not," he said curtly, scarcely opening his mouth.

At last Evelyn laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Harry, this girl you're going to marry tomorrow, is she—do you love her?"

"I'm going through with it," said Hoyt.

"That's silly, Harry, if you don't—"

"It's not silly." Hoyt sprang to his feet. "And I'm going through with it!"

He stood a moment facing Evelyn. Then with a brusque movement he crushed her in his arms, kissed her briefly, impetuously, turned and fled. The door slammed after him.

Evelyn stared at the door. Above the plaintive hum of the fan she heard his footsteps running down the stairs. She opened the door.

"Harry!" she called.

There was no answer.

Without a second's hesitation, she ran down the stairs after him. He was in trouble; he had come for her help, and was reluctant to ask it, after what he had done to her. But she was still his friend, even if she did not love him. She would help him.

The street door was open. She started out, then pulled back in terror. A figure rose up before her, the figure of a bearded man who saluted and mumbled sleepily in Hindustani. It was the *durwan* who slept outside the entrance nightly. Evelyn did not know that, but she dashed past him—for she had just seen Harrison Hoyt running down Guru's Lane, turning the corner into Elliots Road.

Evelyn ran after him.

CHAPTER V.

THE VANISHED BRIDEGROOM.

INSPECTOR Leonidas M. Prike, C.I.D., was reading the *Statesman* as he slowly ate his *chota hazri*. As usual, his appointment as chief inspector was not yet listed in the official gazette column. Made acting chief inspector after his swift solution of the murder of Sir Anthony Daniels aboard the *Bombay Mail*, he had been waiting a good many months for his promotion to be gazetted. However, he had been in the service long enough to be able to smile tolerantly at the tedious unwinding of official red tape.

As he sipped his tea, waiting for his bearer to prepare his bath, Prike was clad only in a crimson *dhoti*—a ceremonial loin-cloth presented to him by the Brahmans of Bisewar Temple in Benares, after his recovery of the sacred treasure stolen from that Hindu Holy of Holies. When he turned the pages of his newspaper the ripple of muscles beneath the firm skin of his bare torso indicated the development and agility of a man fifteen years his junior—although Inspector Prike was not as old as his prematurely bald head might lead a stranger to surmise. The muscles of his intelligent face, on the other hand, appeared to have been trained to expressionless immobility.

Only his alert eyes, the color of gunmetal, occasionally betrayed a flicker of emotion—an understanding blur of tolerance, a flash of quick anger, a shadow of disbelief. He had the earnest lips of a scholar, the strong chin of a dogged fighter, the slightly-beaked inquisitive nose of a good detective.

There were two items in the morning paper that were of particular interest to Inspector Prike. One was an announcement that the Maharajah of Jharnpur had arrived in Calcutta for the "cold weather" and was reopening his palace in the suburb of Alipore. The other was a Reuter's dispatch from Singapore to the effect that Straits police had seized a Japanese vessel with a cargo of five thousand Japanese-made machine guns; some irregularity in the ship's clearance papers made the ship's destination obscure although the Straits police suspected her to be bound for Madras or Calcutta; there were no clues as to the identity of the consignees, the ship's officers maintaining that they were to have received instructions by radio later. . . . Inspector Prike chuckled to himself as he read the Singapore dispatch. Too bad the Japanese freighter had not been allowed to drop anchor in the Hooghly. The inspector fancied he would have had better luck tracing the consignee of the machine guns than had the Straits police.

The inspector was so engrossed in his newspaper that he was unaware of the discordant chorus of *bikhri-wallas* outside his window. Even among the mansions of Lower Circular Road, these half-naked brown hawkers managed to get into the courtyard and shout their wares to the discomfiture of anyone foolish enough to want to sleep past six-thirty in the morning. It was now past nine, and a chutney vender, a fortune teller, and an itinerant cobbler were all yelling in falsetto under Prike's window. The inspector read on. Then his telephone rang.

"Prike speaking," said the inspector, as he picked up the instrument. "Who? . . . Why don't you send a deputy from the Bow Bazar *thana?* You don't want me. . . . See here, I'm going off on a holiday this evening. . . . Puri . . . I won't be back until after the *Poojas* are over, so you'd better— What? Well, it's not the first time a bridegroom has been late for his own wedding in Calcutta. Probably had a drop too much at his bachelor dinner and . . . Harrison Hoyt? The chap I'd been investigating in regard to the . . .? What church was that, again? Dharmtolla Street? . . . Very well, I'll go right over."

IN a few minutes Inspector Prike had been converted from a bald *flâneur* in a red loin-cloth to a dynamic officer of the British Indian Criminal Investigation Department. A small man, he was nevertheless a brisk, impressive figure in his white drill trousers, black alpaca coat, and khaki topee. His walk epitomized energy and authority, as he stepped into the taxi that his bearer had summoned to the compound of the flats.

The taxi rolled into Lower Circular Road, sped north to Dharmtolla Street, stopped in front of a small and unfashionable church. About the entrance to the church stood a motley group of Europeans and Westernized Orientals. Across the street was a turbaned crowd of brown men, their lips red from chewing areca nut, watching with eyes as round and ex-

pressionless as those of the sacred bull that sauntered among them. Prike jumped from the taxi.

A European constable stepped up to him.

"Glad you're here, Inspector," said the constable. "Still no signs of the bridegroom."

Inspector Prike nodded curtly in reply. He was studying the group of wedding guests, who stood about awkwardly, talking in unnatural tones that betrayed their tense uneasiness. A small, scrawny European, with a dirty topee and whites that were frayed at the seams, came forward as Prike approached. The inspector recognized Rufus Dormer, sub-editor of the *Anglo-Bengal Times.*

"Hello, Dormer," said Prike. "You here professionally, or as a wedding guest?"

"I'm the wedding guest," said Dormer, fingering the dark, moth-eaten mustache that straggled along his upper lip, "but I've not been waylaid by the ancient mariner."

"When was Hoyt last seen?" asked Prike soberly.

"He disappeared from his bachelor dinner last night," said Dormer, with a cynical smile. "If you ask me, you'll find him tanked up somewhere in Karaiya Road. I'd suggest Madame Karnoff's. . . ."

"The Thanadar has had men making the usual search for the past hour," interrupted the European constable. "They haven't found the slightest trace."

Again Prike nodded. His alert gaze continued to detail the guests. He knew most of them—racing people, a Eurasian pearl dealer, two Parsi theater owners, a plump Bengali Babu with a black umbrella, looking very uncomfortable in European clothes and a celluloid collar, whom Prike knew was clerk in Harrison Hoyt's office. Standing a little apart from the group was the resplendent Chitterji Rao, the Maharajah of Jharnpur's household officer, and two A.D.C.'s of the Maharajah's staff.

"Who's the very loud gentleman wearing one gray glove?" Prike suddenly asked Dormer.

"Some American friend of Hoyt's," Dormer replied. "Name's Linnet, I think. Just arrived yesterday."

"And the tall, red-headed chap talking to Kurt Julius?"

"That's Lee Marvin, the best man."

IN three quick strides, Inspector Prike was standing between Marvin and Kurt Julius. The wild-animal buyer greeted him vociferously, slapped him on the back, introduced him to Marvin. The inspector nodded his response to greeting and introduction, but did not remove his hands from the pockets of his black alpaca coat. He seemed particularly interested in the face of Lee Marvin, which was tired, almost haggard, with dark pouches under the eyes.

Kurt Julius began a rapid and detailed recital of Harrison Hoyt's disappearance from his own bachelor dinner, how no one had seen him go, how his departure was not noticed until Kurt Julius himself had proposed a toast. . . .

"At what time was this?" asked Prike quietly, still watching Marvin.

"Eleven o'clock, maybe quarter past," said Julius.

"And how much later did the party continue?" asked Prike.

"It didn't," said Julius. "Right away everybody went home."

"Everyone but Mr. Marvin,"

suggested Prike. "Mr. Marvin doesn't seem to have had much sleep. Spend the night looking for your friend Hoyt, Mr. Marvin?"

Lee Marvin seemed disquieted by the persistent, searching gaze of Inspector Prike. He stammered slightly as he said:

"Well, yes, I—in a way."

"In what way, Mr. Marvin?"

"— I had an appointment to meet Hoyt at his flat at midnight," said Marvin. "Naturally I went there to meet him."

"And Hoyt kept his appointment?"

"No, sir. He did not."

"How long did you wait for him?" asked Prike.

"About an hour. At least an hour."

"And no one came to Hoyt's flat during that time?"

"Mr. Hoyt did not come."

"I see. Someone else did. Who?"

"I'm not sure," Marvin replied. "Someone drove up in a closed third class *ticca ghari* at about half-past twelve. It seemed to be Hoyt's Bengali clerk, Babu Gundranesh Dutt, but I wouldn't swear to it. He went away again almost immediately."

"You were inside the house at this time?"

"Well, no," Marvin admitted. "When Hoyt's bearer told me his master was not home yet, I didn't go in. I waited across the street."

"Why?"

"Well, I—I wasn't sure why Hoyt wanted to see me," said Marvin. "I thought I should like to be forewarned, if he were bringing someone else home with him."

"Who for instance?"

"No one in particular," said Marvin. "But you know yourself, Inspector, that Hoyt has a reputation for vaguely unsavory dealings of one sort or another, and I was rather anxious not to become involved in any of them."

"I see. And at one o'clock you went home?"

"No. I went to the Grand Hotel. I thought Hoyt might be with his fiancée, Miss Vrai."

"And was he?"

"No. I haven't seen him since."

"But you've tried?"

"Yes. I went by on my way home, at about two o'clock. And I called again this morning, naturally."

"You have no idea where he might be?"

Marvin hesitated for a fraction of a second. Then he said:

"Not the slightest."

Prike took Marvin's arm and pushed him gently toward the church.

"Let us interview the bride," he said.

ANTOINETTE VRAI and her father were waiting in the anteroom of the church. As Prike and Marvin paused outside the door, the voice of the jilted bride could be heard shrilly within. Hysterics, Prike thought to himself; tears all over the place; a decidedly unpleasant assignment. He opened the door.

If the sight that greeted him was a surprise, his stony, inexpressive features gave no sign of it. Instead of a weeping bride, he was confronted with a furious one. Antoinette Vrai had torn the bridal veil from her head and was shaking it in her clenched fist as she gesticulated almost under the nose of her father. Her curly black hair stood more erect than ever as she shouted in violent French.

Jacques Vrai, in an ill-fitting morning coat, paced the room slowly, ignoring the shouts of Antoinette.

Half an inch of dead cigarette was flattened between his bloodless lips.

When Prike and Marvin entered, Antoinette stopped suddenly in the middle of a high-pitched sentence, whirled, and glowered.

"Pardon this intrusion, Miss Vrai," said Prike quietly, "but I believe I may be able to help in clearing up the mystery of—"

"Mystery?" Antoinette threw back her head and uttered a shrill, mirthless laugh. "There is no mystery! He knows where is Harry Hoyt!"

She pointed an accusing finger at Lee Marvin. Undisguised hate blazed in her black eyes.

"I've questioned Mr. Marvin," said Prike, unruffled by the woman's outburst, "and he says he knows nothing of—"

"He is a liar!" screamed the jilted bride. "Always he has tried to break my marriage with Harry Hoyt! He hates me! He has had his way at last! He is keeping my fiancé from me! *Tant pis pour lui!* He will be sorry! And you will be sorry! Go away from me, *chameau!* Go away! Tell all those people to go home!"

"I'll tell them the ceremony has been postponed. . . ."

"No! Tell them it is cancelled! Definitely! Come, Papa!"

With a domineering gesture, Antoinette motioned Jacques Vrai to the door, and swept from the room after him.

Prike followed, with Marvin close behind. As they reached the steps of the church, they saw a *ticca ghari* drive up. It was a closed, third-class vehicle, like a shuttered packing case on wheels. The bewhiskered *ghari-walla* reined in his bony horse and shouted something in Hindustani.

Instantly Inspector Prike sprang past Antoinette Vrai and her father, hurtled through the crowd, bounded down the church steps. The *ghari-walla* was still declaiming in Hindustani when Prike reached the closed carriage, seized the door handle, jerked it open.

A woman screamed.

A tallow-faced, glassy-eyed young man in evening clothes toppled stiffly from the *ghari* into the arms of Inspector Prike.

Prike lowered the young man carefully to the ground. One arm, pointing upward at a grotesque angle, vibrated rigidly in short, lifeless arcs.

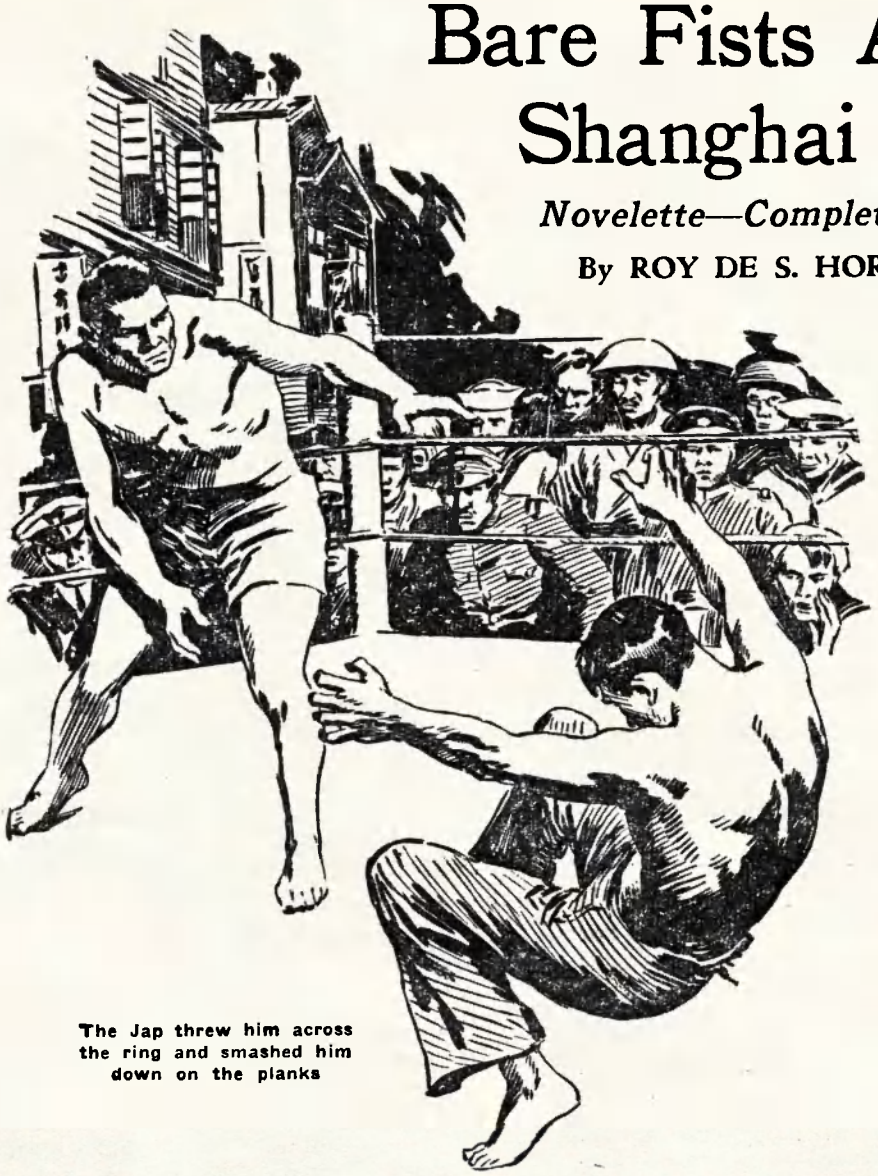
Harrison J. Hoyt was quite dead.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Bare Fists At Shanghai

Novelette—Complete

By ROY DE S. HORN



The Jap threw him across the ring and smashed him down on the planks

Bare fists alone could save the face of the U. S. Navy—and ruin the career of Lieutenant Sharkey

CHAPTER I.

GENT FROM NINTH AVENUE.

THE thud of leather was like the rattle of a stick on a picket fence. Feet pounded and shuffled; and quick-drawn breath hissed. Then there was a flat *bong* as the timekeeper pounded a pan to indicate the end of the round, and Pete Nelson's jeering laugh.

"How'm I doing, boys?"

A murmur of approval came from the circle of bluejackets on the fo'c'sle. It was broken by a voice, quiet but authoritative.

"Terrible, Nelson, you're doing awful. Malone got to you twice that round. You've got to do better than that or you'll never bring home the belt."

"Yeah?" Nelson's voice was a snarl as he turned on the speaker, a grizzled bo'sun's-mate. "Listen! I'll run that tramp, O'Leary, plumb outa the ring! I'll make him jump over the side. I'll—"

"You won't if you lose your temper like that. Malone wouldn't 'a' touched you if you'd kept your left hand up like I told you. But no: he brushes one across your nose, and you see red and gotta hammer for him with both hands. You gotta keep your head to win any belts in this man's Navy."

"This man's Navy? Sunday-school, you mean! You mighta been good in your time, but you wouldn't get to first base where I come from! I've licked guys on Ninth Avenue that could put a leak in your boiler any time, guy. If you don't believe it, quit talking and come out here and put the gloves on—"

For a moment Pop Kerry, bo'sun's-mate of the Sixth Division, seemed inclined to accept, despite his grizzled hair and the hash-marks on his sleeve.

"Twenty years ago, Nelson, and I would—"

He stopped. A pair of broad shoulders in a snug blue uniform with the gold stripes of a junior lieutenant had pushed through the circle. Lieutenant William Sharkey, ship's athletic officer and boss of the Sixth Division, grinned, and his blue eyes twinkled.

"Hi-yah, Chief," he said. "How's things coming? These leather pushers rounding up into shape?"

Bo'sun's-mate Kerry hesitated for a moment. "The rest of 'em are doing as well as we expected. But Nelson here—I can't make him remember to hold up his guard. He loses his head and wants to go in swinging, sir."

Sharkey turned a quick eye on the *Columbia's* candidate for the Fleet heavyweight belt. "Many a fighter's dusted the back of his pants, Nelson, because he tried to lead with his right. Better remember what Pop says. He's been in there plenty, himself. Now get in there with Malone, and let's see how you can do."

Seaman Pete Nelson hitched up his trunks and stepped into the cleared space. But there was an ugly scowl on his face.

Malone, the gunner's mate who was acting as his sparring partner, also stepped in willingly. Pop Kerry brought his fist down on the battered pan—

Immediately it became apparent that Nelson had no intention of sparring. He was forward with a rush, his left swinging, his right cocked for a pile-driver blow. His left thudded home with a vicious *thut* and his right, shooting over, caught the gunner's-mate alongside the ear, driving him back and across the ring.

Instantly Nelson was on him like a tornado, slashing, battering with both fists. Malone covered, shot a quick glance toward where his divisional officer stood beside the bo'sun. But their eyes were grim, expressionless.

Again Nelson's slashing fist went home. A dribble of blood showed at Malone's lips. He brushed it off, and gave ground warily.

"Why don't you fight? Why don't you quit runnin' and fight?" Nelson jeered. "I'm gonna show that has-been—"

Plup! Like a striking snake Malone's left had shot out and landed, landed fair on the jeering lips. It was not a hard blow, but the seaman's face

purpled with a rush of rage. He spat out an oath, and charged.

This time Malone did not backpedal. He shifted, stepped inside the whirling fists, clenched neatly but effectively. Nelson's furious fists hammered at his shoulders, the back of his head.

"Nelson! No rabbit punches—"

But before the athletic officer's warning cry had finished, the snarling seaman had broken loose. He all but whirled the gunner's-mate on his back in wrestling fashion as he tore loose. Then his right fist drove home.

With the thud, the gunner's-mate went white. He dropped his guard helplessly, staggered on his feet. Wolfishly Nelson leaped to the kill.

"Time!"

THE lieutenant's shout came almost simultaneously with the *bong* of the pan in Kerry's hands. Pop Kerry stepped forward, caught the stumbling gunner's-mate.

But Sharkey's eyes were as hard as steel, and his voice was cold, crisp, as he turned.

"Nelson, if there was another man on the *Columbia* who would stand a chance—if the crew hadn't already bet their money—I'd throw you off the squad. I'd take your gloves away and set you polishing bright-work. That punch was two inches below the belt—"

Nelson, still snarling, his face purple, spat back fiercely. "It wasn't! If it was, it was because he ducked—"

"Two inches below the belt, Nelson!" The officer's voice was decisive. "You lost your temper, and you just threw your fists anywhere. Get your gloves off and report to me in my cabin. And when you speak to me like that you put a 'sir' on it!"

Scowling, the seaman jerked off his gloves, turned toward the casemate. The ring of bluejackets mumbled for a second, then began to melt. Pop Kerry was left alone with the division officer.

Lieutenant Sharkey's face was grim.

"What's the matter with Nelson, Kerry? He's the only man—"

"Cocky. He's too cocky—too big for his britches, sir." The old petty officer's answer was respectful but not servile; the words of a man who knows his rating and knows he has the stuff to stand on it. "One of those Ninth Avenue alley scrappers that thinks he knows it all. He don't like to be told."

"Too cocky for the Navy, eh? Well, Pop, one of the first things a man has to learn is that the Navy is bigger than he is. But I thought I heard something as I came up—"

The old bo'sun's-mate grinned. "He was asking me out to put on the gloves with him."

"He was?" A reminiscent look came into the officer's face. "Twenty years ago I would have liked to have seen it. I would like to have seen him step into the same ring with the man I saw fight Jimmy Teague on the old *Utah.*"

Pop Kerry's face lighted. "Was you there? Say, that was one swell smoker! But I thought, after Teague dropped me for that count of seven, I wasn't going to see much of the rest of it."

"Yes, I was there—summer cruise, my second-class year." The *Columbia's* athletic officer nodded. "Saw you come back, drop Teague for the count and the belt in the fifth. Those were the days—Teague, Smarmanski, Whirlwind Warwick—"

"A grand bunch of guys, sir, a grand bunch," Kerry cut in eagerly. "Teague licked me twice, two years

running, before I got him. Probably wouldn't 'a' licked him then if he hadn't been getting old—"

"Yes, a grand bunch, Kerry. Pity some of these youngsters like Nelson couldn't have seen them. But about Nelson—if he goes bull-mad on Fleet night, he won't get a smell of the belt even. If he can't learn—"

"Maybe this'll be a lesson to him—especially if you talk to him, sir. I'd hate to see him kicked out now. He's the only championship material we got—and all the boys have bet their pay—"

"I know. I'll have a talk with him."

IN his quarters aft, ten minutes later, Lieutenant Sharkey studied the man who stood before him.

Second-class seaman Pete Nelson was as sturdy as a recruiting station poster. Square-jawed, big-muscled, heavy-built, he was of the type that gains its growth quickly. He was not more than twenty-three, yet his six feet even carried a hundred and ninety pounds, all hard meat.

There in the little cabin, it was amazing how much the two looked alike, yet cast in different molds. The officer was just as trimly built, just as square-jawed. Only in proportion were they different. Probably twenty-six, the lieutenant weighed probably one hundred and sixty and scaled sixty-eight inches. Half a dozen years earlier he probably wouldn't have weighed a hundred and forty-five.

But there was one important difference. The officer's face was keen, judicial. Nelson's was sullen, scowling.

"I've already told you about losing your head, just now, so I won't repeat that," said Sharkey quietly. "But that isn't all that I wanted to talk to you about. There's something else—your attitude toward the ship and the Outfit in general."

"What's the matter now?" snapped the seaman quickly. "I ain't done nothing—I ain't got no court."

"Not yet—though you may, if you keep on like you're heading. You haven't done anything to get you a court-martial, but there are plenty of little things I've noticed that don't set right. Late at quarters—slovenly at inspection—disrespectful to petty officers—dirty hammock."

"I do my work—but I never come into this Outfit to scrub paint an' run a squilgee. I thought this was a place where a guy come to fight—"

"That's just the reason I'm talking to you, Nelson, instead of running you up to mast," the officer said patiently. "I think you would fight, and like hell, in a war. But wars these days, Nelson, aren't won by getting mad and sailing into the enemy with a sword or a club. They're won by fleets—ship team-work—turrets and batteries firing a dozen miles at enemies you never see. And the only way this sort of battle can be won is by drill—discipline—the thing that makes a thousand individual humans into a smooth, well-oiled fighting machine. You're ruining that discipline now. Your grumbling and disrespect and slipshod work is upsetting the whole division. I want you to turn to and be a sailor—a real seaman—instead of a grouch. I want you to win the Fleet belt for the *Columbia*—but it's a lot more important for you and the ship to win out over that temper of yours. That's all. . . ."

Seaman Pete Nelson respectfully kept his hat off until he was out of the officer's quarters, but once he was in his casemate where the Sixth was billeted beside its broadside guns, he let

go all holds. He threw his hat down on the deck, kicked it and swore.

"The dirty little son-of-a-so-and-so! If I got my hands on him—"

"What's the matter now, hard guy?" It was Gunner's-mate Malone who, coming up, had overheard. "Who you want to take to a cleaning now?"

"It's that punk of a stripe-and-a-half—that rabbit-faced half-Louie of ours!" cursed Nelson. "Sit there like a Sunday-school parson and gimme a bawling out about how rotten I am for discipline. For *discipline!* If it wasn't they send a guy to Portsmouth for hittin' an officer, I'd 'a' took a swing at him."

"Yeah? But you remembered in time, all right, didn't you?" jeered the gunner. "Say, just what d'you think your name is, anyway—George Washington Lincoln?"

"No, it's Nelson. And there's been some damn good scrappers named Nelson. Bat Nelson was one—and I'm another!"

Malone jeered again. "Uh-huh—but did you ever hear of another fighter—a fella named Sharkey?"

"Sure I heard. An' he was only a second-rater—never done nothin' but get licked by Jeffries."

"He was a fighter and a mighty good one," Malone insisted. "Tom Sharkey was. A Navy man, and a sight better one than you'll ever be. But that ain't the fella I'm talkin' about right now. Didja ever hear of Spike Webb, and the Olympics then, maybe?"

"What of 'em?"

Nelson was even more sullen.

"Well, Spike Webb coached the U. S. boxing team that cleaned up against the best amateur boxers in the world at the last three Oylmpics. But Spike Webb also is boxing coach at the Naval Academy—the school where they train officers. This Lieutenant Sharkey you want to swing at happened to win the middle-weight championship at the '28 Olympics—and Spike Webb said that he was the best born fighter he ever looked at."

Seaman Pete Nelson snorted. "Amateurs! Pink-pants guys! I know 'em—any Ninth Avenue bartender could run the whole lot of 'em outa town with his bare hands."

"Yeah?" Malone looked at him queerly. "Trouble with you, guy, is you don't know nobody else lives in the world but you. Some o' these days, though, you're gonna find it out. And when you do it'll be just too ba-a-ad—for you!"

CHAPTER II.

LUCKY GLOVES.

THE annual smoker of the Asiatic Fleet was the big event of the year. Held at the Manila anchorage, it brought out all the rank and file, from Army brass-hats to the bunch up at the Cavite base.

The ring itself was pitched on a barge moored alongside the *Columbia's* rail, flooded by a big cargo light on a boom, and with the whole port side of the *Columbia* serving as the grandstand. Rail, bridges, turrets, even the searchlight platforms and boat cranes, were packed with officers and men till they had to train out the starboard guns to trim ship.

Lieutenant Sharkey was serious as he spoke a last word to Pop Kerry. Kerry was to act as second.

"How's Nelson, Kerry?"

Kerry frowned. "If he can keep his head, he'll win. If he can't—it'll be

a thin payday on this wagon for a long time."

Then he swung over the rail and down the sea-ladder to the barge below.

The preceding bout had just been finished, and the ring cleared. Nelson came swaggering down and plunked himself into the seat at the corner with a sneer.

"You can throw away the towel and waterbucket, Grandpa," he suggested. "You won't be needin' 'em."

"Yeah?" Kerry looked his disgust. "Still cocky, huh? I almost wish you'd get your head beat off, even if I have got money on you."

Then O'Leary was in the ring, too, and Kerry was across to inspect his knuckle tapes.

O'Leary, the defending champ from the destroyer flotilla, was tall, almost lanky. His chest and shoulders were as brown as coffee from training in the sun. He looked across at Nelson with the quick appraising glance of the experienced fighter. But Nelson only gave him a snarl and a jeering laugh.

Then the referee gave his last instructions, the ring cleared, and the gong went.

Instantly Nelson was across the ring like a tiger. He shot a left to the waist and a right to the head. But O'Leary blocked with the ease of years' experience, and shot out his left in return.

But Nelson, stockier, heavier, never slowed. He flung leather from all sides, so quickly that one blow crashed home. O'Leary staggered, backed into the ropes, slipped. And before he could side-step to avoid the rush, Nelson was on him again with a one-two.

O'Leary crumpled, slid to one knee. A roar went up from the sea of heads beyond the floodlights. The referee's hand began to rise and fall in the count.

But O'Leary was up at the count of seven. He was up, but he was hurt. One of those pile-driver blows had caught him in the solar-plexus. He tried to cover, to slip away from that rain of fists.

But Nelson was eager for the kill. He came in like a whirlwind. Again there was the thud of solid leather crashing home. And again the champ went to the canvas. The referee waved Nelson back, stood over the down man. Like a relentless pendulum the counting hand swung—

Bong! It was the bell for the end of the round.

The champ's handlers were in the ring at a bound, lifting their man, hauling him to his corner. Nelson swaggered to his own corner, hoisted the waterbucket unaided with his gloved hands, took a mouthful, spat it on the deck.

"Think I can't do it, huh?" he jeered to Pop Kerry. "If that bell hadn't saved him, I'd had him cold by now. They can pay off on the next round."

"Luck! Just plain, dumb luck—and you're the guy that can't see it," snorted Kerry. "He slipped coming out from the ropes, or he'd 'a' tied you in knots. But you think you done it yourself—"

"Luck, hell. If it hadn't been for them ropes I'd knocked him plumb over the side. Watch this next round, if you think that was lucky!"

"You'll be lucky if he don't cross you comin' in," retorted Kerry. "Watch that left of his, guy—watch that left!"

THEN the ring was clear, and the gong sounding for the second round.

The short rest had helped O'Leary some—but not enough. He kept his

guard up, sunk his chin behind the armor of his glove and shoulder. But that blow to the nerve center had sapped his speed. He tried to slip away again—and again Nelson's battery of fists had battered him down.

Strength, weight, speed—all the advantage of youth was on the side of the challenger. And it was not to be denied. Twice O'Leary dropped to the canvas, twice pulled himself up to meet a still fiercer attack. The roar from the *Columbia's* rail and turrets was almost continuous now. For the third time Nelson drove home.

And this time the champ did not go down. Worse, he crashed against the ropes. One arm went outside. The top rope slipped between arm and body. And with the desperate, dazed instinct to hold himself off that canvas, the champ clamped onto it, one arm before him, his face turned out, dogged but helpless.

The referee started forward, hand ready to wave him out. But Nelson was there before him. As swift as a pouncing panther, as deadly as a leaping lion, he flashed in and out. The thud of the leather on the dogged, outthrust chin was like a shell ramming home. With that thud, the dogged head dropped forward. The clamping arm loosened, went limp. And the champ crumpled in a heap in the corner, to make way for the new and sneering champion.

Without even a glance at his handlers, Nelson waited for the referee to raise his hand, then jerked off the gloves, stepped to the sea-ladder. Only two short sentences he flung back to the frowning Kerry.

"Nuts to you and the Louie! And nuts to your whole pink-pants Navy!"

Kerry didn't offer any answer. He knew when to keep his mouth shut.

LIEUTENANT SHARKEY, waiting above, was the first to speak to the petty officer.

"It was lucky for Nelson that O'Leary slipped, that first round. He never fully came out of it—or he would have knocked Nelson's head off, coming in wide open like that."

"Lucky, yes, sir—but he don't know it. Well—we got a new champ on the *Columbia* now—"

"A champ—yes." Sharkey's eyes were sober. "We have the belt—but it may be a hell of a costly belt to us, before we're through with it."

CHAPTER III.

SHANGHAI.

GOING to China, with the Asiatic, was just as natural as the robins winging northward. A week after Fleet night the *Columbia* was leading the way, with the rest of the Fleet swinging after, and the crews, from the wardroom to the fo'c'sle, humming the old ditty:

Oh, we'll all go up to Shanghai in the springtime,
Oh, we'll all go up to Shanghai in the spring:
Oh, we'll all go up to Shanghai,
Where the champagne corks will bang high,
Oh, we'll all go up to Shanghai in the spring!

Coming into Shanghai, though, Lieutenant Sharkey was aware of a tensity in the flag quarters, a tightness of lip, a soberness of brow.

It hadn't been a pleasant cruise for the Sixth Division officer, either. Since Fleet night the division had been disrupted. Pop Kerry, with the experience of a half dozen hitches, put his finger right on the sore spot.

"It's that Nelson, sir. He was bad

enough before. But since winning that belt, he thinks the Navy ain't good enough for him. Growling at Quarters, grumbling at bright-work—hell, he acts like the Admiral oughta bring him his breakfast to his hammick!"

"That's what I was afraid of," said Sharkey soberly. "Well, he'll either get wise or he won't. He's not going to ruin *my* division for me. If he gets fresh, he'll find himself in the brig on bread and water."

At Quarters, the very next day, he had to speak to him. Passing down the line for inspection, he stopped before Nelson.

"What's the matter with those shoes, Nelson? Why don't you try polish and a little elbow grease? You've got the dirtiest shoes on the ship."

Nelson promptly straightened belligerently. "I *did* polish 'em! Put a whole half hour on 'em—nobody can't say I didn't—!"

"If you'd keep your ears and eyes open as wide as your mouth, Nelson, you'd have learned you can't polish shoes when you've had salt water on 'em. Wash 'em off with fresh water, then they'll take a shine."

He passed on down the line, but out of the corners of his eyes he saw that Nelson was glaring after him, and he knew that the seaman was mumbling.

Pop Kerry attended to that. When Sharkey passed that way that afternoon, the seaman was snarling as he did extra duty polishing the bright-work in the division's compartment, while Pop Kerry stood over him to see that he did it. Sharkey grinned, and passed on. A good division officer knows when to leave a little job in his bo'sun's hands.

But Shanghai was to be something else again. As the gray vessels steamed slowly into the harbor, the Admiral and his whole staff were on the bridge. Sharkey saw their eyes gazing ahead with the intentness of men who sight a situation.

Sharkey needed to take no second look to know what that situation was. There, anchored in trim columns, were a dozen men of war. Trim, powerful craft, squat as bulldogs. From the stern of each floated the rising sun ensign of Japan.

The staff captain looked, turned to the Admiral.

"Crafty people, those Japs. Throwing a dozen of their latest in here to show up our old tubs. That battle cruiser there—she could lick just about the whole Asiatic—and even the Chinese can see that."

"That's exactly what they're here for." The Admiral nodded, glanced down at the antiquated ten inch guns and off center eights that had seen service as far back as the Spanish War. "But we can't print a book and tell 'em that we keep our real Fleet at home—that we only send our old over-age ships to the Asiatic."

"Well, we'll lose *face*—and plenty of it," the staff captain said sourly. "I wish we could show our real Fleet to this coast some time—like Teddy did when he sent the Fleet around in 1907."

"Yes—it might be a good thing—and it might not. That isn't our job, though, Captain—that's Washington's. But it isn't only ships that count—it's the men in 'em as well. We'll just have to do an extra good job as *men* to save our *face*."

Face—Sharkey had been long enough in the Asiatic to know what that all-important word meant in Oriental psychology. The man who's the most belligerent—the man who talks

the loudest and puts on the biggest show—even if it is a foolhardy one—is the one that the Chinaman throws in with. And with the remembrance of Shanghai and the bombardment of Chapei still fresh in his mind, Lieutenant Sharkey could see what that display of up-to-date fighting power might mean.

The Admiral turned to the staff captain again. "Captain, I don't want any *situations* coming up while we're here. Get out an All-ships order at once: Commanding officers will see that *strict orders* are given immediately to all officers and men that they are to avoid all personal contacts or other incidents that might contribute to quarrels or unfortunate incidents ashore. Place under arrest for general court-martial immediately anyone who violates this order."

At Quarters that morning, that order was read to every officer and man aboard the *Columbia*. Pop Kerry spoke to Lieutenant Sharkey.

"Might be a good thing to keep Nelson aboard. That guy's a trouble-maker anywhere."

"He's on the good conduct grade—at present," said Sharkey, thoughtfully. "Can't take away a man's liberty without good cause, Kerry."

"What's the difference? He ain't going to stay in the Navy, anyway. You know what that cock-eyed guy is saying now, sir?"

"No. What, Kerry?"

"He's saying he's going to quit the Navy and go where the *real* fighting and the *real* money is. Says if he can grab off a few hundred somewhere, he'll jump the Outfit and get him a manager and turn professional."

"Well, if he jumps ship the only fighting he'll do will be with rocks and a hammer in Portsmouth. They can haul you back for desertion from any state in the Union."

"He don't figure on going back to the States, sir. Says there's plenty money to be picked up fighting in Australia, Europe, and around. And foreign countries don't turn in deserters everywhere, sir."

Sharkey was thoughtful. "Well, we can't stop him—as long as he's on the liberty list. But keep an eye on him, Kerry. Stick with him ashore."

THE visit of the Asiatic Fleet to China was always an event, both for the Fleet and the people ashore. The International Settlement was a whirlpool of activity. There would be celebrations, carnivals, dances for both officers and men. And on the second day there would be a big naval parade, with bluejackets from all the visiting ships—American, Japanese, British, even a French cruiser that had come nosing into port. A naval parade in honor of the birthday of the Cherry Festival.

That afternoon the harbor was a whirlpool of activity. Boats with uniformed officers scurried to and fro, flags fluttered up and down, the shrill pipe of bo'sun's whistles rang out as visiting officials were piped over the side. The crash of saluting guns shattered the quiet.

At three-thirty the Admiral of the Asiatic paid his official call on the Japanese Admiral. At four o'clock the Japanese repaid the honor.

Lieutenant Sharkey was on deck as the boat drew alongside. Near the gangway the side-boys waited, and five paces inboard the Admiral of the Asiatic was drawn up with his staff. On the bridge the gunner stood beside the waiting saluting guns.

As the Japanese Admiral with his

glittering staff came over the side, the bo'sun's pipe rang shrilly. On the bridge the gunner dropped his lifted hand.

One after another, at measured intervals, the guns roared the admiral's salute. Intervals measured by the gunner's beating hands, his chant in the time-honored words:

If you wasn't a gunner you wouldn't be here—
Fire, port!
If you wasn't a gunner you wouldn't be here—
Fire, starboard!

At the last crashing report the Japanese Admiral, who had remained frozen in salute at the top of the gangway, stepped on the deck. He saluted the Admiral of the Asiatic. The *Columbia's* Admiral returned the salute, stepped forward. They shook hands. The Japanese staff followed their leader.

One Japanese flag-lieutenant was no older than Sharkey. He was shorter by two inches, but stockier. Their weights would have practically been the same to a pound.

For a full moment the two staffs faced each other. Brown faces were immobile, squat figures in blue with gold-braid were as stiff as ramrods. The Americans were equally military. It was like two strong forces measuring each other. And then the *Columbia's* Admiral smiled, led the way below to his quarters. As they passed Sharkey at rigid salute, the Japanese lieutenant's eyes met his. Sharkey was conscious of black eyes as piercing as rapiers, as bright as polished steel. Then the Japanese had passed on.

Sharkey became aware of a voice at his side.

"Times have changed. I was 'round with Teddy's fleet in 'Nought Seven, and they didn't have the boats, didn't put on the dog like now."

It was old Pop Kerry, the harbor breeze ruffling at his graying temples.

Sharkey nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, times have changed, Kerry. And they may change more before you and I hear Taps."

CHAPTER IV.

SHANGHAI NIGHT.

THAT night half the Asiatic Fleet was ashore. Sharkey had been to a dance at the Settlement, was returning home in his cocked hat and tight-buttoned jacket of his dress uniform. The car he was riding in slowed, came to a halt.

There was a crowd packed and jammed in the streets. Chinese in bright colored silks, American, British and Japanese bluejackets, here and there a girl secretary from some of the foreign business houses hanging to a grinning bluejacket's arm. Ahead was a bright floodlight, the square island of a platform of some kind.

And then almost beside his car, Sharkey heard a voice, loud, excited.

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant Sharkey!"

It was Pop Kerry. His face was beaded with perspiration, his petty officer's cap askew from pushing through the crowd.

A wave of worry swept over Sharkey. He leaped out of the car.

"Yes, Kerry. What is it?"

