AS GOOD AS MURDERED, A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

BLUE BOOK

DECEMBER

25 CENTS

Painted by
Herbert Morton Stoops

A novel of Hannibal in the Alps by GORDON KEYNE

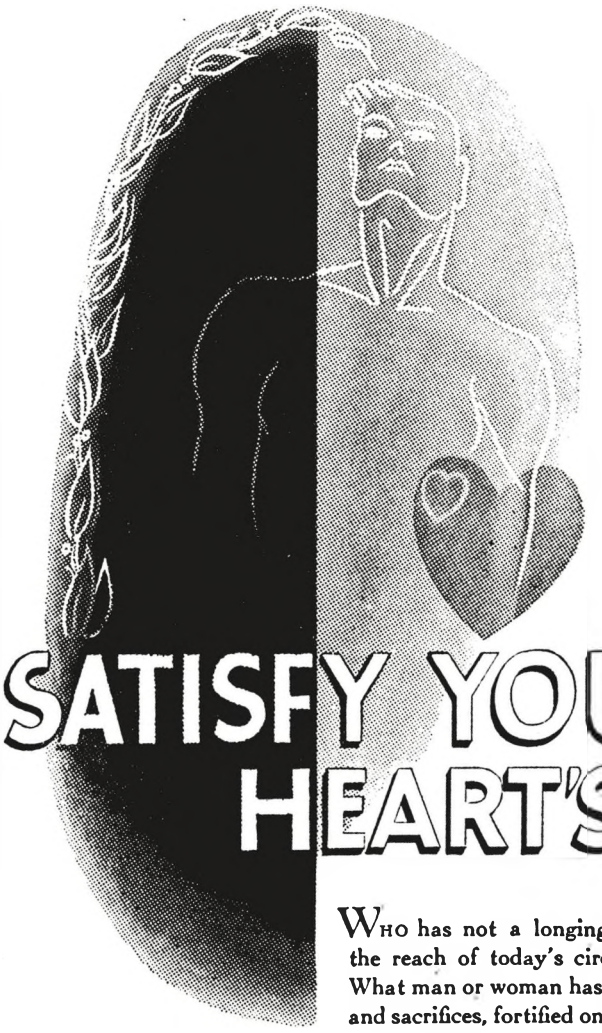
ELLERY QUEEN • H. BEDFORD-JONES • JAMES O'HANLON

"Submarine Sunk!" by BORDEN CHASE

Drawn by L. R. Gustavson

"Have you gone crazy?" shouted the Major. "Not nearly so crazy as you," replied Red Rodgers. "This man tried to poison His Excellency."

(From "The Elusive General," by William Makin, beginning Page 57)



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BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1939 VOL. 70, NO. 2

A Book-Length Novel

Seven Short Stories

Two Serials

Prize Stories of Real Experience

Cover Design — Painted by Herbert Morton Stoops

Except for stories of Real Experience, all stories and novels printed herein are fiction and are intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or to actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.

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J. D. Hartman, *Treasurer*

DONALD KENNICOTT, Editor

Published monthly, at McCall St., Dayton, Ohio. Subscription Offices—Dayton, Ohio. Editorial and Executive Offices—230 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE—December, 1939, Vol. LXX, No. 2.

Subscription Prices, one year $2.50, two years $4.00 in U. S. and Canada, foreign postage $1.00 per year. For change of address, give us four weeks' notice and send old address as well as new. Special Notice to Writers and Artists: Manuscripts and art material submitted for publication in the Blue Book Magazine will be received only on the understanding that the publisher and editors shall not be responsible for loss or injury thereto while such manuscripts or art material are in the publisher's possession or in transit. Printed in U.S.A.

Entered as second-class matter, November 12, 1930, at the Post Office at Dayton, Ohio, under the Act of March 3, 1897.

Prize Offer

for

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THERE is material for a novel in every person's life, it has been said. Whether this is true or not, we do believe that in the lives of most of us some experience has occurred sufficiently exciting to merit description in print. With this idea in mind we shall be pleased to receive and to print true stories of real experience, running from one thousand to four thousand words each. For each of those accepted each month we will pay, according to our appraisal of its length and strength, an average price of $50.

In theme the stories may deal with adventure, mystery, sport, humor,—especially humor!—war or business. Sex is barred. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Real Experience Editor, the Blue Book Magazine, 230 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. Preferably but not necessarily they should be typewritten, and should be accompanied by a stamped and self-addressed envelope for use in case the story is unavailable.