The bo'sun's-mate was panting. "It's—it's Nelson, sir! The fool—the damned fool—!"

Sharkey's voice was grim, accusing. "I told you and Malone to keep an eye on him—"

"We did, sir! We was right along with him, when he busted loose! He's going up there—he's going to try for that thousand bucks! I was running for the beach patrol when—"

But already Sharkey was shoving a way toward that platform. Instinctively he knew that it had to do with Kerry's excitement. "What thousand dollars? What do you mean—?"

"The thousand dollars they're offering to anybody that can beat their jiu-jitsu champion! They got a carnival Jap that's offering a thousand—and Nelson said he could use it to jump ship and start prize-fighting! I run for the patrol—and then I saw you—"

Sharkey had seen jiu-jitsu performances before—exhibitions of that deft, bone-breaking science of the Japanese that takes the place of both boxing and wrestling in Nippon.

"But Nelson doesn't know anything about jiu-jitsu! All he knows is boxing—"

"Yes, sir, but this Jap is taking on all comers—boxing, wrestling, anything. And he's offering a thousand dollars to anybody can stay in the ring—"

Tight-lipped, Sharkey broke through the crowd. Ahead he caught sight of Malone.

Malone saw them, smashed the crowd like a battering ram. "Did you find the patrol, Kerry?"

But Sharkey reached out a hand, grabbed him. "Where's Nelson?"

"He's gone! Back there somewhere! He's undressing—says he's going to grab that thousand—"

Curious faces turned toward them—yellow-faced Chinamen, brown, stocky Japs. There seemed to be an unusually large number of brown faces beneath blue flat hats.

The ring, roped, raised six feet in air, was just in front of them. A sleek, brown-skinned form was there, clad in the little half-trunks of a jiu-jitsu performer. A sign in ideographs and English proclaimed that Professor Takahashi offered one thousand dollars to anyone who—

Malone let out a cry. "There he is! You can call him, Lieutenant—stop him—"

But Lieutenant Sharkey shook his head.

"Too late for that," he said crisply.

Nelson had leaped into the ring from the far side. His face was flushed, his eyes were greedy. His lips were already curled back from his teeth in scowling pugnacity.

Face! In that brief instant Sharkey had remembered the Admiral's words —"to save face," the most important thing in the Orient.

And Sharkey had been in the Navy too long to make the mistake that Malone suggested. Nelson was excited, Nelson was thinking only of that easy thousand. And Sharkey's uniform of an American naval officer was too conspicuous to fail to be recognized. To shout an order at Nelson now—and have Nelson refuse to obey, mutiny—would be worse than anything else that could happen. For an officer to be unable to enforce his orders to an enlisted man would be for the Navy to lose face forever in these Orientals' minds!

Nelson had stripped to the waist, but his bell-bottomed bluejacket trousers were unmistakable anywhere in Shanghai. They were the recognized uniform, the symbol, of the American bluejacket.

Alongside the bluejacket's six foot, one-hundred-and-ninety pounds of Anglo-Saxon physique, his stocky brown-skinned opponent looked like a dwarf. To a stranger it would have

looked ludicrous. But not to Sharkey —he had seen jiu-jitsu performers before.

With almost no preliminaries the two opponents squared off, Nelson with his hands raised, fists clenched, the Jap waiting quietly but catlike. Then the bluejacket rushed.

HIS fists rammed out like plungers, his charge would have bowled over a bull. But the fists landed with no spat on brown skin. As quick as a cat, the little Jap had stepped aside, his arms flashing out as he moved. And the bluejacket, partly through his own headlong charge, was suddenly, inexplicably in the air. He landed with a crash at the edge of the boards.

"Charging blind—all fists and no eyes!" said Pop Kerry. "He won't never learn—"

"Wait!" said Lieutenant Sharkey. He was leaning forward, his eyes like coals.

But the Jap had made no move to throw himself upon his momentarily dazed antagonist. Instead he had stepped back, his hands limp, in his former almost lazy gesture.

The bluejacket scrambled to his feet. Now his face was purple with rage, anger driving out even the shock of his surprise. He whirled, started forward with wildly swinging arms.

But again that same deft side-step, that same flash of brown arms. And this time Nelson landed in the opposite corner of the ring.

"He didn't lay a hand on him! He can't lay a hand on him—" Malone was groaning. "Get in there, Nelson! Knock his head off! One lick 'ull do it!"

Perhaps Nelson heard. He came up fighting—only to be dropped even more shatteringly for a third time.

Sharkey whirled Malone around, gave him a shove. "Get the patrol! Get the beach patrol! And tell them to hurry here on the run!"

As Malone fought his way through the crowd, Nelson was fighting again. At least he was trying to fight. He had suddenly penned the Jap into a corner, slid a glancing blow off the close-cropped brown head. Then with a sudden snarl of satisfaction, he started pounding with both fists in a wild whirlwind of blows.

But amazingly the Jap, who had hitherto kept his distance, let him close in. The brown face was pressed almost into the heaving chest of the big American. There was a grunt. But it was not from the Jap. It was from the bluejacket. And Nelson was whirling in the air, twisting in the embrace of powerful arms, coming down in a rolling ball on the floor.

And out of that ball the bluejacket's face showed, wide-eyed, dazed. But his arms and legs seemed knotted, twisted in impossible positions, twisted and held there by glistening brown arms and legs. And now those brown limbs began to tighten, to twist white limbs into still more impossible positions. There was a straining gasp, then a cry from the bluejacket's lips. A groan was followed almost by a scream. Nelson's mouth was wide, his eyes bulging.

Then as swiftly as the knot had formed, the jiu-jitsu performer unrolled. He carried the bluejacket with him. Like a bouncing ball he came to his feet, the bluejacket still in his arms. The arms flashed, the bluejacket went high in air. This time when he crashed, he shuddered, went limp, lay still. Brown-skinned helpers scrambled in, to lift him off the stage. Nelson could not even help them.

A grunt of untranslatable meaning rose from the Oriental audience.

Bo'sun's-mate Kerry was cursing. But Sharkey was silent. Only his hands were busy. Busy jerking buttons out of the buttonholes of his tight-fitting uniform jacket. He shoved something into Kerry's hands.

"Hold that, Kerry."

Then Kerry saw what he was doing. Saw white shirt and collar follow the blouse. With sudden realization he caught at Sharkey's arm.

"But you can't do that, sir! The Admiral—they'll court-martial you! Let me do it, sir! Let me in there—I'll take him on!"

But Sharkey's tones were crisp.

"Wait here, Kerry!"

And the bo'sun's-mate, staring, saw him climb into the ring.

CHAPTER V.

BARE FISTS.

EVEN more distinctive than the bell-bottomed bluejacket trousers were Sharkey's dress uniform trousers with the wide gold stripes down their sides. Above he was stripped to his waist, his muscles rippling like waves under his smooth skin. He saw the Jap's eyes widen.

And then Sharkey's eyes widened, too—and then narrowed. He had stared full into the jiu-jitsu man's face and eyes for a second. Those black, piercing eyes, that immobile brown face, that stocky body—where had he seen that before?

And then he knew, even before the flicker came into the black eyes, the edges of the man's lip's quivered.

But only for a second. And then the jiu-jitsu man was standing back as before, careless, waiting.

And then Pop Kerry, gaping, saw something that made his mouth open wider than ever. Instead of moving forward warily, guard up, like an experienced Olympic champion, Sharkey was rushing—rushing even more wildly than Nelson!

It was almost a repetition of the previous bout. The Jap slipped aside like an eel. And Sharkey, deftly thrown over his hip, landed with a thud on the planks.

And almost like Nelson, the officer sat there for a moment, blinking, before he scrambled up. Scrambled up to make that same flailing charge again.

Three times that happened. Three crashing falls. The Jap's smile was as catlike as his walk now; there was almost a gibing laugh on his face.

And Pop Kerry had seen but one blow landed—one that landed high up on the Jap's head, utterly without effect.

Sharkey came up that fourth time snarling. But his glance whipped past the Jap's for one moment, found Pop Kerry's. It was a glance that carried the glint of ice.

Sharkey's fourth rush had driven the Jap back, into the corner. His left hand flailed out, his right was cocked back close to his side. And like a flash the Jap closed in. There was a flurry of twisting bodies, then they were both on the floor. And again the Jap's steel-muscled arms and legs were meshed with the white.

But differently from Nelson, Sharkey had fallen on his hips and one shoulder. One arm was drawn close in.

The Jap's eyes gleamed. His left leg shot out, clamped the ankle of his right, vising the white body between. Ridges of muscles showed under the brown skin.

But the American's back did not bow into a back-breaking bend. Pop Kerry saw the neck muscles bulge in Sharkey's neck. And slowly, surely, the brown arms were pried up, away.

But his shift of hold was like a flash. One hand shot out, caught the American's, jerked two fingers back and apart from the others. His other hand caught Sharkey's foot, began twisting.

Pop Kerry saw his officer's face grow white, saw the beads of perspiration and pain spring out. And the bo'sun's-mate groaned—and then he let out a yell.

Suddenly, as quick as light, the American had rolled. His brown opponent clung like a leech. But Sharkey had found leverage, got one knee under, his free hand to the floor. His imprisoned right jerked suddenly loose. And Sharkey came up from the floor, shaking his brown opponent off like a spaniel shakes off water. And only Pop's straining eyes saw that left fist, cocked and held low, shoot out as they broke.

Not more than six inches was its travel. But it landed with a spat. And Pop Kerry saw the black eyes suddenly pop open, the spurt of blood from the cut lips. The brown bullet head popped back.

But only for an instant. Then the jiu-jitsu man threw himself forward again, arms clutching. And this time there was a deadly, killer look on his face.

But amazingly this time it was the American who was not there. Even more catlike than the brown man he had stepped aside. And again his arm flashed, high up. And the Jap staggered and half fell, the brow above one black eye gushing blood from a gaping cut.

Pain twisted at the Jap's face as well as surprise. He twisted, tried to slip away. And a slashing blow ripped at his ear, half spinning him in his tracks.

"Your right—your right! He's softened! Give him your right!" Pop Kerry was screaming.

But Sharkey apparently did not hear. His right was held in close; it was with his left only that he was hitting.

BUT each of those blows was like a ripping blade. They slashed at nose, at eyes, at the battered lips again. They were making mince-meat of the brown face. Blood dripped and spurted from crushed lips, battered nose, from gashes opened above brow and cheekbone.

The jiu-jitsu man was no longer trying to clutch his enemy. He was reeling, staggering, helpless—trying to escape from that tornado of fists that was battering—battering—battering.

His face—lumpy, torn, blood-smeared, no longer like a human face.

And then for one short instant the American stayed his relentless drive. He paused. His lips were tight, his eyes narrow slits. His right fist dropped down, close in.

Again his left shot out, but lightly, almost mockingly. It turned the Jap partly around, set him on his heels.

And then that right came up. It came up from waist-height—the speed of a piston, the power of a rammer. Full on the hapless brown chin it landed. And like a stump blasted from the ground, the Jap's body rose in air, feet lifting high, shoulders hurtling back. It never even touched the low rail of the platform as it shot out into space, to fall with a limp thud on the shoulders of the gaping Chinamen beneath.

Kerry was sputtering, yelling, as

Sharkey stepped panting from the platform.

"I knew it—I saw it coming! Knew it when you measured him! Here's your shirt, sir, and your blouse—"

But there was another voice cutting in, cold, grim. It was the voice of the commander in charge of the beach patrol. His three gold stripes glittered on his sleeve, the heavy Colt sagged the holster at his side. Behind him four belted bluejackets of the patrol came, their heavy sticks swinging.

"Lieutenant Sharkey, it would have been surprising to have found an ordinary seaman like this. For an officer—it is incredible! Consider yourself under arrest!"

Sharkey opened his mouth—then shut it, tight. It was Pop Kerry who sprang forward. "But, sir, he—"

"You will also return to your ship immediately as a witness," snapped the commander of the beach patrol crisply. He turned to the belted patrol. "Take these two petty officers and that seaman over there back to their ships. Lieutenant Sharkey, come with me!"

He drew Sharkey into the nearest taxi, snapped an order to the driver. Pop Kerry sputtered an oath, and then with Malone and the battered Nelson, who was just coming out of his daze, he marched off under the guard of the bluejacket patrol

IN the Admiral's cabin of the *Columbia*, the Admiral of the Asiatic Fleet was bowed over papers of instructions for the parades and celebrations of the following day. The Chief of Staff and lesser aides gathered around him.

Suddenly there was the crisp stride of the marine orderly, and his snappy salute. He waited for the Admiral to look up.

"Sir, there's a chief petty officer outside to see the Admiral."

One of the gold-braided aides frowned, started for the door. "What's his name? Did he bring any official permission from his commanding officer?"

"No, sir. His name is Kerry—Bo'sun's-mate Kerry."

"Kerry?" The Admiral suddenly looked up. "Kerry, eh? Now I wonder if— Let him come in, orderly."

In a moment Pop Kerry stood before the Commander-in-Chief of the Asiatic Fleet, his cap in his hand.

"Sir, I know I'm busting regulations—coming straight to you like this. But I had to see you—it was important. It wasn't Lieutenant Sharkey's fault—"

"Lieutenant Sharkey?" The Admiral was puzzled. The report of the arrest would not reach him in due course before tomorrow.

"Yes, sir. For tangling with that Jap. He's under arrest in his room, now. And Captain Jones is ashore, and so is the executive officer. I had to see you—"

The Admiral stared at him. The Staff Captain shuffled the papers impatiently. Suddenly the Admiral spoke.

"You're Pop Kerry, aren't you? Weren't you with me in the old *Utah?* You won the Fleet championship, as I remember—"

"Yes, sir." Kerry nodded. "I didn't think you'd remember—"

The Admiral put out his hand. "I hope I'll never forget the old men I've served with. I'm glad to see you again, Kerry. Now what is this about Lieutenant Sharkey—and tangling with a Jap?"

"Why, you see he *had* to do it!" Kerry was anxious, earnest. "It was a Jap jiu-jitsu man, offering a thousand

dollars to anybody who could stay in the ring with him. And that fool Nelson, in our division—the one that won the heavyweight championship at Manila—he took it up. The Jap tied him into knots. In front of ten thousand Chinks and Japs and other people. It was a matter of *face*—Lieutenant Sharkey had to whip him, don't you see?"

The Admiral's face had clouded at first; now it cleared. "And Lieutenant Sharkey beat him? And is under arrest for it—?"

"Beat him? He almost beat his head off. If there was any *face* lost, it was the Jap's, sir. He ain't got what you'd call a face left, hardly!"

"Commander Smith!" The Admiral turned to one of his aides sharply. "Have Lieutenant Sharkey report to me immediately."

What they talked of, the next fifteen minutes—the Admiral, the grizzled bo'sun's-mate, and the young junior lieutenant—was never to go in the official records. But at the end of it, the Admiral gravely shook hands with Lieutenant Sharkey.

"Orders are orders, Lieutenant, and I expect them to be obeyed. But this Navy has been made by officers and men who know *when* to break orders and take charge of a situation on their own responsibility. How do you feel?"

"How do I feel, sir?" Sharkey repeated the question, puzzledly.

"Yes, how do you feel? Were you hurt? You have no outward marks, no bruises. But I know these jiu-jitsu men. Can you march in the parade tomorrow?"

Sharkey nodded. There was a white twist of pain around his lips, but he spoke quietly. "He broke two fingers on my right hand, sir. And I think one of my ribs went—he got a scissors on me, sir. But I can march in any parade, sir."

"Good! Because I'm having you transferred to my staff—the official papers for your transfer as one of my aides will be delivered to your captain tomorrow. You've got to march—got to show yourself, see—?"

"Yes, sir." Sharkey nodded again. "You mean it's a matter of face. And I should report, sir, that that jiu-jitsu man was a flag lieutenant of the Japanese staff. I recognized him. But—he won't march in any parade, sir; I can promise you that."

"What I expected—what I was afraid of, Lieutenant. A deliberate attempt to make the Americans lose face here in China. Report to your medical officer immediately and get treated. Because you must march in that parade tomorrow."

THE next morning at nine o'clock, Seaman Pete Nelson, in the *Columbia's* sick bay for observation before going to the ship's brig—a man can't fall five feet on his head without some risk of brain concussion—stared at the *Columbia's* medical officer and two hospital apprentices. They were winding sheet after sheet of strong adhesive tape around the ribs of Lieutenant Sharkey. They drew the last strengthening band tight.

"And now," said Lieutenant Sharkey, "those two fingers. But you've got to paint the adhesive after that—so the white adhesive won't be noticed."

"Flesh colored cullodion — right here," said the medical officer. "But those ribs—it'll be very painful making a three mile parade with those."

"I'll make it." The junior lieutenant grinned. "Admiral's orders."

The taping finished, he slid into his blouse while the apprentices held it. With a last grin and a "Thanks, Doctor," he stepped out through the door.

Seaman Nelson drew a deep breath. "And he whipped that Jap—with two busted fingers and a pair of smashed ribs?"

One of the apprentices nodded. "That's what Kerry said. Takes guts—but he's got 'em. Plenty! . . . Hey, what you doing?"

Seaman Pete Nelson had crawled from his bunk and was reaching for his shoes. "Going to polish my shoes. What'd you think I'm doing—squilgeeing the deck? How's it to lend me your polish?"

"Polish!" The apprentice laughed. Jeeringly. "Where you're going, you won't be needing no polish. You'll be *outside,* fella—wishing you was back in the Outfit where the grub is plenty and regular. But that Court you're going to get will bounce you out on your bottom so quick you'll see stars!"

"Lieutenant Sharkey won't let 'em," said Seaman Nelson. "He's my divisional officer, see? And he said this was a place where a guy could get in some good fighting in a war. Well, bring on your war!"

THE END

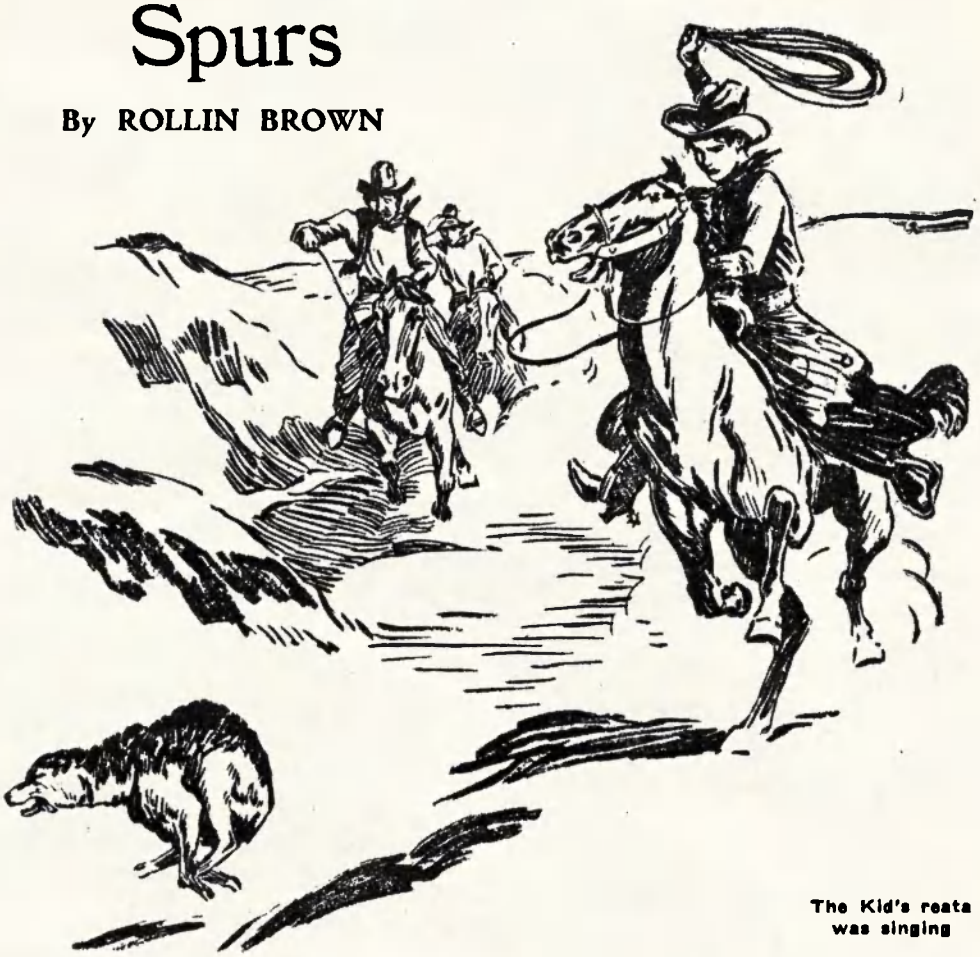
The Old Gray Hudson Ain't What It Used to Be

ONCE the Hudson River was one hundred and thirty miles longer than it is at present The bed of the original stream can still be found in the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. It forms a great gorge, that at one point is over a mile under the wave-tops. But this fact, just lately discovered, it turns out, is of more value than just as a bit of information. When the old river bed is thoroughly mapped it can be used to guide steamers in from the ocean. Sounding devices on the bottom of the vessels will do the trick. So once again ships will sail in that part of the Hudson that hasn't been a river for thousands of centuries.

—*Harold Ledbetter.*

Spurs

By ROLLIN BROWN



The Kid's reata was singing

The moving story of two rangeland waifs—and how each fought to find his destiny

WHEN Swifty the fox was born up in a den under the roots of an old dead pine on the Little Mutau where his mother had already brought forth three litters, the Kid had been at the Circle Z two years. Fourteen years old the Kid was then, for he had confessed to the age of twelve the day Knotty Tolton had found him, lying exhausted and nearly dead under a stunted juniper some three miles from the ranch house. The Kid had attempted to walk the twenty-five burning, dusty miles into the Circle Z from Morro Junction with an old bottle full of water in one hand, and a handkerchief, a pair of old socks and a crusted dried sandwich he had begged in the other.

He had revived somewhat, put up in Knotty's saddle, while the cowboy trudged ahead back to the ranch; he revived enough to clamber off the horse at the corrals, scorning aid, and walk straightly up to Saunders and say, " Mister Boss, I'm in need of a

ridin' job. Have you got anything here on this ranch to offer?"

While Saunders stared at him the Kid wavered from side to side, and finally slumped down into a limp little heap in the dust. Saunders swore, and picked up the slight body gently in his arms and carried it to the weathered old ranch house. However, that was all Saunders was able to learn—"Mister Boss, I'm in need of a ridin' job." No name, while the Kid babbled in fever; no chance word as to how or where from he had come into Morro Junction; no trace of his identity. "Call me Kid, if you want to," he had said a week later, lying wasted and pale in Saunders' own bed. "It ain't good breedin' to ask too many questions, Mister."

It was all Saunders could get from him. The boy knew something of handling a team and of farming, they saw later, and from that the Circle Z decided he had come from somewhere east. They ran a personal in the Des Moines, Kansas City and a Nebraska paper, but to no avail. Because there was nothing else that could be done they gave the Kid a job—helper to the cook, bunkhouse janitor, water-carrier, mender of knick-knacks and milker of the Circle Z's single milch cow.

IN the course of a year he was accepted just as grumpy old Dad Wilkins, veteran of no one knew how long at the Circle Z, was accepted—as a matter of course. No one plied him with further questions; he was just "the Kid, the Kid over at the Circle Z." Everyone knew him; everyone had a nice paternal pat for his back or his head. Those who knew him did it to tease him, the others because some sentimental interest prompted it. And impartially the Kid cursed either, as though they had touched him with a white-hot iron, cursed them with a withering, exacting thoroughness that only Dad Wilkins could equal in his moments of tense emotion. There is a story of when an itinerant minister of that country visited the Circle Z and patted the Kid on the head and called him "my little man." But let that pass. . . .

After the first year—he was then just thirteen—the Kid came to make a formal monthly pilgrimage to the ranch house to see Saunders. "Boss," he would say, "I've been with the Circle Z twelve months now—" or fourteen, or fifteen, as it happened—"and I'm a-wonderin' if a ridin' job has opened up for me yet?"

Saunders would slowly, seriously shake his head. "No, not yet, Kid. You see, I can't fire one of the old hands to make room for you. No . . . What's more, Kid, we need a man like you around the bunkhouse an' up here mighty bad, an' I can't quite let you go from that job. Here's yore check for this month—five dollars. That's right, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, boss." And back down to help the cook the Kid would go—saying nothing, his lips tightly compressed, crumpling and uncrumpling the check for five dollars in his fingers.

The Kid saved every cent of his money. It was for his "outfit," he said, his "ridin' gear." Old Dad Wilkins, hearing, gave him a silver-mounted bit and headstall, and Knotty Tolton later took ten dollars of the Kid's money, on one trip into town, and got the Kid a twenty-five-dollar pair of boots. He got them cheap, was what he told the Kid. High boot-heels clicked through the bunkhouse

after that, while the Kid cleaned out, and high bootheels stamped their little dots into the dust when he went at dawn and sunset to milk the cow.

Finally the Kid sent to a mail-order house and got a saddle and chaps—eighty dollars they cost. But they were worth it, everybody agreed. And with an outfit like that, they decided the Kid ought to have a horse. A week later Saunders gave him an old cutting animal that was gentle and a still not beyond turning back any grass-fed steer.

The Kid's joy knew no bounds when he saddled up with his own outfit for the first time. His eyes got so blurry that Saunders finally had to finish the knot on the cinch strap. Then the Kid mounted and went off with Knotty Tolton for a day in the east range. After that, the Kid always saddled his horse and dressed himself in full regalia for the formal, monthly pilgrimage up to see Saunders.

OF all of this, of course, Swifty, nuzzling his little fox jaws into his mother's bags and scrambling with his brothers and one sister for a point of advantage, had no idea. Despite the fact that Swift's and the Kid's trails were to cross several times, known and unknown to both, Swifty had no idea that such things as humans existed. All that existed for him was the nest-like cave under the roots of the old pine, grayish and dank with spring, and his mother's furry belly. And if someone had told the Kid that six or eight miles up above the Circle Z's buildings, up on the Little Mutau's tributary, a mother gray fox had brought forth a litter of four puppies, grayish, skinny little rat-like things, he would have shown his customary interest in all that was new, but no more. A fox was a fox, a horse was a horse, and the Kid was some day going to be a cowboy—these things made up the Kid's philosophy of life.

Yet as the Kid learned and earned his five dollars a month, so did Swifty learn—and earn the breast of a quail, or the tender sweet back of a young cottontail, or the tasty morsel of a chipmunk from his mother's jaws. He learned to imitate the exact movements of his mother before the others had come to realize that she was exaggerating the stalk, the pounce or the freeze of the game trail for their benefit. He grew strong and wrestled and fought against the other three on the sunny slope below the old pine. His sagacious little eyes, his head resting across a root of the pine, came to take notice of all things that moved in the lands below him. He slunk back and froze at the sight of animals greater than himself; he crept softly down on a lesser—a bird, or a worm, or butterfly. Sometimes he caught a butterfly, and his little forepaws stamped down on a worm as though it were real game.

One day his mother lay beside him, both watching the low country while the other pups lay asleep in the den. Hours passed in the warm sunlight, and Swifty dozed off. He was awakened by the sudden tensing of his mother's body. Before he was fully awake he followed her example, freezing, his beady little eyes looking where hers looked. On the slope below two tufted, big mountain quail were hunting food around the roots of the stunted sage.

Swifty's mother began to move, slowly—a furry little body, gray as the sage beyond, seeming to flow close against the ground like a drop of

moisture will slowly trickle down a window pane, almost invisible, without sound. With his nose close to the plume of her tail, Swifty followed.

Down the slope they went, one behind the other; but, almost upon their prey, the mother halted. Swifty slid up beside her. He felt the quiver of her muscles; his own body trembled under the fuzzy coat of its fur. Instinctively he knew when the time was ripe—when the larger of the quail scurried across an opening of the brush stems before him. Instinctively he knew that his mother waited on him.

He leaped; caught the feathered body in his jaws, clamping down tight into the delicious soft flesh. One of the quail's wings whirred and beat his eyes. He bit deeper. The second of the quail was volplaning off across the brush.

Then a sudden, big, gray-tawny body pounced with its full heavy weight on Swifty. He caught a glimpse of the thing over the beating quail's wing. He tried to turn and get away. It had him. Something ripped his shoulder. The quail was torn from his jaws. Over all he heard the snapping snarls of his mother and knew that she was fighting the thing.

It seemed a long time until he was loose, and limping, as fast as he could move, up toward the den. Down through the stunted sage a coyote trotted away, bearing the warm quail between his jaws. . . . Swifty's mother followed her cub, and in the grayish dark of the den she licked his torn shoulder with her pointed little tongue.

IT was two weeks before Swifty again braved the light outside the den. He limped up to his old place and rested his head across the root. The sun warmed his wound, and after a time his body responded to the full heat, heat that was nourishing and life-giving. His fear lessened gradually, day by day.

Not so his mother's. She hunted no more by daylight. Her pups became accustomed to the sudden rush of her body into the den at night, bringing them food. They grew accustomed to her snarl, the whirl of her body to guard the den entrance behind her; and they sensed that something was hunting her, that there was danger outside. Swifty saw the danger in the moonlight one night — the gray-tawny coyote he remembered. He snarled and backed into the farthest corner of the cave, trembling. Again, two days later, he saw the coyote by daylight, waiting down the slope.

The sneaking, grinning prairie-wolf became a familiar sight to him in time —always waiting down the slope somewhere, or above. He came, in a way, to understand that the coyote had chosen this means of getting its food, that it was living by the robbery of his mother. Twice in the dawn he saw her lose kills to the animal, once a feathered, big grouse, again a cottontail. . . .

It became increasingly hard for the little bitch fox to feed her brood, both because they were growing rapidly and needed more food and because she lost a large portion of her kills. Always the big, tawny-gray form loomed close to the den, waiting for her. She was scarred by his teeth across her chest, jaws and back. She feared to take her brood, now old enough and more, on the forage with her. None apart from Swifty had ever made an appreciable kill; she remembered only too well what had happened on that day.

Heroically she fought a one-sided,

losing battle. She hunted tirelessly, and with an over-swiftness because she feared for the nest of pups in her absence. The pups, hunger-mad, fought each other blindly and savagely for what food she ran through to them. It was not enough. The little female fox of the brood died one night, and all the next day the mother nuzzled and licked it, attempting to put life again in its body. Two days later, at dusk, she moved her three remaining young to another den, calling them lowly, stealthily moving up the slope. And a short way behind, the big coyote, the habitual grin across his chops, followed.

A week after that one of Swifty's brothers was killed. Instinct had driven him out to find food, and he caught a young robin a hundred yards from the new den. When his jaws were clamped in a first delicious crunch of the flesh, the big coyote descended on him. The coyote's big jaws crushed his back as he swallowed the bird. . . .

When the first early fall of snow sifted down over the Little Mutau, Swifty and his one brother, trained with only a small portion of the skill their mother, unmolested, would have taught them, attempted to hunt and continue to live. It was more difficult now, with the cold coming on. Their mother had left them long before. Birds had gone south or down to the low, warmer country; game was scant, wily and hard to find. The first snow had scarcely begun to melt when a second fall came. The level drift came up to Swifty's belly; it was just soft enough so that he sank in the mass, while the few big-pawed rabbits ran swiftly on the crust.

After two futile days Swifty turned his head down from the Little Mutau toward the valleys. For half a night the young, three-quarter grown fox traveled down. He was tired; his underfed, thin body cried for food. . . .

Then on the valley breeze came the scent of pungent ripe meat, mingled with something else, a musky lovely odor that Swifty had never smelled. He quivered with eagerness. His nose in the wind, he hurried toward the feast. He did not pause as he came close; his instinctive caution was deadened, blanketed in his eagerness. . . .

Something dropped slightly under one of his forepaws. The *click* of metal snapped. . . . Long after, when he had exhausted himself in mad struggling, Swifty crouched back and looked at his forepaw, and the steel jaws of the trap clamped onto it. He fell to chawing the metal. His jaws became red and frothy.

"WHAT you got in the bag?" the Kid asked interestedly, as old Dad Wilkins came riding a gentle old mare up to the Circle Z bunkhouse.

"Wall, now, Kid; what yo' guess, huh?" Dad Wilkins swung out of the saddle and put the bag on the ground. Something alive moved within it.

"Don't know," said the Kid. "What?"

"A little kit gray fox. Yeah. Caught in that-there coyote trap I had set up-valley. Pore little feller, I felt sorry for him when I see him, so I brung him home alive. . . . Yeah, an' I'll be danged if there, off about twenty yards, as I rid up, wasn't a big, yeller-gray coyote sittin' on his haunches an' watchin' the little feller." Old Dad Wilkins paused.

"Didja get him?" asked the Kid. "The coyote, I mean."

"Naw. Shot twice, but I reckon I missed both cracks."

"Too bad," said the Kid, sympathetically. "What yuh goin' to do with the fox?"

Dad Wilkins was leading the mare toward the corrals to unsaddle. "Aw, give 'im to you, maybe. You want 'im, huh?"

"You bet!"

"All right. Make some sort of a cage fer him, 'fore you let him out the bag. Maybe thet ol' chicken pen of th' cook's would do."

"I'll ask Cooky."

"Yeah."

Despite the fact that the Kid wore a man's high-heeled riding boots, had a first-rate "kack" and chaps hung up in the saddle-room, and could swear better than old Dad Wilkins himself, he was still just a kid, fourteen, would be fifteen in the spring. The little kit gray fox interested him a lot, since it was his own. He let it out of the gunnysack into the old chicken pen and watched it cower into the far corner of the wires. Then, understanding, he got a box and darkened it with an old saddle blanket, so that the little fox could hide away. He stole a big chunk of fresh beef from the cook, and put it and water in the pen.

The next morning he was delighted to see that the little fox had eaten. He had no way of knowing for how many months Swifty had been close to starvation, no more than Swifty had a way of knowing how much the Kid wanted to be a cowboy. "Pore little feller," the Kid said. "Reckon yo're mighty hungry all right, after a night in a trap." Whereupon he stole another chunk of beef from the cook.

Under the dark of the box Swifty's little beady eyes watched the Kid come and go. Since Swifty had been hungry enough to eat anything, and in the black of the first night of his captivity had sunk his jaws into the beef tainted by human hands and found it good, he ate more. He licked his leg, where the jaws of the trap had cut it, for hours at a time. It healed, and Swifty, for the first time since he had nursed at his mother's belly and gnawed at the bones of her free kills, before the coming of the big coyote, knew satiation. His body was warm in the cold of the nights because good food put warm blood to pounding in his veins.

The Kid, with an understanding of the wild little thing he held captive, would not allow anyone to go near the pen, and the men, laughing, obeyed. But from a distance, as he went about his work, he himself paused and watched. Rarely, at first, did he see the little fox; all day Swifty crouched in the dark cover of his box. And the Kid, taking food and water to the pen, never pushed him out.

THE Kid's attention was divided between the horse Saunders had given him and the fox. He had "a way with critters," too, as Dad Wilkins expressed it. That was a good sign. Many are the cowhands who don't have it, and many of them are good men, but still there was no rider but what would be better for it —according to Dad Wilkins. The Kid had turned into something of a protégé of the old man's. There were hours through the winter when he turned to teaching the Kid the intricacies of the *reata*—how to flip the noose out in the corral with one short motion; mounted, how to get the swing of it and send it far in an open cast.

"Be careful of yore fingers," the old man would say. "Take yore dallies

on the saddle horn so—no fingers stickin' out. See these—" and the old man would lift his right hand. The forefinger was gone at the second joint, the index was crushed at the end. "They's from when I was learnin' to lass. Finger in the dallies, between the rope an' horn, an' a heavy steer on the end of the line. Yeah, couldn't let go fast enough."

Much the old man taught the Kid in the idleness of the winter snows, when the other riders were gone for long periods of time out into camp in the range shacks, riding snow-fields and working the weaker animals to the sheltered valleys and better feed. Dad Wilkins was tending his coyote traps and gentling two colts in the corrals. Saunders gave him a free hand and did not begrudge the hay the colts ate, because he knew that the old hand's cunning eye had picked the two from the whole of the Circle Z's *remuda* and that he would make top saddlers out of them. Horses that the old man condescended to break always turned out to be the best on the ranch. The Kid helped Dad Wilkins with them.

"Wall, Kid," the old man said one afternoon, as they left the colts, "I reckon yo'll be ridin' 'fore so very long." The Kid's eyes lighted. "Yeah, 'fore so very long. Kid, do you know how a rider more or less won his spurs in the days when I was a kid?"

"No." The Kid shook his head.

"Wall, he proved hisself with a lass rope. Ridin' the bad-uns of course was another way, but the rope is the thing what makes a cowhand valuable. The boys is expected to ride their string, but the top-hand is the feller what can really lass. Understand? A bronc-twister's a bronc-twister, but the real cowhand is the one what knows stock, has an eye an' a way with it, an' can handle his lass rope. Understand, Kid?

"Yes, sir, Dad."

"As I started to say," the old man rumbled on, "when I was a lad a feller won his spurs by the *reata*. I've known riders to lass a buck deer. That's luck. But listen, Kid: a crack hoss will run down a coyote, given the right start. The hoss'll do it in five-hundred yards, or not at all—see? An' a coyote can dodge, an' zigzag, an' double like nothin' else but a jack rabbit, or maybe a streak of chain lightnin'. In my day, Kid, when a youngster lassed his fu'st coyote he won his spurs."

The Kid said nothing to that, but his eyes had a dreamy faraway look in them. At early dusk he saddled and rode formally up to see Saunders, although payday had passed a scant week before.

"Boss," he said, "come spring, it seems to me I oughta have my ridin' job?"

SAUNDERS realized that somehow this occasion was different from those that had gone before. "Kid, to tell the truth, they's too many top-hands wantin' jobs," he confessed. "Spring'll see a dozen riders driftin' in as usual, all A-number-1 cowmen, an' each wantin' work. Another thing, Kid: You ain't big enough or strong enough yet to stand the gaff. I ain't sayin', mind you, that you ain't been learnin' fast an' doin' mighty well, but then, Kid, you ain't no top-hand. Sure you know that. . . . Tell you, Kid, you wait until yo're eighteen or nineteen, say, an' then—"

Eighteen or nineteen! It might have been a thousand years to the Kid.

"Hell, boss!" The Kid felt his eyes getting blurry. He brushed his hard little right wrist across his face and spat on Saunders' floor so that Saunders wouldn't see. "Hell, boss; that's a long time—"

"Three, four years. Not so much in a lifetime."

There was a long pause. The Kid spat again.

"S'posin', boss, I was to win my spurs, come spring?"

"Spurs! Ain't I already give you my old ones?"

"Yeah. But not like that. S'posin', say, I was to lass a coyote in the open? S'posin', say, I was hand enough with a rope to do that?"

Saunders looked at him for a long time. "You reckon you're good enough to do that?"

"Yes, sir, boss. Maybe."

"That ol' fool, Dad Wilkins, has been stuffin' yore head with them romantic notions. Don't you pay so much attention to that ol' duffer."

"He ain't no duffer!"

"All right; maybe not."

"What d'you say, boss? S'posin' I can do that?"

Saunders bit off a chew of tobacco. He waited for a long time before he said gruffly, "All right. All right. Win yore spurs, like you say, an' you got the job. Mind, though"—he glared—"that you ain't out from mornin' to night tryin' to do it. See?"

"Yes, sir, boss."

"Yo're a little fool!" Saunders exploded after him. "I mean what I say—you go neglectin' the cook an' I'll can you off the Circle Z sure. Hear?"

"Yes sir, boss."

The Kid floated out of the room to mount the gentle old horse, and ride, buoyant on air, down the hundred yards back to the corrals.

He told the cook about it, when he couldn't hold it to himself any longer.

"Yah? Yah?" the cook said. "Dahm fool, you! Me, I like nice warm kitchen, yah."

THE Kid had to talk to somebody about it, and after supper, since old Dad Wilkins had followed Saunders up to the house, he left the kitchen and went out into the night. It was warm outside—spring was in the air somehow, although the winter wasn't nearly over yet. The Kid turned toward Swifty's pen.

He stopped before he came to it. Back and forth, back and forth, he could see, Swifty ran. Back and forth—just two good leaps, a turn, two leaps. Over and over again Swifty repeated the motion, his little gray body like a shadow in the moonlight.

The Kid watched him for a long time, thinking to himself. Then he went close, and Swifty crouched back into the box.

"Little fox," the Kid said, "what yo' runnin' like that for, huh? Back an' forth. Say, little feller, yo' want to git out in the moonlight?" A new thought came into the Kid's mind. "Say, little fox, is this-here pen like a kitchen to you, huh? Back an' forth? An' me like a cook, say, allus keepin' you in when the wind's blowin' free out across the valley, an' cows is a-bawlin' out somewhere 'long the crick willers? Say, little fox—"

The Kid went silent, and after a while he walked back up to the darkened bunkhouse kitchen. The cook had a chunk of sirloin hung up in the room to thaw out so that it would be ready for morning's breakfast. The Kid took the chunk without scruple, and went back to Swifty's pen.

"Here, little feller, take this. An'

say, if you ever git hungry come on back. From time to time I'll put a little chunk in yore box there, where nobody'll see it, an' it's for you. So-long, little feller." The Kid paused. "Reckon I'm mighty glad to have met up with you. See you ag'in some time. . . . Say, ol' Saunders has me a ridin' job promised, come spring." The Kid told Swifty all about it, as he had planned when he first left the kitchen. "Wall, so-long. See you out there sometime—out there, huh? So-long."

He left the gate open, and after a while he saw a shadow move swiftly off across the snow-patched foreground, fading away. The shadow held its head high, a big chunk of sirloin in its jaws.

"So-long," the Kid breathed. "See you ag'in sometime maybe—out there. Come back if yo're hungry. . . ."

Twice before spring had really come, before the drifts had melted much from the northern slopes, the meat that the Kid religiously left in the box was gone.

"Good little ol' feller," the Kid said. "See you next winter, huh? Reckon you know what's what."

The Kid told the men, now coming in force back to the bunkhouse, a different story. "Yeah, little ol' fox got away. I musta been right careless to fergit an' leave the gate open like that."

Old Dad Wilkins even gave him a forceful lecture about carelessness. The Kid had become an out-and-out pupil of the old man's, like the two colts in the corral. "When I teach my hand to a man," he said, "it's like a colt. I make a top-hand out of 'em, like I make top hosses. See? . . . But Kid"—he turned—"I cain't make no top-hand out of a keerless, flighty, fergitful—" And so, on and on.

"Ol' man's gittin' a mite childish," Knotty Tolton said in private.

SPRING came. Little patches of grass cropped out along the bottoms; then a level verdant carpet clothed the valley. At first there was much riding to do, for the cattle that had wintered on the dry grass and browse fell eagerly to lapping up the thin-stemmed green stuff. It was as yet without much nourishment for them. The cattle "scoured," became weak and bogged down in the spring seepages and *cienagas,* and the Circle Z force rode long and hard and stretched their *reatas.* But shortly, for the year was good and the grass grew swiftly, the animals became stronger and put on flesh. Many bawling calves frisked at their mothers' sides; the bulls lowed in deep-toned bass across the flower-spotted valleys and bottoms.

A month of green feed ripened into a second, and Saunders, judging the condition, the flesh and strength, of the cattle with a trained eye, began preparation for the spring round-up. As he had predicted, men rode almost daily into the ranch and asked for jobs. They were silent, competent riders; their saddles were worn, the wings of their chaps scratched thin by much work in the brush.

Saunders hired three for the coming ride, and the Kid, watching, became frenzied. He said nothing; he merely watched. Not even to old Dad Wilkins did he tell his thoughts, but they were filled with a mad resolve. His thoughts were turbulent and wild; sleeping, he tossed with dreams. Despite Saunders' words, with no thought to them, he neglected everything for the old cutting horse at the corral and the *reata* Dad Wilkins had given him. The cook complained, and Knotty

Tolton caught one of the new men in the act of giving the kid a first-rate and, as the rider judged, a much-needed licking.

"Dang 'im!" said the new rider. "The best hoss I ever straddled I brung with me over here. Now—dang 'im!—this youngster has lassed an' lassed an' lassed the pore critter until he's wilder'n a cub wolf an' all skin an' bones, never gittin' to grab a peaceful mouth of hay. Say—"

Tactfully Knotty drew the injured man aside and explained much in detail. At the end the new rider was almost apologetic. "Aw, sure," he said. "Sure. Reckon I didn't understand. Yeah. Sure. Thass all right. Yeah." Later he even offered to let the Kid ride his much-prized horse.

Saunders called the Kid aside the night before the round-up — chuck-wagon, *remuda* and assembled men from two other ranches—went into the field. He gave the Kid strong words and strong advice.

Little good it did. . . . At sunrise, while the cook cleaned up alone, and cursed, and harnessed the four mules to the chuck-wagon, and all the rest of it, the Kid was riding his old cutting horse at Dad Wilkins' side. Dad Wilkins grinned.

THREE days went by. . . .

It wasn't that the Kid was lazy. No, far from it. The instant he came into camp, he fell to helping the cook. He was up at two-thirty in the morning, starting fires. The riders were rolled in blankets before the Kid had finished washing pots and dishes at night.

No, he wasn't lazy—but at dawn, somehow or other, he always managed to get the old cutting horse from the *remuda* and saddle. He evaporated into thin air, it seemed, to jog nonchalantly down some slope an hour later and take his position at Dad Wilkins' side.

Saunders' words to him made the air sing. The Kid said, "Yes sir, boss; yes sir." If he were ordered back, he disappeared for an hour, rarely longer. Saunders, who had readily enough foreseen what might happen that night when he had let himself make the Kid the promise, had had no idea things could turn out as badly as they had. The Kid wasn't himself; a mania had hold of him; he was crazy with his mad ambition. Saunders seldom spoke to him now without cursing. Yet secretly he admired the Kid's superb nerve. He hoped, secretly, that the cook would let things slide a bit and not force an issue out of it. The riders all grinned.

The crisis came the fourth night, as the ride was swinging back from the east. The Kid came in too late to help with anything. He came riding in alone on the old cutting horse, and the animal was near exhaustion. It seemed, from what everyone could gather and from what two riders had seen, that the Kid, rope down, swinging madly, had given chase to a stray coyote and followed it for no one knew how far. Five miles; ten, possibly.

Dad Wilkins was furious. "If you don't get up in five hundred yards," he bellowed at the Kid, "yo're done for, yo'll never git up, yo'll never ketch 'im. Ain't I said thet? Don't you never pay no attention?"

It was the cook's voice though, rising in a shrill crescendo, that brought things to a head. He was leaving, pulling out, hauling freight "to hell away from the Circle Z." No helper; nobody to drive team or help

harness! "A no-'count, dizzy-headed, boot-wearin', gal'vantin' y o u n g-ster! . . ." So on, while Saunders tried his best to soothe him.

It couldn't be done. At last Saunders turned to the Kid.

"All right, Kid," he said very slowly. "You're followin' the cook out to Morro Junction tomorrow. Don't let me ever see you on the Circle Z again. You can keep the old cuttin' hoss I give you. You're old enough to make yore own way now, I reckon. That's all."

After all, the Kid had just turned fifteen. No one ever knew how blurred and dizzy the stars looked through that night, as he stared at them over the edge of his blankets. He was up long before daylight making the coffee fire, as though that would make amends; while the cook still lay under his dirty tarpaulin, feigning sleep, and the riders, later, joined in rummaging the grub boxes.

Saunders, now that his word was given, was sternly true to it.

"Boys," he said "I'll jog along to the Junction with 'em, an' try to bring back a new cook an' helper by tomorrow night. Yo'-all can sling grub together, between you, till then, I guess." As an after-thought he told Dad Wilkins to come along and they would check the north range as they went through, sort of look things over. The round-up would be over there in a couple of days.

Dad Wilkins came over to the Kid, as the Kid saddled the old horse. "Kid," he said, "want to ride one of my hosses? Let the cook take yore ol' nag."

The Kid understood that Dad Wilkins was making a parting gift to him, a day's ride on one of the fine saddlers of the old man's string. "Yeah, Dad; I'd like mighty well to." The Kid hated to think of the sour old cook riding his own horse, but he couldn't turn Dad Wilkins down. "I'd like mighty well to, Dad," he repeated.

The old man shortly led a beautiful, clean-limbed sorrel out of the *remuda*, his best horse, one of the year-before-last colts. "Take 'er," he said.

The Kid resaddled. Together the four of them swung into the start of the sixty-mile ride into Morro Junction, an ominous, strange silence between them. As he had come, three years before, the Kid was going back.

IT was toward noon of that day, up on the Little Mutau, that Swifty made a kill—a fat ruffed grouse that he had taken off the nest. He was crouched low in the brush because in the daylight he felt conspicuous. . . . In the time since Swifty had left the pen at the Circle Z he had met up with a little bitch fox who had lost her mate, and the two had come to hunt together. Then one night the bitch had dropped a belated litter of pups in a shelved-rock den not far from the big pine, and since that time Swifty had seen her only occasionally. He knew that she had a nest of growing pups, and that he was not especially welcome; but, as had happened before, some instinct now prompted him to take the grouse to her.

He began to work down the slope. On the edge of a narrow, open flat that it was necessary to cross, he paused, crouching low and gathering his courage to break into the open. The fresh odor of the grouse in his jaws overpowered any stray scent on the wind. His first knowledge that any other animal was about came from his ears—the soft, swift rush of something through the brush behind him.

Before he saw it, he knew what it was. He shot into the open, the grouse in his jaws. The terrible memory of his first puppy kill came over him. Fear blinded him; fear made him forget the grouse, cling stubbornly to it. His body was a streak of gray into the open. The big, tawny coyote snapped viciously at the plume of his tail.

They quartered into the flat. Half across, Swifty suddenly changed his course and turned back. The coyote's teeth nipped his haunch. He zigzagged. The wolf cut fur from his shoulder, the same shoulder he had slashed almost a year before. Still Swifty did not drop the grouse; fear stunned his usually quick little brain.

A sudden sharp halloo echoed across the flat. In the madness of the chase Swifty had almost led into four riders just emerging from the brush ahead. Someone yelled again. It seemed that before Swifty could turn from this new danger a clean-limbed, fast sorrel had left the other three—beating toward him — spur-mad, thundering hoofs. . . .

Swifty managed to dodge. The coyote had turned and fled.

Down the open, long flat the coyote fled while the mad little sorrel, picked two years before from the best of the Circle Z's horses by old Dad Wilkins' cunning eye, followed. She was very fast. There was a sudden gleam of pride in the old man's watching eyes, a flicker of satisfaction. Within two hundred yards she had the coyote dodging before her.

Then, it appeared that the Kid would be too slow—too slow in getting his rope loose. Seconds seemed to take on the maddening span of minutes. The old man yelled frantic, high-pitched advice that the Kid of course did not hear.

Half a dozen times the coyote zigzagged. Finally he saw his chance and turned straight for the edge of the flat and the thick underbrush, where no rope could penetrate.

The Kid's *reata* was singing in a tiny noose across the sorrel's flattened ears. "Kid! Kid! Git 'im!" old Dad Wilkins yelled at the last. Even Saunders shouted.

In a swift, straight line the noose left the Kid's hand; shot out beyond the sorrel. Trained, fine animal that she was, she slid to her haunches. In a tiny, fore-going swirl of dust the coyote upended, bit at the rope that had encircled and snapped taut about his body, writhed and got to his feet.

He was jerked down again. Spurs in her sides, the sorrel raced back up the length of the flat. On the end of the Kid's rope the tawny-gray coyote turned over and over, fought, snarled, bit at the rope, and turned over and over again. . . .

Of course the Kid could soon enough have dragged the coyote to death, but old Dad Wilkins didn't want to see him take that chance. Something might happen and the wolf twist free. The old man worked his horse in behind and shot his own *reata* onto the animal. It was all over then.

SAUNDERS said little as they rode on, quartering down into the valley to the Circle Z buildings, getting the cook's belongings and packing them on a horse and continuing on to Morro Junction. He didn't refer to what had happened up on the Little Mutau at just a little before noon. He didn't look at the Kid, riding behind at Dad Wilkins' side.

"Dad," said the Kid, "you saw it, didn't you? You saw the little fox—

that same little fox what you give me?"

"Rats!" said the old man. "'Tweren't the same fox. All foxes look alike. Kid, you let yore imagination run away with you."

"I guess I know that little feller, Dad. When I let him go, I told him we'd meet ag'in sometime. Reckon he understood."

"Aw, rats! . . . You never told me you let him go; you says, as I remember, that he just got loose."

The kid hesitated.

"I reckon I were lyin' then, Dad."

The day passed into sunset, then dusk, and the few lighted windows of the Junction twinkled out on the road ahead. The lights drew near, and the four riders pushed their horses to the hitch-rail before the single hotel of the town.

"Wall, so-long," said the Kid after a long moment, to old Dad Wilkins. "So-long, Dad. I won't never fergit you, I guess." His voice lowered to a whisper. "Dad, I reckon I won my spurs anyhow, at the end. Good little ol' fox!"

The old man pressed the Kid's hand.

"Say, Kid," Saunders' voice cut in, "where you goin'?"

"Don't quite know yet, boss."

"Leavin' the Circle Z, are you?"

"I reckoned so, boss."

"The ranch ain't so bad, Kid."

"No . . . I know it."

"What you goin' for then?"

"'Cause you know that—"

"Maybe it's a raise in wages you want, huh?"

"Not exactly. Say, boss, you don't mean—"

Saunders appeared not to hear. "Wall, if that's the case, I kin offer you thirty a month, not as top-hand quite, but as one of the ridin' men. That enough raise to hold you, Kid?" Under his breath he went on: "No man's ever said I don't keep my word straight through."

The Kid stood shuffling from one foot to the other. Then: "Boss, I reckon I don't want you to take me back just because of yore promise that night."

"Aw, forgit it," said Saunders gruffly. "Forgit it. Ain't I always lookin' for a good ridin' man—one that's won his spurs, huh? One that'll stick with me?"

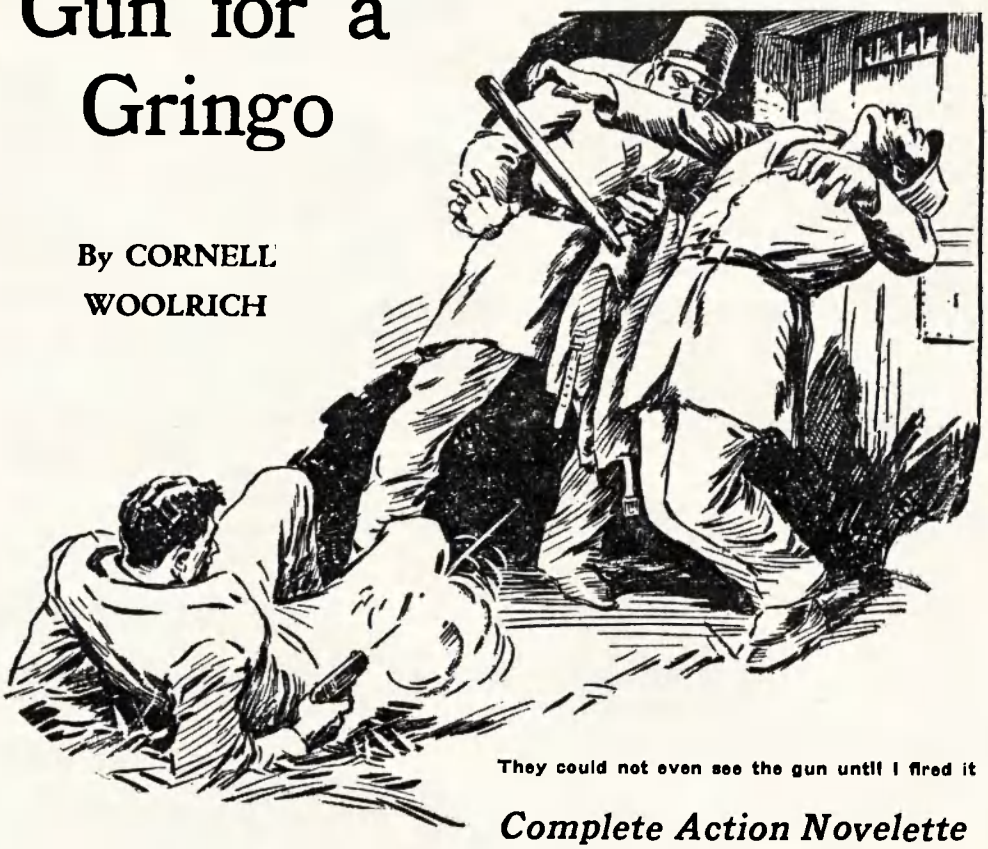
"I'll sure stick, boss."

Even the cook smiled into the darkness then.

THE END

Gun for a Gringo

By CORNELL WOOLRICH



They could not even see the gun until I fired it

Complete Action Novelette

The Gringo got the job—to kill the man he'd been hired to protect!

CHAPTER I.

THE GRINGO GETS A JOB.

I WAS sitting there sketching with a pencil-stub on the marble table-top and rubbing it out with my elbow, when he came over and took a gander across my shoulder. It's a great habit I have of killing time when I can't pay for a drink I've ordered, for instance, or I want to stay out of the hot sun like I did just then. That sun they have down there at Costamala is nothing for a white man to fool around with. But under the big stone arches of this sidewalk café, which they called Filthy Frank's, it was nice and cool and shady. So all the dirty looks I was getting from the *mozo* for staying there all afternoon on a twenty-cent gin daisy (unpaid) just rolled off my thick skin.

This guy that had just come up looked like a big shot; he reminded me of some of my former side-kicks in Chi. He had a headlight on his little finger the size of a walnut, and after he'd been breathing down the back of my neck a couple of minutes he said in my own language, without much of an accent: "You do that very well."

"You can't eat it, though," I said.

"You're a gringo, aren't you?" he said then.

"It's a cinch I'm no Chinaman," I let him know.

"What're you doing down here?" he asked next.

"I'm taking a sun-bath on the beach," I told him—and he knew exactly what I meant, all right. My shoes were in two parts, soles and uppers, I had a week's back-shaving coming to me, and the sea was three hundred miles away, so I didn't mean that kind of a beach.

"Why you not bring money with you from your own country?" he wanted to know.

"I left kinda quick," I told him drily.

"Ah, I begin to understand!" He seemed to get strangely interested all at once. He sat down with me, flagged the *mozo*. "Let me buy you a drink," he suggested affably.

"I never said no to that one yet."

When the drinks showed and we'd each taken a muzzle at them, the next crack was: "So you are—shall we say, a fugitive?"

Seeing that he wanted it that bad, I paid it off to him for a come-on. Whether it was true or not was my own business. "Had a little accident," I told him. "Just li'l accident with my trigger-finger. And it seemed there was a gun wrapped around it, and it seemed the gun went off, and it seemed there was a guy in front of the gun, and it seemed he lay down flat, and it seemed there's a law against that up there, dunno why, so I came down here."

He looked all around him, to make sure we weren't being overheard. "Whatever the hell it's all about, here it comes now," I said to myself.

"I could use someone like you, a man who doesn't let a little accident worry him," he breathed. "What would you say to having another little accident—this time for five thousand pesos to repay you for your, ahem, carelessness?"

"So I had you spotted right along, did I?" I said to myself. I took my time about answering, to give the build-up the right look. "That's eighteen C's in our money," I drawled. "Jack it up a little and I'm in. You gotta remember that I can't lam out this time, there's no place else to go from here."

"Seven-fifty," he said, as though we were talking about the price of neckties or something.

I gave him a sour grin. "For that ticket," I said, "I'll do you a catastrophe, let alone an accident. Now, who do I get careless with—and where do I make the mistake?"

"Not so fast," he said cagily. "We have tc know a little more about you first."

We, meant it was a combine. "You can call me Steve Willoughby," I said, "and I sleep on my right side. Now what else d'ye wanna know?"

"All right, Stiff." Some of the velvet wore off and he started showing his claws from this point on. "Now there's one thing you better get through your head. Once I tell you who this party is who has the accident happen to him, it's too late for you to back out, you already know too much. So I'm going to give you until tonight to think it over, and you better make pretty damn sure you don't change your mind after that—if you know what's good for you." He fooled around with his pongee vest, which had big pearl buttons, and managed to sell me an eyeful of a packed armpit holster. "Otherwise you li'able to have a little accident yourself."

I went ahead drawing as though I hadn't noticed it. "Pretty up-to-date down here yourselves, aren't you?" I murmured. "*I* should try to back out —with an extradition rap hanging over my head and not even a passport to get out on? Get smart to yourself, *señor*, get smart to yourself. Why not spill it now, and get it over with. What're you worried about? I told you I'm in."

"Tonight will be time enough," he smiled sleepily. So I knew by that what he wanted the delay for, to check on me and find out if I was all I seemed to be—and I didn't like the idea much, in fact hardly at all. "You be here tonight at this same table," he went on, "and you order a big glass of ice' coffee, and you lay the straw across the top like this, flat—see? And after that, everything takes care of itself. But I advise you to be here, otherwise—" He snapped his fingers. "I wouldn't give *that* for your chances of seeing the night through."

"And what do I use for money to order this coffee on?" I said surlily, to stay in character.

"Use this for a retainer," he said, and contemptuously tossed down a crumpled bill. I pounced on it like I'd never seen one before, then after he'd gotten up and strolled off I calmly thumbed the waiter over and handed it to him. "Leave this table just the way it is and don't get itchy with that wet cloth of yours until I come back, get me?" I said in Spanish.

"I understand," he said.

I SAW my late table-mate cross the sun-baked plaza and get into a whopping Bugatti parked across on the other side. I waited until the man at the wheel had checked out with him, then I went inside. The back room at Filthy Frank's had one of the few telephones there are in Costamala. I kept my eye on the table from where I was, while I was getting a connection. I could see it through the tall, arched doorway. I made a funnel of my hand, for a silencer. "This is the gringo. Send one of your *agentes* around to Frank's. Now, get this. Tell him to sit down at the third table from the end, on the outside row, and take a good look at the sketch of a man's head he'll find pencilled on the table-top. I want to know who it is. In case he has a little trouble with it, tell him to add a pongee vest, a big rock on the little finger, and a Bugatti—that ought to help it come clear. I think I'm watched, so he shouldn't give me away."

I hung up and gave the swinging door next to me a jab with my heel so it flapped in and out a couple of times. Then I showed up outside again as though I'd just come out from the verminous wash-room. I sat down at a different table and ordered another daisy.

In about ten minutes a government man I knew by sight showed up and sat down where I had been first. He wouldn't have fooled anyone back home for a minute, but they're slower on the pick-up down there. His technique was punk and I kept cursing under my breath. He ordered some kind of bilge, and then he kept staring straight down at the table. I expected him to come smack over to me after that, but at least he had sense enough not to. He got up and went inside, and we hooked up in there, on different sides of the swinging door.

"That's Torres, the son of the former minister of war," he said.

"I wonder who he wants rubbed?" I thought to myself. This was getting into the upper register now. "What else?" I asked.

"The old man is supposed to have had his father shot during the last revolution."

I didn't have to wonder any more, after hearing that. "Just forget about it," I told him. It was a job up my own private alley, I could see that now—one of the very kind I'd been hired for and brought down here from three thousand miles away to handle—and I wasn't splitting it with anyone. The poor "old man" couldn't trust anyone in his own country I had a belly-laugh over it without letting it show on my face. They pick his own bodyguard to be their trigger man! Was that punch-drunk or was *it* punch-drunk? In one way, of course, they had the right angle: a foreigner was their best means of getting at him for the simple reason that he didn't trust his own countrymen, and they knew it.

The Costamalan dick mooched off one way, looking furtively all around him—he might as well have had a sandwich-board on his shoulders labeled "I am Operative Number 5"—and I ambled off in the other. I thought it over this way: since Torres wasn't alone in this, and I had no proof so far whom he was out to get, the only thing for me to do was pull my punches until after tonight when I'd made sure. If it was somebody else he was putting the finger on, it was none of my business, I wasn't a commissioned member of the secret police force; if it was my employer, that was different. I had to be sure, because their idea of a trial down there is to stand the guy up against a wall and bang, bang, bang!—a mouthpiece was never heard of in that country. A spring just meant a season of the year.

I was probably being watched right now, but the thing was—by who? The plaza was dead, too hot for any of the regular bench-lizards to be out yet. There was, however, a guy standing on the opposite corner running through the winning lottery-numbers pasted up on the wall to see if he'd clicked. He'd been there a little too long, though, he should have found out by now. "So it's you, is it?" I said to myself, "Well, watch me give you a run for your money!"

I TOOK the *Reforma,* the main lane, nice and slow, and he stayed about a block and a half behind me. Which is too much leeway, anyway you look at it. So I just turned a corner all of a sudden, popped into a prewar cab ricketing my way, and got down flat on the floor. "Keep going aimless like you were, and leave your pennant up," I told the driver, "only don't take on anybody else." So a minute later an empty hack passed my tail, going in the opposite direction, and he never even gave it a second look.

Still, a guy with white skin was bound to stick out like a sore thumb in that town, so I knew I'd be picked up again in no time, maybe by someone else, and this was only a breathing spell. The place was stool-riddled. They wanted to check on me, and the idea was not to make it tough for them, but easy. So I used the breathing-spell to give up my own half-way decent quarters, which a beachcomber wouldn't rate, brought away my razor in my pocket and my differential in a leg holster, like a garter around the calf of my leg. Then I found a mangy, run-down rat-hole in an alley called "La Libertad"; it smelled of stale chili and mouldy plaster, but it was just what I was looking for.

I bought a fifty-centavo room for five pesos. "I've been here five days," I told the guy that ran it.

He didn't think I had. "This four-fifty extra says I have," I snapped, so then he agreed I had and probably blamed it on marihuana. "Somebody's going to stop in between now and evening and ask you," I told him. "What's more, I haven't paid a cent; you don't know whether to kick me out or turn me over to the police. *Comprende?*" After I'd repeated it five times it finally sank in, but if he'd had scissors and a paper-pattern he'd have handed them to me. I went up and took a look. The mattress had a lot of black specks and they didn't stay still.

They traced me in less than an hour. I could hear the voices down in the flea-bitten patio, and tuned in through the crack of the door. "Si, a gringo," the owner was saying, "we have one here. For five days now, and he hasn't paid a cent! Mother of the angels, am I running a charity ward?"

"Not bad, greaseball," I grinned. I got a look at them over the railing. One was the same guy I'd ditched in the cab, the other one was new to me. Well, I had three of them rogues-galleried now—and Torres' driver made a possible fourth—but I knew there must be more of them than that in the daisy-chain.

I spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning my little buddy from Chicago with the tail of my shirt, and then I went back to Filthy's in time for what they called the "refresco-hour," which was when everyone in town showed up there to get tanked. The place was blazing with lights and they were packing them in, but I got my same table back and bought a coffee. They bring it in a glass down there and you could spot what it was all the way across the room. I laid the straw flat across the top of the glass, and then I sat back and waited for the pay-off.

You saw everything there but ladies and gentlemen, the place is known from Nome to Cape Horn and back again; half-breed generals with swords and cocked hats, little man-eaters with tall combs in their hair, Chinese cocottes drinking absinthe, Indian girls with bleached blond hair, the dregs of the earth. Then into this mess, like an angel from another world, stepped a white woman, a lady, and they all soft-pedaled their noise for a minute. She was more than that, she had on the flowing black garb of a religious order, a nursing sister of charity, and a market-basket hung on one arm. In the other hand she held a small receptacle, and went around from table to table asking for contributions for some hospital or something, like the Salvation Army used to do in our saloons in the old days.

They all loosened up, their kind always do, and she got around to where I was sitting last of all. It was a beautifully-timed performance but I didn't tumble for a minute. I'm no piker, but I was supposed to be a derelict and I wasn't shelling out and giving myself away that easy. I shook my head uncomfortably while she stood there whining something about the House of the Good Shepherd, with her eyes on my coffee-glass and the transverse straw. Then suddenly at the tag end of her spiel, in the same sing-song voice, she murmured under her breath: "Go to 14 *Reforma,* they are waiting for you there." It was fitted in so slickly with the rest of it that it took a minute to register on me, and by that time she'd slipped silently out again and was gone. Not even a mind-reader could have suspected that a signal had been exchanged between us.

I waited long enough to make it look right, then I blew. Outside, just be-

yond the radius of the bright lights at Filthy's, the same Bugatti as earlier in the day was standing. The driver furtively unlatched the rear door, backhand, and jerked his head at it. I got in and we slipped away smooth as oil and headed up the *Reforma.*

CHAPTER II.

RENDEZVOUS WITH REBELLION.

THE house was on the outskirts of the town, set far back from the street and screened from view by leafy banana trees and other foliage. You wouldn't have known it was there at all except for the wall that enclosed the grounds; not a light showed. The driver pulled a bell-rope for me and a peon in pajamas came shuffling out and undid the chain that braceleted the outer gate. I followed him up a tiled walk and into the place.

Torres was standing waiting for me on the other side of the door; I noticed he had his differential ready in his hand, a snub-nosed Belgian peacherino, the kind you load at the butt. "So you ordered coffee," he said, putting it back under his wing.

"I ordered coffee," I agreed.

"Lucky for you," he said dryly. "Come in, Stiff." He motioned toward a door off the main hallway. There were three of them in there, heads close together. Two were the same ones who had checked up on me at the rat-hole. The third was another big shot, I got a load of a diamond crown on one of his grinders when he opened his mouth to talk.

"Amigos," Torres introduced me, "this is Stiff, who likes the climate down here better than in his own country." The way he pronounced my name was beginning to jar on me. I wondered if he really knew what it meant in slang; it might yet end up by being appropriate for all I knew.

He handed me a pencil and a square of paper tacked to a drawing-board. "I got them specially for you," he said, "Now show us what you can do." He brought out a photograph clipped out of a newspaper and laid it beside me. It was of an old man with fierce white mustaches, wearing a visored army cap. I recognized it right away and got a grip on my chair with one hand. "Go on," he urged, "copy this picture. But quick, just the sketch, the cartoon, eh? I time you." He took out his watch and held it in his hand.

It was a pushover; I had a rough outline of the photo down on paper in something under a minute-and-a-half. He passed it around among them. "Do another," he said, "and see if you can cut it down to a minute, leave out all the shading and fancy business." I did it in fifty-five seconds.

"Still too long," he said. "It's got to come out in thirty seconds. No more than ten strokes of the pencil." I showed him I could do that too.

He turned triumphantly to the others. "What did I tell you? This man is just what we need, eh? I knew that the minute I watched him at Filthy's today! All we have to do is fix him up with a clean shirt and a counterfeit staff-artist's press card—they won't even search him going in! Being a damned gringo, he can get closer than any of us could without arousing suspicion."

I had everything I needed to know now except two things—where and when. I wasn't kept in the dark long. "Know who this is?" he asked me, fluttering the newspaper-likeness.

I shook my head. "Never saw him before in my life."

His eyes narrowed to malignant slits. "Savinas, President of the Republic. Savinas, dog of a tyrant, butcher, assassin! You're going to meet him face to face tomorrow night at the Villa Rosa, the Pink House, on the hill. He's giving a banquet to all his generals to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution. You're going to ask permission to draw a sketch of him for your paper back in the States. He's as conceited as a peacock, he'll be tickled silly! You're going to stand in front of him and draw him, like you did just now. And when he picks it up and looks at it, you're going to put a bullet through his head!"

FOUR pairs of eyes were watching me. There was an automatic lying on the table, no one's hand was on it but it was pointed my way. "Either, or—" it said. My own was down under my trouser-leg. I could have had an itch down there that needed scratching, for instance, or a shoelace that needed retying—it would have been easy enough. But I was under pretty definite instructions and it was up to me to follow them out. My orders were to protect the old man from harm, and nothing else; not to make a pinch or try to clean up single-handed. I was his personal bodyguard and not his chief of police. And I'm funny that way, I do just what I'm paid for and nothing else. There's a gent in Alcatraz right now could tell you the same thing. Besides, by tipping off these four in the room with me, I might be letting forty others get away clean, and the whole thing would only start over again next chance they got.

"Well," he said, "what've you got to say?" And his fingers, drumming the table, inched nearer the automatic.

To have taken what he had just paid off to me without a jolt, would have been a dead give-away; they would have tumbled in a minute that I was phony if I'd appeared willing to go through with it that easy. Even a stumblebum derelict would have shied at the kind of proposition this had turned into. So I squawked, not too much and not too little, just enough to make it look right.

"Seventy-five C's," I said with a lopsided smile. "Why didn't you make it two million? I'll be where I can't enjoy 'em. You're not paying me to rub Savinas, you're paying me to commit suicide. Why didn't you give it to me straight?"

For a minute his paw closed on the automatic, and I knew I could never get down to my hoof in time so I didn't try. But I must have stacked up just right for their trigger-man, I guess he hated to waste me. He banged open a drawer instead and took out some stuff in an envelope. "Here's a forged Costamalan passport, here's your ticket for the Pan-American night-plane that touches here at midnight tomorrow night. My Bugatti will be waiting outside the grounds for you. It can get you over to the airfield in ten minutes flat—there's not another thing on wheels in the country that can catch it. All you have to do is remember which door you came in by in the Villa Rosa; the chief electrician there is in with us. When he hears your shot, a fuse will 'accidentally' blow, every light in the place will go out, it will be half an hour before they go on again. What more could you ask?"

"That's more like it," I drawled. "Y'had me going for a minute when you first sprung it at me like you did. The way you tell it, I'd call it a very classy little set-up. I'm your guy."

He put the gun away. "I'm glad we came to an agreement," he said smoothly, "I would have hated to have to bury you in the garden outside—my servants just got through spading it."

I looked politely bored. "And there really is a seventy-five hundred, or zat just a figure of speech? I've only got twenty-four hours I can swear to, so I'd like to get the feel of it," I told him. But what I really wanted was to get out and turn in my report to the old man as quick as I could, so he'd have time enough to take whatever precautions he needed to, and unloading a little of the blood-money around town came in handy as an excuse for getting away.

But they weren't the suckers they looked. "You can have it right now," he said, "but I don't know what good it's going to do you, because you're not going any place to spend it. You're staying right here." And he took out a rubber-banded wad of it and pitched it at me.

I pocketed it—for evidence. "So what am I gonna do," I yelped angrily, "sit here and play solitaire with this all night?"

"What'd you have in mind?" he said. He was fiddling with the gun again, this time leaving it in the drawer. I saw one of the others bring one out too. Then he must have pushed a button without my noticing it, for the driver was suddenly standing behind me, blocking the doorway.

"I wanna take a bath in cologne-water," I said. "I wanna lie there cracking champagne-bottles in the tub. I wanna sleep in silk pajamas and light my Perfecto with a five-peso bill. This is my last night on earth, damn it all; I gotta lot of back splurging to catch up on!"

"You think we're crazy?" he snapped. "You think this town hasn't eyes? This afternoon you're flat broke, tonight you start buying half the town drinks—and talking your head off. I know your kind! Savinas' police agents pick you up in a minute, ask you where you got the sudden money, they have ways of making people talk. You can do everything you want to do right here under this roof. Take him upstairs and lock the door!" he snapped at the driver. "Then go out and bring in a case of Mumm's 1915, and a pair of silk pajamas from one of the Chinese stores, and a box of Perfectos, and a deck of cards—anything he wants, I don't care!"

That being the way it was, I shrugged. "You win," I said. It was a cinch I'd get out of here before the night was over, anyway, so why gum up the works now?

I FOLLOWED the driver upstairs to the second floor, to a room at the rear, overlooking the garden. The windows had no bars on them, and it wasn't much of a jump down from the little balcony outside. Getting out was all right, but I also had to figure on getting back in again before they missed me. I decided I'd put the lam off awhile, until they all started pounding their ears.

The driver started checking off the things I wanted on his fingers. "Wait a minute," I said, "I'll write you out a list."

"I can't read," he grinned apologetically.

I stopped short and gave him a look. Then I grabbed a scrap of paper, scribbled on it in English: "Can't sleep, give me something that will make me."

"Here," I said, "take this with you. Y'know that English pharmacy near

Filthy's? Show it to the guy in there, he'll give you something that'll scent up my bath. You wouldn't know how to ask for it otherwise."

Torres could read English and might intercept it, but he'd think I wanted it for myself. Who wouldn't be jumpy the night before they were slated to kill a president?

He went out and locked the door after him. I went right out on the balcony and scanned the garden. It was so choked with banana-fronds and herbage it was hard to gauge how high the drop would be from where I was, so I decided the old bedclothes-rope stunt would be the best bet after all, instead of risking a broken neck. And right while I was looking, the tip of a cigarette glowed red down there in the dark. Probably the peon-gatekeeper was out there, set to watch me. I went back in again as though I'd just come out for a breath of air.

The driver came back again lugging all the stuff for my "celebration." He also had a small pill-box labeled: "Only one to be taken at a time." I stuck it in my pocket and got the cover off it after it was in. I could feel a lot of little things like aspirins.

He locked the door again, on the inside this time, and shoved the key into his pants pocket.

"So you're staying around?" I said.

"I'm sleeping in here with you tonight—boss' orders," he told me.

I shrugged.

"You're sleeping in here all right," I said to myself, "but not with me, Sun-tan." I busted the neck off one of the champagne bottles against the wall and got it into two glasses. You couldn't notice the three little pellets dissolve in all that fizz. I don't think he'd ever seen champagne before anyway.

We clicked glasses. He made a face. "Bitter," he said.

"Y'gotta get used to it," I answered. I got most of mine down the collar of my shirt. It ran down my sleeve, but he didn't notice it.

"Open up the cards," I said, "and I'll teach you how to play rummy. We need somebody else, though. Who's that guy down in the garden? Get him up here, there's too much champagne for two of us anyway."

He went out on the balcony and whistled down. "Hey, Jose," he whispered, "want to come up and have a drink?"

"Tell him to climb up on the outside," I said, shuffling. "They'll never know the difference."

By the time the gatekeeper had shown up in the room with us, I had his nightcap all ready for him. Then the three of us sat down and I started to teach them.

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD MAN.

I LET them stay right where they both were—both sound asleep in no time—just took the car-keys away from the driver and emptied both their guns, then put them back again. I could hear them still jabbering downstairs, so I didn't try getting out the front way. I let myself down over the balcony on two sheets knotted together. I got out by a side gate in the wall, went around to where the Bugatti was, got in at the wheel. It made quite a racket turning over, but I counted on the bunch of greenery in front of the house muffling it. I lit out for downtown and the Villa Rosa.

It was about ten when I was ushered up the long marble staircase to the old

man's private office. He came in a moment later from his sleeping quarters in a dressing-gown, held out his left hand; the right had been shot off in some long-forgotten revolution.

"Well, it worked," I said. "They swallowed the beachcomber disguise hook, line, and sinker! I told you it was better to find out what we were up against, than sit back and wait for it to happen. This way we know what to expect, at least!"

"And that," he sighed wearily, sitting down across the desk from me," is another attempt on my life, no doubt?"

I explained it all to him, how I'd been hired, too. "Tomorrow night, right at your own banquet table here in the Pink House," I said. "You'd better call the whole thing off until you've rounded them up—"

"To do that would be to warn them that we have found out," the old man explained immediately. "They would scatter and disappear. There is no use making the arrests until I am sure of getting them all, if one stays out of the dragnet that means the whole thing starts over again in a week's time! I have a better idea. The banquet will take place, so will the assassination—but with blank cartridges! Then, in the darkness and confusion—" He leaned toward me, dropping his voice.

"Boy!" I couldn't help blurting out admiringly, "no wonder you've stayed on top twenty years! They think you're out of the way, and they take over this place, give themselves away—then you come back with the loyal part of your army, surround them—and you've got 'em all in the hollow of your hand!"

He nodded and said: "You hurry back, now. You can see how important it is that they do not suspect you; nobody but you must be sent here to make this dastardly attempt, otherwise I am a dead man!" He placed his hand upon my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. "*Señor* bodyguard, I trust you, my life is in your hands!"

"You're a brave old gent," I told him bluntly, not being much on presidential etiquette. "But you're not taking a chance this time, you're dealing with a white man now! Are you sure you can count on that regiment down at Santa Marta?"

"They're full-blooded Indians," he said, "they'd die for me! It's the half-breeds who are not to be trusted."

"Then I'll get you down to them tomorrow night, right in their own Bugatti. Y'better slip on that bullet-proof vest I brought you from Chi, just to be on the safe side—and don't let your valet see you do it."

And going down the stairs after I'd left him, between sentinels that would sell out to the highest bidder, I thought to myself: "It must be tough to have to wait till you're seventy before you find a man you can trust!"

I stopped in at the guard room on the ground floor and put in a requisition-slip he'd initialed for me for a round or two of blanks. They kept them there for firing salutes in the palace courtyard on holidays. Then I climbed back in the Bugatti and headed back where I'd come from. If nothing went wrong, we stood a good chance of outsmarting them between us, him and me. I'd get him safely to that loyal regiment of his tomorrow night if it was the last thing I did; what went on after that was none of my business—he was running the country, not me.