A pen name may be used if desired, but in all cases the writer's real name and permanent address should accompany the manuscript. Be sure to write your name and correct address in the upper left-hand corner of the first page of your story, and keep a copy as insurance against loss of the original; for while we handle manuscripts with great care, we cannot accept responsibility for their return. As this is a monthly contest, from one to two months may elapse before you receive a report on your story.

A Sailor's Reckoning

A ship captain balances his polite prevarications against the lives he helped to save.

By CAPTAIN WILBUR ROSS

SOME day I am going to stand face to face with the Great Pilot. He is going to study me sadly for a few moments and then say: "Hello, you old liar, you."

There won't be much I can say, because I know He's got the goods on me. But I'll try to explain that at least one of my lies was told with the most kindly of intentions. When He asks which one that is, I'll say: "The one about Mount Sinai." . . . .

When I first passed through the Gulf of Suez, in command, my Sunday-school days were far behind. Much that I had learned from the Bible had long been forgotten. That was why I was puzzled when, shortly after we entered the Gulf, a dear old lady asked me when we would see Mount Sinai.

Something in her manner convinced me that she really expected to see it. Therefore it seemed likely that it was somewhere in the vicinity. Thus it was that, for no good reason at all, I replied that it would be abeam at four P.M.

From the conversation that followed I gathered that someone had told her she would see it. She and her minister had looked it up on a map before she left home. They found that it was right on the coast only a short distance inside the Gulf. When she returned home, all her old friends at the Ladies Aid would be so thrilled when she told them that she had actually seen the sacred mountain.

After leaving the old lady I went on the bridge and looked at the chart. I located Mount Sinai. And by a strange coincidence, we were actually going to be abeam of it at about four o'clock.

But there wasn't a chance of our seeing it, for it was nearly a hundred miles inland, and there were many higher mountains between our position and Mount Sinai. Possibly the map that my old friend looked at was a small one and the mountain did seem right on the coast.

I went to my room and fished a Bible from under a pile of old books and read up on the things that had happened to Moses on that mountain. I thought that since I couldn't show her what she wanted to see, I might at least talk to her about it.

About four o'clock I walked on deck. Standing by the railing and anxiously gazing out across the water toward the shoreline was that sweet old lady. There was a beautiful expression of sweet anticipation in her eyes. The moment I saw that expression, I knew that I wasn't going to tell her that she couldn't see the mountain.

Inland a few miles stood a mound of sand several hundred feet high. A few wretched-looking shrubs at the summit were the only signs of vegetation in the whole dreary waste. I pointed at the sand dune. "There's your mountain," I said, looking over her head.

Of course it was wrong—or was it? As far as she knows, she saw Mount Sinai. Judging from the expression in her eyes, it made her supremely happy. But for my lie she would have been bitterly disappointed. From the time that devout old lady left home, her main objective was that view of Mount Sinai.

And even if the Great Pilot fails to see my point of view and tacks on an extra pot or two of brimstone, I won't mind so much. It is worth almost anything to have seen the look I saw in the eyes of that little old lady when I pointed out Mount Sinai to her, many years ago.

MAYBE I can bargain with the Pilot. I'll tell Him I helped to save the lives of three remarkable people whom the world couldn't spare. I helped save other lives too. But these three people stand out. My part in the saving of their lives should really be a mark in my favor.

(Please turn to page 191)

Statement of the Ownership, Management, Circulation, Etc., required by the Act of Congress of March 3, 1933,

of THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE published monthly at Dayton, Ohio, for October 1st, 1939.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared John D. Hartman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Treasurer of McCall Corporation, publisher of The Blue Book Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher: McCall Corporation, 230 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. Editor: Donald Kennicott, 230 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor: None. Business Managers: None.

2. That the owner is: McCall Corporation, Wilmington, Delaware. The following are the names and addresses of stockholders holding 1 per cent or more of the capital stock of McCall Corporation:

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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

John D. Hartman, Treasurer.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 8th day of September, 1939. Frank H. Murray, Notary Public, New York County, New York County Clerk's No. 280. New York County Reg. No. O-M-3. My commission expires March 30, 1940.