IN front of 14, I braked the Bugatti exactly where I'd picked it up, right over the same gasoline-drippings. Then I went around and slipped

into the grounds by the side gate, which I'd left ajar. The house was dead, the only light that showed was from the rear room that I'd left, and I could hear snores coming from there. The rope of sheets was still hanging from the balcony, like a white vine in the gloom. Getting up it wasn't as simple as getting down it had been, but the gardener had managed it without any rope so why shouldn't I with one?

I was winded by the time I rolled across the balcony-rail and landed on my feet. I hauled the sheets up after me and took a look in. Their Nibs were both dead to the world, sprawled there producing nasal music. One of the two electric globes had burned out during my absence and the corners of the room were in shadow. The door however was still securely locked. I removed the driver's gun and refilled it with blanks, put it back again. Then I cracked the gardener's, and just as I had that reloaded, I suddenly froze, bent over him.

There was a little round, cold steel mouth pressing into the back of my neck, just below the hair-line. Sort of kissing me, if you want to be poetic about it. Another one came up against me on my right side, and then a third just over my heart. There hadn't been a sound in the room around me.

It was Torres' voice that spoke. "I told you he'd come back. The way he left the gate down there open showed me that."

I turned slowly, elbows out. The three of them were on top of me, and in the background was the woman who had contacted me at Filthy's, hood thrown back now and eyes glittering with malice.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Pull your triggers!" she rasped. "You saw me with your own eyes! If he hasn't already crossed us, he will tomorrow night! He knows too much. Are you going to let him go on living?" She meant it, too.

I was sweating like a needle-shower, not so much because I was afraid of being killed but because I had bungled the whole thing up the way I had.

Torres silenced her with his hand. "One thing at a time. If he has already betrayed us, then killing him won't save us. If he hasn't, it will be easy enough to silence him—for the rest of his life. Call the Villa Rosa. One of the presidential secretaries is on my pay-roll. Find out if the banquet has been cancelled or not, that will tell the whole story!"

They frisked me, but missed the leg-holster. They brought out rope and nearly broke both my arms fastening them wrist-to-elbow behind my back. They didn't waste their time asking me where I'd been or what I'd done, just waited for word to come back.

The one who had gone to find out came running back again. "We're safe! No orders have been given to postpone the banquet!"

"Then he hasn't told them yet!" Torres gloated. "Well, we'll make sure that he doesn't! Stuff something in his mouth. Help me to get him down to the car. There's a better way of getting rid of him than killing him here in the house—"

They all turned to look at him inquiringly.

"The House of the Good Shepherd," he smiled evilly.

My blood froze, and for the first time I knew real fear; I was wishing now they had shot me down a while ago! I hadn't been in the country long, but I already knew what that place meant, for all its high-sounding name. The State Institute for the Insane, a

madhouse with three-feet thick walls, from which no one had ever yet been known to come out alive! I knew how they treated the insane down there, no restrictions, no experts on lunacy to make an examination. Once you were in you were as good as dead! And Torres just had pull enough to have me railroaded into that hell-on-earth, under a false name so that even the old man couldn't get me out again. And he'd be dead by tomorrow night anyway, shot down by somebody else in my place.

I put up a terrific struggle, but all I could use was my legs, and that didn't get me anywhere. They dragged me backwards down the stairs and dumped me into the car with my mouth gagged. "The more violent he is, the better!" I heard Torres chuckle. "He won't last a week in that place!" He turned to the woman, whom they called "La Vibora"—the snake!" You lower your veil and come along with us. You can sign the commitment papers, as his nurse. We'll book him as a homicidal maniac; the director there is a personal friend of mine."

They got in with me and we started off, Torres himself at the wheel since his driver was still out. I reared violently, trying to throw myself out of the car and finish myself under the wheels, if I couldn't do anything else, but one of them brought the butt of his gun down on my head and I slumped and went out. The last thing I heard was Torres saying, "We'll go through with it tomorrow night just the way we intended to. Send somebody else there with the same sketches this damned gringo made; if he keeps his head lowered until he's right in front of Savinas the old fool will never know the difference, he's near-sighted, anyway!"

WHEN I opened my eyes I was still in the back seat of the car, but it was standing still now, and Torres and La Vibora were missing. Greasy, age-old walls loomed near by in the dark, without a single break in them, without even a slit for a window. The House of the Good Shepherd, I remembered hearing, had been the old prison of the Spanish Inquisition three hundred years ago. And now worse things probably went on within it than even then.

A minute later they came back again, with two guards and the fat, sleepy-eyed director. "Here he is," Torres said. "And I warn you he is a very dangerous type. His obsession is that he has been hired to kill some very influential man; sometimes it is Napoleon, sometimes Julius Cæsar, sometimes—may the saints protect us—even our own esteemed beloved president! He escaped, I understand, from an asylum in his own country—"

"Well, he won't from here!" the director promised softly, with a cruel gleam in his slitted eyes. He motioned the two guards. "Take him in—the necessary papers have all been signed by Señor Torres and the holy sister."

I tried to hang onto the door handle with my bound hands as they lugged me out of the car feet first, and one of them promptly brought down a short leather-bound truncheon on my already aching skull. I groaned, but didn't lose consciousness a second time.

A heavy iron door clanged ominously behind me, cutting me off from the world outside, and I was taken into the director's office and stood up between the two guards like a mummy. He showed his true colors now that Torres and his party were gone, came in after us snarling ill-humoredly.

"Getting me up in the middle of the night like this—as though I haven't got enough of them on my hands already!" he raged.

He sat down at the desk, banged open a huge book, yellow with age, began filling in an entry, consulting the papers those two devils had signed as he did so. "Let's see what we have here," he said. "John Doe, homicidal mania, eh? You better put him by himself, or he'll kill some of the others. Seventeen's empty, I think, since that last one hung himself, isn't it? Throw him in there. If you have any trouble with him, give him the water cure. No knives or forks with his food, of course; pass it into him chopped up. Take away his belt and that necktie—" He threw down the pen, leaned back and yawned. That's the way they did things.

They were already dragging me out between them, still tied and helpless. Along endless corridors they hauled me, past locked chambers of horrors where voices jabbered, laughed shrilly, or howled. All I kept thinking was, "They gotta leave that gun on me! If they only leave that gun on me—" I knew enough not to struggle, not to antagonize them in any way. There was just a bare chance that they'd overlook it.

They swung open a squealing iron door, so low that you had to stoop to get through it, hustled me in between them. The only light came from the corridor outside. One of them stood over me with his truncheon poised while the other one busied himself freeing my arms. The circulation was all gone. I couldn't have made a move with them if I'd wanted to.

"Go get him a rig out of the storeroom," one said.

"At this hour?" the other objected indolently. "Let him stay in his own clothes for tonight!"

They turned all my pockets inside out, to make sure I had nothing sharp-edged hidden about me, took my belt, tie and shoelaces off, then backed warily out, taking care not to turn their backs on me. My numbed right arm was already stealing lopsidedly down toward my leg, but they beat me to it; the cell door had crashed closed and the key turned in the lock before it got there. I heard their footsteps die away outside, and I was left there in a greasy six-by-four cell, without even a cot, just a pile of straw over in the corner. The door was the only opening in it, and the two small grilles at top and bottom of that—one for spying on me, the other for passing food through—were the only means of ventilation.

I stood there upright in the pitch-darkness of that awful place, quivering, tense, and I was holding something pressed to my lips with both hands, kissing it. Something that wasn't made to be kissed—a Colt automatic, still warm from my leg. It was all I had, in that darkest hour of my life, with the noises of bedlam percolating through the slitted door from outside. It was going to get me out of there, one way—or the other. I knew if I stayed there longer than twenty-four hours I stood a good chance of going whacky myself. A place like that will do that to you.

Then I hid it in the straw. To leave it strapped to my leg would have meant losing it; they'd muffed it the first time, but they wouldn't when they came back in the morning to put me into asylum-garb. I lay down close by it, keeping my body over it, and the long ghastly night slipped away. The horrible noises at least died down after a while, as the inmates fell asleep.

IT was when they started growing louder again that I could tell it must be morning. I had no other way of knowing. A little later the murky yellow that faintly outlined the door-slits changed to gray all at once, so I knew the light in the corridor had been turned off.

The lower of the two openings had tipped me off long ago to the way they'd feed me. It was a small hinged slot that was pushed inward from the outside, without opening the door at all. To simply shoot through it and kill the guy was worse than useless; he might fall down out of reach of my arm and I'd never be able to get the key off him and let myself out. Then they'd simply gang up on me out there and it would be all over. On the other hand, if I waited until they came in to me, to get my clothes, there would almost certainly be two of them to handle. They didn't, apparently, carry firearms, just those wooden bludgeons.

The problem solved itself without my having to decide. The door-flap suddenly cracked open without any warning, then slapped shut again long before I could get the gun out of the straw and make a move over toward it—and there was a wooden bowl of beans and bread standing there on the floor. So my only chance was when they came in here, the feeding was done too cagily to be able to take advantage of it. I stayed there motionless, sprawled on my side, my right hand buried in the straw just within reach of the gun—waiting, waiting.

Hours went by, and they didn't come. They must have forgotten they'd left me in my own clothes, or maybe they were too lazy to bother. I hadn't closed my eyes, but who could think of sleeping in the fix I was in? A hand abruptly snatched the bowl of junk away, thinking it was empty, then finding that it wasn't, put it back, and I heard myself being cursed out and threatened from the other side of the door. I just lay pat and didn't make a sound. I figured that was the noon feeding, overlooking the fact that this wasn't exactly the Ritz. About fifteen minutes later the yellow came back again in the corridor and showed me I'd been half a day slow—it was evening already. And in a little while the banquet would be getting under way! And in a little while after that, somebody uninvited would show up at that banquet! And here I was!

I would have pitched the bowl of food out, to rile them, get them to come in to me, but the slot in the door was latched or something on the outside, I couldn't budge it. I had a bad time after that. Suppose they didn't come near me for days, weeks even? And then suddenly, just when I'd given up all hope, there was a tinkering at the door—not the slot this time, but the lock itself.

By the time they got it open, my finger was fish-hooked around the hidden trigger. Two of them came in together, the way I'd figured they would. One just had his truncheon ready, the other had a suit of bughouse-garb slung over his arm. The straw rustled as I shifted the gun to cover the foremost; any fool would have known which one to take first.

They closed the cell door after them before doing anything else, which was just as well. I still didn't make a move, just lay there breathing heavily.

"Stand up!" the one with the club said.

I didn't stir.

He swung the club back to bean me one so I'd obey him. There was no question of fair play in this, the odds

were too great against me. And there was more than just my life at stake; they'd put me through a night of hell that doesn't bear dwelling on. So I gave no warning, didn't even uncover the gun, just blinked my eyes.

It must have seemed to them as though a firecracker exploded in the straw. The one with the club, who was the nearer of the two, opened his mouth and then dropped vertically with it still open that way. The other one turned to get at the door and get out, and I got him in the back of the head. When I peered out into the corridor, it was empty, so I closed the cell door after me and started down it. I could tell by the twittering going on in near-by cells that the gunshots had been heard, but whether the sound would carry any distance in that thick-walled place I doubted.

Anyway, I met no one as far as the turn in the corridor, which seemed miles away. I hugged the wall, in shadow half the time, and of course my hand wasn't empty nor down at my side. Around the turn I saw a staircase. Whether it was the one they'd carried me up the night before I could no longer remember, but this was no time to be choosy. I started inching down it. My shoes, yawning wide open without laces, were a real danger, threatened to trip me at any moment. On an impulse I stepped out of them and went on just in my socks.

CHAPTER IV.

DEATH JOINS THE PARTY.

IT was the wisest thing I could have done, it did away with the scrape of shoe leather on stone, silenced my tread, although I hadn't been thinking about that when I did it. At the foot of the stairs there was another passageway, wider than the one above. At the end of that, in full sight of me, a guard was dozing on a chair tilted back against the wall. If I'd kept my shoes on, he surely would have heard me. This one was armed, too; a Mauser rifle leaned back against the wall, cradled in the crook of his arm. Two cartridge belts full of steel shells criss-crossed his chest. But the big double door just beyond him, with a chain at the bottom and a chain at the top, was the door to the outside world.

Beween him and me, though, a brightly lighted side door yawned wide open, splashng yellow on the mouldy wall opposite it. This one I remembered from the night before: the director's office. And from within came a very faint sound, the scratch of a pen on paper, but enough of a give-away to show that it was occupied. A minute later there was the sound of some one clearing his throat.

I could have tried squirming past the opening flat on my stomach, hoping his desk would hide me. But I figured he had the keys, not that fellow at the door. And I figured he had a car too, even if it was only a model-T. So I lounged around the corner of the doorway and sighted my gun at the middle of his face. He looked up and turned from coffee color to green.

"Come here," I said. "The keys!"

He could hardly make the distance between us, he was wobbling like jelly. He had the keys in a big ring fastened at his wrist, I could hear them jangle.

I got him out into the passageway after me, where I could keep an eye on both of them at once. Then I warily closed in edgewise on the sleeping guard, keeping my gun on the director. The guard gave a sudden sigh that told me he was waking up.

I gauged the distance I had drawn the director away from the sheltering doorway of his office. Eight, ten yards. He couldn't get back in again in time, if he bolted. So I swung the gun backhand, and brought it down violently on the guard's bare head. He reared and I struck a second time, then he slumped, fell off the chair with a thud. I stopped the flying director right at the office threshold, drew him back toward me with the gun for a magnet.

"Open!" I ordered. He stepped over the prostrate guard, got a key out, fumbled at the ponderous lock with hands that waved like ribbons. I closed in behind him and bored the gun into his spine.

The chains clanged like tocsins when he swung them back out of the way, and the door itself squalled loud enough to wake the dead. But if there were any other guards besides the three I had eliminated, they were off duty, sound asleep somewhere. "You first," I ordered, and I closed the door after us.

I gave a sudden sharp intake of breath as I came out. A crescent moon was riding the sky. There wasn't even any afterglow left from the sun any more. The banquet must have been in full swing long ago!

"Quick, your car," I said, prodding him. "Where do you keep it? Don't stall now, or—"

Garages weren't very common down there; it was under an open shed around from the main entrance. "You are at the wheel," I said, and got in after him. It wasn't quite a T-model, but it wasn't much newer, a '26 Chevvy or something. It ran, that was all that mattered.

"The Villa Rosa," I said; "make it *pronto!*" If he'd had any doubts before, I could see now that he was sure that I was crazy; why, all he'd have to do there would be to turn me in again as an escaped inmate—or so he thought. He stepped on the gas almost willingly, and we tore away from that accursed place that I was never again to forget as long as I lived.

IT was further out than I thought—everything seemed to be against me—all I kept gritting was "Faster! Faster!" while the damned thing rocked from side to side over the dirt road. But finally after about twenty minutes or so, the lights of the town began to show ahead of us, in a big semicircle. I didn't need him any more after that.

"Open the door," I said, and I took the wheel over with one hand, motioned him out with the gun. "Jump—and go to hell!" I slowed just enough so he couldn't be killed, then sped on again, leaving him back there on his face. A minute later the lights of Costamala had blossomed all around me.

The Villa Rosa was blazing with them when I finally braked outside the grounds, vaulted out and tore for the entrance. It took the fact a minute to sink in—the fact that this meant I was in time and not too late. The pistol shot, they'd told me, was to be the signal for plunging the place in darkness; this meant it hadn't been fired yet. I didn't even take time off to be thankful, just kept going.

There were plenty of horse-drawn carriages lined up, and even decrepit taxis, but only a few private cars, and the Bugatti stood out from these like the Normandie from a crowd of tugs. It was off by itself to one side, and I could make out the outline of someone sitting waiting in the front seat. So he was in there already, whoever he was!

Somebody had been passing out champagne to the sentinels at the main entrance, that was all that saved me—rushing at them the way I did, out of the dark, with a bared revolver in my hand. Their rifles had been laid aside and they were too slow on the uptake; by the time they were rushing for them and yelling at me to stand and deliver, I was halfway up the marble staircase already.

The hum of dozens of voices was coming from the big banqueting hall on the second floor. There were no soldiers on guard there, only a couple of plainclothes men. I knocked them both apart before they even saw me coming, and looked in and saw what was going on.

It hadn't happened yet, but it was going to in about a second more. A long table loaded with flowers, wines, and dishes ran the entire length of the room, from where I was to the opposite side. Halfway down it sat Savinas, and directly in front of him, facing him across the table, stood a man busily sketching on a drawing-board. I couldn't make out who he was at that distance, and I didn't give a rap. All I saw was that he had on a thick pair of glasses, to partly conceal his identity. I glimpsed the old man's face—yellow with fear, glistening with sweat; he was edged as far back in the chair as he could get, unable to save himself. He knew what was coming, knew something had happened, knew they had sent someone else in my place—and yet couldn't lift a finger in his own defense, surrounded on all sides by men he couldn't trust.

Right while I stood looking on, the man finished the sketch with a flourish, turned it around and offered it to Savinas. I saw his other hand reach toward his coat, as though to put the pencil away—there was no time to get over there, to call out, to do anything. I simply aimed at the broad part of his skull, above the ear, and fired. I saw him jolt upward, rise about an inch on his toes, and then the whole room plunged into darkness around me, before I even saw him fall. The bribed electrician had simply mistaken the signal, that was all.

Instantly there were two other shots just behind me, from the plainclothes men on door duty, and I dropped, unhit, and swerved to one side. The table was the only thing that showed faintly in the pitch-blackness. I found the edge with my hand, kept my palm on it for a guide, and ran down the length of it, bent double. The body of the would-be assassin, lying in my path, which tripped me and sent me sprawling on my face, showed me where Savinas was—otherwise I might have run too far past him to the lower end.

I picked myself up, reached across the table, and grabbed someone's shoulder—the *stump* of someone's shoulder. He hadn't moved, hadn't even had time to get out of his chair yet.

"Boss!" I breathed in his face, "It's Stiff! Duck underneath to this side. I'll get you out of here!"

His shoulder sank from reach, not an instant too soon. "Death to the tyrant!" a voice bellowed beside the chair, and there was the hiss of a saber cleaving the air and a splitting of wood. I fired, once, at where the voice had come from, and heard a groan and—crazy sound—the tinkling of a lot of medals and decorations as they swept the table-top.

A moment later a hand gripped my leg, and the game old man had crawled through unhurt to where I was. I hoisted him to his feet. "Keep your

head down!" I cautioned, and began zig-zagging toward the door, towing him after me by one hand—the only hand he had.

THE big banquet-hall was a pandemonium, chairs going over, glasses breaking, cries of "Lights! *Por Dios,* give us lights!" Pin-points of light flickered fitfully here and there, but not the kind that did any good—cigarette lighters, matches, stabs of orange gunfire from the door, where the two plainclothes men seemed to be firing just on general principle.

I swept him after me over to the other side of the room, in a big arc, then went at the door obliquely from that direction, sort of offside and out of range. They hadn't had presence of mind enough to close the door yet, but just as we got to it a match flared in Savinas' face, and a shot went off so close to him I expected to see him fold up at the end of my outstretched arm. I fired at the face behind the match and it went out. The old man was still on his feet as we got out on the stair-landing. "Thank God you wore that vest," I panted.

We went down the stairs hugging the wall. Forms brushed by us rushing upward, never guessing who we were. The last hurdle was the pair of sentries at the main entrance, who rushed together with crossed rifles to bar the way as we showed up. They saw his face, and hesitated. "In the name of the President of the Republic, stand aside!" I thundered. It worked. He was still alive, so he was still on top, and the winning side was always their side. They stiffened to attention, but with their mouths still open.

I let go of him and headed for the Bugatti on my own, to get there quicker. It was lighter out here, there were street-lights beyond the grounds shining in, and Torres' driver must have seen me coming. He had the car-door open and was out on the running-board firing away before I could close in. I didn't feel anything, and thought I was crazy for a minute, I wasn't wearing any bullet-proof vest. Then I remembered the blanks I'd put in his gun the night before; they'd seen me do it, but maybe they'd forgotten in their excitement to tell him; and he'd been drugged at the time.

I held my fire and closed in on him. By that time he was down on both knees already and his gun had gone over his shoulder. "*Señor, señor,* you must be the Devil! The bullets won't go near you—!"

"I am the Devil!" I told him. "In! You're driving us to Santa Marta!"

Savinas came tottering up, at his last gasp by now, and got in the back seat. "Stay down on the floor," I warned him. I crowded in next to the palsied driver. "Now aim at that front gate, and never mind waiting for them to open it—this thing has steel fenders!"

The gate burst in two with a terrific clang just as a crowd came spilling out the front steps, peppering away at us and yelling, "He got away! Stop him!"

There wasn't any chase; nothing in the country could have even kept that Bugatti in sight once it got going.

I turned around after a while and said, "You're alive, anyway. Why don't you chuck it all and come back to the States with me?"

He was a game old man, all right. "President I am!" he said, "And President I stay! It will all be over before the sun comes up."

We got to Santa Marta an hour before midnight, and routed the loyal regiment out of its barracks. I hung

around just long enough to make sure what kind of a reception he'd get, and hear him give his orders. I needn't have worried. They yelled their heads off for him, and started back at a double-quick trot then and there, breathing smoke and flame.

"Get in, Stiff," the old fellow beamed, his good arm around my shoulder. "We go back now and watch the—how you say—mopping up."

"You can drop me off at the airfield on the way," I said. "I got a seat coming to me on the Pan-American, may as well use it now as any other time."

"But Stiff," he argued, "I will make you my chief of police, I will name streets after you and put up statues of you—the country is yours!"

"You don't need me any more," I said. "You'll be all right now. I'm homesick, I guess. I'm going back to Chicago, where it's peaceful."

THE END

Lady Musher Goes Boating

FATHER BERNARD HUBBARD got himself into a pretty tough pickle not so long ago when coasting down the rapids of Twin Glacier Rapids up in Alaska. His boat wrecked and he landed high and dry on a rock in the middle of the stream. He might be there yet, if Mary Joyce, Alaska's "Lady Musher," hadn't happened by and rescued him. Miss Joyce, who had left her dogs behind, sailed by in another boat while Father Hubbard was marooned. She couldn't get him off the rock herself so she found a man who could. While the boat sailed by at express train speed Father Hubbard jumped aboard. Which all goes to show that ladies, as well as men, know how to act in emergencies, at least ladies like Miss Joyce. But maybe she is an extraordinary lady—for last winter she mushed over a thousand miles in one stretch. Quite a feat, even for a man, and a thing seldom done by women.

—*J. Wentworth Tilden.*

The Ghost Mascot

The two joined battle

By ANTHONY RUD

Author of "The Black Warrior," "Sorcerer's Treasure," etc.

Living, Sorrowful Sam, the giant moose, wove with his hulking form a pattern through men's lives—dying, he left behind for them wealth and a legend

IN that day there was no railroad from Le Pas to Hudson Bay. Cree Indians, with a sprinkling of white trappers in season, dwelt in the Cranberry District of north-central Manitoba.

A year or so before Sorrowful Sam was born, however, a half-breed found an outcropping of copper ore so rich it could not be mistaken. The copper came in thin sheets. When stripped from its matrix it looked like peanut brittle.

That started a rush, and gave the world the famous Flin-Flon and Mandy mines, with a dozen others almost as marvelous. The ore was so extremely rich that the miners could afford to haul it overland all the way to Trail, British Columbia, for smelting, then ship it by rail to Elizabeth, New Jersey, for refining.

Sorrowful Sam was elected mascot to the pioneer prospectors.

The Crees called this almost barren country the Land of Little Sticks. White men enthusiastically rechristened it the Land of Lobstick and

Lode. Lobsticks were the markers, used instead of blazes along a trail. An Indian would shin up the tallest tree he could find. Coming down he lopped off every branch save a tuft or cluster of branches at the top. This plume, with the denuded trunk beneath, could be seen plainly from a long distance, and was called a lobstick.

Sorrowful Sam was a moose of the largest variety (*gigas*). In past time his ancestors had wandered southward from the region of Kenai Peninsula and Cook Inlet. A herd of some two thousand had taken up its habitat in the less rigorous climate of Manitoba.

Sam was born in May, when the Chinook had just begun to melt the drifts of snow. When he was able to stagger erect on stilts of legs that folded up ludicrously under him every few minutes, he was a knock-kneed, awkward infant, thirty-two inches in height, clad in a thick coat of sandy red like a buffalo calf, and given to bawling tremulously for Ma.

Make the most of that during two weeks; for virility flowed into the blood of Sam, and he never again was in the slightest degree inclined to depend upon anyone but himself. He grew swiftly and enormously, and he lost the red coloration of his coat.

An elephant possesses a sense of humor—sometimes—and it is possible for his mahout to love him. But nothing on the frozen muskeg, or the summer lakes and river wallows, ever strikes a moose as funny. For that reason there is something terrific and awesome about a full grown bull moose, standing seven feet at the shoulder, carrying more than a hundredweight of palmated horns, and viewing life as sternly as an old-time Puritan elder scenting witchcraft.

Sorrowful Sam, however, came as near to being loved as any moose who ever lived in Canada. That was just a break of good luck, for he certainly did not reciprocate.

That first summer, ranging with his mother until she rejoined the great herd, Sam covered an immense amount of territory—from the Saskatchewan River on the southwest, to Cross Lake eastward, and north through the Cranberry to the Kississing.

During summer all moose are irritable. The reason is—flies. Canada has more fly plagues than any other country. One of the first jokes sprung on a chechahco runs as follows, with the Indian guide talking—the first time his fly-swatting white man charge gives him an opening:

"Ah *oui!* De flies! First w'en de Chinook come, is de black flies. Den come de deer flies, den house flies, den greenhead flies, den bear flies, den—"

"Well, what comes then?" demands the exasperated chechahco, swatting the back of his neck.

"Den de snow flies!"

FOR Sam, however, the flies were torment. He had an insignificant tail; and for the month when he shed his baby coat, and only started to grow the coarse thatch of straw-like, purple-gray hair which he would wear through adult life, he spent every possible moment immersed in water.

His food was present all through the Cranberry and Kississing in abundance. He was a finicky eater, however, subsisting almost entirely upon the tender twigs of willow, birch, hemlock, spruce, alder, aspen and maple. Whenever the herd came upon water-lilies in the lakes, they gorged themselves upon the tender stems. In the winter they would eat sphagnum moss, until the sap rose in the trees again.

Because this menu, and nothing but, will keep a moose like Sam healthy, it is a practical impossibility to raise a baby moose in captivity. Ninety-five percent of those born in zoölogical gardens die before they reach adult stature, gastro-enteritis killing them. But in the wild state where green twig food is plentiful, there is no such thing as a sick moose.

Except for the flies, Sorrowful Sam had a magnificent summer. There were dozens of young calves to try his budding knobs of horns on; and when autumn rutting season started the old ones to charging each other like pairs of runaway locomotives, Sam learned to paw the muskeg with his sharp hoofs, snort, and put up an excellent sham battle with one or another of his four-month-old rivals.

During this season he found himself alone, his mother having left the herd. In fact only a half dozen scarred old males and a few scrubby cows were left as a guard over the youngsters.

Then with the first deep drifts of snow, came the wolf attack. It was a menace which would confront any lone straggler from the herd at any season, but now with most of the redoubtable warriors paired off with mates, the howling pack grew bold. They circled; and the grumpy veterans had their job cut out to marshal the fearless but foolish young ones into the center, where the great, pointed horns could put up a barricade before them and the cows.

One obstreperous youngster, in fact, refused to realize the danger. Just when the wolves were about to abandon the attempt, he butted under and out, idiotically croaking his baby imitation of a moose call. . . .

He never had a chance, after that, to learn what the danger really was....

Gray streaks came at him through the snow. Red tongues, flashing fangs, the hungry, whining *yip-yipping* of a slavering, starved pack seeing fresh meat there before it for the slaying.

In a matter of seconds they had the baby moose hamstrung, sitting down to have his throat cut. When the old ones charged, he was lying flat. The wolves dodged nimbly, though one of thirty got caught, gored and trampled into extinction.

The time came, though, when the herd had to move along. The wolves had sat on their haunches waiting for this. The dead calf lay there. They swooped upon it, and soon were wrangling among themselves over tidbits. The old ones of the herd, understanding, did not look back as they passed slowly from sight with their dependents. It is the first law of the wild: folly brings quick punishment, and the only punishment is death.

Deep gloom attached itself to the remnant of the herd. Far from sprightly at best, the old ones now discharged their duties toward the young with unrestrained savagery. It was excellent discipline, but Sam did not like it at all. He tried insubordination several times, and each time got hide torn as he was bowled from his feet, and then cut by the sharp hoofs of Old Sinner—the impatient patriarch of the herd.

In a couple more weeks, however, pairs of younger moose began to drift back into the fold. Not all would return, of course; but there were a few newcomers to fill the gaps. Now and then a cow came in alone. There did not have to be any explanation. The antlers of her mate probably were on the way to some taxidermist, or lying unwanted out in the snow somewhere, while a fat Cree and his squaw gorged

on the succulent meat, and made thread for garments out of those strong sinews.

Moose meat is tough, but it has a better flavor than caribou or elk. The only reason the moose still survives is that both Eskimo and Indian prize fish —or the flesh of sea animals like the seal and walrus—far higher.

White men rarely eat moose. They kill for the thrill of facing an animal able to destroy them, and for the great trophy to hang on the wall of the library at home.

SORROWFUL SAM grew gaunt that winter—but he grew. When the soft Chinook blew again the following spring, and tender green shoots began to appear, he was a frame of bones and skin, with a semi-prehensile upper lip hanging down four inches beyond the lower lip, ready to eat, eat, eat and never stop. It took him well into July before he began to have any outside interests at all; satisfying his voracious innards took all his waking time.

But his horns were spreading then, and he had become truculent. He feared nothing; and he had to be taught all over again that he was two or three years away from being boss of the herd.

That summer the great herd split into six parts. Sam cherished a notion he was going to run things in the part to which he attached himself. He was wrong. Thunder Cloud, the huge purple leader, knocked him down time and again, gored him, and left him exhausted in a mire of muskeg while the other bulls and the cows moved away.

It was not until a week later that he ceased that mournful bellow born of hurt feelings and a desire for vengeance, and realized that he was completely alone.

A pair of luckless prospectors, trudging back toward Atikameg with food gone, ammunition reduced to a pair of cartridges in a .30-30, spied the fifteen-months-old moose standing there at the edge of a clearing.

Sam stared back at them. They were his first men, and they did not look big enough to seem menacing.

With hands that trembled, Jules LeGendre *click-clacked* a cartridge into the chamber, aimed and shot—at a point-blank range of one hundred sixty yards.

The moose moved his head, but still stood there. Jules hurriedly fired again, muttering French-Canadian oaths below his breath.

Then he and his companion fairly exploded. Sorrowful Sam shook his head again, wondering what those jarring clicks against his antlers could have been. He turned and went slowly away—and all the half-starved partners could do was curse. And Jules supposed to be the best shot in the Cranberry!

They walked to where the moose had stood. They saw rock jutting up beside the spot. And then, swearing shakily the way men do when tremendous good fortune has come unexpectedly, they knocked off pieces of that rock containing slices of pure copper! They were still celebrating when Sorrowful Sam came back to gaze moodily at them. They did not see him. He evidently disapproved, for after several silent minutes he raised his head and sent that mournful, blood-chilling bellow across the open glade.

Then he turned, shaking his great antlers, and departed, leaving a pair of superstitious French-Canadians to swear tall tales about a giant ghost

moose who could not be slain, who had come to show them the great copper lode they now hastened to locate and register!

Nothing as spectacular as that ever happened again. But Sam did appear a number of times to prospectors. He had no fear of man, and no particular animosity toward them. They just seemed to get in his hair wherever he roamed in the Cranberry.

The fact that several of these prospectors did strike it rich was perhaps not so extraordinary. Everywhere in the Cranberry traces, at least, of copper—with some gold and silver—can be found. Probably the moose-haunted ones who did *not* find rich claims, said nothing. At any rate the superstition became so rooted that for a space of some six years a white prospector would no more shoot a moose than he would feed his grubstake to the wolves.

Sam became known. He had one mark out of the ordinary, a silver question mark of hair on his left jaw. Rightly or wrongly he became credited with finding more sixteen percent copper ore than the telephone companies could use in ten years. Prospectors actually went out without rifles, but equipped with rolls of birch bark—calling moose in hopes that the lucky ghost moose would come and bring them fortune!

SAM did not mate that autumn. Before the snow grew deep, however, he was lucky enough to find and join a small herd—else the wolves surely would have picked his bones. Even as it was, the herd was sorely beset; and three members were left behind in the drifts to be devoured by the fanged fiends.

By the following summer Sam was almost full grown. He stood eighty-five inches at the shoulder, weighed 1,450 pounds, and had a seventy-six-inch spread of widely palmated antlers with thirty points. He had become boss of his small herd, with only nominal opposition.

Sam was less of a rover than most bull moose. He stayed close to the Cranberry, and only once did firearms take toll of his herd. That time an Indian trapper on webs shot a cow; and Sam actually could not guess what was the matter with her, or with the swarthy human creature who came flopping on those ungainly feet, shouting and waving the bang-stick to scare away the rest from his kill.

The legend of his luck to prospectors persisted and grew. Even the whole of the next year, when no prospector actually encountered the lucky ghost moose, dozens of men crossed themselves and watched for him, hoping.

Sam mated; but when the snow began and he and the cow sought the herd they had left, they found another and much larger one instead. This was a gathering of ninety-odd, and it was in charge of that wise old warrior, Thunder Cloud, whom Sam had known before!

The young moose had enjoyed a taste of authority over a dozen of his kind. Now he joined battle immediately with Thunder Cloud, intending to lead this big herd or perish in the attempt.

The two came together with a crash of horns which made snowshoe rabbits start nervously from covert, half a mile away! And it was Sam who was jarred back on his haunches.

He could not understand it, and tried again, after scrambling to evade those destroying forehoofs. He weighed as much as his wise and wary antagonist. He was fully as tall, if not an inch or

two taller. Yet somehow for the second time Thunder Cloud set him back ignominiously. This time a great welling of blood came from a twelve-inch gash on his right shoulder. And one of the herd leader's forehoofs tore skin, fat and muscle from his upper right leg, as well.

Once more Sam tried, and this time he was rolled over and over, stamped on, and generally made to understand that he either would submit now and bide his time, or be crippled and left for the wolves. He was sorely puzzled, but understood that much.

He got up, faced away, and single-footed to the rear of the herd. There he stood, with drooping head shaking slowly from side to side, a beaten and baffled bull moose.

THAT year he added another fifty pounds, and an inch of height. Four new points came on his horns, and they reached their record spread of seventy-eight inches with a palmation of sixteen inches. But he did not fight Thunder Cloud again; and when the next mating season had ended, Thunder Cloud's mate came back alone to the herd. Somewhere that wise old moose had fallen prey to a hunter's gun.

Sam fought two young moose who had big ideas if not much else, and then led the herd undisputed. For three years, the herd increasing in size and strength, it roamed the Cranberry and Kississing. Occasionally in autumn a prospector or trapper would get a sight of the ghost moose with the silver question mark on his jowl. But the day of big copper strikes had passed; and Sam's legend faded—though the old-timers still shot other meat in preference to moose, just to be on the safe side.

Then after mating season in the sixth year of his life, Sam—now growing more gray, though losing none of his enormous strength—came back to his herd with his mate, and found a strange veteran in charge!

This was a moose not quite as tall as Sam, but stockier. He was a year or two older, and had been in many battles, to judge by his broken horns and scarred sides. He stood lowering, pawing the frozen muskeg, silent as Sam snorted and bellowed his indignant challenge.

Then both started at the same instant, *sprinting!*

It was inconceivable that any lumbering moose could travel so fast! They met—and both were jarred backward by the terrific impact of bone on bone. Sam was up first, and after the interloper with sharp hoofs. But the latter managed to get away without much damage—though he left a great spade of horn there in the snow.

The most terrible tragedy of the Northern wild was enacted then. The two charged, came together; but this time they did not part! Butting, making short charges back and forth, they stayed together, though this was against instinct with both. They shook their heads. They snorted till red blood flowed from their nostrils. Still they stayed on their feet, head to head.

Their great horns were locked, to stay that way until death!

Fascinated, the rest of the herd watched all that day. When morning came, the two antagonists were still wrestling back and forth, but wearily. The herd had seen enough. It moved along, grazing, and the two great fighters could not follow. Within eighty yards of where they first met, they still struggled to free themselves. In vain.

Toward nightfall the wolves came, and it was almost a mercy. In quick slashes they hamstrung both moose. Then sharp fangs sank into their throats. Glaring red-eyed at each other, unconquered and unconquering, they died.

Days later an old man, laying a string of traps, came upon the skeletons. The heads were chewed somewhat, but on the jaw of one of the moose was a question mark in silver hair. The old trapper crossed himself.

"De ghos' moose, by Gar!" he muttered in his beard.

He went for a sled and a hatchet. With the latter implement he cut away the lesser antlers, taking only the skull and horns of Sorrowful Sam. He dragged the sledge in to the Hudson's Bay Company factory, where he created a real sensation which was to spread throughout the Cranberry.

A legend was ended. . . .

In due course that skull and horns were presented to the Field Museum, in Chicago, where they now hang. With thirty-four points, they are said to be the largest moose antlers ever found.

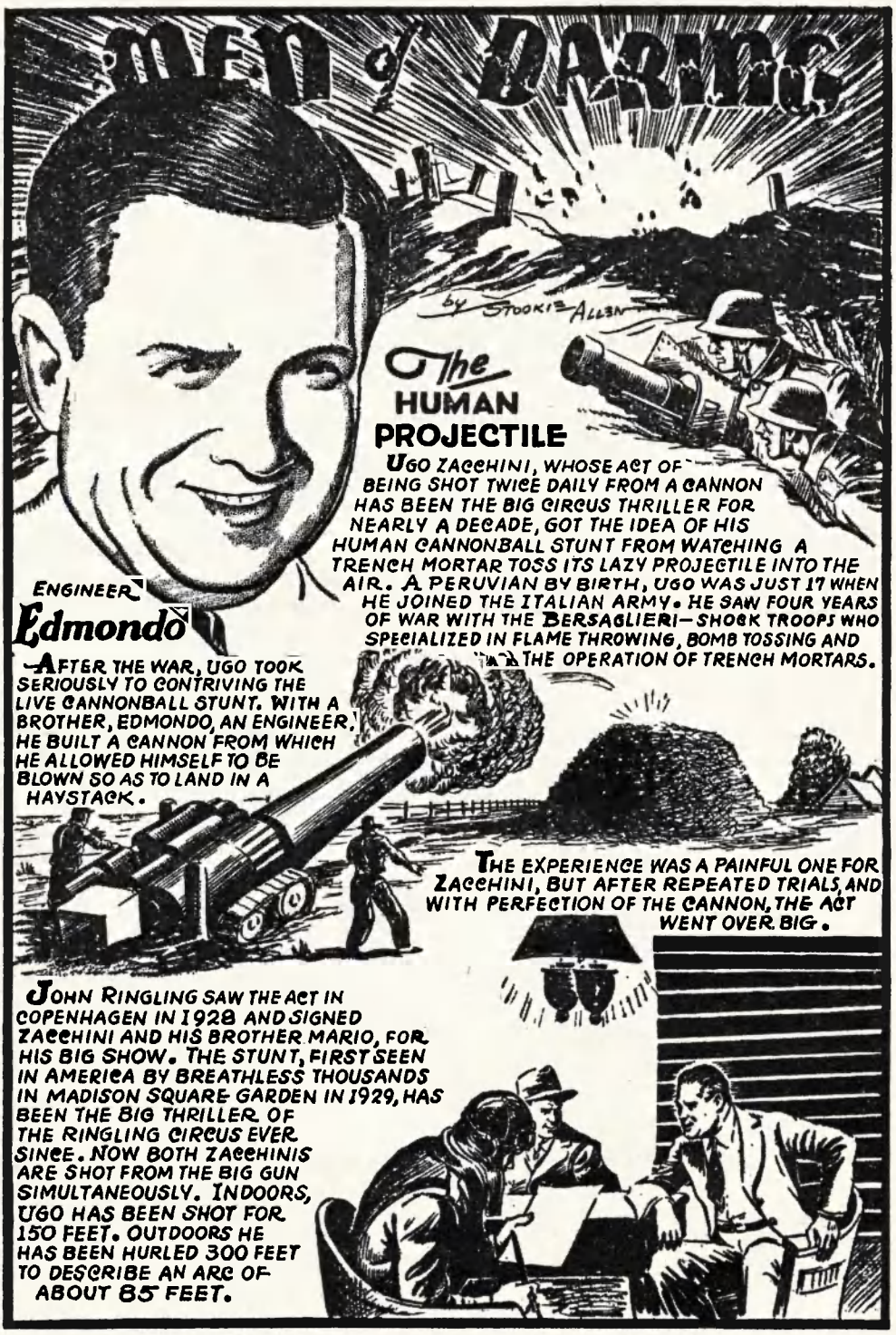
THE END

New Whippets for the Navy

NOT so many years ago, the nations of the world were trying to see which could build the biggest battleship. Now, they're trying to outdo each other in building little fighting ships. Maybe this is a hopeful sign.