STORIES FROM THE FRONT

OUR own Intelligence officer William Makin, author of the famous Red Wolf of Arabia stories, writes from London, under date of September 11:

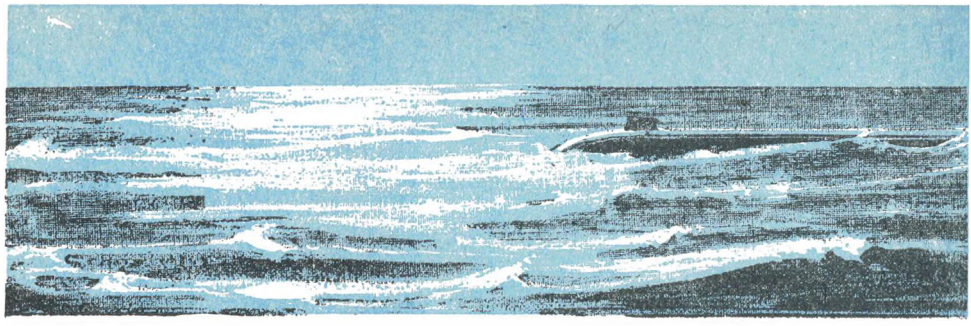
Since the outbreak of war I've been working night and day on naval intelligence, chasing German submarines and suspicious freighters by radio reports and maps from a room in London. I learned today that within the next fortnight I am to be sent out to . . . . on what my Chief calls "a sticky job."

Despite these activities, I hope to keep you well supplied with Red Wolf stories, and of a more general European war scene. In fact, I must, for the pay I get is only acceptable on the grounds of patriotism. The real feeling behind the scenes here is that the war may be over much quicker than most people believe. That comes from a knowledge of how much raw materials we are keeping from reaching Germany.

I am glad to say that I managed to get my wife and children away to the comparative safety of South Africa before things got really serious here. London, I think, will be bombed sooner or later, but it is possible each belligerent is hesitating about attacking the other's capital for fear of retaliation.

My best regards. . . . And be prepared for Red Wolf stories straight from the European front.

Mr. Makin writes of war with authority, for he was wounded and gassed in the World War—and also got a bullet through his neck when he "covered" the 1931 revolution in Portugal as a correspondent; we will watch for his stories, therefore, with special interest. . . . If, however, you'd like escape from tragic headlines, be sure to read H. C. Wire's novel of the old Texas trail "North to the Promised Land," published complete in our next issue, along with the first of H. Bedford-Jones' new historical series, and many other exceptional short stories.



Submarine Sunk!

CHARDY HARRIS got in before I did. He was always bigger and stronger. A year older, too. When he tried the recruiting station at Times Square, they took him right away. That didn't make me feel any too good. I'd tried the same station and been turned down because I was seventeen. All of the fellows in Bensonhurst were joining the Navy. Some had already come home on leave from the training-station in Newport, wearing uniforms. It was summer and they went to the yacht-club dances. Girls flocked around them and the rest of us felt foolish and out of it. I was certainly mighty glad when I got in. Lucky, too. The recruiting officer knew I was lying about my age.

"Sure you want to join this man's Navy?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I told him.

He passed me along to the doctor and the doctor was nice, too. Eyes, ears, legs —everything was fine, except I didn't weigh very much for my age.

"Sure you want to join up, son?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

He sort of hesitated. Then he pointed to the white painted scales. "Jump on," he said. I started to step onto the scales and he grinned. "I told you to jump on." And he winked.

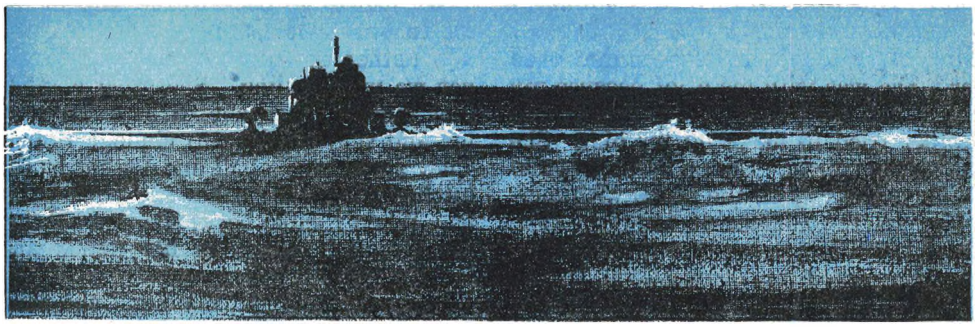
"I get it," I told him. And I jumped onto the platform so the brass weight on the scale arm would lift.

They didn't keep us long at Newport. Most of us were fellows who had been brought up along the ocean front. We knew boats and had a feel for lines. The drilling didn't amount to anything: A few weeks of marching with rifles. No target practice. There was a range at Newport but there wasn't time to let us fool around. Too many recruits coming in. I didn't get to fire a rifle before they shipped me down to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, but one of the old-timers taught me how to wash my dress blues, fold them damp and press them under a board. That was important.

Chardy Harris had shipped out on a cruiser when I reached the Yard. He was always one jump ahead of me. He played better football than I did and he could lick me every time we put on the gloves. I could swim faster than he could, though. I learned when I was about five, but Chardy came from another section of Brooklyn where there wasn't much swimming. He was over ten when my mother taught him. He liked my mother. Always called her Mudsy. So did a lot of the other fellows.

I felt pretty bad when I found Chardy had beat me to it again. I went to the yacht-club dances and showed my uniform. It was good fun, even though some of the Naval Reserves had ratings on their arms. I was in the Regulars and ratings weren't for boots like me. Still, I could make the Reserves look foolish when I said, "Oh, you're in the Reserves. Too bad you didn't sign up in the Regulars."

Everything was all right, even if Chardy had shipped out on a cruiser, until Hazel Bellaty showed the letter from her brother. Bill was older than the rest of us and had signed up on the first day. He had all the luck. He was assigned to the *Alcedo* with Riker and they made the first trip across. Sure enough, a submarine got



What war meant to a man, a boy—and the boy's mother.

By BORDEN CHASE

Illustrated by Charles Chickering

the *Alcedo,* and Riker was killed. Bill Bellaty saved the ship's papers and got shore duty in Brest for a reward. Once Hazel showed that letter around, my uniform didn't seem important any more. I wanted to grab a destroyer and make a trip.

No such luck, though. I was transferred to the old *North Carolina* and sent out on convoy duty. We took the *Agamemnon* and the *Von Steuben* across when they had the collision, but we didn't land in France. So back I came to Bensonhurst, and still I wasn't important. But my luck had to change, and when the Armed Guard was formed, our six-inch crew was sent to the Brooklyn Barracks. That meant a new band for my flat hat. I was careful to show it at the dances. I was hoping Chardy Harris would get back so I could show it to him. He didn't.

Then we were shipped aboard the old *Anthony Wayne,* and I was really on my way to France. Gunner Boone ran the Armed Guard crew, and it didn't take him long to make sailors of us. He was a real old-timer—a Fleet Reserve man who had worked in South American revolutions as a machine-gunner. He knew his stuff. Drilled us for hours on the six-inch relic they'd bolted to our after deck. Made us shoot at barrels and drifting spars when we weren't in convoy, and that was most of the time—usually the freighters had to load and run for it alone.

WELL, I saw France and it was great. The French girls pretended to like us, but all they really wanted was money. But it was fun telling the fellows about them when the ship docked in Brooklyn. I'd lie a lot, and then suddenly get quiet when one of the neighborhood girls joined the group. And of course we brought home souvenirs—silk handkerchiefs with American and French flags crossed on them, and pillow-covers and perfume.

I looked for Chardy Harris at the yacht-club dances but he was on a freighter too. So I didn't get a chance to tell him about France. I met Ethel Jackel, though, and her sister, Marie. They were beautiful tall blonde girls, and Ethel liked Chardy a lot. Marie liked me, and we fixed a date for the four of us when Chardy would be in port. . . .

Naturally I spent some time at home with my mother. She was very proud of my uniform. I figured she would like to meet Gunner Boone, because he had four hash-marks and a first-class rating. While the *Wayne* was loading at Bush Docks, I asked the Gunner to come to my house, have dinner and stay over for Sunday.

"I'm not much on that home stuff," he said. "Maybe you better go home alone, kid."

But later I asked him again. I told him there might be a dance at the yacht club, even if it were late in the season.

"I'm not much on dancing," he said. He was oiling an automatic, and he put his thumbnail under the barrel to send light along the bore. "Tell you what, though—I *could* stand a good home meal."

"You'll get a good one," I promised. And he did.

My mother was glad to meet him. She took him into the kitchen and made him feel right at home. Even put an apron on him and let him help with the pie-crust. I tried to stop her, because I thought the Gunner might not like it, but she laughed

and he laughed, and there was nothing I could do. She was a swell mother. I think every fellow in Bensonhurst loved her. She was with me a lot because my father had died when I was a kid, and Mother tried to make up for him. She worked, of course. But on Saturdays and Sundays she was on the beach with me.