Not long ago, England turned out the first of her tiny "mosquito" boats; now the United States Navy has launched the *Erie*. England has the edge on us in smallness, though, for the mosquito boats are only fifty feet long, whereas the *Erie* is a 2,000-ton gunboat. She will carry four 6-inch guns, several rapid-fire anti-aircraft guns of a new type, and a seaplane. She will have a crew of about two hundred and thirty men and eleven officers.

The last word in naval design, the *Erie* will scoot through the water at twenty knots an hour. Because of this and because of her long cruising radius, Naval officers believe she will be highly valuable in wartime for convoy, patrol, and independent service. Already a sister ship, the *Charleston*, is being completed at the Charleston Navy Yard. —*Charles Dorman.*


MEN of DARING
by Stookie Allen
The HUMAN PROJECTILE
UGO ZACCHINI, WHOSE ACT OF BEING SHOT TWICE DAILY FROM A CANNON HAS BEEN THE BIG CIRCUS THRILLER FOR NEARLY A DECADE, GOT THE IDEA OF HIS HUMAN CANNONBALL STUNT FROM WATCHING A TRENCH MORTAR TOSS ITS LAZY PROJECTILE INTO THE AIR. A PERUVIAN BY BIRTH, UGO WAS JUST 17 WHEN HE JOINED THE ITALIAN ARMY. HE SAW FOUR YEARS OF WAR WITH THE BERSAGLIERI—SHOCK TROOPS WHO SPECIALIZED IN FLAME THROWING, BOMB TOSSING AND THE OPERATION OF TRENCH MORTARS.
ENGINEER Edmondo
AFTER THE WAR, UGO TOOK SERIOUSLY TO CONTRIVING THE LIVE CANNONBALL STUNT. WITH A BROTHER, EDMONDO, AN ENGINEER, HE BUILT A CANNON FROM WHICH HE ALLOWED HIMSELF TO BE BLOWN SO AS TO LAND IN A HAYSTACK.
THE EXPERIENCE WAS A PAINFUL ONE FOR ZACCHINI, BUT AFTER REPEATED TRIALS AND WITH PERFECTION OF THE CANNON, THE ACT WENT OVER BIG.
JOHN RINGLING SAW THE ACT IN COPENHAGEN IN 1928 AND SIGNED ZACCHINI AND HIS BROTHER MARIO, FOR HIS BIG SHOW. THE STUNT, FIRST SEEN IN AMERICA BY BREATHLESS THOUSANDS IN MADISON SQUARE GARDEN IN 1929, HAS BEEN THE BIG THRILLER OF THE RINGLING CIRCUS EVER SINCE. NOW BOTH ZACCHINIS ARE SHOT FROM THE BIG GUN SIMULTANEOUSLY. INDOORS, UGO HAS BEEN SHOT FOR 150 FEET. OUTDOORS HE HAS BEEN HURLED 300 FEET TO DESCRIBE AN ARC OF ABOUT 85 FEET.

Next Week: Roger Q. Williams, Veteran Flyer

The throw to first was a honey—but Jojo beat it by an eyelash

The Speed King

By GEORGE BRUCE

Author of "The Rockets' Red Glare," etc.

Hero by day on the pitcher's mound—but zero by night among the high-hat millionaires

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

SOME people think that a sports reporter has the softest job this side of Paradise. Ringside seats at all the big fights, fifty-yard-line tickets for the Army-Navy game, press box accommodations at the World Series—things like that. But Ed Brand, baseball expert of the *Daily Blade*, discovered that a good reporter must also learn to take the bitter with the better when his hard-hearted editor assigned him to the horrible task of covering the spring training camp activities of the Busters.

What, you never heard of the Busters? Then you've missed one of the biggest treats in baseball. The Busters were edged out of the pennant last season by the narrow margin of sixty-two games. They've been in the cellar of the National League so long that there's moss growing on some of 'em. The columnists call them variously the Dizziness Boys, the Witless Wonders, and the Diamond's Dolts of Destiny. For years they have specialized in catching flies with their skulls, stealing second with the bases full, laying down sacrifices with two gone, and other such insanities.

Ed Brand, it seemed, had become slightly exhilarated at a farewell dinner to the Busters at the end of the past season. He

This story began in the Argosy for August 29

had delivered a rambling speech on the keynote of "Wait till next year!" Thus he had become the bosom buddy of Manager Frisco Smith of the Busters, who requested his assignment to the training camp.

DESPITE the lowly standing of the Busters, hope springs eternal in the soul of Frisco Smith. On the train to Palm City he reveals his plans for the year. The Busters, of course, have not been able to afford any new talent—but what does that matter? "We'll climb out of the cellar for sure this season," Frisco declares. "Why, we might even finish in fifth place." There is one new rookie coming up—a right-handed pitcher from the Prairie States League who has been highly touted by Frisco's scouts. A big fellow, a horse for work, who answers to the name of Lancefield Lee. "If this Lee is as good as they say," opines Frisco, "he might even win ten games for us."

Ed Brand is on the practice field when Lancefield Lee at last appears. He's big, all right, but what a greenhorn! Attired in hill-billy clothes that include yaller shoes and a celluloid collar, he modestly announces that he also plays the outfield on the days when he doesn't pitch. He had an earned run average of .047 last year, he reveals, and batted a mere .526. Frisco invites him to demonstrate his prowess, but he refuses. "No, sir," he avers. "Not until we-all have talked business."

THIS amazing rookie then reveals a proposition that leaves Manager Frisco gasping. He wants a starting salary of fifteen thousand a year! For this amount he will pitch every three days and win at least twenty-five games. Unless he wins the twenty-five he doesn't want a penny.

Manager Frisco thinks the whole business is a hoax. Brand finally persuades him, however, to give the lad a try-out, just for the laugh. He takes the box against the Buster sluggers—and Frisco almost swoons when Lancefield Lee reveals a pitching form that is reminiscent of Walter Johnson in his palmy days. Speed, curves, control—the kid has everything!

To top the day off, Lee steps to the plate and starts lathering the Buster pitchers with whistling drives that smack the outfield fences on the line.

Ed Brand, of course, hotfoots to the telegraph office to wire in the news of the new Buster discovery. Steve O'Grady, his boss, thinks he is joking and refuses to print the yarn. Other papers likewise call it a pipe-dream. So the reporters with the team enter into a conspiracy of silence to keep Lee under cover until the opening of the season. . . .

As the Busters work northward, playing out the exhibition schedule, Ed Brand discovers that he is drawing closer to Lee. He recognizes that the lad is not the loud-mouth braggart his team-mates believe him to be. He is shy, sensitive—wants to be a gentleman. Brand helps the young fellow pick out a wardrobe, and agrees to become the lad's personal agent at Lee's request.

Now the team has hit the Big Town and is opening with the Giants. The Royal Rooters of the Busters roar in dismay as the name of an unknown is announced as the pitcher. "Who's this Lee?" they howl as Joey Moore, the lead-off hitter for the New Yorkers, strides to the plate. (Ed Brand is telling the story.)

CHAPTER VI.

HOG WILD.

LEE stands in the middle of the diamond, his hands behind his back. He looks slowly around at his infield: There's Truck Moole at first, looking as big as the Hindenburg; Tiny Renn playing second, hopping up and down, crammed with nervous energy; Scoop Taylor at short, kicking at the dust with his spikes and beating his right fist into his glove; Wop Scoza, almost black-faced, graceful as a whippet in the way he handles himself.

In the outfield is Bumps Harring, playing right. He stands out there in a half-slouch, his awkward legs and angular body making him look like a mechanical man in a baseball uniform. Monty White is in center, relaxed and

taking it easy. And in left field, Doll Carter squints up at the sky, shading his sun-goggles with his glove.

There is a sustained roar from the fifty thousand inside the park. It rises and rises.

Ollie Kroup walks halfway out to the mound, shakes his fist at Lee, yells at him, trots back behind the plate. He adjusts his mask over his head, crouches down, gives the signal. Lance Lee nods as he toes the rubber.

I'm watching the kid's face, and a little pulse of anxiety thumps in my chest. His face is so drawn, so white, so strained. I suddenly realize just how all alone a pitcher is out there on the mound—alone with a hundred thousand eyes watching his every move. I understand for the first time in my life just what it must mean to a boy like Lee, fresh out from the red clay of Missouri, to find himself in the goldfish bowl with those thousands staring at him. A boy who couldn't sleep on a railroad train because the man blew the whistle and scared him.

I'm remembering that shock-headed kid with the blue eyes and the fighting chin and the circus-clown clothes who walked onto the Busters' field down in Palm City. I can still hear him say: "If I don't win twenty-five games—I don't want a penny."

And there he is, green as grass, facing the Giants on opening day. Every night and every day since his first day with the Busters Lance Lee's been with me. I guess I know him better than any person in the world—better even than himself. No wonder I feel as if I'm out there doing what he's going to do.

I'm worried because he hasn't got that sarcastic, almost flippant air about him. He's too serious, too tight. His nerves are murdering him. . . . And I can't blame him, brother, for my own are as sharp as a razor blade, and my knees are shaking a fandango.

Joey Moore jiggles his bat and eyes the mound. Jojo Moore, alias the Thin Man, who likes to murder that first pitch. My eyes bug out as I watch Lance Lee settle back. His body slides forward and that arm of his, with the full weight of the body behind it, snaps forward.

He throws that first ball twenty feet high against the screen. Throws it like a projectile, so fast that nobody even saw it until it bounces back on the field and the ball boy runs for it. A wild pitch—hog wild!

Lance Lee stands there, looking at nothing. His tongue licks over his mouth. Ollie Kroup runs out with a new ball, slaps Lee on the back. Moore grins. The crowd hoots—they're crying for blood, fresh blood with the first pitch.

Lee rubs the gloss from the new ball, takes a grip on it. He's working carefully, deliberately. He lets it go. It streaks toward the plate—wide and outside.

"Ball!" says Rocky Ryan.

Lee walks around on the hill. His face is wet with sweat. He brushes the stinging stuff out of his eyes. He rubs at the ball again, sets himself, lets the next one go. It's a mile high, over Moore's head. Ollie has to jump for it to prevent another wild pitch.

The crowd is yelling derisively. I feel like murdering them, one and all. Can't they give the kid a chance to settle down? What kind of sportsmanship is that?

Kroup is halfway out to the hill, talking to Lance and trying to settle him. Frisco Smith is pacing back and forth in front of the dugout, looking toward the bull pen where Fireball Floyd is taking off his wind-breaker.

I'm mumbling to myself—and if I had not forgotten the words I'd be praying.

Lee takes deliberate aim—and heaves the ball so far on the outside that Ollie has to dive headlong for it to smother it on the ground. Moore slings his bat toward the dugout and grins toward the mound as he trots down to first.

Whitehead steps into the batter's box. The Phi Beta Kappa kid is grinning too. He waves his bat toward Moore on first as if to say: "Get set, Jojo. You'll be on your way in a second."

Lee's face is like a gray mask. He's thinking of nothing but to get that ball over the plate. He lets go deliberately, half speed.

Whitehead swings to face him, shortens his hold on the war club, eases the pellet in a beautiful drag bunt down the first base line. Lance Lee pounces on it, moving like a flash. He comes up with it, looks toward second, and heaves it at Truck Moole.

And it's a wild throw! The ball bounces off the front of the field boxes, with Moole scampering after it like a crazy man.

Moore makes third and Whitehead goes to second on that bloomer.

Terry tosses away his two extra bats and steps into the box. He takes up that little half-crouch and swings the bat with that slow easy motion. Lee looks at him for a moment. His mouth moves once or twice as if he was going to say something but changed his mind. He steps down on the rubber, uncorks, and the pitch whistles under Terry's chin for a ball.

Terry looks at him, mad, and then looks at the umpire.

The next pitch is low and outside to a left hander. The next two are inside and high, and make Terry duck. Manager Will flings his bludgeon away and trots down to first.

Three men on, nobody out—and Ott, the little mashie-shot dynamiter who makes a habit of scooping the ball into the stands for a home run, walks out to face Lee.

Those Buster fans—rabid even in moments of sanity—are frantic. They are frothing at the mouth, booing, trying to tear up the seats. The waves of voices rolls down over the field, each imprecation in it aimed straight at Frisco Smith.

"Where did you find that lemon? Oh, you fathead. Take him out—give us a ball game! Bury that guy! Cross—we want Cross!"

Frisco Smith's face is white and his hands are shaking. It seems that all Frisk's dreams must get busted before they're even dreams. The dream, the showmanship, the secrecy, the strategy aimed at this first game are backfiring in his face. Lord—how he wanted Lee to make good! He had prayed for a pitcher with Lance Lee's promise during all these dismal years they had saddled him with a bunch of misfits. And now—

Frisco was broken-hearted. His shoulders suddenly hunched. He looked at me, shook his head dismally, and gave the signal to the bull pen for Floyd Cross to come in.

BUT Lance Lee, out on the mound, beckoned to Ollie Kroup and said three words. Kroup trotted back, spoke to Rocky Ryan. Ryan nodded, stepped in front of the plate, lifted his hands in the time-out sign.

Lee walked to the side lines and gave Frisco a jerk of the head. The whole Buster infield trotted over to the side-lines, clustering around. In the unex-

pected hush I could hear Lee's voice: "I'm sorry," he was telling Frisco. "The crowd and everything, I guess, got me like this. I began sweating all over. Hands got slippery, couldn't hold the ball. Maybe—you felt that way the first time you played in front of a crowd like this. I didn't know there was this many people in the world. It's a lot different than I thought . . ."

Spike Green runs out with a towel and a paper cup of water. Lee nods his thanks and swabs off his face and dries his hand on the towel. He rubs his fingers on the grass.

"I'm all right now," he tells Frisco in that steady voice. "I won't never be bothered again by no crowd. Right now there ain't anybody out here—but me and them Giants!"

He turned away abrupt and walked back to the center of the diamond.

Frisco stands there a minute, looking after him. Then he suddenly grins, trots back to the dugout. He motions Cross back to the bullpen, while the crowd roars disapproval.

And then happens one of those screwy things that sometimes comes over a mob. They lapse into a sudden, absolute silence. Maybe it was that grin—that sarcastic, confident grin on Lee's face. Maybe it was in the way he stood up out there, looking at Ott. No matter what—that mob was breathless.

Three men on base—nobody out—and Master Melvin Ott up there with his big black war club swinging.

Lance Lee juggles the ball in his hand. I can sense—I can *see* the change that's come over him.

"So you're the Boy Wonder, eh?" he calls out. "You're the lad who hits all the home runs? Well, mister, try your bat on this one!"

The boastful brag of a busher? The blab of a swell-head, shooting his mouth off? . . . Some of the others thought so—and claim so to this day—but I rate it different in my book. Lance Lee may have hurled those words at Ott, but it was himself he was really talking to. It was just a kind of war cry.

The kid rears back and lets that ball loose. You could have heard the smack in Ollie Kroup's glove clean up on Lake Michigan. And you could almost have heard Ryan calling the strike just as far away.

That was the fastest ball I ever looked at. It was just a blister on the breeze as it passed the plate, and Ott never saw it. The Giant right-fielder looked out at Lee, powdered his hand in the dust, gripped the bat again and stepped back into the box.

Again Lance Lee went through that lazy motion. The ball left his hand the second time. Waist high, over the inside corner, where Ott loves 'em. That right foot of Ott's cocked itself. He swung, he whirled.

And Rocky Ryan said, "Strike two!" and he grinned as he said it.

Lee caught the ball from Kroup with an indolent flip of his glove, stood off the rubber, looked at Ott.

"Ain't anybody ever told you that you got to keep *both* feet on the ground to hit good? You can't get nowhere standin' on one foot like that. Makes you look like one of them pelicans or storks, or whatever them birds are with the long noses."

And he glances contemptuously at Terry on first. "Are you lucky!" he says to Bill. "But that's as far as you'll get all day."

He steps on the rubber and lets the ball go again.

Ott nose dives into the dirt. I mean he must have taken the skin off his nose. He's getting up, plenty mad.

"Strike—three!" howls Rocky Ryan, ripping his arm through the air.

"What!" screams Ott. "That ball liked to kill me!"

"It was a curve ball—through the middle of the pan," sighs Ryan. "Don't tell me I'm going to have trouble with you so early in the season."

Ott throws his bat twenty feet—a terrible exhibition of temper for such a mild-mannered man—and stomps back to the bench. That brings up Hank Leiber.

Lee looks over at the bench and grins at Frisco. "He's been holdin' out, ain't he?" he asks, fixing his hands like a megaphone. "Is that right he ain't in shape yet?"

Frisco grins and yells back. "Yeah—but don't be soft-hearted."

"I ain't," says Lee.

And the Arizona Adonis, one of the most murderous hitters in the game, nearly breaks his back swinging at that floater Lee throws out of his fast ball motion.

Lee grins at him. "Don't feel bad about that," he sympathizes. "You wait till you see Terry go for that one."

And his body swings forward again, and the ball cracks, and Ryan says—Strike two!"

Leiber glares. Lance Lee gets the ball back and heaves it again. And Big Hank takes a third strike with the bat on his shoulder. A beautiful knee-high curve that broke over the outside corner.

By this time the crowd is leaning forward in the seats, and kind of choked up.

Scrappy Dick Bartell comes to the dish. He has a scowl on his face. He pounds the plate with his bat. Moore takes a big lead off third. Lee glances at him. "Don't be nervous like that," he counsels. "You ain't goin' nowhere."

And that gets the crowd. Some guy yelps, and in one second the whole fifty thousand is roaring, "You ain't going nowhere!"

Lee looks at Frisco. "Ain't this the fella I heard about that plays baseball with his spikes?"

One thing about Frisco Smith. He's a good straight man and a bear cat at ad libbing. "Sure," he tells Lee. "That's the fella. Scrappy Dick, they call him."

"Better not let him get on base, then," says Lee with mock concern. "Somebody might get hurt."

And he strikes Bartell out, swinging, on three pitched balls. All of them fast balls on the inside corner.

He turns around and grins at Terry, and trots off the field.

Frisco Smith meets him with a hug at the first base line. The whole team forgets to hate him for a second while slapping his back, and the fans are standing up, screaming at him, mocking at Terry, showering torn newspapers down on the field. Fans are funny. They forget in one second what they've been yelling a minute before.

Lee comes to the box rail. He stands just an instant, looking at me.

"I'm glad that's over, Ed," he says very soft and quiet. "For a minute I thought I was going to pass out—or something. I couldn't breathe right. The air got all tangled up in my throat and my eyes saw things funny, and I was sweating like a horse. Plain buck fever, I reckon."

"You did all right, kid," I tell him, though my own voice was a little shaky and I felt that I was taking a bath in sweat and had been run through a mangle.

He nods slowly. "From now on, I'm

boss!" he says. "They're all just fellas with baseball bats to me."

CHAPTER VII.

ROAR OF THE CROWD.

HUBBELL is Hubbell. And a screwball, the way Don Carlos throws it, is a mystery in spades to the Busters. Leiber, Moore and Ott is an outfield in any league. And Terry, Whitehead, Bartell and Jackson do all right as an infield.

Renn goes put on a tap back to the box. Scoza pops up to Terry. And White smacks a long high one to left center that Moore takes after a hard run.

That's the Busters' inning.

And after that it's everybody's inning. It becomes one of those ball games that look swell on a record book but is hard to watch. Tense, nerve-racking, with the pitchers doing all the work and the outfielders loafing. The high spots are the roars from the crowd. Especially when Lee sets Terry down swinging in the third inning, and makes Ott pop-foul to Kroup on the first pitched ball.

High spot in the third inning, with two men away. Lee walks to the plate for his first time at bat against league competition. Hubbell makes the mistake of throwing him a nothing ball after trying to make him hit on three bad pitches. Lee wades into it with that perfect swing, and the crowd comes up screaming while Moore goes back and back, and finally makes a leaping one hand stab for the ball, just before it bounces off the wall in deep center field.

In any other ball park, or hit to any other field, that would have been a home run.

Lee comes back to the bench. He says: "It's a long way out there. Longer than I expected." And starts for the mound.

The Busters might as well have stayed in bed. They were pushovers for Hubbell. They hit three balls out of the infield up to the seventh inning. But Lee had those Giants in even worse condition.

With two men away in the eighth, Moore comes up. He swings hard at the first pitch, meets it squarely, and the ball bounces once on the grass. Scoza lunges for it, blocks it with his glove, knocks it down—but Jojo beats the throw.

I sit there as if the bottom had dropped out of the world. The eighth inning—and not even a ghost of a hit off Lee up to then. The boys in the press coop are looking down at me. Frisco Smith turns around anxiously. I put the finger up in the air. I got to give Moore a hit. It breaks my heart, but that ball was smacked too hard to tab Scoza with an error on it.

Frisco spits disgustedly, even Rocky Ryan glances at me dubiously. Lee just grins. He strikes out Whitehead and the inning is over.

It was zero-zero in the Busters' half of the ninth. The Hubbell hypnosis has been complete. The Busters have just three hits between them, where it didn't do 'em any good. The fans had settled down in the dumps. The old story, a beautifully pitched ball game going into extra innings, with the Busters losing because pitchers can't stand teams like the Giants on their heads until darkness breaks up the ball game.

The crowd expects nothing. The tail end of the list is coming up. Scoop Taylor, Ollie, and then Lance Lee.

Lee is sitting on the step of the dug-out. He looks the bench over. "You

fellas don't do much hitting, do you?" he asks with an innocent face. "From them spring games I thought you were bear cats with the willow. But it looks like you play soft-ball after the season starts. . . ."

There is a rumble from the crowd. Scoop Taylor has worked the tiring Hubbell for a walk and is standing on first.

Everybody perks up. A break!

Frisco Smith looked the bench over, and sent Duke McCroskey in to bat for Ollie Kroup. This is a smart move, for the Duke can lay down a bunt with the best of 'em. It is a very smart move—except that the Duke remembers he's one of the Dizziness Boys and ignores Frisco's signal. He misses two screwballs, swinging mightily, and then lets a beauty zip by with the bat on his shoulder. The Duke does not believe the third one is a strike. He pounds his bat on the plate and howls at Rocky Ryan while the crowd hoots.

"Get off the field!" orders Ryan. "You can't talk to me like that."

McCroskey bellows something else, and Ryan takes one step forward, his chin jutting. Rocky is a plenty bad guy when he means business. The Duke walks off the field, kicking dirt with his spikes.

"And take fifty bucks fine with you," calls Ryan as a parting shot.

IT'S the kid's turn next. Lance Lee stands up, sheds his wind-breaker, strides toward the batter's box.

The crowd is on its hind legs, giving him a mighty hand. Cool as a cucumber, he takes his stance, and he waves his hand at the crowd, as if to say, "Peace, my children!" He gets himself a toe hold in the dirt, and cuts the air a couple of times with his big bat.

Hubbell curls one over the outside corner for a called strike.

Lee grins. He calls to Hubbell, "It must be tough to lose this kind of a ball game, mister. I feel real sorry."

Hubbell lets go the next pitch. Lee looks it over and lunges forward, his whole body one quivering mass of power. The bat swings. There comes that crash of wood on leather that only means one thing. That one sound—like no other sound in the world.

Moore is racing back, fading fast to cover the ball. He almost plunges headlong into the left-center field bleacher wall, while the horsehide sails into the fourth row of the open seats. A 420-foot wallop on a line that's a he-man homer in any league!

Maybe the crowd kind of expected that. Maybe that curious inner-sense warned them that it was coming. They are out of their seats with the crack of bat on leather, but for a long moment they just stare, dumb and motionless while Lance Lee trots around the bases, with Taylor ahead of him.

Old Frisco, his hat on the ground, is giving a fair imitation of a pie-eyed Indian war dance, swinging his arms, and yelling his head off. Spike Green is turning somersaults in front of the bench. All this in a breathless hush, as if the Royal Rooters can't believe what their eyes see.

And then the avalanche of sound breaks over the field like a typhoon. The air is white with drifting bits of torn paper. The mob surges out of the stands like a charging brigade of lunatics. They have waited years and years for just this kind of a day. Just a simple gang, those Buster fans, and heart-hungry for a Hero. They wanted a Frank Merriwell—a guy who could win his own ball game in the last of the ninth with a home run.

Lance Lee was the answer to their prayers.

They sweep him up. They wrestle with him. The Busters race out onto the field trying to rescue the grinning kid from the mob. He is boosted up on a dozen shoulders while the mob snake-dances around the field. They corner the Giants, taunting and mocking them. They boo them and they also laugh at them.

Ah, it is a day of days in Buster-Land, with the pent-up emotions of the chronic underdog coming out in one glorious burst of triumph. Let the Dizziness Boys lose tomorrow—and the next day—and the next. But this is today—and nothing else matters.

When they carry Lee to the clubhouse steps and turn him loose his shirt is out of his pants, his face is red, he is half torn apart, but he's still grinning. He runs up the wooden steps and stands on the top landing like a Mussolini looking down at his worship-drunk followers.

He puts up his hands, and the crowd stops yelling.

"Us boys ain't really begun yet," he tells the milling faces at the bottom of the steps. "We was kinda rusty out there today, but watch what we do to them Giants tomorrow!"

And he leaves the mob howling in maudlin glee as he dives through the clubhouse door.

STEVE GRADY, my boss on the *Blade,* is fit to be tied. "You're fired!" he howls—which makes twelve times already I'm fired by Generalissimo Grady.

"What for this time?" I ask.

"What for? For disloyalty to your paper! For withholding information, for being an unmitigated moron with no sense of honor and no sense of news. For being a thirty-third degree lug—"

"What are you talking about, Friend Steven?"

"You know blame well what I'm talking about! You had that Lance Lee angle covered! You were at camp with the Busters and even *roomed* with Lee! And what does that get me? A run-around! We should have had that Lee exclusive in the *Blade.* Signed stories about him—feature on the sports page—"

I blew smoke in his face.

"Why, you silly looking ape!" I tell him, all burned up. "I broke the story on Lance Lee the very day he showed up in training camp. And I get a 'you're fired' wire from you, with a lot of wise cracks and advice about possible markets for the yarn. You told me you were running a newspaper, not a comic magazine—"

He waves a fist in my face. "Don't call me a ape, you grinning baboon!" he sputters. "Who was going to believe that fairy story you wired from Palm City? What kind of a sap do you think I am to print that kind of guff? A bush league idiot making monkeys out of big league ball players, and getting a contract where he has to win twenty-five games his first season to get a dime for playing ball?"

"You're the editor, toots," I tell him sweetly. "What do you pay reporters to go out and dig up yarns for?"

"Well, you're fired—this time for real."

"Suits me, darling!" I reply with a wave of the hand. "I've got a better job anyhow."

"What kind of a job?" he asks suspiciously.

"I'm the one and only manager, the confidant and pal of Lancefield Lee, who in one week will be the biggest

sensation in baseball. I handle all his dough, steer him away from the pitfalls which lurk for unwary and unspoiled athletes. I handle all the contracts covering endorsements and advertising, and I cut in to the tune of twenty per cent on every dollar he makes, over and above his baseball salary."

"You—manager!" he squawks.

"Yeah. And my first official act is to accept an offer of five grand for a brief synopsis of the life of Lance Lee as told to Ed Brand. The *Globe* got to him at the ball park and he sent them to me. Five grand is five grand. It's a beginning and it's better than walking around in the hot sun. Listen, my red-headed paste-pot walloper. I'm going to make that boy Lee a million in a year or two. Just wait till I start signing him up to endorse breakfast foods, baseball gloves—"

"Wait—wait, now, Ed," wheezes Grady. "Old pals like us can't lose our heads like this. You can't do this to me."

"Do what?"

"Why sell me out to the *Globe?* You got to gimme first crack at this Lee feature."

"You had it, but you wise-cracked your way out of it."

"Look—don't rub it in. Anybody can make a mistake. Who'd believe a guy like this Lee exists? I thought you were on a bender or something. But business is business, I know. I'll meet what the *Globe* offered for that exclusive story—"

"Don't be silly," I tell him. "I'm doing business for Lee—no palsy-walsy stuff in this. The highest bidder gets the feature. But for old times' sake, if you put up seventy-five hundred bucks I'll close with you right now."

"Why, you no-good, chiseling robber!" screams Grady. "I ought to murder you. Seventy-five hundred . . ."

"Wait till I offer it to Hearst and the *Journal,*" I tell him.

"I'll take it," he moans. "But some day—some day I'll square this."

Thirty minutes later the agreement is signed. I fold same very carefully and put it in the pocket.

"Thanks, Grady," I tell him. "I'll be seein' you around."

"Aw—look, Ed," he grins. "Let's get together on this. You stay on the job with the Busters and give us a break on this Lee guy. He's a natural. The biggest natural since Babe Ruth—"

"Since?" I demand. "There ain't no since when it comes to Lee."

"Well, you wouldn't be happy without your *Blade* connection anyhow. We just didn't speak the same language for a minute."

"Well, now," I drawl wickedly, "I might be induced to remain with the *Blade*. But of course, considering how busy I am as Lee's manager, I couldn't think of it without *some* added inducement."

"Why, you panhandler! You're drawing your salary, aren't you?"

"Those couple of bucks you give out with a grunt once a week and call a salary can be wrapped up and concealed in a gnat's eye," I told him. "You got to talk money to me now."

So I got a raise too. . . .

"I'd like to meet this Lee boy," says Grady. "He must be a wow. How about bringing him down to have some pictures made?"

"Mr. Lee can be seen only by appointment," I tell him in a phony upstage voice. "And I make the appointments." With that I leave him flat, on the border line of apoplexy.

THE next afternoon it's Castleman for the Giants and Floyd Cross for the Busters. It's in the middle of the week, a cold sunless day, but there are twenty-eight thousand people in the stands. It has been announced that Lance Lee will play center field for the Busters, which same he does.

You can look up the box score. The Busters win again, six-and-two. All Lee has to do with the game is three-for-five, a triple and two doubles which knock in four of the six runs. He scores another himself, all the way from second on a looping single by Tiny Renn. He has seven put-outs in the field, and two of them are highway robbery on Mancuso and Moore. And he figures in one double play, center field to first base, which doubles Whitehead twenty feet off the bag on a rifle-bullet throw to Truck Moole.

On Friday, in the last game of the Giant series, he gets two-for-two. He can't get any more because Terry orders Fitzsimmons to pass him twice in the clutch.

On Saturday he opens against the Phillies, and shuts 'em out, two-and-no, giving up three singles.

At the end of his first seven days in the majors he's a legend. The radio has taken him up. The newspapers are hog wild about him. Everything he says is printed. Everything he does is mugged. Guys on street corners can't seem to find anything to talk about but Lance Lee. The Royal Rooters are insane, and there is even talk about buying Lee a house near the ball park, the fans taking up a collection for the purpose.

The Busters are running neck and neck with the Cardinals and the Cubs for first place, and the Giants, because of the Dizziness Boys handing them threee smacks on the snoot, are down in the cellar with the Braves and Phillies.

Yes, gentlemen, peace and good fellowship and ecstasy hold forth. Frisco Smith is the man of the hour, and the turnstiles at Busters' Park have spun around more times than Carnera did when Maxie Baer clipped him.

After we play the Bees we hit the road. And Lee is a bigger sensation on the road than in Flatbush if possible. The whole world wants to see this guy Lee.

And he don't disappoint 'em. He puts on a show that leaves 'em still thinking that it is done with mirrors.

CHAPTER VIII.

FLY IN THE OINTMENT.

WELL, believe it or not, the same team that boots the pennant last season by the narrow margin of sixty-two games, comes back from the West after the first swing around the circuit in a tie for second place with the Cubs. The same team, man for man, with the exception of Lancefield Lee. The same team that once was the Lunatic of the League is now playing baseball that has the other clubs standing around with a dumb look on their mugs, mumbling to themselves. Enemy relief pitchers are wearing a path on the grass between the various bull pens and the pitcher's mound.

How those Buster babies shellac that onion! How they stand up there and take that cut! They suddenly find out when they swing they can hit, and that the only difference between Dizzy Dean and Red Lucas is that when you you smack one of the Dean's fast ones on the nose it travels farther.

They honestly jump into the role of

Busters. They're breaking hearts—pitchers' hearts. Hollingsworth of the Reds last three innings against the Dizziness Boys in Cincinnati. Brown and Swift stagger through a whole game, but lose. Dizzy Dean goes out in the fourth with the Busters combing him for nine hits and seven runs. Warneke makes faces at the Boys and the Boys let him have it. Six tallies in one inning!

It goes that way all over the league, until a guy just sits there and looks and looks, wondering if he isn't dreaming.

Coming back to the home park, the standings look like this:

	Won	Lost
Cardinals	16	5
Cubs	14	6
Busters	14	6

Lee's average as a pitcher is six won and none lost. One of those games he pulls out in the seventh inning when he goes in to relieve Gazzi, who has done a whale of a job against the Cubs but is tiring. That makes two out of three Lee takes from the Wrigley Wreckers in three days. He's so popular in Chicago that if he'd have broken his neck falling down the clubhouse steps the North Side would have attended his funeral with a brass band.

The club is hitting an average of .286. The Busters—hitting .286! Scoop Taylor is leading the league in errors as usual, but is socking the pill for .342 to balance it. Truck Moole has driven in 26 runs and Bumps Harring hasn't got a single crack in his skull, and is batting .368. He's knocked out 37 hits in 20 games—the kind of drives, most of 'em, that make a pitcher fall flat on his face with the crack of the bat while the second baseman runs out into center field for the relay.

Even Ding Bell, the Prize Bust of the Busters last season, is winning ball games, pitching like a Lefty Clark on one of Clark's good days.

And Frisco Smith is walking on clouds, babbling out of the middle of his mouth, existing in such a dizzy daze that half the time he forgets at which hotel the team is stopping.

I'm so tickled and happy for Frisco that I feel all bubbly inside. If ever a man deserves a break from the baseball Fates, and earns that break, the guy is Frisco Smith. With more brains than the average manager, knowing baseball down to the ground, a diplomat and a fighter, he's been saddled with a bunch of second-raters year after year. Uncomplaining, he's battled the handicap of a bank-controlled front office that seems to have the idea that ball players should be satisfied with publicity and glory instead of wanting a salary. No wonder he's walking on air right now!

The team comes home to find ten thousand baseball-bugs waiting at the station with red fire torches, and the Ancient Order of Hibernians' Brass Band and Bagpipes. The gang mobs the train. They demand a speech from Frisco Smith, so Frisco mounts to the top of a baggage truck. He lifts his hands in a Mussolini gesture and says:

"Dear Friends of the Busters! You should have stood in bed on account of I don't want the boys all excited by celebrations on account of we expect to make mugs out of them Giants come Tuesday, and I don't want the Busters to have no swelled heads. I ain't deservin' of no credit—except I'm the manager. I knowed we could do it when we got playin' ball the way we shoulda played last year. What we done to them Cubs and them Cardinals we're goin' to keep right on doin'. I ain't mentionin' no names in public, but if that fat-headed lug who wanted

to know if the Busters was still in the National League will come out of the Giants' dugout, come Tuesday, and play first base—I'll be glad to show him the newspapers givin' the standin' of the teams—if the guy ever loined to read. . . ."

There was a roar of delight. The band tooted "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here!" The Busters were pushed into the middle of the parade. Lance Lee was manhandled by his well wishers, and the parade marched out of the station headed by the Chowder and Fish Fry Association of Young Democrats.

Not even the Cardinals, when they brought St. Loo that first pennant, got a reception like the Busters got. You might have thought they'd captured the World Series from the Tigers, four games straight, instead of just coming back from the first Western trip of the season in a tie for second place.

The Dizziness Boys just move around during that parade in a state of hypnotized disbelief. If one of them Buster fans—just one—had heaved a pop bottle, or yelled "Kill the big bum!" it might have added a touch of reality to the celebration, made them understand that this was really home. But nobody did, so it all went for a pleasant dream.

TUESDAY, the day we're scheduled to open the second series at the Polo Grounds, I'm sitting in the box next to the Busters' dugout, chewing the fat with Frisco Smith and kidding with the players. Lance Lee is hitting out fungoes to the outfielders and hitting 'em a mile. Every time that ball leaves his bat the fans yell their heads off.

I'm tickled. Lee rates with the bleacher-bugs the way Ruth rated with 'em. Guys like Ruth and Lee don't belong to any team—they belong to baseball. They get a loud huzzah even when they hit a home run with the bases loaded in an enemy park. So Lee, with a grin, lays the ash on a couple and knocks 'em up around the loud speaker in center field. During batting practice, hitting left handed, he knocks five straight pitches into the home run section of the right field stands.

Somebody touches me on the shoulder and I see Frisco Smith jerk his cap off his head. "Good afternoon, Judge," says Frisco.

I turn around. Sitting in the seat behind me is Judge Mason, who owns the Busters via a couple of holding corporations and trusts.

"Ah—pardon me—Mr. Brand," he says in the bluff voice, which goes for jolly good fellowship with the judge. "May I present my daughter? Ann, this is Mr. Brand."

I should have been warned right then and there, but I was feeling on the top of the world. Lee was going to pitch against the Giants, the sky was blue, the Busters were in second place, ready to jump into the league lead—what more could a man ask for. But I should have been warned, because whenever the Judge starts off a conversation with an apology, the wise guy who knows his Judge will dive down the nearest coal hole.

The Judge could give a Missouri mule-trader lessons in blandishment. He could give Helen Wills Moody valuable pointers about keeping a poker face, and teach the House of Rothschild how to accumulate the interest. The Judge looks like a philanthropist, and talks like one, but he didn't collect those eight or ten million bucks by giving out. He's strictly a taker-inner.

"You know Mr. Brand, darling,"

he told the red-headed eyeful with him. "He's the star writer for the *Blade*. The one who took the hide off me last year because I would not follow the example of Mr. Yawkey and spend a million or two for ball players."

"Oh, yes," says the eyeful brightly. "I remember. He called you a slave-driving, coupon-clipping tightwad who ran a baseball team on the theory of the public be damned. He said you were a disgrace to the sport and that one more year of Judge Mason's Busters would bust baseball right out of our fair city."

I grin. "I also said that if the fans organized a tar-and-feather party for the purpose of riding a certain citizen out of the city limits I wanted to mention my own candidate for the fireworks," I tell the pair of them.

"Well, my boy," booms the Judge, "it just goes to show you how wrong even a newspaper man can be. The same team, the same field, the same fans, the same uniforms—and look at us! Second place. We'll win the pennant this year."

"Oh, do you think so?" asks Ann Mason of me.

"Who am I to argue with the Voice of the Law?" I parry.

"WE came out to look at this fellow Lee," said Mason. "Which one is he?"

"*He* owns the club, and *he* wants to know who Lee is?" I say to Frisco Smith. "How's that for a close interest in sports?"

"Naturally, I can't be expected to know *all* the boys," smiles Mason, a little red in the face. "But Ann, here, is simply breathless about meeting this chap. She seems to think he's a combination of Lochinvar, Galahad, Babe Ruth, the Four Marx Brothers, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt."

"Well, like Lochinvar, he comes out of the West. Like Galahad, he can do no wrong. Like Ruth, he hits 'em a mile. He's funnier than the whole *five* Marx Brothers, and like Roosevelt he's giving the Busters a New Deal. But that is just the beginning. There isn't anyone like Lance Lee. Not anybody I ever saw in a baseball uniform."

"Oooooh!" trills the titian-haired fugitive from Earl Carroll's daisy-chain gang. "Do you suppose I could meet him?"

"If my old man owned the ball club I have a hunch I wouldn't have a lot of difficulty in meeting one of his hired hands," I told her. "Would you like him presented now or after the game?"

"Oh, now! On the field!"

I give the eye to the camera men who are hanging around, waiting for something. I tumble. Old Judge Mason and daughter are going to crash Lance Lee's triumph. Something like "Buster Boss Meets Marvel," with a four column cut on the back page of the final sports edition.

"How about it, Frisk?" I ask with a dead pan and a wink. "You suppose it would upset Lance to meet his boss and bossess just before a crucial game?"

"Gosh, no," grins Frisco. "Wait, I'll bring him over!" He goes to the warming up slab and tows Lance across.

"This," says Frisco, "is Lancefield Lee . . . Miss Ann Mason and her father who owns the Busters. You read about Judge Mason in the papers?"