She sat the Gunner at her right side, and I faced him across the table at supper. She asked lots of questions, and he answered as best he could. Sometimes I felt foolish when she told of things I used to do as a kid. I figured all that sort of talk would come back at me when we got aboard ship. It didn't. The Gunner was nice that way.

That night there was no dance at the yacht club, but one of the girls in the neighborhood gave a party. I thought the Gunner would make a big hit, even though his face wasn't exactly even. He had done quite a lot of fighting in the ring, and his nose was broken. Still, it was war time, and those hash-marks would have meant a lot to the girls.

The Gunner wouldn't go. "You have your fun," he told me. "I'm going to stay home with Mudsy."

That was funny, to hear him say it. "How'd you learn her name?"

"It's a good name, isn't it?"

"Sure," I said. "Only, that's Chardy Harris' name for her. He started it, and now all the fellows use it."

"So I'll use it too," said the Gunner. He sort of pushed me toward the door. "You go ahead and dance. Get home early, because we got to go to church in the morning."

THAT mother of mine certainly was a smooth worker. I can't imagine how she made the Gunner agree on church. Not that he wasn't religious. He believed in God, and when any of the men in the crew cursed too much, he'd say: "Better be careful. You're going to meet That Man some day." But I still couldn't figure him as much of a church-goer.

He did it nicely, though. We walked out in the morning with my mother between us, hanging on to our arms. She was bowing to all her friends. Gunner Boone and I were kept busy tipping our flat hats. Then in church, I got another surprise. The Gunner knew the hymns, and he sang them in a voice you could hear half a mile. Stood up and sang at the top of his lungs, and held the hymnbook with my mother. She was certainly a proud lady that Sunday.

We had to go back to the ship in the afternoon. The Gunner made me take my mother up to her room when I told her we were sailing. She cried a little. Not much. Then she came down with me and said good-by to Gunner Boone. They stood in the hall and I went to the kitchen to get the cakes she'd made for us. When I came back, she was holding the Gunner's hands in her hands and looking into his eyes.

"He's all I've got, Gunner," she said. "He's a good boy."

"He's a good boy," said the Gunner. He nodded.

"Will you take care of him for me?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am. I'll take care of him."

"And send him back the way he is now? Will you, Gunner?"

"I'll do my best, Mudsy."

I came into the hall on the run. Mother didn't know it, but she was certainly making it tough for me. You'd think I was a kid. And here I had convoy duty and a trip to France behind me. But mothers are funny about some things. She kissed the Gunner and gave him a tight little wink with both eyes. She didn't come out to see us go downstreet. . . .

The trip over was easy. Wind most of the way, and clouds at night. Not a sign of a sub, and we made the trip in fourteen days. We pulled into the locks at St. Nazaire and moored to the *Muldanic,* a freighter unloading under the big crane. And there on the after gun platform of the *Muldanic* was Chardy Harris. I'd caught up with him at last.

"Hey, sailor!" I yelled. And I waved to him.

"Hello, kid!" he yelled. He came to the rail of the platform and waved. "How do you like this man's Navy?"

"Not bad. How about you?"

He was wearing working blues, and he showed me his right arm. He'd beat me again. There was a third-class gunner's mate rating at the elbow. Gunner Boone was with me on the platform, and he laughed a little.

"Don't let it throw you," he said to me. "You'll be flashing one of those crows soon."

The Gunner was a swell guy. He didn't crack a smile when I told Chardy I had a rating too. Of course I had to lie a little and say I was waiting to get back to the States to get the rate confirmed. But it went over. Chardy didn't try to talk down to me when he visited our gunroom. He acted like one shipmate would

"You—you mean the *Muldanic?*" I said.

to another, and that night we went ashore together. He knew St. Nazaire better than I did, and he showed me some new spots.

That week he and I put on a bout at the Salvation Army hut. He gave me a good trimming, but I was used to that. Gunner Boone was in my corner, and he promised me I'd take Chardy in a few months. Told me he'd teach me a flock of tricks and develop a good inside right hook for me. I made a date to fight Chardy again the next time we were in port together. Then we all went out to have some fun.