"Not me," says Lee. "I never had an automobile, and never was arrested, so jedges don't mean anything in my life. But I'm mighty glad to meet Miss Mason."

He stands there, sweat on his forehead, his hands hanging, staring frankly at her. She looks back at him with that finishing school smile which is reserved for those members of society one cannot catalogue at first sight.

"I want to congratulate you, Mr. Lee," she says. "I think you've been splendid. It's been so thrilling to read about you in the papers."

"Yes, ma'am," says Lee seriously. "I guess those newspaper boys do tell some mighty tall stories about me."

I'm chuckling inside. The camera men are shooting their heads off. The Judge has his favorite pose—spread out and smiling beatifically, as a lover of all mankind should.

"I came out especially to watch you beat the Giants again," said Ann Mason. "I hope I bring you luck."

"Shucks, Miss, you don't have to go to all that trouble," says Lance. "Even if you hadn't come out I would have licked those fellas—and I won't need no luck to do it."

"I think they're horrid—I've hated them for years!"

Lee grinned. "You ain't that old," he told her. "And you don't look like a very good hater. Now me—I'm a *good* hater. I can hate worse than anybody I know."

"I wish you'd pitch this game for me," she smiled. "It would be *such* a thrill to sit here, thinking that every time you threw the ball at those Giants you were throwing for me."

"Well, ma'am," says Lee, "I'd like to oblige, of course, on account of your father 'n' all. But when I'm out there heaving that apple I don't think of nothing except foggin' 'em in. I just kind of keep my mind on the batter. 'Course I'd be glad to sit here between innings and talk with you if there wasn't a rule ag'in' it."

"Not even one little thought?" asks Miss Mason coyly.

"Well, I tell you now. When I strike out that Terry, I'll kind of look over here—you know, kind of—so you'll know that I'm givin' him to you as a present."

THE umpire is dusting off the plate. The Giants run out on the field.

I forget Judge Mason and his beautiful offspring in watching Lefty Al Smith fire his practice balls to Danning.

I should have had cold chills up and down my back. One time my own Boss's daughter got kind of sweet on me. Because a job is a job and I need the dough, I play along, even if she did have buck teeth and a giggle. It finally adds up to this: Either I marry the dame and own the newspaper or grab a rattler out of town.

If I hadn't caught that rattler I might still be gathering items for the Pottsville (N. Y.) *Clarion*. I still get goose pimples when I think of the buck teeth and the giggle and life in Pottsville. Since then I've got to be other places whenever a Boss's daughter walks into the picture.

Anyhow, Lance turns back the Giants three-and-one that afternoon. If Scoop Taylor doesn't pull his daily error and if Truck Moole doesn't heave the pill over Renn's head in the eighth inning, the kid is a cinch for a shut-out. But he wins anyhow, and in the Giants ninth, with a guy on first because Ollie Kroup drops a curve ball which is a third strike on Whitehead, Lee gets mad and fans Terry with three pitched balls. Fans him swinging—and tips his hat to Ann Mason in the box.

"Oh, I think he's—he's wonderful!" screams the red-head over my shoulder. "He's terrific!"

"Even if you don't think—he's still terrific," I tell her.

"Do you think I could have him at the house—to introduce him to some people?" she wants to know. "I hardly got a chance to speak a word with him. He's so unspoiled, so sure of himself. I know a lot of people who would love to meet him."

I gander around at her. "Look, Miss Mason," I tell her. "Why don't you let well enough alone? Why throw the monkey wrench in the machinery now? Think of the Royal Rooters—with the Busters in second place today because the Cubs lose. Think of the old home town that ain't won a pennant in sixteen years. Think what it will mean to wives and sweethearts and poor innocent children if the Busters blow the start they got this year. Why, who knows? It may mean a revolution! Those guys that buy the tickets which your old man converts into tax-free Government bonds, can stand no more. They may froth at the mouth and tear you limb from limb."

"I—don't think I understand, Mr. Brand," she says.

"Lady," I tell her, "this Lance Lee is just a hillbilly kid who is spang in the middle of having all his dreams come true. I saw you put the works on him when you were introduced, and I know when a gal has what it takes. He's doing all right for himself—why gum it up? Why don't you just let him play baseball like the good Lord intended? Those boys and gals out there on Long Island have plenty to amuse themselves with. *They* don't need Lance Lee."

"I think you're trying to be insulting," she tells me, kind of white in the face.

"And how," I nod. "To me you're just another young lady with too much dough for her own good. I like this boy Lee. I've been trying to steer him straight. I'd hate to see somebody like you bust up the biggest attraction that has come into baseball since Ruth—a guy that has a fortune in his hands and the world at his feet. I'd hate to see it because—you want to know the truth?—you aren't worth it. No gal is worth it."

She has gray eyes, and they're glittering with little icy flames. "Thank you for a frank opinion of me and 'my kind,' Mr. Brand," she says with icy politeness.

"I always manage to speak my mind," I tell her. "If you can't take it, you don't belong around a guy who lets go both barrels when he sees the Ethiopian in the wood pile."

"You're something like a manager to Mr. Lee, aren't you?" she asks casually.

"So—you do know something about Mr. Lee! Sure, I'm his manager. But more than that, I'm his friend. I know him better than anyone in the world—even better than he knows himself. From the minute he walked onto his first big league training field, we kind of clicked it off together."

"Of course it's strictly altruism on your part?" she says sweetly.

"I'm getting a cut on all the money I make for him outside baseball," I tell her without batting an eyelash. "But if you think I'm keeping Lance Lee under cover for what I can get out of him, I'll tell you like I'll tell anybody else. You're just a small-time liar."

The old Judge smiles benevolently. "Come, come!" he says. "You two children aren't arguing, are you?"

To the gal he says, "Ann, don't you know you shouldn't bait the press. It'll be in all the papers—"

"You bet it will be in all the papers," she says hotly. "In the society column, if not on the sports page: Miss Ann Mason entertains for Busters star!"

I shrug, walk out of the box and across to the clubhouse. I'm mad clean through. I've seen what happens to young athletes who get "taken up" by society.

I slam into the dressing room. The Busters are running around in the raw, whopping each other with towels, whooping it up. The room is so thick with the mixed smell of soap, liniment, rubbing alcohol, sweat, steam from the showers, that you could cut it into slices.

A wet towel flips over my arm and fingers grab me by the elbow. I look up to see Lance Lee, glowing after his shower.

"Gosh," he says in a tone of awe. "Ain't she beautiful?"

"Who's beautiful?"

"That gal—that Ann. What's-her-name?"

"Mason," I tell him shortly. "Her old man owns the Busters, if you haven't heard, and she's included among the things you should have nothing to do with."

"But—she asked me to win her a ball game. I wanted to win her a shut out—only Scoop Taylor booted that grounder. . . ."

"Forget it. Three-and-one ain't so bad as a present."

"Was she watchin' when I belted that triple and batted in them two runs?"

"She and plenty thousand others."

"You talk as if you don't like her?"

"General principles," I tell him. "No guy that stayed away from a buzz saw ever got his fingers cut off by a buzz saw. It's elementary. Don't feed the animals, and all that stuff."

"I thought maybe she'd wait for me after the game—to say thanks—"

"Get dressed," I growl at him. "Let's amscray out of here."

CHAPTER IX.

FINE FEATHERS.

FRIDAY morning right after breakfast the boy pages me in the lobby.

"Telephone, Mr. Brand," he says. I take the call on the house phone in the lobby.

"Hello, there," says a gal's voice. "Just a minute please, Judge Mason calling." And then the Judge's voice booms in the earphone.

"Hello, Brand. Sorry if I got you out of bed. I suppose you boys sleep late—"

"Didn't you ever hear of morning practice?" I ask him.

He laughs. "Don't tell me that you even attend morning practice," he marvels. "My word, your devotion is simply magnificent. I'll have to speak to Mr. Alwing about it."

Mr. Alwing is nobody but the owner and publisher of the *Blade*.

"Don't bother," I tell Mason. "He probably knows all about it. He probably reads his own newspapers."

I get another of those laughs for that one.

"What I wanted to speak to you about, Ed," he says, "is a little informal gathering my daughter is giving at the house Saturday night. Just a few friends, nothing at all elaborate. She would like to have the pleasure of your company—and Lance Lee's."

Well, the works are in. And what can a guy do about it? I'd be a sap to fight eight or ten million bucks, or to have the owner of the club get sore

at Lance. In baseball a lot of nasty things have happened to boys who didn't hit it off with the front office. They get sent back to the minor leagues, or even traded to Philadelphia. But I make argument just the same.

"Look, Mr. Mason, I oughtn't to have to tell you this," I open. "You're the owner of the club. The Busters are fighting right now for first place and may even have a chance for the pennant. The most important factor in that *may* is Lance Lee. The club has certain training rules that everybody has to keep. One is that all the lads must be in bed not later than eleven every night. Social activities are not very important to the club now —but good baseball is. Why not wait till after the end of the season to introduce Lee to your friends?"

"Mr. Brand!" says Judge Mason. "I am perfectly able to control my own ball team and my own players. My daughter extends an invitation to Mr. Lee and yourself. She already has extended invitations to many of her friends to meet Lance Lee. I am sure that you would not put Lee in the position of embarrassing her by advising him not to appear."

"No," I said disgustedly. "I'm not a sap."

"That's splendid. I'll expect you Saturday night then. I know Ann will be very pleased. Goodbye, Mr. Brand."

I could have chewed that telephone into a pulp. Was I burning!

Every day since Tuesday Ann Mason has plumped herself down in the front row of the Busters' dugout box. She has been all smiles for everybody, but for Mr. Lee in particular. I can see with half an eye that she knows she's giving me needles by being nice to Lance. Every time he gives her a smile or sits on a stool in front of the box during a Buster half of an inning, she gives that certain look and that certain toss of the head.

She knows she's swinging the whip. I know what these "strictly informal" parties in the Mason sector of Millionaire Row turn out to be. Soup and fish, with the guys wearing white dinner jackets with cummerbunds. A sideboard loaded down with ice and fifteen kinds of liquor. Poisonous sandwiches. A dance band. And all the lounge lizards that infest "society." These little affairs commence at any time before dinner and sometimes run for a week. The party starts all over again every time the group recovers consciousness.

FRIDAY night after the ball game I drag Lance down to a gent's shop on the Avenue and have him fitted into a white evening outfit. He's as eager as a school kid.

"She called me up," he kept saying. "Gee, I reckon she's just about the swellest gal I ever saw. She kind of makes me wish—well, I wish I knew more about everything. She asked me to come to a party at her house. Ain't that somethin'. Me, fresh out of the backwoods, going to a party at a millionaire's house already. Look, Ed—how long will it take me to be a millonaire? I mean if I keep on beating them lugs around the circuit?"

"About twenty years," I tell him gruffly.

"I can't wait that long," he says. "I got to be a millionaire almost right away. I got to have a house where I can give return parties, and such. I can't invite her to a party in a hotel room, can I?"

"Are you nuts?" I ask him.

He gets red in the face. "I don't know. . . . Only, after she goes, I get thinkin'. I guess it's because she has that funny kind of red hair, and gray eyes like the sky gets sometimes when the sun is hot. And—she likes me."

I don't figure that it'll get either of us anywhere to tell him that he has the same attraction for Ann Mason that one of the Ubangi savages at the circus would have.

He looks at the monkey-suit with dubious eyes. "You mean to tell me that a fella has to wear one of these things to be a gentleman?" he asks suspiciously. "Look here now—this black thing around the waist. I wear galluses. I don't need no ribbon to hold up my pants."

"It's an ornament," I tell him, while the salesman is fluttering around, fitting the cummerbund.

"Well, if all her friends dress like this, I reckon I gotta be a gentleman, too. But that collar is goin' to saw my neck in half. I ain't never seen no collar like that before."

I stand back and look at him. A thoroughbred is a thoroughbred, if he does call braces "galluses." You can't miss with Lance Lee. One look, and you know he's the McCoy. That white dinner jacket makes his strong young sun-bronzed face stand out. The spread of those mighty shoulders, the flatness of his hips, the long legs in the broadcloth pants—no kiddin', he's something that would make any gal catch her breath.

He stands there quietly, letting me inspect him. His gray-blue eyes are kind of soft as if he's thinking about things that happened long, long ago. The straw-colored hair has grown in, and looks civilized by now.

He squints at himself in the mirror. "Gosh," he says softly. "I kinda want to go over and touch me—just to be sure I'm lookin' at me. This must cost an awful lot of money. Why even old Senator Ham Johnson, back home, didn't have swell clothes like these and he was the richest man around. I didn't know they made shoes all shiny like these—almost like glass."

"Take 'em off," I told him. I turned away, feeling almost like bawling. Just something about the things in the kid's eyes.

"Take 'em off?" he asks. "Can't I wear 'em home?"

"Not hardly. They've got to be fixed up and pressed, ready for tomorrow night. The store will take care of all that and deliver the outfit to the hotel in plenty of time. Don' worry—you'll get to your party, and you'll look like a gentleman."

"They're so plumb nice I'd like to wear 'em. . . . But if you say so—" He slid off the pants, but kept watchin' them as the salesman took 'em away.

Out on the street he puts his arm through mine and leans down so he can speak in my ear: "Gosh, Ed, don't —kinda—say nothin' to the other fellas on the team, will ya?"

"Why not?"

"Well—you know—they might not understand about me tryin' to be a gentleman. Maybe they ain't got nice clothes like you're buyin' me, an' I wouldn't want 'em to feel bad or think I was stuck up—see?"

CHAPTER X.

THE SOCIAL WHIRL.

THE château out in the dough-heavy suburbs—which Judge Mason called "our country place" in the same tone you'd use to refer to a log shack, is a joint with a

half-mile driveway between the front door and the front gate. It's a cross between the Malmaison and the Metropolitan Museum, sprawled out in a neighborhood that has produced more elderly stuffed shirts and more roaring young drunks than any other spot in the world.

The doors to this architect's dream are solid bronze, imported from Italy, and are twenty feet high. Said doors open into a few rooms inside the house —maybe sixty. Just a simple country place, nothing elaborate. . . .

When we get there a band is playing and maybe twenty couples are dancing on the front piazza. I drive right up to the steps in my Ford cabriolet with the top down. The chauffeur on duty steps into the bus and drives it away. And there we are, all ready, to be tossed to the lions.

For a long minute Lance Lee stands at the bottom of the steps looking up at the house with unconcealed consternation. He looks like a guy discovering a new wonder of the world.

"Gosh," he says in a hoarse whisper out of a tight throat, "I didn't know that anybody *lived* in a house like this. Why it's bigger than the State Capitol! Gee—" He stopped and stared.

I could hear his brain clicking. He was wondering to himself how long it would be—how many times he would have to beat the Giants in order to build himself a shack like this. The mere fact that Miss Ann Mason lived in such a joint was enough to knock him silly.

There was a patter of running feet on the porch and a vision in billowing white came tripping down the steps. There was starlight in her eyes, and enchantment on hr mouth. Her voice was tuned to a 'cello.

"Mr. Lee!" she says. "Oh, I'm so glad you could come. I was so afraid that Mr. Smith or someone would spoil your party."

"I don't reckon nobody could keep me away if I wanted to come," he said, still with the dazed look in his eyes. He was watching the changing lights on that coppery-bronze head of hers.

I'll give her credit. She was just about the most beautiful thing I ever looked at—and I've seen plenty.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Brand," she says to me, her voice changing plenty. "The faithful chaperon, eh? The Old Guard—well, let us hope you surrender gracefully, and that it doesn't really kill you."

She slipped her arm through Lee's and led him up the steps, where the whole gang is waiting, all smiling.

"It's an awful pretty house you got, Miss Mason," says Lance. "Only when we drove in the gate I thought Ed was making a mistake. Ain't you afraid you'll get lost—and nobody will find you?"

"I feel lost most of the time," she told him.

I see a couple of guys nudge each other and grin.

"A whole band—just for you folks?" he marvels. "It shore must cost a powerful lot of money. They play good, too. I heard 'em, coming up the drive. The only dances I ever saw, back home, there was a fiddler—or two, if it was a big dance—and maybe a guitar. But you can *doesy-do* to that pretty good, too."

He is shaking hands with the gals and guys alike, completely ignoring the names Ann Mason mentions as she makes the introductions. I put my back up against one of the porch posts, watching him. I know why I am there. Nobody is interested in meeting me, and that goes vice-versa, in spades, as far as Ed Brand is concerned.

SOMEBODY brought Lee a drink. He gripped the glass in his big hand, smelled the amber mixture, squinted his eyes. "Why—that's likker—ain't it?" he asks.

Two of the gaping guests laugh right out loud.

He hands it back. "I don't touch it. Not that I'm agin' it or nothin'—it just ain't good for pitchers. 'Course, fellas that don't have to pitch, and keep an eye on the ball—it's all right for them, I reckon."

Ann Mason nods to the orchestra leader and the band starts playing. She holds out her arms to Lance, he stands awkwardly, looking at her. Red surges into his face, ebbs down his neck into his collar. Once or twice his big hands and arms start to reach out—to actually touch her. Then they drop to his sides.

"Gee, Miss Ann, ma'am," be blurts. "I—I never did learn to dance. I never was around where dancin' was goin' on. It wouldn't do me no good to lie about it and to kind of take hold of you under false pretenses. I'd just muss you up a heap. . . ."

There is a little silence. "But I'd mighty like to learn," he says in that deadly serious voice.

"Why, I'll teach you in no time. You just take me—like this—"

She was egg-shell thin and ten times as fragile. Lance is breathing in snorts, and his face is flaming, and his long legs just can't get trackin'. In the first three steps he stumbles over her feet twice, and is in a panic.

"Let's stop!" he begs.

But she won't let him. Maybe she likes to be held inside a pair of arms that could give a grizzly bear the first hold and then crack the bear's ribs.

The rest of the clucks are watching —dancing with effortless ease, and watching. The guys are grinning. But I can see somehow that, though the girls would also like to grin, they can't take their eyes away from that strong face, and those shoulders, and the ripple of muscles under that white dinner-jacket. Women don't laugh at things like that—even when they want to. . . .

After half an hour the party heads inside the house. The longer I stay, the worse my teeth itch, for it's not hard to tumble to the whole lay-out. Lance Lee is a guest in this house for only one reason—to amuse these gin-and-Scotch guzzling young washouts. They expect a million laughs from him. They're grinning and nudging each other behind his back. They're mimicking his awkwardness in dancing. They're mocking his expressions and aping his voice.

There is one guy in particular I don't like. His tag is Harner. He seems to think of Ann Mason in the possessive case. He acts like the white-headed boy around the joint.

The other guy I don't cotton to is Marty Mason, Ann's brother. I don't like him first because he's too young to drink—and second because he's had too much. His face is dark and flushed and his eyes full of the devil. He has brick-red hair and a husky pair of shoulders. He might have been a fine kid if he hadn't been born and bred to the phoney tradition of synthetic blue-bloods.

He and this Harner guy act like bosom pals. One look at this Harner and I mark him n.g. I don't care if his old man has fifty million bucks—a guy can have that kind of dough and still be a pain in the neck.

The dancing boys and girls drape themselves around the room inside. And this Harner appoints himself master of ceremonies.

Lee has a flushed face and a rumpled shirt front. He's starry-eyed, grinning at everybody and everything. He's in heaven—the poor chump. I hang around the outskirts of the mob, wondering how long it's going to take him to understand that he's just a monkey-on-a-stick for this gang.

"It must be wonderful to be a big-time ball player, like you? Mr. Lee," says this Harner guy, with a wink at young Mason. "Tell us all about it. Just what is the secret of your phenomenal success?"

Lance looks embarrassed. His eyes go around the room. He sees the smiles, but he don't read 'em right.

"Well, I'll tell you. I reckon anybody can be a success," he says gravely. "Only you got to want something awful much and keep after it all the time. You got to make that thing you want the biggest thing in your life. You got to fight for it, live with it, and die for it—if you have to. All my life I wanted things—things I never had—things that just seemed plumb silly when I thought about 'em. But I just kept bearin' down, learnin' control and a change of pace—and—I'm goin' to get 'em."

"Splendid!" said that lug Harner. "Just what is a change of pace?"

"Mixin' 'em up—that's a change of pace," said Lee. "Never let the hitter know what's comin' and don't toss too many of the same kind of balls."

"Maybe you could give us an example. We all see ball games—but when it comes to the real inside stuff, why it takes an old master like you to explain it. Show us how you pitch a curve—how you throw that fast one."

I step into the picture. "It's getting late, Lance," I say, with a poisonous look.

But Lance is teeing off at one end of the long room. "Well, first you got to get position on the rubber," he says.

They're grinning at him. He grins back, but it's a different grin.

"Then you got to know how to hold the ball, and where it's goin' when it leaves your hand. It's like this—"

HE stands there, Lance Lee on the mound. He squints at the imaginary batter. He goes into the pitching motion, his body lunging forward as his arm snaps down. But his collar also snaps. It flies open at the neck.

He pulls up in a panic, and looks around. "Gosh—them things are sure tricky," he says. "I ain't never worn one before."

They are applauding him.

"I'll bet you know a lot of tricks," says this Harner. "You must be a scream at a party. You aren't also a champion hog caller, by any chance?"

Lee looks up from wrestling with his collar. "Hog caller?" he asks innocently. "How do you reckon I'm a hog caller? That's one of them fellas I see in the newsreel that yells like all get out, ain't it?"

Polite laughter rises, but laughter with an edge on it. I'm seeing red.

"Don't tell me that you never called a hog!" begs Harner. "Why I thought everybody in the backwoods called hogs. We thought around here that the Missouri razorback was almost human, people made such a fuss about calling them. . . . Come on, Lee, break down and give us a good old-fashioned hog call. I'll bet you do it swell."

A little change comes over Lance Lee's face. He looks around at the others in the room. He glances at Ann Mason who is smiling a little, then turns back to Harner.

"I don't reckon you know much about the real backwoods, mister," he clips, and there is a sudden chill on his voice. "I reckon I seen as many hogs in N'York as I ever saw in Missouri. The funny thing is, though, in New York most of 'em wear pants like yours. A man can hardly can tell the difference."

Harner's face flushes. "What do the porkers wear out in Missouri, Lee?" he asks. "Baseball uniforms?"

That wisecrack started it. There is a spatting sound and Mr. Harner is sprawled on the flat of his back. How he got there I don't know. All I know is that something moved with the speed of a panther's pounce—there was the crack of knuckles on jaw—and Wiseguy Harner was resting on his shoulder blades, his eyes glassy and his cheek smeared with blood. Lance Lee towers above him, his face white, eyes icy-cold, his hands clenched and his big chest rising and falling.

"Get up!" He spoke in almost a whisper. "Get up, you white-faced ape, and I'll show you what wears baseball uniforms in Missouri."

Marty Mason steps forward. "Why you—you hillbilly lout! Where the devil do you think you are?" He draws back his arm.

Lee wards off the punch as easy as he'd step back from a close one inside. There's anger flaming in him, but it's tightly controlled. His big hand flicks out and slaps Mason across the jowls. Slaps him three times, with the cracks sounding like pistol shots.

"You stay away, son!" he says quietly. "You don't belong running with no men nor mixin' up in a man's quarrel. You're just a bottle baby—a liquor-bottle baby. You need your pants warmed, that's all."

Young Mr. Mason stumbles backward, fingering his stinging cheek. Lance Lee takes a deep breath.

He towers there, facing the sobered mob of 'em. A little white grin comes on his face. Lord, but he looked like a thoroughbred! His hands drop to his sides, finally, but there is the bitterness of gall in his voice, and his eyes are ice-cold staring at Ann Mason.

He whirls on me. "I'm plumb sorry, Ed," he says. "I drug you here when you didn't want to come. I was wrong and you was right. I reckon you knew what kind of people we'd find here. . . .

His eyes shift again to Ann Mason. "Ma'am," he says, icily polite but with his breath whistling through his teeth. "I made a fool mistake. I thought you were a lady. I didn't have much experience, because I never met nobody like you before. I know better now. I thought you wanted me to come out here—friendly like. But you didn't—you wanted to show me off to your friends. Show off the Missouri hog-caller to this bunch of white-livered rats that ain't got nerve enough to take up that smack in the teeth I hit their boy friend.

"But from now on I won't make no mistakes about ladies and gentlemen. I never had much truck with people like you, nohow, and from here on I'll stick with my own kind. I know where I belong. I won't make the mistake again of tryin' to be anything but a baseball player."

He grabs me by the arm. "C'mon, Ed," he husks. "Let's get out of here."

What happens next wasn't Lance Lee's fault. I guess it was mine as much as anybody's. He is towing me fast towards the door, but I hang back a little and cannot resist the temptation to turn a sour grin on Miss Ann Ma-

son. It's an I-told-you-so smirk if there ever was one—and Miss Ann Mason is red-headed.

Maybe my grin was the match that fired her temper.

Anyway, there she comes, running across to face us. She's breathing fast, eyes glinting, her lips set in a thin line of wrath. She slaps Lance twice—hard across the face—before he can back away from her.

"You hillbilly clown!" she gasps. "You illiterate boor—"

I'm watching Lance Lee. The blood drains out of his face and a bleak blankness comes into his eyes. His mouth opens but no words come out. Like a blind man, pawing, he sweeps her aside. She staggers back, staring at him.

That blind push and Ann Mason's stagger are the blow-off. It's the one thing her giggling gang needs to stir 'em to the fighting pitch. There's a snarl and a shout, and a big lad lunges at Lance from the side in a diving football tackle. Another piles in on him with a haymaker swinging, and somebody chucks a glass.

Bedlam isn't in it thereafter.

Lance sidesteps his tackler and knocks another lad headlong. I'm lunging to get beside him when a fist socks me behind the ear and pinwheels start exploding. The last thing I see as I go into a slow-motion sprawl is this baby Harner, snarling like a cat, as he circles behind Lance who is fighting off two others. There's a brass-headed golf club—Lord knows where he snatched it from!—gripped in Harner's hands. He's swinging back with it.

Then I'm down and some lad is stepping on me. I can't see a thing except shoes and legs and even those are hazy. My alleged brain is crammed with one picture and one alone that may be happening right now. The picture of Lance Lee toppling down as that driver smacks his cranium.

I'm yelling into the din. "No—!" I'm screaming. "Look out, Lance—" But even my voice is weak as water.

Concussion of the brain! Hospitals! A million-dollar piece of baseball ivory ruined in a silly society brawl. . . . For if they hurt that kid the Busters will be busted wide. Frisco's dream will shatter in that instant. And there go my own hopes along with those of fifty thousand Royal Rooters. . . .

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Longhair Said No

The band of shrieking Sioux tore on

By RICHARD SALE

There was no turning back for Custer's tiny army—or for his young scout, Johnny Rainor, who had sworn to protect the man he most despised

AT eleven o'clock on that windless morning when the cloudy sky burned white-hot beneath an invisible sun, young Johnny Rainor reached the summit of the western slope of the Wolf Mountains and dismounted. He turned slowly to gaze back toward the verdant valley in the north from where he had ridden. Beside him, peering down keenly at the silver serpent of a river which twisted through the valley, was Bloody Knife, the valiant Arikara scout of the 7th Cavalry. In the sultry air, Johnny Rainor's lithe body was drenched in its own sweat and caked with the white dust which had haunted the hoofbeats of the command. He was very tired. He had come fifteen miles.

" How, Johnny," Bloody Knife said.

Johnny nodded, still panting a little. He tied his horse to a fir and watched the beast's head droop thirstily, its flanks alive with flies and dirt. He

wasn't much better off himself. His buckskin sagged with dust. He took off his brimmed hat and beat it against his legs, watching the spouts which shot out of it. Then, replacing it, he resumed his watch of the Little Big Horn river.

He looked as much an Indian as Bloody Knife, bronzed by the sun, with a nose as hooked as any in history, his face was as leathery as his worn saddle and just as hairless. Only his pale blue eyes set him apart from a redskin. He gnawed his lip as he watched the fertile valley dancing in the heat haze northward, shimmering like melting glass. He could see that where Sundrance Creek met the river a blue cloud filtered up, confirming what he already knew.

Bloody Knife saw it too and grunted.

"Smoke," he said.

"Aye," Johnny said quietly. "Big village. A thousand Injuns if there's one."

"Heap too many."

"Aye." Johnny pushed back the brim of his hat and pointed. "Watch there where the plum-colored haze is."

"Worms," Bloody Knife observed, his eyes fixed on the left bank of the river.

"Worms!" Johnny Rainor laughed dryly. "The liveliest worms you ever saw! Ponies—Injun ponies! I'll swear a man never saw so many ponies in one place in his life!"

Bloody Knife shook his head, his long, gaunt face sober. "Heap too many, Johnny. I'll tell Longhair. You stay here."

The Arikara mounted his own horse and rode off down the eastern slope into the bottom of the ravine where the army of longswords had been in hiding, awaiting some sign of the illusive Sioux.

PRESENTLY Johnny Rainor heard the brassy voice of a trumpet blaring noisily beneath him. He listened to it sound officers' call and looked disappointed. He untied and mounted his horse and wheeled it around so that he could survey the eastern slope. In minutes the advance was under way. He could see the reformed column of longswords on the march. They toiled up the slope, six hundred weary men and horses, grumbling, cursing, sweating; their blue uniforms were lost beneath the blanket of dust which rose up in their midst like a pillar. Johnny shook his head.

Six hundred men, so pitifully few against the hordes to the north in the village where the clans had gathered—Sioux, Blackfeet, Hunkpapa, Brules, Sans Arc, Minneconjous, Oglalas, Northern Cheyennes, Santees, Yanktonnais—making their last determined stand against the white man.

It was high noon when the column crossed the crest and started down into the valley. The men looked withered under the heat, much like the aromatic fir trees which studded the mountainside and the burned brown grass below it. Soon Bloody Knife came riding up, his long black hair flowing over his broad shoulders. Beside him was moon-faced Captain Benteen, grizzled, white-haired veteran at Indian warfare. And behind them both came Longhair.

He wore a white-brimmed hat jauntily cocked on one side of his head. There were highlights on his forehead and high cheek bones, and his face tapered down gracefully to a thin chin over which drooped the ends of a full mustache. Usually his golden hair hung down over the back of his neck. It was his hairdress, in fact, which had prompted the Sioux to nick-

name him—in dread—Longhair. But today the locks were missing, having been cut recently with horse clippers. Johnny Rainor trotted his horse over to meet him and called, "General Custer, sir!"

George Armstrong Custer reined in and waited for the scout. "What is it now, boy?" he asked, his light eyes twinkling.

"Are you movin' into the valley, sir?" Johnny asked, in tones which showed he disapproved.

Longhair smiled indulgently.

"We're going to find some of these Indians everyone seems to think are ahead," he said.

Johnny Rainor scowled. "There's a big village at that fork, sir. I reckon there's maybe a thousand or more Sioux. They mean business too. They'll fight, General. It's too big a bunch for this man's army, beggin' your pardon."

"Little boys have big eyes," Longhair said, looking annoyed. "Perhaps you don't remember, but I encountered the Sioux once before. I suppose they meant business then, but they damn well scattered fast enough! Rainor—you're as bad as the Crow scouts. They're so frightened they're staying behind. You've even got Bloody Knife here hypnotized!"

"Heap too many," Bloody Knife said. "Johnny is right."

"I've been all the way to the village myself," Johnny Rainor said quietly. "I couldn't count all the lodges, sir. But I know this: we're outnumbered at least three to one."

"Of course!" General Custer laughed. "We'll all be wiped out, I'm sure!"

"Oh, no," Bloody Knife said. "But it takes several days to kill 'em all."

"Oh, I'll guess we'll get through them in one day! *If* there are any, which I doubt."

"Which you doubt!" Johnny exclaimed. "For God's sake, General, take a look where that plum haze is lying. I never saw a pony herd that large. They look like tangleworms, they're that thick!"

Longhair glanced casually out at the haze, then back. He said evenly, "Now look here, boy. I've been on the plains a good many years. My eyesight is as good as yours. I can't see anything that looks like Indian ponies."

"Ponies there all right," Bloody Knife said.

"General—" Johnny blurted in desperation, "if you don't find more Indians in that valley than you ever saw before, why—you can hang me!"

Longhair laughed soundly and shook his head. "All right, all right," he rattled. "It would do a damned lot of good to hang you, wouldn't it?" He waved the scout aside and called, "Benteen!"

Captain Benteen glanced over his horse. "What is it, Custer?"

"Take Troops H, D, and K, and reconnoiter. Take those gray bluffs to the west and drive everything before you there."

So while the army toiled down the western side of the Wolf Mountains, Captain Benteen left the broad fresh Indian trail and bore away obliquely to the left with his companies in the direction of the hazy bluffs four miles away. He soon disappeared.

Johnny Rainor was speechless. He was even more stunned when Major Reno came up and received orders to take specific command of Troops M, A, and G. This was suicide! In the face of an enemy which outnumbered them three to one, Longhair was splitting the command into three fractions.

"Don't worry," Bloody Knife told Johnny. "Longhair knows what he's doin'."

Johnny wasn't so sure. For the first time that day, he felt the effluvium which hung over the column. It was the effluvium of the death to come in the afternoon. He felt it like ice in the white heat of the day as he joined the soldiers in the creaking-saddle slide down the slope. It made him shiver and recall suddenly Alithea's trust.

REMEMBERING Alithea was easy. She obliterated the summery heat while he rode down the trail in advance of the column scouting with Bloody Knife, Bouyer, the half-breed Sioux, and Half Yellow Face, the Crow. She made him forget, too, the rains and mud which had bogged them down, and the tedious delay before the start of the expedition while General Custer languished impatiently in Washington, tangled up in the investigation of the Secretary of War. She could wipe out even the fact that the 7th Cavalry was under officered and thirty per cent filled with green recruits. This was not the same 7th which had put the Sioux to shame at Washita.

Yes, Alithea was easy for Johnny Rainor to remember. But it saddened him to recall the last night he saw her, May 15th, two days prior to the departure of the army.

Alithea was the daughter of Burton Stevens, head of the Bismarck Indian Agency. She had come west from a Boston school but a few months before. She was younger that Johnny, dark-haired, pale-faced, with quiet soft eyes. In three days, Johnny had fallen mutely in love with her. To his quiet delight, she seemed to enjoy his company. He taught her to ride, to shoot a Henry (the original Winchester), to follow a trail and stalk buffalo. She asked him countless questions about the Indians and he was constantly relating all the lore. He told her, too, the story of his own life; how when he was thirteen, his mother and father had been slain by a band of Brules, how he himself had lain beneath the wagon expecting to be shot and scalped, how Flying Moon, chief of the Brules, had spared his life and adopted him into his own camp. At fifteen, he ran away and became an agency scout, finally joining the government staff as a scout for the 7th Cavalry. He was twenty years old then.

On the night of May 15 when he saw her, the imminence of the expedition broke down his shyness. Riding now, he remembered his crude proposal in hot shame. They had sat in the shadow of the barracks where the glow of the oil lamps illumined Alithea's white face; he stammered and faltered for an eternity before—in sheer desperation — he blurted puerilely, "M'am, you never asked me how the Injuns make love."

Alithea glanced at him in wonder. "Why, yes, that's so," she said. "But why—well, how do they make love, Johnny? Tell me."

He evaded her eyes, his face flushing in the dark. "You see, m'am, when an Injun brave loves an Injun girl, he goes callin' to her tepee at night with a blanket and he knocks on the door. Then the Injun girl sorta peeks out and sees who it is. If she likes the brave and thinks maybe he'd be a good husband, she comes out and they make love. They have to have the blanket because the old chiefs are curious and spy on 'em. . . . But if the girl don't like the brave, she shakes her head and goes back inside and he runs off and

never calls again. That's Injun courtin' m'am."

Alithea laughed. "There's certainly no artifice, is there?" she said. "I'm not so sure that such frankness is—" She stopped and her smile faded. She looked at him steadily. "Johnny."

"Yes?"

"Johnny, why did you want to tell me this?"

"Well, m'am," he said, letting his head droop miserably as he muffled his words, "I was wonderin' if—wonderin' if you was Injun and I was Injun and I knocked on your tepee—what would you do?"

She didn't answer. The silence held a long time, then deepened, broken only by the voices of the troopers who were singing in the barracks:

> In hurried words her name I bless'd,
> I breathed the vows that bind me,
> And to my heart in anguish press'd,
> The girl I left behind me.

Alithea said at last, "You love me, Johnny. That's what you're trying to say."

"I reckon it is, m'am."

Her hand came through the darkness to brush his leathery cheek. Then it abruptly vanished. She said, "You didn't finish the story, Johnny." Her voice was strangely quiet. "Suppose the maiden loved the brave and wanted him for her husband, but that the chief —her father — objected and had planned otherwise. What could she do then, Johnny?"

"She'd have to obey her father, m'am."

"You see—that's the way it is." As he stiffened, she added quickly, "Do you know Lieutenant Harry Storen?"

"Yes. 7th Cavalry replacement."

"Lieutenant Storen is my fiancé."

"I'm sorry—"

"No, Johnny," Alithea said in a low voice, "*I'm* sorry. But you must understand. Harry and I have known each other all our lives, we're second cousins, we've grown up together. Our families have expected this, they've always planned on it."

"Do you love him?" Johnny asked.

"I'm very fond of him—" her voice caught in her throat—"besides that would make no difference. Even if I said I loved you, we couldn't change anything."

Johnny took a breath. "I understand. I reckon I shouldn't've spoken."

"I'm so glad you did," she whispered. "Now we can stay friends at least. I do so want you for a friend, Johnny. . . . I'm going to give you a trust; will you keep it for me?"

"I'd do anything for you, m'am."

"Watch over Lieutenant Storen," Alithea said. "Oh, I know, he's much older than you and he's an officer and all that. But he's so green, Johnny! He never fought an Indian in his life. He doesn't know anything about it. Please bring him back safely to me, Johnny. Promise me that you'll not let anything happen to him."

"I'll bring him back. I promise."

And then she raised up on her toes and brushed his lips with her own and said tremulously, "God bring you back to me too, Johnny boy."

Two days later, on May 17th, the longswords marched to the lilting strains of Garry Owen, away from Fort Lincoln to destiny. . . .

"TA-AY!" Half Yellow Face shouted, holding up his hand. He pointed up, then down.

Johnny Rainor, Bloody Knife, and Bouyer reined in also, examining the signs. Along this Indian trail, the low

branches were broken from the passing of horsemen, and under the hoofs of their horses, there were scattered pony droppings. Peering ahead through the trees, they made out the lonely cone of a lodge. They spurred their mounts on quickly until they reached it. It was utterly deserted, and it looked stark. No smoke at all; not even a mongrel dog roamed around by the latched door flaps. And while they looked at it, the muttering thump of hoofbeats sounded to the southwest. Bouyer said, "Thar go Injuns like forty devils!"

It was true. A band of shrieking Sioux warriors crossed the knoll not forty yards away, riding westward toward the silver river and flinging back catcalls of scorn.

Leaving Half Yellow Face and Bouyer there, Bloody Knife and Johnny Rainor returned to the column to report to General Custer. But the ride was unnecessary. Longhair had seen the galloping Indians himself as they beat back in derisive retreat. He had counted them—thirty-nine riders.

Johnny Rainor said, "I told you, sir. The village is at the fork—a big one—"

But Longhair excitedly waved him away now. This was no time for digression. He waved away too the adamant doubt which he had held concerning the possible Sioux habitation of the valley. It wasn't important that he had been wrong. The fact was he had seen Sioux and that meant action. He straightened up in his saddle and snapped at his adjutant: "Ride ahead and tell Major Reno the Indians are two and a half miles ahead and on the jump! Tell him to follow as fast as he can and charge them and we will support him!" And as the adjutant rode off hurriedly, Longhair turned to his favorite scout and added, "You and Rainor join Reno and scout for him."

"Good," Bloody Knife replied, nodding.

They joined Major Reno and his three companies. Johnny realized he could do nothing about it, but he looked back at General Custer's two hundred and twenty-five men and wished he could have stayed. Lieutenant Harry Storen was back there in Company C, and Johnny had promised Alithea.

Shortly, a hill rose up and Custer's men dropped out of sight behind it, lagging so that Reno's charge could go ahead. Sweaty and tense, in a jumble of hollow hoofbeats and swirling dust, the twin columns of Reno—with the Major and Bloody Knife and Johnny Rainor at its head—swept down to the belly-deep Little Big Horn and plunged into it. The fording took a long time, for the thirsty horses stopped to drink and would not move until they had finished. But at last the command reached the left bank of the river and reformed.