CHARDY got me alone after a while. His ship had been pulling into Newport News, and he had had no chance to get home. He asked about Ethel Jackel; he was worried that some of the Naval Reserves stationed in Bensonhurst would take her away. I said not to worry. I told him she was always talking about him and showing his letters to everyone. And Chardy was glad to hear that. . . .

The *Muldanic* loaded sand ballast before we did, and the crew got good news. They were bound for the Bush Docks in Brooklyn, and that meant Chardy would get home to see Ethel Jackel. He was certainly happy. I never saw a man so anxious to leave port. I asked him to drop in and tell my mother everything was all right. The *Muldanic* was faster than the *Wayne;* he'd be home almost a week before me. He said he would.

The *Muldanic* shoved off that night, and our gun-crew stood on the locks to yell good-by. Chardy had made a hit with the fellows. I reminded him of our date with Ethel and Marie Jackel. The four of us were going to the Winter Garden to see Al Jolson; then we were going to the Strand Roof to dance. He said he'd set the date. Then the *Muldanic* moved out of the lock.

We followed in the morning. It was bad weather for a crossing—no wind, and a bright moon at night. We picked up a sub the first evening and tossed a few shots at her. Nothing serious. We were still close to France, and she knew the gunfire might bring a destroyer into the

The wake churned and bubbled and made twisting pools behind us. Once I looked down into it and imagined I could see Chardy Harris there, turning over and over.

picture. But the action put us on our toes. Gunfire does that. It's like the smell of liniment in the dressing-room before an important football game. And that's about the way we figured a scrap with a submarine. We knew the stuff in the newspapers about Germans cutting off the hands of Belgian kids was the bunk. Besides, I'd never seen a German in uniform except the prisoners working on the docks. They weren't bad. I had a more personal hate on for the Indians that killed Custer than I did for the Germans. I'd seen that fight in the movies.

BUT after we'd seen the sub, we were careful. Gunner Boone didn't have to worry about the men on watch. They were doing a good job. The rest of us piled into the gunroom during our spare time. I was scrubbing clothes in a bucket during the eight-to-twelve that evening when Sparks, the wireless man, came in. He closed the door behind him and stood near my bunk. His head was in front of one of those purple lights, and it kept me from seeing the picture of Marie Jackel I had hung over my bunk.

"Sit down," I told him. "If you want the makin's, they're on the table."

"I don't want the makin's," he said.

"Then what?"

"The *Muldanic,*" he said, sort of slowly. "A sub got her with all hands."

"Yeah?" I said. And then all of a sudden I got a pain in my stomach. I stopped scrubbing my clothes. "You —you mean the *Muldanic?*"

He nodded his head. Up and down about four times.

"Say something, you dope!" I yelled at him. "You mean the *Muldanic*—with Chardy Harris?"

"That's what I'm tryin' to tell you, kid."

I let my wash go back into the bucket, and I cried. Not loud. I just sat there and cried to myself for a minute. Then I stood up and walked to my bunk. It was the top one of three, and I leaned my head against it. I didn't think about anything much. Sparks started to tell the others about the messages he'd received, but Gunner Boone told him to get the hell out of the room. All the gun-crew followed except me. I sat down on a bench and started to think about Chardy Harris. Then I got frightened.

I didn't want to stay in the gunroom alone, so I went on deck. The others were up on the platform, and I walked to the rail. There was a moon on the water,

and I looked at the road it made. That was all right. The water looked hard. As though you could walk on it. Then I looked where it was black. Chardy was down there. That was all I could think of. He was down there in that black water. Rolling around like the drowned man who had floated in to the yacht-club dock one summer.

I thought I was going to get sick but I didn't. I went back into the gunroom where I couldn't see the water. I closed the door and looked at it. Then I made believe a torpedo had got the *Anthony Wayne*. I felt her lurch and start to go down. Water came in through the hatch and the port, and finally the door burst open and the water had me. . . . I wanted a smoke, but I couldn't roll one. I took a chew instead, and it made me feel worse. Soon I crawled into my bunk and after a while I went to sleep.

It was all over in the morning. I felt good again and I was ashamed because I hadn't stood my watch. Gunner Boone stood it for me, and he told me to shut up when I tried to thank him. He swung the watches so we could stand them together, and that was nice too.

I was glad to get up on the gun platform with him. It was a clean day. Sun and bright water and just a soft breeze out of the west. The ocean was friendly the way it used to be during summer vacation. Only the wake was bad. It churned and bubbled and made twisting pools behind us. Once I looked down into it and imagined I could see Chardy Harris there, turning over and over. I walked to the gun and pounded my hand on the barrel.

"That's the way it is, kid," said the Gunner. He was looking at the water and chewing slowly.

"Yeah," I said. "That's the way it is."

He didn't say any more. Neither did I. I had clothes to scrub when we went off, and afterward the Gunner kept me busy cleaning automatics. I liked the feel of those things in my hands. Liked the way I could squeeze them. I felt like shooting one, and the Gunner said it would be all right. I tried a few clips at some driftwood. Split a plank with one clip. Then I had to clean the gun again.

WE talked about the *Muldanic* at supper. I even talked about Chardy Harris. He'd put a puff under my left eye in our bout, and I pointed to it and told the others what a sock he carried in his right. Then it was eight o'clock, and time for the Gunner and I to go on watch again. The *Anthony Wayne* was riding into the west, and the moon came up over our stern. Silver right from the horizon. When we changed course, I could look off the quarter along the moonstreak. Then I got to thinking.

"I guess it was about here," I said to the Gunner.

"Might be," he answered. He was leaning against the gun-barrel near the trainer's stand.

"According to the time we're making, it ought to be right here."

"It could be," he said. He turned to look over the stern. "Chances are that it aint, though. We been doing a lot of zigzagging. So did the *Muldanic*."

"But it could be here."

"Yeah, it could be," said the Gunner. "And now we're past it."

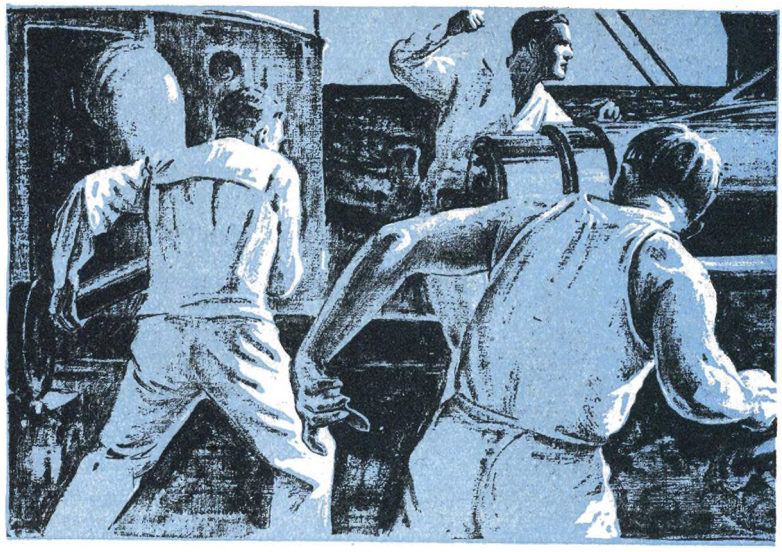
"It could be just ahead, too."

The Gunner walked to the rail to spit. "Better not do that, kid. Just keep watching the water."

I WATCHED the water, and I got to hoping we'd sight a sub. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to sight a sub. The same one, it could be. I walked around to the pointer's wheel, and stepped up on the platform. If that damn' sub was still out here, I'd surely like to get a crack at it. Just one. Or maybe two shots. Those lousy Germans. It would be swell to get them under the sights and slam one into them. Right in the belly. If the sub was off the quarter and coming down the moonstreak, a guy couldn't miss.

No use looking into the moonstreak. Those Germans knew better than that. They'd come up in the dark. But if a man were careful, he could see the foam where the periscope breached the surface. . . . A white patch like that one over the stern. Just a long white line. Hardly enough to see. It could be a broken wave or even a porpoise. I didn't think it was a porpoise. Didn't ever remember seeing a porpoise at night. Bayliss said he'd seen them at night, but he liked to kid a lot. . . .

That thing off the quarter *wasn't* a porpoise! It was running forward, toward our beam. Maybe I was crazy, but it certainly looked like a sub to me. The Gunner would know, but he'd think I had the jumps if I asked him. Not yet. But I could swear it was a sub. It had to be. I was going to tell the Gunner, no matter what.



I'd get that sub this time . . . the guys that had drowned Chardy Harris.

I pointed my finger. "Could that be a sub, Gunner?" I said, sort of quiet. Even as I spoke, I knew it was. "Yeah, Gunner! It *is!* It's a sub, all right!"