Before them stretched a two mile plain, flanked far down by a fecund sprouting of timber where the river curved. The timber hid the terrain beyond the curve. But, nevertheless, one thing was plain. The Sioux were launching an attack of their own. High over the timber's top, a gigantic, dark dust cloud hovered, raised from the earth by the beating of the Indian ponies on the ground. In the face of this invisible host, Major Reno stood in his stirrups and shouted clearly, "Left into line! Guide Center! *Gallop!*"

Men and horses, galvanized into a charge, swept across the rolling brown plain toward the nimbus of dust. A trumpeter blew jerkily. Low in his saddle, Johnny Rainor watched the two intervening miles vanish beneath his

mount and with breath-taking rapidity, the column reached the curve of the Little Big Horn and thundered up to the timber, one hundred and twenty-five strong.

The Indian dust cloud instantly became a reality! Out of it poured screaming, half-mad savages, preceded by an avalanche of whispering arrows and cracking bullets. Johnny saw their number and was appalled. They skirted up to the line of the dust and let go a blast of rifle fire and then they fell back into the turbid obscurity, cannily drawing the soldiers after them.

Johnny saw the trick at once. He pushed his horse to the head of the column until he had reached Major Reno. "Ambush, sir!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. "They're pulling us into ambush!"

Major Reno had seen that too. Up went his arm and the charge melted away like butter in the face of the bloodthirsty foe. "Halt!" he cried. "Prepare to fight on foot!"

"My God no!" Johnny called. "We're outnumbered, sir! They'll murder us!"

MAJOR RENO didn't hear him. The sudden confusion was too great. The men tumbled out of their saddles, each veteran fourth man taking charge of the mounts and whirling them quickly away into the dubious safety of the timber on the right flank. The trumpet blared again and died as abruptly. Orders ran down the columns. "Form your lines here and fire!" The line was thin enough. It advanced brokenly, then steadied. With his Winchester seventeen-shooter, Johnny fell into the line, firing steadily into the yellow pall where bodies and ponies appeared faintly, dissipating and materializing magically. A private who stood behind him, working frantically on the breach of his jammed carbine, took a bullet in the chest and fell, shrieking, "Death! Death!"

In minutes, Johnny knew the barrage of bullets and arrows was to be mortal. There was no respite anywhere. Moving low, he slid toward the timber where Major Reno was standing, shouting at Billy Jackson, a half-breed scout. "Where's Custer?" Reno said frantically. "Where in God's name is my support?" Nobody answered him. Nobody was to ever know why Long-hair did not appear on the plain behind them to sweep down in a brilliant charge as was his way, and save the day.

A glance back told a far different story. The Sioux were pouring around behind them through the weak left flank. They were surrounded there. Major Reno pulled at Billy Jackson and pleaded with the scout to go back and contact Custer and hurry him. "No," Jackson said. "No man could get through that."

Johnny, close by, realized that Jackson was perfectly right. No man could have gotten through the wall of Indians behind them. But there remained the timber. It grew all the way to the left bank of the river and a man might get through there with nerve, hard riding, and a smattering of luck. He ran to Major Reno. "I'll make a try, sir," he said. "I'll hit through the timber."

"Go ahead, for God's sake!" Reno bawled. "Tell Custer the Sioux are attacking and we need that support!" He was barely audible above the lusty banging of the Springfields and Spencers.

Returning to the thickets of the timber, Johnny got his horse and mounted.

Out of white smoke, Bloody Knife evolved beside him, calling, "Where you goin', Johnny?"

"For Custer," Johnny replied. But in cold horror, he realized that the Arikara never heard his answer. A bullet split the Indian's skull. The thwack of it was quite distinct and macabre.

As Bloody Knife fell, Johnny struck out for the river through the timber, riding far down to elude the low branches of the trees in his path. Thickets sprang up to tear cruelly at his horse. He never left the tumult and the shrieking. The warriors were everywhere, on the plain, massed in the thickets, behind the trees, sniping from both banks of the Little Big Horn. They poured out murderous volleys every foot of the way. How he escaped the rain of lead, he didn't know. Certainly he had not bargained for so much of it. He reached the river after an infinity, firing his rifle from his side as he rode wherever he saw smoke close to him. He plunged in his horse and struggled for the opposite bank. Tiny white geysers leaped up in the water around him as the Indian sniped from behind. He reached the other side and was riding up from the water when a ball struck his left arm. For seconds, he didn't know what had happened. Then his Winchester fell from his numbed fingers and he saw blood twisting down around his wrist and he knew he was hit. There was no pain; only a shocked numbness.

He gave his horse its head then and rode toward the east furiously. The firing around him rapidly diminished, then ceased altogether. He had not fled a quarter of a mile when he discerned suddenly—where the rolling knolls of the south curved gently away—Captain Benteen and his three companies coming up to Major Reno's support like a thunderbolt. The charge was beautiful to see. He halted to watch it, marveling that men and horses could ever achieve such a perfect wedding.

But where, he thought suddenly, is General Custer?

If Benteen were coming from the south, Longhair could not be there. West was the battleground; no sign of Custer there. East, ahead of him, the plains and knolls rolled clear to the foot of the Wolf Mountains uninhabited.

North . . .?

With quick dread eating out his heart, he turned north, galloping as fast as his tired horse could run.

LONGHAIR was northeast of the big village. Johnny Rainor found him shortly after three-thirty, found him in a dismayed rout. There was a slight ridge which sloped up from the banks of the river toward a smooth small summit, its long grass sunburned into an olivy-brown. Here lay the blasted remnants of General Custer's two hundred and twenty-five longswords, ambushed completely and horribly by the wily leadership of Chiefs Gall and Crazy Horse who led the Sioux. The bodies of the dead, dying, and wounded, were strewn down the slope; the terrific power of the Indian war-machine was plainly evident. There were no lines of defense. The attack had been too abrupt. The soldiers, quick and dead, were scattered like seeds in the wind; they lent the gentle ridge an aspect of maddened disorder.

Up near the summit of the ridge where the surviving soldiers had retreated to make their last stand, Johnny Rainor fell in with them. It was simple to reach them at that time, since the

Sioux had not flanked them entirely. Somebody had planted an American flag in the center of the besieged circle of men. To one side of it, Longhair stood calmly firing his pistol into the horde of warriors which rode around the rude breastworks of dead horses; he seemed contemptuous of the replying flights of arrows and bullets. In the circle, Johnny Rainor found Lieutenant Harry Storen. Storen was half hidden by the rump of a horse's corpse. He raised his hand to fire a pistol blindly, without even aiming it. Abject terror lined his face, made his black mustache darker against the pea-green color of his skin. Johnny didn't blame him. To a veteran, this slaughter by the Sioux was harrowing enough; to a raw recruit from the east, it must have been ghastly. He crouched down with Lieutenant Storen and laid his Winchester across the belly of the carcass and began to shoot.

All around him, the firing became steady thunder; no desultory shots. The Indians rode in columns of dust, shrieking and shooting. It was soon to be over, Johnny saw. It was inevitable. They were surrounded, outnumbered, overpowered. It was only a matter of hours—no, minutes! But he continued a telling fire, disregarding Storen who—beside him—finally broke into a low rattling sob, dropping his gun and covering his face with his hands as he cried, "Oh, God, I'm going to get it! I'm going to get it!"

"Wait a minute," Johnny Rainor said, frowning. He had just killed a Sioux brave who had ridden up to the breastworks in a lone attempt to storm them. The brave lay on the slope below him, no more than ten feet away. He wondered: if I had missed that Injun and he'd gone back—

"Wait a minute," he said again. "Look at that. I've got an idea." He handed his rifle to Storen. "I'm goin' out there, Lieutenant. You cover me."

"Yes," Storen replied with hysterical acerbity, "I'll cover you! Can you save us, can you?"

"Keep your shirt on, mister," Johnny said. "I'll be right back."

He leaped over the carcass and ran to the dead brave. He quickly stripped the brave of headdress and blanket. Twenty feet to the south, he saw another dead Sioux. Despite the wall of bullets, he reached this body, stripped it too. Then he returned to the dying circle below the summit with his loot.

"Take off your coat, Lieutenant," he told Storen, meanwhile grabbing Storen's brimmed hat and skimming it aside. Over Storen's forehead, he jammed down one of the leathery headbands which he had salvaged. In its rear, he thrust an upright feather, while around Storen's shoulders, he wrapped the Indian blanket. "Now rub your face with dirt. That's it, all over your face. . . . I reckon that'll do. You look as dirty as they could ever get. Now pick up your pistol and take a look at me. Do I look Injun? . . . Good. Then let's go."

They stepped over the dusty carcass and ran. For several infinite seconds, Johnny felt the tautness of doubt through his body as he watched to see whether or not the ruse would work. Close around them the air was filled with the crisp cracking of passing balls. The smoke and dust was so thick that they could not see where they were going at times. They headed boldly toward the encircling warriors. Johnny felt cold when they neared the Sioux and saw them at closer range. The Indians were in a dazed, demoniacal frenzy; in the end this probably saved them, made them appear to be two com-

rades returning to safety after a courageous attempt to storm the ridge of remaining longswords. In among the wheeling ponies, Johnny knew they were safe. He pounded Lieutenant Storen on the back and pointed east where a line of timber crept up from the river's bend. "Down there!" he shouted. "Go down there and hide in the thickets 'til I come!"

"For God's sake, you're not going to leave me!"

"Hide in the timber 'til I come!" Johnny repeated. "You'll be safe enough! These devils won't be lookin' about 'til they finish with the others on the ridge!"

"Rainor! Rainor!" Storen screamed. "Don't leave me here! For God's sake, have mercy!"

Johnny shook his head adamantly and threw off the Lieutenant's gripping hand. He caught one fleeting glimpse of Storen stumbling blindly down toward the timber, and then he returned his attention to the task of rejoining the soldiers on the ridge. He kicked his way desperately through the stomping horses, choking in the yellow pall of dirt.

Soon he could just discern the bobbing heads of the soldiers above the dark bodies of the horses. He broke from the Indian ranks and charged up the slope, throwing open the blanket and tearing off the headdress and shouting, "Don't shoot—it's Rainor—don't shoot—"

He would undoubtedly have perished in that charge, for he saw the carbines swing around and aim at him, but simultaneously, Longhair — who was still standing—recognized him and warned the sharpshooters concerning him. He finally reached the circle, fell over behind a carcass and laid there for minutes, tired, panting, filthy. When he could speak again, he tugged at General Custer's leg and said, "General, sir!"

"You're wounded, Rainor," Longhair replied, fanning the hammer of his pistol coolly enough.

"It's nothin'," Johnny said. "At least I can't feel it any even if my arm don't seem to work. General, listen. You've got to listen to me, sir!"

"What is it?"

"I can get you out of here, sir! I've already got Lieutenant Storen out! Take this headband and this blanket and disguise yourself. You can break through the Indians disguised as a Sioux and get through them!"

Longhair stiffened, his shoulders moving out like a cobra extending its hood. "Disguise myself like a dirty savage?" he said. "I'll be damned if I will!"

"But they'll kill you here!"

"I'm not dead yet."

"But, General—"

"No!" Longhair said. "For the last time, no!"

Johnny Rainor never saw him alive again. As for himself, he didn't want to die. The necessary disguise was here and he'd used it once successfully. So he used it again. . . .

WHEN he reached the timber, he dove into the hot shade of the trees, then into the seclusion of a clump of sumac. He had a taste of blood in his mouth and each time he drew a breath he made a rasping moan and felt a high nausea at the top of his stomach. But this exhaustion passed after awhile and he rested. The sounds of furor on the ridge finally roused him. Grimacing at the pain in his wounded arm, he peered out through the sumac leaves. He saw that the flag which had flown in the center of the

last stand had now disappeared. Indians swarmed over the ridge. Down from the river, the women and children were coming up with knives and tomahawks to strip, steal, and mutilate. When he saw them, Johnny Rainor knew that it was the end.

A few minutes later he heard voices. He half-rose from the sumac clump and looked out. In a quiet glade no more than twenty feet away, he saw four Minneconjous in full war paint. They were arguing about a scalp from what he understood, but while he watched, one of them who had been examining the victim, suddenly fell away and wailed, "*Aie! Aie!* Evil spirit!" Then they all fled.

When the glade was clear, Johnny rose and walked to it, carrying his pistol, fully loaded, in his good right hand. On the floor of the glade he found Lieutenant Storen dead, gun in hand. A single shot had killed him. There was a hole in his right temple.

"Evil spirit," the Minneconjou had said; Johnny Rainor knew what that meant.

He took to a tree for safety's sake. . . .

When darkness came down, the Indian shooting died away entirely as the warriors retreated to their village to celebrate the great victory.

He could see their camp-fires flare from where he perched. He knew no braves could resist the show which would take place in the village that night. It was safe to come down now.

Weary in the new coolness which the night brought, Johnny returned slowly to the ridge where he found every mother's son dead. It was dumbfounding—the flower of the service—cut down like weeds. In the center, surrounded by his officers, Longhair reposed with wounds in his side and head. He was smiling as though he had fallen asleep and were having a pleasant dream. He hadn't been scalped but his clothes had all been stripped from him.

Johnny Rainor sighed heavily.

Sadly he went down the slope listening to the satyr-like revelry of the Sioux the chants and minor key songs and the hollow dum of victory drums which broke the night silence.

He would contact Benteen and Reno, Johnny reflected, and tell them of the disaster.

And as for Alithea—well—he would tell Alithea that Lieutenant Storen had died while trying to bring succor to his comrades and that he had been so brave even the bloodthirsty Minneconjous would not take his scalp because of their respect for him as a great white chief.

There would be no need, he assured himself, for Alithea to know that Injuns never touch the scalps of the self-destroyed.

THE END

They plunged from the cell onto the unsuspecting guard

Don Peon

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Don Peon, caballero in exile, follows the light of a lady's eyes to a rendezvous with death and dishonor!

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

DON FERNANDO VENEGAS, scion of one of the greatest families that migrated from old Spain to California, was a proud and haughty *caballero*. His body servant, Miguel, was the most humble of peons. But when Don Fernando found Bartolo Rios, son of a family known for wealth rather than nobility, beating his servant, he stepped in and saved Miguel. Bartolo Rios resented Don Fernando's interference. Don Fernando had insulted him, he claimed, and he took bitter offence when Don Fernando refused to settle in a duel, claiming that Bartolo was little more than a peon, himself, and that it would be a dishonor to cross rapiers with him.

So that night at a dance when Don Fernando got the eye of Senorita Manuela Moreno, a girl whom Bartolo has already chosen for his own, Bartolo's anger overflowed. He approached the girl's father, Don Carlos Moreno, boasted of his wealth, asked for the girl's hand in marriage. Don

This story began in the Argosy for August 22

Carlos also rebuffed Bartolo Rios, and the girl laughed at him. So after the dance he corners Don Fernando outside, insulted him, and drew his rapier. Don Fernando could do nothing but fight—the blood lust swept over him. He killed Bartolo Rios.

FRAY MARCOS, the holy man, was witness to this killing and insisted that Don Fernando come to the church and pray for his soul. Don Fernando went with him and there Fray Marcos insisted that the young man do penance for killing a man when it was only necessary to wound him to clear his honor. Don Fernando humbly agreed to do whatever Fray Marcos might order.

Then Fray Marcos told him:

"For three months you must live like a peon. You will live as the lowly live. The highborn will cuff you and kick you. You will submit with all humility."

And that is worse than death to proud Don Fernando Venegas!

BUT Don Fernando did not refuse. In the company of Pedro, a peon, he set out on three months' wandering. The first night out he met up with El Cougar, a half-breed who is mixed up with a prospective revolution of the peons. With El Cougar was the bandit's sister, a lovely girl named Singing Wind. The party was headed for a bandit rendezvous where José Tappia, the leader, is going to talk on the revolution. Don Fernando, remembering that he is only a peon for three months, went along with them.

On the way a group of soldiers under Sergeant Juan Zapata came hunting for El Cougar. El Cougar managed to get away, leaving his sister under Don Fernando's care. A while later one of the soldiers came back, and following the custom of the country at that time, tried to take Singing Wind away to be his woman. Don Fernando could not stand for that. He nearly killed the soldier.

That made him a bit of a hero at the bandit rendezvous. By that time they were calling him Don Peon, he was so like a don though obviously a peon to them. This, it turned out, was a good thing, because after listening to José Tappia talk Don Fernando was convinced that the man was a mountebank and said almost as much. José Tappia immediately became his enemy. Some of the peons almost changed their loyalty. But Don Fernando and Pedro decided to leave the rendezvous before anything happened, and started back on their wandering.

A FEW days later Don Fernando happened to be in a crowd when Senorita Manuela, who was traveling with her father, threw some coins to the peons. He caught a gold piece. The girl's eyes met his. She did not know of this penance. It was strange, she thought, that two men should look so much alike.

And then the trooper that Don Fernando beat up sighted him and arrested him. Don Fernando and Pedro were thrown into a filthy jail. They were sentenced by Sergeant Zapata to:

"Twenty lashes each—at sunrise. . . ."

CHAPTER XIII.

FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.

IN San Juan Capistrano at the time were some men who had been at the canyon the evening before, and others who knew Pedro by sight, and they were quick to carry word out to those in the canyon that Pedro and his young friend had been caught and confined and would receive twenty lashes each at sunrise.

El Cougar got the news, and Singing Wind cried in misery when she heard. Then El Cougar went to the hut where José Tappia made his headquarters to acquaint him with what had happened.

"There must be a rescue!" El Cougar declared.

"A rescue?" José Tappia cried. "Are you mad? Storm the town and the jail, be beaten or slain, possibly have our plans discovered, merely to save those two a few blows on the back?"

"They are my friends," El Cougar said, simply. "Moreover, the man Fernando saved my sister—"

"I appreciate all that, *señor*," José Tappia interrupted. "And I also appreciate the truth that there are times when a few must suffer for the good of the many."

"We could get near the place of confinement during the night, when the guards are careless," El Cougar persisted. "They will not be expecting an attempt at rescue."

"An insane idea!" Tappia blustered. "It will be guessed immediately that we are banded together. Investigations will be made, possibly some men tortured, and the truth will come out. All our plans will be ruined. A few lashes across their backs—it is not enough for which to risk everything."

"They are my friends!" El Cougar repeated. "They choked a trooper. They dared act as we all hope to act in the near future. They are men worth saving. Twenty lashes—but if they are given with a will they may be enough to wreck these men forever. I have seen such lashes given, Señor Tappia. Do you refuse to try a rescue of these men?"

"I wash my hands of it!" José Tappia said. "I start today for San Diego de Alcalá. I had hoped to have you go with me, El Cougar, and to have a part in the planning, and later to send you back this way with word when we are to strike."

"I'll follow you to San Diego de Alcalá, as soon as I have helped my friends," El Cougar told him. He turned away abruptly, with Singing Wind beside him, called to some of the other men, and they squatted at the edge of the brush to make their plans.

IN the place of confinement at San Juan Capistrano, Don Fernando and Pedro had considered their predicament. Ordinary peons would have become resigned, would have waited for the whip, not thinking of possibly evading it. But Don Fernando was not of that sort, nor was Pedro.

It was a vile place, the jail, crowded with peons and natives who had transgressed, some under punishment and some awaiting trial, when the absent *comandante* should return. Some there would die at the end of a rope, and some by the lash, and others had been imprisoned for debt and knew they would never be able to pay, and in time would become slaves on some rancho.

Women were there, too, because they had displeased some man of influence, and they huddled against the walls, or sat in corners muttering to one another, looking at the squares of windows through which streamed the light of day and through which came the breath of the freedom without.

Don Fernando and Pedro mingled with these others, gradually examining the big room, the walls, the doors and windows, and Don Fernando marveled that this jail was not more impregnable, until it dawned upon him that it was impregnable through fear. Once behind these walls, men gave up. They were not the sort, usually, to plan escape, to think of fighting guards. Their mentality was such, generally, that they had no ability in plotting.

Only one window was large enough to admit of the passage of a man's body, but the bars in it were loose. There were two doors of iron bars opening into a dark corridor. At the end of the corridor a guard was stationed.

Sitting in a corner, presently, Don Fernando and Pedro whispered and made their plans. They had ascertained that a guard came at nightfall with a couple of peons, to bring what passed for food. The door was opened, the peons carried huge containers inside, while the guard stood at the door, reviling the unfortunate and beaten prisoners.

"It is sure death to try and fail," Pedro whispered.

"It would be death for such as me to have a lash put upon my back," Don Fernando replied. "I could not endure life after such a thing. Even good Fray Marcos did not anticipate such a thing to be a part of my penance. If you have doubts, my friend, remain behind."

"Did I not promise Fray Marcos to care for you as much as is in my power?" Pedro asked. "Why not demand to see this Sergeant Zapata and reveal your identity and the cause of this masquerade. He would arrange your release."

"And did I not promise Fray Marcos that never would I call upon the power of my name or position during these three moons?" Don Fernando answered. "That cannot be done."

"It must be as you have planned, then," Pedro said.

Other men were crowding around them, looking at them, and growing excited. Word had been passed that these men were to be lashed because they had attacked a trooper and choked him, and that made them heroes in the eyes of those confined.

Many of them, Don Fernando suspected, were there unjustly and unable to alter their circumstances. Others merited the punishment which had been given them. Some would reveal a plan to escape, hoping to curry favor with the soldiery. He wanted help in his plan, but dared not speak openly.

The heat of the day came, and it was stifling in the jail, and the stench of bodies was almost unbearable. Don Fernando and Pedro got near one of the windows through which a breeze was blowing.

Through the window they could see the buildings of the mission, the great stables, and Don Carlos Moreno's carriage. The carriage would be going down the highway at nightfall, Don Fernando supposed, carrying the *señorita* with it.

He must escape and avoid the promised punishment, he told himself, and get on down El Camino Real with Pedro. He could not fail! That a Venegas should be whipped—it was unthinkable!

He had strength, skill, an alert mind, the consciousness of superiority to his foes. That sufficed. Surely he could not fail!

IN whispers he discussed the plans with Pedro again, and decided there could be no changes or additions. They won, or they lost and paid the penalty for attempting escape. They knew what it would be—death at rope's end instead of lashes.

The sun sank toward the west and the breeze came in from the sea to make life more endurable. Don Fernando and Pedro loitered near the window again, and watched. The hour of *siesta* was over, and there was more activity in San Juan Capistrano.

The sun disappeared, a flaming ball, and the soft dusk came. The natives were in their huts, before which the cooking fires were burning. Lights gleamed in the mission. Laughter and music came from the guest house, and Don Fernando smiled grimly to think that it was his right to be there, dressed in silks and satins, sitting at table with the *señorita* and her kind, listening to the music of her voice and watching her sparkling eyes.

Those in the jail were crowding near the doors now, for it was time for them to receive their poor meal. In the corridor some man was shouting. Boots thumped the stone floor. A guard appeared, and behind him came two peons who carried huge jars filled with an atrocious stew.

"Back, unmentionables!" the guard ordered, stopping at the door. "Here is your swill, pigs! Prepare for it."

Don Fernando noticed that all those incarcerated had a small bowl. The door was opened and the peons came in with the jars, the prisoners crowding around like hungry wolves, trying to fill their bowls before the jars were set down on the floor.

The peons retreated, and the prisoners elbowed and jostled and screeched at one another as they fought for the food. The guard was bellowing at the peons again, telling them to hurry with the jars of water. Don Fernando and Pedro stepped up to the open door.

"We have no bowls, *señor*," Don Fernando said. "We are but new put into the prison."

"Are you the two who choked a trooper?" he demanded.

"Of such we are accused, *señor*."

"I'll have one of the peons bring you bowls, and see that you have food, even if that in the jars is gone by the time your bowls get here." His words surprised them until he continued: "The man you choked —this is between ourselves, dogs—did fleece me at dicing one night not long ago. You were choking him for me, though you knew it not."

So, Don Fernando and Pedro remained standing at the side of the open door until the peons returned with the water jars and one was sent for a couple of bowls. The guard was a huge man, too fat for activity, no doubt given this task because he no longer was fit for riding and fighting. He yawned, looked at the feeding prisoners, turned to glance down the corridor.

Don Fernando struck Pedro on the shoulder, which was the sign. They hurled themselves through the door and upon the guard, bearing him to the floor, and Don Fernando got the blade that he wore.

They howled and attracted the attention of the others, who stopped their feeding to see what occurred, and surged toward the door, marveling to see a guard down and prisoners throttling him.

"Out! The way is open!" Don Fernando cried. "Out, and take to the hills! Freedom for all!"

SINCE the way was open they took it swiftly. Howling like maniacs, they surged through the door, trampling the guard as Don Fernando and Pedro sprang aside, rushed in a body through the long corridor, overpowered a guard there, and spilled out into the night.

Don Fernando and Pedro went with them. This was what Don Fernando had planned, escaping in the rush of the mob and having a chance to get away, whereas but two men alone might have had less opportunity.

The wild cries of the escaping prisoners startled those at the mission, those taking the evening air, the natives around their huts. They startled Sergeant Juan Zapata and the few troopers with him in the barracks, and caused Zapata to howl to one of his men to make an investigation, since he did not care to leave his evening meal to make one himself.

The trooper ran out, and ran back again.

"The jail is emptying!" he cried. "The prisoners are escaping! They are running wild down the trail toward the hills!"

But two were not. Don Fernando and Pedro knew better than to travel with the others, knowing there would be instant pursuit, that the paths to the hills and the canyon would be followed and watched. They had darted around the jail building to the wall of the mission, and were crouching in the darkness there, watching the unfortunates scattering among the huts, upsetting cooking pots, seeking hiding places, else running with what speed they could to get as far away as possible.

Mounted troopers appeared, charging through the dust clouds in grim pursuit, their weapons gleaming in the light of the rising moon. Shrieks came from the distance as some of the fugitives were overtaken. Don Fernando touched Pedro on the arm.

"Let us go, my friend," he said.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE CART CREW.

OUTSIDE the mission compound, three heavy carts had been drawn up, and the oxen turned loose, and the men handling them had gone to fraternize with men of the community. Don Fernando had noticed them in the morning, had watched them through the window of the jail during the day, and they had a part in his plan.

Now, with Pedro close beside him, he slipped along the wall, keeping always in the shadows, moving slowly so as not to attract the attention of any. Men were rushing about, calling to one another, and the confusion aided them.

They got to the carts, crouched in the darkness near them, observing that one man only was on guard, and that he was a peon whose attitude was that of resentment because he could not leave his post. He wandered away from the carts a distance, watching the scene of tumult outside the mission walls.

The carts appeared to be heavily laden with bales and boxes which were covered with sheets of thin skins to keep off the dust and ward off rain if any came. Don Fernando was quick to whisper his intention to Pedro, for he had not told him all his plans.

"The nearest cart," he said. "The covering is loose. We got beneath it—"

"And are caught when they search the cart?" Pedro asked.

"Unless I mistake, they will think we have run for the hills, as most men in like circumstance would do," Don Fernando insisted. "And I do not think they will search these carts. They carry the personal baggage of Don Carlos Moreno. I ascertained that this morning. They left Reina de Los Angeles ahead of the carriage, and the carriage will go on ahead of them soon, no doubt, and they will follow."

They watched the peon guard carefully, and when his back was turned went swiftly through the darkness to the side of the nearest cart. The skin covering was

loose, as Don Fernando had pointed out, and beneath it was space enough for both of them to hide. They got in, pulled the skins down over them, remained there quiet and motionless.

"Once safely away from San Juan Capistrano, we can slip out and take our own direction," Pedro whispered.

"That was my thought," Don Fernando said.

"The carts cannot start too quickly to suit me, then. There is danger as long as we are here. If we are caught now, after an escape from confinement—"

"The rope," Don Fernando added.

"The rope—*sí*. It is not a pleasant thought."

"Then do not think of it, my friend. Think only of getting safely down El Camino Real to San Diego de Alcalá."

"Even then!" Pedro said. "Consider what we have heard—that Sergeant Juan Zapata will have a transfer there, that José Tappia is going there. Somebody is sure to recognize us."

"The man who borrows trouble heaps up misery for himself," Don Fernando said.

THE distant din died down. They listened to men calling to one another, and made out that some of the fugitives had been captured, that nobody seemed to know how the jailbreak had been accomplished, that Sergeant Juan Zapata and his troopers were keeping to the trails and brush, seeking to find more who had escaped.

Then they heard men approaching the cart and listened to their talk. They heard the *superintendente* of the cart crew raging.

"Two fools who will finish at a rope's end!" he wailed. "Deserting to join with rogues! And here I am short-handed, and how am I to get proper assistants?"

There was more talk. Don Fernando and Pedro listened closely. They learned that two of the cart crew had deserted to go to the canyon and join José Tappia's men. If they could get their places—!

"Don Carlos will be starting soon in his carriage," the *superintendente* was wailing. "We must start immediately behind him. A curse on this journey! There are hills between here and San Diego de Alcalá, I have been told. That may mean shoulders to the wheels. And we are short two men!"

Don Fernando lifted a corner of the skin and peered out. The *superintendente*, a huge man, was stalking back and forth and cracking a great whip. Four other men stood aside, listening and making no reply.

Don Fernando whispered to Pedro again, and once more they made plans. Watching for an opportunity, they crept out of the cart and dodged back into the shadows. Down into a ditch they dropped, to travel for a short distance, and then return boldly.

They approached the *superintendente*, removing their headgear and saluting with knuckles to foreheads.

"What wish you, scum?" the *superintendente* asked.

"We overheard you talking, *señor*, of having the need of two men to work on a journey," Don Fernando replied.

"And are you men, and can you work?"

"We are eager to go to San Diego de Alcalá where, we understand, your carts are going. Give us food, and let us ride at times, and furnish us your protection, and we ask for nothing more. We are strong—"

"Do you belong here in San Juan Capistrano?"

"We are from the north, and go south to seek our fortunes," Don Fernando replied.

"How do I know but what you are some of the scum who escaped the jail?"

"If we were, would we be here inviting disaster?"

The *superintendente* eyed them and considered a moment. "I must have been, must take what I can find," he said. "One of you will go with the second cart, and one with the third, assisting the drivers. If you wish cold food, eat now, for soon we start. Food is in the first cart."

They went to the cart, and a man there gave them cold meat and thin wine, and they ate. The oxen already were in yoke. The *superintendente,* it was evident, was but waiting for the carriage to pass him before starting down the highway.

And, as they finished their meal, the carriage came, four fine blacks drawing it, a driver in livery, four armed outriders, well mounted, galloping beside it. The carriage pulled up, and Don Carlos Moreno got out of it.

"Everything is in order, Don Carlos," the *superintendente* reported.

"You will make what speed you can, which will not be much," Don Carlos replied. "When you reach San Diego de Alcalá, seek me out."

"Two of the men deserted, but I engaged two rascals to replace them."

Don Fernando was glad of the semi-darkness then. Don Carlos Moreno walked over to them, and they bowed low, and Don Fernando managed to avert his face. He looked past Don Carlos, and saw that the *señorita* had left the carriage also, and was stepping to her father's side.

"The men look good—but watch them," Don Carlos said.

The Señorita Manuela was beside her father now, clinging to his arm. She, too, inspected the new peons. And again her eyes widened as she saw Don Fernando, and she took a step forward and peered at him closely.

"Have I not seen you before, fellow?" she asked. "Have I not seen you in Reina de Los Angeles?"

"I came from there, gracious lady," Don Fernando replied, in a low and strange voice, and acting embarrassed that a lady of noble blood address him so.

"Your face has a familiar look," she said.

"I am grateful that you notice me, *señorita.* Perhaps it is but a resemblance to some other person."

"Perhaps," she said. "I am sure you will work faithfully, and help protect our goods. At the end of the journey, there will be rewards."

She looked at him searchingly again, and he avoided her level gaze in part by bowing once more. Then she turned back to the carriage with her father, and the horses tugged in the harness and started at a rapid pace, and the outriders spurred to follow.

"On!" the *superintendente* shouted.

THE men shouted and used goads, the oxen pulled, the wheels creaked, and the three heavy carts started out upon the dusty road. Pedro walked beside the second, Don Fernando the third.

Don Fernando was exulting at the situation. In his happiness, he was forgetting his rags and debasement. He was on the highway again, headed toward his destination, and he was at work for Don Carlos Moreno. Perhaps, when the destination was reached, he would be given more work to do, and could keep near until his term of penance expired. He could worship the Señorita Manuela from the near distance, be on hand if danger threatened her.

Before they had gone a mile, there were hoofbeats behind, and a trooper overtook them and called upon them to halt.

"I look for fugitives," he told the *superintendente.*

"These are the carts of Don Carlos Moreno, and are entitled to courtesy."

"I do not intend to search them, if I have your word none is concealed within them."

"None is concealed in them. The coverings have not been off, Señor Trooper."

"You vouch for your men?"

Don Fernando almost held breath at that, and he noticed Pedro stiffen. But the *superintendente* disliked the soldiery, having been despoiled of a sweetheart by one of their number in days gone by, and he did not wish to find himself shorthanded again. Moreover, he did not care whether the two were fugitives, as long as they worked well for him.

"My men?" he asked. "I vouch for them, Señor Trooper, knowing them well, except I do not vouch for their industry. They are lazy and worthless, like their

kind. They are more difficult to goad to work than are the oxen."

The trooper laughed, wheeled his horse, spurred back toward San Juan Capistrano. The *superintendente* howled orders, and the carts started on again.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MEETING.

NIGHTS of traveling with the slow carts, hours of rest in the heat of the day, stops that meat might be cooked and eaten, dull monotony, a sudden downpour of rain which turned dust to mud and made the cart crew put their shoulders to the wheels!

Don Fernando, used to his big black horse of speed and stamina, of carriage teams that galloped, thought the oxen-drawn carts scarcely moved at all. They crawled over the miles, up hills and down, until time meant nothing and distance was only a thing which stretched from one hill to another.

Great changes had taken place in Don Fernando Venegas, though he scarcely realized it, changes both mental and physical. His viewpoint on life had changed because his mental horizon had been broadened, and he understood now some things concerning men and their emotions and trials which he had not understood before.

And there had been great physical changes, too. Don Fernando always had been in splendid condition, yet now he had become hardened, and to alert physical skill he had added stamina he never had possessed before. Despite the hard and unusual fare, his body was heavier, more solid. His hands were roughened. His face was burned brown by sun and wind, his hair was long and uneven. Brain and brawn both he possessed now, an alert mentality and strong muscles to respond instantly to his will.

So they came finally to the mission of San Luis Rey de Francia, and there, the *superintendente* decided, they would rest for a couple of days at least, and unloaded one of the carts to repair it.

Don Fernando liked the mission of San Luis Rey, the friendly Franciscans, the natives who worked for the mission, the peons who lived in the huts and seemed more prosperous than some others. Here, too, were rumors of the contemplated uprising, but men did not take it so seriously.

They spent the first day unloading the cart and repairing a wheel, while the oxen were given a good feed and a chance to rest. The *superintendente* strutted around among the men of the mission, proud in his importance. The men of the crew, except when they were guarding their master's goods, visited among the huts and made friends.

Don Fernando and Pedro were assigned an empty hut and made it their home for the stay. And on the second night, as they sat on the ground before it, a native came creeping to them through the shadows.

"I seek Don Peon and a man called Pedro," he said.

"We are the men you seek," Don Fernando told him.

"One wishes to see you, if you will come with me."

THEY followed him behind the huts, wondering what this might be, into a coulee and along it, and finally came to a moon-drenched clearing at the side of which was a makeshift hut of brush.

"Greetings, my friends!" a voice called, and there was El Cougar before them.

They slapped his broad back, and he slapped in return, and called, and Singing Wind came from the hut to greet them also, her eyes glowing as she looked at Don Fernando.

"I must remain in hiding," El Cougar said. "Any trooper who finds me will try to pick me up. José Tappia has gone ahead to San Diego de Alcalá, and I follow. So you escaped jail, my friends! I had it planned to attack the jail and release you just before dawn, and you spared

us the trouble. And you are working with a cart crew, and so can travel safely."

They squatted on the ground to talk in low tones, and Don Fernando found Singing Wind beside him, clinging to his hand, looking at him continually.

"But yesterday," El Cougar said, "I saw a man I gladly would have slain, had I happened to have a weapon."

"How is this?" Pedro asked.

"One who bears a name I hate, though he has done me no wrong personally. He is riding down El Camino Real, and is guest at a *hacienda* out the road. His name is Luis Rios."

Don Fernando drew in his breath sharply, and Pedro sat erect.

"Luis Rios?" Pedro asked.

"*Si!* A proud peacock on a fine horse, and a native servant with him on a big mule. A boasting fool! 'Twas his brother, Bartolo, who was slain at Reina de Los Angeles in fair fight, was it not? And by a certain Don Fernando Venegas. And this Luis Rios slurs the man's name."

"How is that?" Don Fernando asked.

"He asserts that he challenged this Don Fernando Venegas to fight him at dawn, and that Don Fernando did not appear. He also charges that, through fear of him, this Don Fernando has left his usual haunts, has run away from his blade. Ha! A man who slew one Rios would not fear another, would he?"

"It does not seem probable," Don Fernando said weakly.

"He is in search of him, this Luis Rios declares. He is publishing far and wide that he dares this Don Fernando to meet him. The boaster may rue the meeting, if it comes about."

They talked more, then El Cougar declared it was time for him to be traveling along with Singing Wind. He walked by night and rested by day, he explained. Don Fernando and Pedro walked a short distance with them.

"Shall I see you again, *señor?*" Singing Wind asked Don Fernando.

"Possibly at San Diego de Alcalá," he replied.

"I wish we traveled together," she said.

"But Pedro and I have promised to work with the cart crew," he explained. "There may be a reward at the end of the journey."

"You will not forget me, *señor*, before we meet again?"

"Does a man forget his sister, Singing Wind?"

"My only brother is El Cougar," she said. "I do not care to have you for a brother. If you cannot be something nearer—" And suddenly she dropped his hand and fled ahead of them into the darkness.

DON FERNANDO and Pedro turned back toward the mission.

"So Luis Rios rides the highway and makes mock of me!" Don Fernando said.

"His talk cannot hurt the hide of a peon," Pedro hinted.

"Some day there will be a reckoning."

Pedro laughed. "I understand, my friend. You will finish one penance for taking a human life, then straightway take another and possibly have another penance to serve."

"You do not understand—"

"Pardon, my friend, but I do," Pedro said, softly. "I know how irked you are. Is it not a part of your penance to undergo the pain of humiliation without resenting its cause openly? Take thought of that."

"I have a suspicion that he knows of my penance, and is in search of me," Don Fernando said. "If we meet—"

"If you meet, will he glance twice at a peon, if you play well your part?"

"If he knows of the penance, he may be looking for me in the guise of a peon."

"How could he know? Fray Marcos would not tell it, nor would your father. You are borrowing trouble again, my friend."

"May I have strength to curb myself if we meet," Don Fernando said. "I wonder why El Cougar hates the Rios so? Did one of them ever affront Singing Wind?"

"She has been too well guarded,"

Pedro replied. "It is not that, my friend. Can you not guess? El Cougar is of mixed blood, he told you. The elder Rios is his father."

"What?" Don Fernando cried.

"His mother was a beautiful native girl who worked at the Rios *hacienda*. Rios gave her father a splendid hut and meat for life and freedom from work. Later, she got away, taking El Cougar with her, and married one of her own kind, and Singing Wind was born."

"So that is it!" Don Fernando said. "Small wonder El Cougar hates them so!"

They walked on and came to the mission wall. Torches were burning beneath the arches. Robed Franciscans were strolling beneath them, some meditating, others enjoying the evening breeze. Lights were blazing in the guest house, for some travelers of worth had just come off the highway.

Don Fernando and Pedro strolled into the compound to mingle with the others before seeking rest. This was to be their last night at San Luis Rey. Tomorrow, at dawn, the carts would start on again.

A sudden clatter of hoofbeats came from behind them, peons and natives scurried out of the way, and a rider came dashing through the archway. Pedro felt Don Fernando grip his arm as the man, laughing, swung out of his saddle. He knew the rider was Luis Rios, who had come in to the mission from the *hacienda* he was visiting.

A peon took the reins, and Luis Rios started toward the guest house with long strides. There was no time to get out of his way, though Don Fernando turned quickly aside to avoid him, though his inclination was otherwise.

The light from a torch struck Don Fernando's face. Luis Rios stopped abruptly, and his eyes widened. Then he grinned evilly.

"One side, peon dog!" he barked.

Don Fernando's eyes flamed and his head came up proudly. Luis Rios took another step toward him.

"Slow to move from my path, are you?" he cried. "Perhaps if I cut your shirt and back to shreds—"

"It would not be wise, *señor*," Don Fernando said, in a low voice.

"How is this? Insolence to me from a peon?" He stepped closer and his voice fell to a whisper. "I know you! I know how you are bound by penance! I have been seeking you. Now, I shall keep you in view. I shall kick and cuff you, put the lash across your back, grind you beneath the heel of my boot—"

"And the day of reckoning—?" Don Fernando asked.

"Perhaps you'll not live to see it. The peon may die before he can become a *caballero* again. If you do live so long, I'll kill you in fight, as you slew my brother."

"Save your animosity till then," Don Fernando suggested. "And get you some practice meanwhile with a blade, for you will have need of it."

"Think you I would toss aside this opportunity to treat a proud Venegas like a dog?"

"Not being a *caballero*, you probably would not."

Luis Rios' eyes blazed anew, and his throat seemed to swell with rage. Pedro was plucking nervously at Don Fernando's sleeve, trying to get him away, but he would not move. Others were drawing near the spot.

"Peon dog!" Luis Rios screeched.

A MAN was passing, one who carried a whip, and Luis Rios sprang to his side and jerked the whip from his hand, and whirled back.

"On your knees, dog!" he cried.

"If you touch me with that—" Don Fernando began, his voice low and deadly.

"Insolent scum! I'll have the hide from your back in thin strips! I'll have you on your knees in the dust begging for mercy—"

He raised the whip, and Don Fernando braced himself to meet the attack. This was something he could not endure. The whip swished through the air and descended, but Don Fernando was not beneath it, to receive its bite and sting on his body.

He swerved sharply aside, and grasped Luis Rios' wrist as the whip fell. His new strength, his new ability to deal man-to-man without blade or other weapon, served Don Fernando now. One twist, and the whip had been torn from the grasp of Luis Rios and was on the ground. And then Don Fernando had both his wrists in a tense grip, and was exerting pressure, and Luis Rios' face was suddenly showing lines of pain, and the perspiration popped out from it in big globules.

Don Fernando, his face expressionless save where dark eyes blazed in fury, put more strength into his gripping. Luis Rios howled because of the pain and many started running toward the spot. And Luis Rios struggled now with all his strength, which availed him little, for suddenly he realized what it was Don Fernando intended doing.

His body bent, his knees sagged, he began slumping toward the ground. He could not fight against the pressure upon him. And so, gasping and panting, commencing to howl threats in his rage, Luis Rios found himself forced to his knees in the dirt before his adversary.

A moment Don Fernando held him so, his lips curling slightly as he looked down at the man. Then others were at them, and a Franciscan darted forward, the skirt of his robe flapping about him, and thrust out an arm.

"What is this?" he cried.

"This peon dog attacked me!" Luis Rios cried. "I demand that he be whipped!"

"You are within the sacred precincts of the mission, *señor*," the *fray* replied. "We do not tolerate violence here."

"I demand he be whipped!" Luis Rios repeated, struggling to his feet. "Tie him up, that I may lash him!"

"I observed the entire affair," the *fray* said, gently. "You were the aggressor, *señor*. You raised your whip against this man, here in the mission, and he but took it away from you and held you so you could do no harm to him. Just held you, *señor*—easily."

"Give me that whip! Stand aside, *fray!*" Rios cried.

"You dare use such a tone to me?" the Franciscan demanded.

"If you oppose me in this—"

"Threats? What manner of man are you? To the chapel at once, *señor*, and pray that you may learn something of compassion and kindness! And you"—he turned to Don Fernando—"leave the compound and go your way with your friend, and do not lead this enraged man into temptation by showing your presence to him before his rage has cooled! Go at once—and God go with you, my son!"

CHAPTER XVI.

GUARDIANS OF HORSES.

AT dawn the carts started onward, and Don Fernando had not encountered Luis Rios again, nor did he do so as they went slowly along the highway with the plodding oxen. Luis Rios was of the opinion that Don Fernando was making his way overland alone, and that he would go to San Diego de Alcalá because Señorita Manuela Moreno had gone there. And Luis Rios judged that the easiest way would be to get himself on to San Diego de Alcalá presently, and by keeping watch on the *señorita* in time encounter Don Fernando.

Day after day, mud and dust, wind and heat, over hills and through canyons the carts went on. The same monotonous routine had become established. They rested always in the heat of the day, stopped to cook and eat, took turns sleeping in the carts. They passed many on the highway—men driving other carts, fine carriages, Franciscans riding mules, peons and natives afoot.

They heard more talk of the uprising being planned, wild rumors, and at times encountered detachments of troopers, who looked and questioned and rode on. Then there came a day when Luis Rios passed in company with some others. The carts were at the side of the road at the time,

the oxen resting, and Don Fernando and Pedro happened to be asleep in the brush. Luis Rios looked and questioned and rode on.

Finally there came a bright morning when they topped a hill and saw they were near their journey's end. In the near distance the sun sparkled on the tumbling waters of a big bay. They could see the buildings of a pueblo—a plaza, houses, warehouses, shops, a presidio. They saw a beautiful valley which ran back from the shore, and a distance up it was the old mission of San Diego de Alcalá, and they could hear the music of the mission bells drifting down to them on the wind.

They did not stop this day in the hour of heat, but kept on eagerly, and even the oxen seemed to sense they were near the end of the long journey, for they did not need the goad. To Don Fernando it seemed they had been an age on the way. In haphazard fashion, he had kept track of time. Almost a moon had passed since Fray Marcos had imposed the penance.

IT was after the *siesta* hour when the carts rolled into the town and stopped in a cleared space near the plaza. The men sprawled in rest, while the *superintendente* went to the inn to do some questioning.

Don Fernando and Pedro strolled to the corner of the plaza to view the scene. Here was the spot where the great chain of missions had been started, where the sainted Junipero Serra had commenced the fulfillment of his vision of an empire. It was a busy place, this San Diego de Alcalá.

It was the hour of promenade, and Don Fernando, keeping a bit in the background, looked again upon those of his own kind and mayhap wished he could be one with them. And then it was that he saw the *señorita* again.

He saw Don Carlos Moreno first, with the *superintendente* talking to him, and then another elderly Don, with the Señorita Manuela and another girl clinging to his arms. And the talk he heard told Don Fernando that this was Don Juan Quinonez, and the *señorita* his daughter, Angelita. So, Don Carlos was with his old friend, and their two daughters had become friends also.

He watched as they got into carriages and were driven rapidly away from the plaza and along the road toward the mission, and saw the *superintendente* hurrying back toward the carts, so started there himself with Pedro.

"What do we now?" Pedro asked. "Are you about to torture yourself, my friend?"

"What mean you?"

"I know the truth concerning you, remember, and Fray Marcos hinted some things to me," Pedro said. "And I saw how you looked at the fair daughter of Don Carlos. Would you give yourself continual torment by being near her, when you cannot approach her as yourself?"

"At least, I can be near," Don Fernando said.

"It is foolishness!" Pedro declared. "But I learned long ago that it is a waste of time to give advice to a man who has felt the lure in a woman's eyes. I was young myself, once, and in love."

"It is a prevalent disease," Don Fernando said, smiling.

The carts were to go on immediately, they found. And soon they were starting around the plaza and toward the road which led to the mission and the *hacienda* of Don Juan Quinonez.

"Good news!" the *superintendente* told them. "There is to be a reward for all, since we have brought the carts through safely. And all will be given quarters and work on this rancho, if they desire it. This Don Juan Quinonez is a kind master, I have heard. And Don Carlos has joined with him in the ownership of the place, which makes two good masters. Men could do worse than remain in their employ."

They all voted to remain, Don Fernando most eagerly. They goaded the oxen, walked beside the carts, eager to be at the destination. Huts in which to live, cooking pots and meat to put into

them, regular work—those things were to be relished after this long trip down the highway.

THE road between town and mission was busy, the travel heavy, and frequently the carts had to be driven aside to let some carriage pass, or to allow fine riders to gallop by. And Don Fernando saw Pedro making a violent motion to him, and looked ahead and saw some troopers coming along slowly, sagging to the sides of their saddles as though fatigued, and Sergeant Zapata at their head.

So the sergeant had been given his transfer, and no doubt here was the assistant to the *comandante*. Don Fernando remembered suddenly that he and Pedro had escaped a jail, the penalty for which was something unpleasant to contemplate.

Don Fernando got quickly to the off side of the cart. But Zapata, riding leisurely and talking to his men, did not even glance at the oxen-drawn vehicles. So they traveled on into the sunset, and it was almost dark when finally the carts came to their destination.

Lights were gleaming in the big house and in the huts of the native servants. The odors of cooking food were in the air. They were taken in charge by an overseer, who fed them first, then demanded that the carts be unloaded and Don Carlos Moreno's goods be stowed away.

It was late when Don Fernando and Pedro finally were assigned an empty hut and told to make it their home. They slept well, and were awake at dawn. They built a fire beneath their own cooking pot, and Pedro concocted a stew from provisions he had requisitioned from the overseer, which was more palatable than the food they had enjoyed recently.

The overseer came to them later.

"What work do you know best?" he demanded.

"Whatever work there is," Pedro replied, promptly. "We are not proud, *señor*. We desire attachment to this *hacienda*, and will serve you faithfully."

"Do either of you know horses?"

Don Fernando's eyes brightened. "*Sí, señor!*" he said. "I know horses and understand them well."

"Good! You and your friend will be assigned to the horse herd. I'll send a man with you to show the way and explain your duties."

And so, a little later, they mounted mules and followed a man away from the buildings, off the trail and across rolling country, and came presently to a canyon where horses grazed. There was a comfortable hut and a tiny storehouse.

Here they were to live, caring for the horse herd, breaking suitable animals to saddle, guarding the mares and foals. At certain times, somebody would come out to see that they were doing their duties properly.

AGAIN a routine, but it was not deadly in its monotony this time. They liked this work. They had good food, comfortable quarters, something to keep them busy. And Don Fernando realized that this was a fine way to pass his time of penance, a safe way, though he yearned at times to visit the *hacienda*.

There were fine horses in the herd, and Don Fernando selected some of the best and sought to break them for riding. It was work he loved, and time passed rapidly. In the evenings, on the ground beside the fire, he rested and talked to Pedro, and dreamed of other things and days to come.

Natives drifted near their camp at times, but never was there intimation that the herd might be troubled. They learned that Don Juan Quinonez was admired and respected by natives and peons as a just man, and his property was held sacred. There was little danger of theft.

An overseer rode out every few days to spend a few hours with them, inspect the herd and give orders, and once a cart came out with fresh provisions. It was a pleasant, easy life.

And one evening, as they rested beside the fire, a soft call came from the depths of

a brush patch near them, and Pedro sprang to his feet and answered. El Cougar stalked from the shadows with Singing Wind beside him.

"We meet again!" El Cougar said. "Word traveled to me that you were here after a safe journey. Others are in the vicinity, too, though you may know it not."

"Any one to interest us?" Pedro asked.

"This Luis Rios has come to San Diego de Alcalá, it is said. What he does here, no man seems aware. Jose Tappia is in the neighborhood making his plans. But the date of the uprising is to be held back for a time. Jose Tappia fears there are spies about."

"There are always spies," Pedro replied. "Does he suspect any certain men?"

"No certain men, but looks with suspicion upon all. He knows you are working here, *señores*. And he looks to this horse herd, if an uprising really comes."

"He thinks to take some of the horses?" Don Fernando cried. "Not while we guard them! And it is understood that the property of Don Juan Quinonez is sacred."

"Jose Tappia says we must take what is necessary to our success, from all. But that is in the future. We have a camp not far away. Why do you not visit it?"

"That we may do," Don Fernando said, quickly. It was in his mind to get in touch with the conspirators again, to work against the uprising if he could.

"Why not tonight, Don Peon?" Singing Wind asked, taking his hand. "It is but a step, and the horses will not be harmed."

"Let us go," Pedro suggested.

There was food left in the pot, and El Cougar and Singing Wind ate, then they started. El Cougar strode ahead with Pedro, showing the best path, and Singing Wind followed at Don Fernando's side, clinging to his hand, her eyes meeting his in wooing when he would allow it.

"I am displeasing to you, *señor?*" she asked him, once.

"Not at all, Singing Wind," Don Fernando replied. "You are beautiful and have grace."

"Then why do you not like me?"

"I do like you," he said.

"But not as I like you, Don Peon. The blood sings through my veins when I but touch your hand. It has been that way from the time of our first meeting. I would travel the hills with you, or share your hut—"

"With this turmoil in the air, it is not a time to think of such things as love and mating," Don Fernando said. "Those should be in a time of peace, when a man may make a home for his woman and give her comfort and safety."

Her face lightened. "You mean—after the uprising?" she asked. "I hope it comes swiftly, then."

"The uprising would be wrong," he told her. "To punish a few unjust men, you would make war on all. It cannot but fail. It would be better if a few just men banded together to make the lot of the natives and peons easier, and I think this will come to pass soon. But, if there is an uprising now, these just men will say the natives and peons are not worthy of being treated in a decent manner."

They stumbled on after the others down a narrow pass lined with rocks, and El Cougar spoke in answer to an unseen man's challenge, and they went on. Singing Wind whispered to Don Fernando that she had a skin of wine hidden and ran forward to find it, and El Cougar left them to find some friend with whom he wished speech.

Don Fernando and Pedro wandered toward the makeshift huts and fires, but darted back into the shadows as a man passed with a long cloak wrapped around him and his face concealed with a mask, guided by three peons.

"Señor Tappia's hut is here at the edge of the clearing, *señor*," one of the peons was saying. "We have orders to take you to him, and none will bother while you talk."

Don Fernando was gripping Pedro's arm so that the latter winced from the pain. He put his lips close to Pedro's ear.

"Did you recognize him? Luis Rios!"

he said. "Here to have speech with José Tappia. What may be the meaning of that?"

"Why not listen?" Pedro asked.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNMASKED.

THEY watched Luis Rios enter a hut and the men who had led him there go to the nearest fire, and themselves slipped through the shadows and got into the brush, and finally came to the rear of the hut, where they could hear.

A single candle burned inside, and Luis Rios had removed his mask and cloak, and was sitting on a rock with José Tappia standing beside him.

"I am interested, Señor Rios," Tappia was saying. "But let us have a clearer understanding, based on what you will give and what you expect in return."

Luis Rios bent nearer and lowered his voice. "I think we are of a mind in the matter," he said. "You no doubt have friends or influence in the north, and possibly here in the south, but have you one in the vicinity of Reina de Los Angeles or San Gabriel?"

"I could use one such."

"Ah! I offer you my hand in partnership, Señor Tappia. I can keep you well informed. I can arrange to have a portion of the soldiery in the wrong place at times. I can give you gold with which to purchase arms and supplies."

"Arms and supplies!" Tappia said, his eyes agleam. "With those—"

"With weapons, with your horde of unmentionables armed, you could sweep the country from one end to the other. I can provide such. You can rule here in California, Señor Tappia—and remember those who have been your friends."

"And what do you require? A man like you, Señor Rios, does not aid a man like me for naught."

"I require three things, *señor*. First, the estates of my father are to be protected from ravage."

"Granted! We can make one of our headquarters at the *hacienda* and so protect it."

"I desire the utter ruin of the Venegas family, to see the proud head of it broken and ashamed, possibly to see him die."

"Gladly will I join you in that. The Venegas represent what we would destroy. And the third thing you require?"

"The daughter of Don Carlos Moreno."

"Ha! There always is a woman in it."

"Not only do I desire her for myself," Luis went on, "but there is vengeance in it, too. My brother fought to his death because of her. And even now, though she has met him but once, this dainty *señorita* droops and pines for love of a Venegas."

"I understand, *señor*. It is agreed."

"I must now get away, Señor Tappia. I am guest for the present at the *hacienda* of Don Juan Quinonez, where the Morenos are living, but cannot outwear my welcome, which in truth does not seem to be so very warm. When and where may we meet again?"

"In four nights from now, in San Diego de Alcalá."

"You dare go there?"

"Few know me by sight," José Tappia said. "The natives and peons will protect me. I shall take a room at the inn. Señor Rios, I am happy to make this connection with you. I tire of the ignorant dupes with which I work."

"This holy crusade to aid the oppressed—it is a subterfuge, then?"

"What think you?"

"A means to wealth and power."

"But naturally," Tappia admitted, laughing lightly. "The oppressed will be more oppressed when we are in power. We'll have them all working for our profit. And the Franciscans of the missions—we can levy tribute upon them, take from their vast herds and flocks. You have no scruples, *señor*, against this last?"

"I am not a devout man," Luis Rios replied, laughing also. "There is a *fray* or two I would see punished for making bold talk to me of my transgressions."

"Possibly that may be arranged also."

José Tappia laughed softly. "In four nights from now, then, *señor*, at the inn in San Diego de Alcalá. It is understood. *Señor, á Dios!*"

"*'Dios!*" Luis Rios replied.

DON FERNANDO and Pedro slipped back into the brush as Luis Rios emerged from the hut and José Tappia called the men to conduct him from the camp.

"So!" Don Fernando whispered. "Now you see, my friend!"

"I see," Pedro replied. "But others must be made to see also."

"That was my thought," Don Fernando agreed. "Knowing men somewhat, I realize it will avail nothing merely to tell what we have seen and overheard. Possibly we'd not be believed, and José Tappia may take warning."

"Then—?"

"Somebody else must hear, and be convinced. Let us find the others, now."

They went through the brush and came into the clearing from another direction, and found Singing Wind searching for them. She took them to a makeshift hut where El Cougar was waiting, and where they had the skin of wine.

"We must return to the herd," Don Fernando said, presently. "If an overseer happened to ride out at night and found us gone, our easy work would be at an end."

El Cougar said he would go with them past the guards, and Singing Wind must go also. They got from the camp without encountering José Tappia, and went through the little pass, Singing Wind clinging to Don Fernando's hand when she could.

And, when the time came to separate, she clung to him unashamed before Pedro and her brother, until the latter smiled and pulled her away and bade her begone, since men wished to talk.

"My sister has eyes only for you, Don Peon," El Cougar said. "And you do not have eyes, it appears, for her."

"It is something of which I dare not think at present, the reasons for it being things I cannot tell."

"I thank you for treating her with courtesy."

"She deserves such," Don Fernando said. "El Cougar, you trust me, do you not? You trust Pedro?"

"That is certain, Don Peon."

"And will you do something I ask?"

"If it is possible."

"Dare you go to San Diego de Alcalá?"

"I am known to some there who are enemies," El Cougar said, "and to many who are my friends and will shield me."

"Meet us there, four nights from now, then," Don Fernando said briskly. "We will be somewhere around the plaza and the inn. And do not question me now why I ask this. But it is something very important."

"Four nights from now, I shall be there."

Then they separated, and Don Fernando and Pedro hurried back to the horse herd and their camp, to find there had been no visitors during their absence. After speaking of what they had heard and making certain plans, they slept. At dawn they were up again. Pedro built a fire beneath the cooking pot and cooked an early meal, for Don Fernando was breaking a team to harness and a pony to saddle.

In the afternoon, while he was working with the harness team and Pedro was watching and applauding the spirited colts, riders appeared. An overseer stopped at the camp, and with him were Don Juan Quinonez, his daughter Angelita, and Señorita Manuela Moreno.

THERE could be no avoiding them, Don Fernando knew. Don Juan was a lover of horses and had pride in his herd, and had come out to see how the animals were doing. And his daughter and Señorita Manuela would be at his side continually.

So, when commanded to do so, Don Fernando drove the new team up for inspection, keeping his head lowered and trying to avoid the *señorita's* eyes.

"A fine team, and well trained!" Don Juan praised. "You are a good man!"

"I thank you, *señor*," Don Fernando replied.

"My overseer tells of a colt you have broken to ride."

"That black, Don Juan." Don Fernando pointed it out. "Never did I see a more beautiful, more spirited colt."

"Saddle him!" Don Juan ordered.

That gave Don Fernando a chance to get away, for which he was grateful. With Pedro's help, he caught up the colt, and put bridle and saddle on him, then got into the saddle and put the animal through his paces.

And he forgot, once he was in the saddle, that he was only an ignorant peon. The feel of the splendid animal beneath him, the rush of air as he rode, brought Don Fernando Venegas to himself again. There was native pride in the manner in which he sat his saddle, a grace no peon could have. He rode back to where they were waiting and dismounted, and they moved forward to inspect the colt, and Señorita Manuela stroked his nose and patted him on the neck.

"Beautiful, and well trained," she said.

Don Juan bowed to her. "He is yours, my dear. That was my object in riding here today — to find a present partially worthy of you. Accept him with my thanks."

Don Fernando could not but smile at her evident delight, and caught her looking at him searchingly again over the horse's mane.

"And may I have another present, Don Juan?" she asked.

"Anything it is within my poor power to give you, *señorita!*"

"This man, then—he who broke the colts. He is a splendid man with horses. Our carriage driver is growing old, and should have life easier—"

"Say no more!" Don Juan turned to his overseer. "Have this man return to the *hacienda* to drive Don Carlos' carriage. Let his friend return with him, since they work well together, and put him to work in the stables. Send fresh men out to the camp here. These men have been laboring here long enough."

The *señorita* thanked him again, and once more smiled at Don Fernando, and her face flushed as she turned away. And Don Fernando wondered whether she knew, or guessed, or still believed it only a chance resemblance, or whether she merely wished to have at hand a man who was clever with horses.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FRESH PERIL.

SO they returned to the *hacienda*, taking with them the new team and the riding pony for Señorita Manuela, and moved into the hut there again.

And Pedro was inclined to be humorous at Don Fernando's expense as they rode the mules slowly and herded the other animals ahead of them.

"Never in my life before," he observed, "have I seen a man so attractive to females. High and low, they turn to this Don Peon. They give him soft glances and roll their eyes in pleasant agony, and sigh and moan—"

"But not so loudly as you'll moan, my friend, if I swing this whip at you!" Don Fernando interrupted.

"Ha! It must be great to be young and spirited and to look handsome in the eyes of women. I am such only in memory, my friend. Yet I cannot complain to an extent—for I have had my moments."

"I believe that, you rogue!"

"But never did I have a lady of high degree and one of lesser enamored of me at the same time. It must be a pleasant sensation. And it may lead to difficulties. What are your intentions in the matter?"

"To avoid all complications with women, for the present," Don Fernando said.

"For the present — ah! At least, my friend, your good looks bring us easy labor. First the horse camp. And now we are of the select, you to drive a carriage and I

to groom fine animals. Such promotion is pleasing."

"The thing to consider now is that we must be in San Diego de Alcalá four nights hence, to learn more and prepare to unmask villains. That is—if you are in sympathy with me in it."

"More than you know, my friend," Pedro said. "You are but a peon, outwardly, so because of a penance, but inwardly you are a proud *hidalgo,* and some day must break your shell. I, also, am a peon—outwardly."

"What is this?" Don Fernando cried. "You are high born?"

"It is forbidden you to acknowledge your true identity for a time, Don Peon—and perhaps it is the same with me."

"I knew!" Don Fernando cried. "I knew from the first. Perchance you are undergoing a penance also."

"Mine was for twelve moons," Pedro said, sadly. "It nears an end, the saints be praised!"

"And that is why Fray Marcos—"

"*Si, señor!* Fray Marcos is a wise man, who accomplishes his ends through peculiar ways, but always accomplishes them."

THEY came to the *hacienda,* stabled their animals, and made themselves comfortable in their hut. Better apparel was brought them by an overseer, who said they would be shown about the carriages and teams on the morrow.

The following day, after the *siesta,* Don Fernando was told to prepare the carriage, and when he drove it to the door of the big house he found Señorita Manuela and Señorita Angelita waiting, and with them a *dueña,* and they desired to be driven a short distance to the home of a neighbor.

They started, Don Fernando on the small driver's seat in front of them, and almost at the *señorita's* dainty feet, and the *dueña* soon was drowsing, being oldish and fat, and the girls talked in whispers, but so Don Fernando could hear.

"Ah, he was so splendid!" Señorita Manuela was saying. "So fine a *caballero,* this Don Fernando Venegas! I spoke to him but once, and danced with him, and saw him no more. But possibly we shall meet again some day."

"Is he not the same who slew Bartolo Rios in a duel, and ran away when Luis Rios challenged him?" Angelita asked.

"He would not run away. There is some mystery in that," Señorita Manuela declared. "I know he will come to me again some day—and he will find me waiting."

Don Fernando's face burned, and he gave his attention to the horses, knowing a servant is expected to overhear nothing. And he wondered again whether the *señorita* knew, or guessed, or was only plagued by a chance resemblance.

On the return journey, just at sunset, the girls spoke again in the same vein, and when the carriage stopped at the big house and they descended Señorita Manuela flashed Don Fernando a smile which annoyed him because there was a hint of enigma in it.

Each day there was a short journey to neighborhood places, but she never spoke to him directly save to give orders, for never were they an instant alone. And, aside from this, Don Fernando was worrying about the meeting to be held in San Diego de Alcalá. El Cougar would be waiting for him there.

But Fate was kind in that. On the evening appointed for the meeting of Luis Rios and José Tappia there was an air of fashion in a house in San Diego de Alcalá, and Don Fernando received orders to drive a carriage to the pueblo.

Pedro, the day's work done, trudged away down the road. Don Fernando brought the carriage to the door at the time named, and Don Carlos and his daughter got into it, with a *dueña,* and in a second carriage rode Don Juan and Angelita and another *dueña.*

On the short journey the *señorita* was gay, speaking of the affair to come, wondering aloud if the *caballeros* she had yet to meet would be handsome and gallant, and Don Fernando wondered if her speech was for his ears and to perhaps arouse his jealousy.

They arrived at the house of their host, and Don Fernando was given orders to unhitch the horses in the rear and to spend the evening as he wished, being prepared to return when the social affair should be at an end.

He drove the carriage to the spot a peon pointed out and unhitched the horses and gave them a feed, then hurried to the plaza and loitered around it cautiously, watching men and women of fashion stepping out of other carriages and wishing for the day when he could take his proper place among such again.

PEDRO finally approached him, and they went around the huts and fires, searching through groups of natives for El Cougar. He stepped out of the darkness, finally, to join them. Don Fernando led the way to the inn.

"José Tappia is here," he whispered. "He is to have a meeting with Luis Rios, who has been living in the pueblo since he wore out his welcome at the Quinonez *hacienda*. They will be somewhere in the inn, probably in a room off the patio."

"And why are we concerned in what they say and do?" El Cougar asked.

"That is to be seen, my friend," Don Fernando replied. "One thing I ask. If you hear something which startles you, make no outcry and hold your hand. Tonight will not be the time to strike."

"I cannot understand your meaning."

"Soon you will understand, perhaps, if the two men meet as planned."

They entered the patio of the inn through the rear gate, keeping in the dark spots near the wall, watched and listened. Crouching there, they saw Luis Rios come from the main room and stroll along beneath the arches. Plainly, he was making sure he was not observed. He hesitated a moment, then darted into one of the rooms.

"There they meet," Don Fernando whispered. "We can hear better, and be safer, outside."

So they left the patio and went cautiously along the wall of the building, and presently stopped beneath an open window which was high in the wall. They could hear, though the men inside were speaking in low tones.

"It is understood then, Señor Tappia," Luis Rios was saying. "We delay the uprising until we can be better prepared. I furnish you gold, so that you may buy weapons. We sweep the country, and then, *señor*—"

José Tappia laughed. "Then, being in control, we make our dupes labor for us, and take toll of the missions, and be as kings. Perchance even His Excellency, the Governor, will deal with us, giving us gold to cease our activities. We can turn over to him certain men as ringleaders, and quietly disappear. The ringleaders are hanged, but what care we?"

El Cougar straightened and seemed to bulge, but Don Fernando and Pedro gripped him by the arms, and the former hissed a warning for him to be still and listen.

"And I grant you what you want, Luis Rios," Tappia was saying. "Your father's *hacienda* shall be spared, we ruin that of the Venegas, and the Señorita Manuela Moreno will be captured and delivered to you unharmed."

"Do not forget what I told you of Don Fernando Venegas," Rios said. "As a peon he is doing penance, and may be anywhere around. If he is taken, let him have the fate of a spy. But I would be present when the fate descends upon him."

"Like myself, *señor*, you hate well when you hate," José Tappia said.

Don Fernando pulled El Cougar away, Pedro following, and they moved to the end of the patio wall.

"You have heard, El Cougar," Don Fernando said. "José Tappia is a rogue. He would send men to death to further his own ends. Rebellion, you see, is not the way. And he makes a deal with such a man as Luis Rios—"

"May they both be cursed!" El Cougar said. "I shall slay them both."

"There is a better way than to make martyrs of them," Don Fernando pointed out. "Tell honest men what you have

heard and let word be spread that José Tappia is not to be trusted. Let that be done immediately."

"But what of Jose Tappia, the traitor?" El Cougar growled. "What of this fine Luis Rios, who would perhaps send some of us to death that he may profit in various ways?"

"Let the soldiery take Tappia and hang him, as he deserves," Don Fernando replied. "As for this Luis Rios—save him for me. His intentions toward a certain lady are such that I shall take it upon myself to treat him with severity when the proper time is at hand."

"A certain lady—" El Cougar questioned.

"I mean the Señorita Manuela Moreno, for whom I now work," Don Fernando explained, "and Pedro also. She is as kind as she is beautiful. She treats the lowly well. That Rios thinks ill of her is enough—"

"I understand, my friend," El Cougar said. "I'll attend to spreading the truth. Come to the camp when you can, and we will make more plans. In the meantime, I hold my hand and tell others to do the same."

They had come to the end of the wall, and were about to go out into the plaza. And suddenly they found soldiers before them, Sergeant Juan Zapata in command.

"Misguided sons of unmentionable parents, I have you now!" Zapata cried. "I beheld you some time ago crossing the plaza. Two of you are wanted for jailbreak, which is a hanging matter. And this giant—it is El Cougar, is it not, who incites to rebellion and causes honest troopers to lose sleep? You are my prisoners, *señores!*"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Dey Ain't No Ghosts!

AS this issue of ARGOSY goes to press, New York City's most recently discovered haunted house is being very carefully investigated. Some time ago a gentleman who doesn't believe in ghosts, but wants to meet one, offered $10,000 for anyone who could produce a genuine haunted house within a reasonable distance of the city. He got one square in the center of town.

But this same gentleman hasn't paid over the $10,000 yet. He is going to make an investigation first. The man who produced the haunted house for him has no doubt at all that the ghost is still there. He used to live there for many years and was on good terms with the ghost, a lady in white, who had a disconcerting habit of vanishing and then reappearing in another room, or walking through walls and sinking through floors. For eight years this went on and then the man moved, not because of the ghost, but just because he wanted to move. The ghost had been very well behaved, and friendly in a sad little way, and it didn't occur to him to broadcast her presence until this $10,000 was put up. Why should he? After all, ghosts aren't so unusual.

But the gentleman with the $10,000 has his suspicions. He is going up there to look, though he doesn't expect to find a ghost or lose his cash. As he puts it: "I have sought good honest ghosts, phantoms, spirits, astral beings, banshees, fays, wee folk, apparitions, fetches—the whole pack and passel of the unsubstantial world—" and has found nothing but frauds.

But still he has hope!

—*Oscar O'Keefe.*

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

THIS is "Take-a-poke-at-your-favorite-author-week." It is the week when authors stand up and take it on the chin, when readers make a jab at the men who write their fiction for them. This was not planned. It just happened.

In the two cases immediately below, however, the editors feel that they should, in part at least, stand up for the authors. We'll explain why, but first we must listen to

AMY SIMPSON

Yesterday I bought a copy of ARGOSY, the July 18th issue, and read some of the stories. When I had finished Patrick Lee's "North of the Stars" I was sore because I took time to read such tripe. It's ridiculous to write a story about scientists being villains when anybody knows they are peaceable, scholarly people. They wouldn't behave like the brutes that Patrick Lee writes about. And from what I hear about Russian scientists, they are making the most advances of any in the world and are peaceable, educated folk.

Any more stories like this junk of Lee's and I'll quit buying your magazine. I like my fiction true to life and not a pack of lies.

Los Angeles, California.

WE are the last people in the world to deny Miss Simpson the privilege of calling Mr. Lee's story junk. But we are the first to claim that her reason for so designating it is entirely wrong. Miss Simpson is not at all justified in accusing Mr. Lee or ARGOSY of calling all Soviet scientists villains, or of maligning them with a "pack of lies." We are well aware that the Soviet scientists as a whole are an unusually advanced group of men; but we also know of one case, at least, where the leader of a settlement group on Wrangel Island—a Russian scientist—became so overwhelmed with his own importance that he opened a reign of terror that would have made anything Mr. Lee's villain did look like the work of a sissy. He was tried this year in his own country, and, if we remember rightly, put to death for his acts.

The fact that he was a Russian is of no importance. He might have been an American or an Englishman or a Greek or anything else. It doesn't matter. What he did up there on Wrangel Island did not make all the other Soviet scientists just like him. And Mr. Lee's villain, similarly, was not intended as a typical Soviet scientist.

In our fiction it is generally convenient to give the villain, as well as the hero, a nationality. Like the real people in the real countries some are good and some are bad. That is what keeps our "fiction true to life and not a pack of lies."

A LETTER from a second disappointed reader follows below. Here again, the editors feel obliged to stand up for the author as against the opinion of

WALTER F. FOLWASNY

I have been reading the ARGOSY for a number of years—as a matter of fact, I have all the issues with the exception of some fifteen or twenty numbers since October, 1919—but after having read "The Golden Knight," it left me speechless.

Of all the characters in history, I believe that Richard the Lion-Heart was least suited to portray the rôle of the Golden Knight. If Richard was anything like that dull, stupid, thick-headed fool, etc., that he depicted in the story, then either history is wrong or else the mentality of the people at that time was so low that the Yokel Richard, in spite of his thick-headed ways, shone above the crowd. But on the other hand, the other characters of the story appeared to be of a greater intelligence than Richard, therefore why Richard's bid for fame?

While I have great respect for Mr. Challis for his previous works, I think he showed bad taste in choosing Richard for the role. Why, until now Richard has appeared as the exact opposite of this character. While the story was very well written, and the plot plausible, the thought of Richard as a dirty, lumbering, slow-witted hulk of a man ruined any chances of the story being a complete success with me.

It would be interesting to compare, if possible, F. V. W. Mason's version of Richard the Lion-Heart with that of Mr. Challis. Incidentally, when do Mr. Mason and Mr. Merritt and Mr. Seltzer return to ARGOSY, now that I notice Mr. Burroughs is due to make an appearance? All four have been absent for too long a time.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

WE will break right down and admit that one big reason that "The Golden Knight" received the unanimous "Yes" of the editors of ARGOSY was because of Mr. Challis' portrayal of Richard the Lion-Heart! Fiction and song have for seven centuries shown the English king as the prototype of chivalry; historical research seems to tell a different tale. There is no doubt that Richard was bold and fearless; but history also shows him to have been a blunderer and a rather bull-headed fellow. He left behind him a record of unfinished campaigns and unsuccessful, costly wars—and little else. He began quarreling with his father, King Henry II, early in his youth, and before the latter's death treacherously allied himself with King Philip of France against his father—all because he wanted some land that his father did not want him to have. Before he reached the Holy Land he was quarreling with the other crusaders, plotting and intriguing against them. On the crusades he accomplished the capture of Acre, the cold-blooded massacre of 3,000 Mohammedan prisoners—and nothing else that he had set out to do. When freed after his long imprisonment he went home to England, squeezed from his impoverished subjects enough money to pay his ransom, then left those subjects flat—that is, left England never to return. He spent the remainder of his life in ineffective and costly wars against Philip of France.

Of him the *Encyclopedia Britannica* says: "He was lavish, generous, and fearless; a skillful commander, but incapable of extensive combinations or far-reaching plans; more religious than his father or brothers, but equally vicious; a bad husband and a bad son, with much of the ferocity that characterized his race. . . . His reign was signalized by no great legal or administrative reform, and England owes him nothing but barren fame."

We repeat then what our own not inextensive reading of Medieval history has told us: that Richard was a bold and valiant fighter, but a simple-hearted fellow withal. We ourselves were immensely pleased to see Mr. Challis, for the first time in fiction, as far as we are aware, portray Richard the Lion-Heart as we believe he was. On the other hand, the history of those times is a fickle thing, often disagreeing with itself; and we know that Mr. Folwasny can find plenty of good authority to support his beliefs. And if for no other reason than that it's given us a chance to air ours, we're mighty glad he's stated them!

We want more letters like Mr. Folwasny's. They keep us—and our authors—on our toes.

AND now we'll take time out of the serious things of life to listen to —guess who—our old friend

SEYMOUR PORLIDES

My dear Panurge, you amaze me. In my letter, I made no claims as to being the inventor of the word-plays on authors' names. As the editor put it: a few random notes. As you put it: would-be humor. That's all.

Somewhere, I dimly remembered, such a process had been used, and it seemed so good an idea I had to take a crack at it, too.

If we were limited to ARGOSY authors alone, the field of names which could be used as regular words, became greatly limited, and perforce some of the names I used seem now to have been used by you, too.

From the lines you submitted in your letter of August 1st, the two letters as a whole are totally different, having nothing in common but the basic idea and some of the names. Not only were the letters different, but a lot of the names themselves were different and hadn't been used by you.

The one phrase which was most like one of yours, "Tut TUTTLE," provides the most amusing note of the whole incident. For that part of my letter was suggested by a friend of mine, who was leaning over my shoulder at the time, and not by me. And a very good friend he is, since it was he who introduced me to the pages of ARGOSY.

Nevertheless, this whole incident has taught me a valuable lesson: Don't tinker with anyone else's ideas, even for such harmless things as letters to a magazine.

Believe me, my dear Panurge, if I have in this way trespassed upon your literary property, I am duly sorry and remorseful. Maybe some day we can collaborate on another such letter to ARGOSY, since I've thought of some corking good names which can be used.

Adios, my dear Panurge—and you, too, editor, who gives us such a swell magazine.

Bronx, N. Y.

WE get many letters requesting back issues of ARGOSY, and many letters offering old copies for sale. We do not have sufficient space to include them all in Argonotes, but occasionally we can make an exception. We'll do this now in the case of

ERNEST SENKEWITZ

Since the death of my father a month ago I

have been going over his effects and I find that he has accumulated every copy of the ARGOSY magazine since January, 1901, with the exception of not more than eight copies. These missing copies may probably be found when we complete cataloguing his other magazines.

Can you advise me if there is a sale somewhere for such magazines? The accumulated literature is far too valuable to me to sell them for waste paper. All the copies are still in first class readable condition, but about fifteen per cent have no covers.

If you cannot advise me as to where these magazines may be sold for a fair price, can you tell me where I may possibly obtain such information?

Thank you for any consideration you give this request.

1612 Grandview Ave.,
N. Braddock, Penna.

Looking Ahead!

TRANSPACIFIC PLUNDER

A great Transpacific plane roars its way eastward high above the ocean—carrying half a million in good hard money, a lovely girl, and seven men who are willing to kill or die to get them both. A high-speed action novelette by

FREDERICK C. PAINTON

HARP'S BLOOD

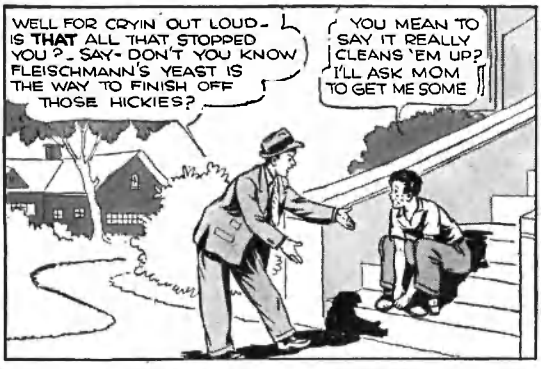
A cove in the Emerald Isle that was haunted by banshees and German submarines —and a pair of fighting Irish cousins who would fight with—or for—each other at the slightest provocation. A novelette of wartime mystery by

MAJOR R. E. DUPUY

ALSO

A full and variegated cargo of all-star fiction by ARGOSY'S ace authors

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—SEPTEMBER 12th!



—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

Don't let Adolescent Pimples spoil YOUR chances for fun . . .

PIMPLES can be real joy-killers to any boy or girl. Yet many young people have skin eruptions after the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or even longer.

During this time, important glands develop and final growth takes place. Disturbances occur throughout the entire body. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin. Pimples result.

Fleischmann's fresh Yeast helps correct adolescent pimples. It clears these skin irritants out of the blood. Then, the pimples go.

Eat 3 cakes daily, one before each meal—plain, or in a little water—until your skin clears.

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Tear the top off a Lucky package. We promise you'll find twenty firm, round, fully-packed Lucky Strikes, just moist enough for the highest kind of smoking pleasure. Moisture content in Luckies is precisely controlled. That is one of the secrets of a Light Smoke. Round and firm, fully packed with no loose ends. Smoke Luckies to your throat's content. Never dry, never too moist—a cigarette conditioned to your taste.