"Nice work, kid," said Boone. Easy as that. He slapped the plug shut and stepped back onto the trainer's platform.

"Come around!" I yelled. "Bring her around, Gunner!"

That was foolish, because the Gunner was spinning the wheel plenty. But I was excited. And happy. Everything was all mixed up. You'd think I'd never fired a six-inch before, the way I was shaking. My legs were bending because the cords behind my knees wouldn't stay tight. I leaned against the rubber guard on the shoulder-piece, and found the water through the cross-wires. The gun was moving too fast, but soon it slowed. Then I picked up the periscope with one wire. Boone was on. I got on too. And God, but it felt good to slap out that first shell!

The flare caught me, and I was blind for a second. Then I picked up the sub again. The Gunner's wire was off, and I yelled at him before I realized he'd stepped back to load. The rest of the crew had charged up on deck, and they were taking their positions. Flynn was the trainer, and he was a good one. Bayliss tapped my arm. He was the pointer, and he was trying to tell me to get off the platform. I didn't listen. Didn't bother about his tapping. I'd been looking for that German out there, and now I had him.

The shell and powder-can were in. I heard the plug slam.

"Fire when you're on, Bayliss," said the Gunner.

I was on. Not Bayliss. I'd get that sub this time. No—not the sub. I wanted the guys who were in it. The guys that had drowned Chardy Harris. They'd done it. And they were going to get theirs, now. From me!

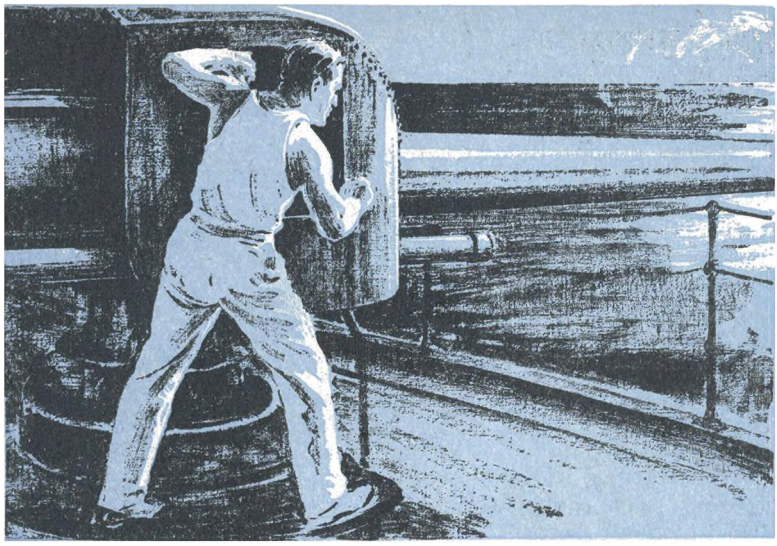
I FIRED. The old *Anthony Wayne* jumped, and smoke drifted over my sights. Soon it was clear. And I'd missed. The sub was still there, swinging toward us—lining up for a shot. Those Germans figured they'd get another freighter. But they were wrong. This time they were wrong. I couldn't miss them with the third. Not them! One more, and I'd break them in half. Then they'd know what it was like to have the water come in on them. Into their gunroom. All over them. They'd try to climb, and it would push them back off the ladders. Roll them around. I'd almost been drowned once, and I knew how frightened they'd be.

"Get off that platform!" said the Gunner. He was on the far side of the gun. "Bayliss! Get him off that wheel!"

"Better get off, kid," said Bayliss.

Both of them were yelling, because our ears were dead from the sound. Bayliss put his hand on my shoulder, but I cursed him plenty. I looked back to see if we were loaded. Boone was running around the breech, just clear of the recoil. His face looked bad, but I didn't care. He wasn't going to get me off that gun. Not this time. I stuck my face hard against the rubbers. Made a suction with the eyepieces.

"Get down or I'll crack your skull!" said Boone.



They'd done it. And they were going to get theirs, now. From me!

"Let him go, Gunner," said Bayliss. "Give him a chance to square things."

"Give him hell!" said the Gunner. I could feel his hands tightening on my shoulders.

"Stand clear!" I said.

And then the sub made a mistake. The *Anthony Wayne* changed course, and the sub was caught right in the moonstreak. Square in the middle. What a chance! My legs were all right now. My chest was hot, but I didn't have to hold my breath any more. Just push it back and forth through my nose, with my lips puckered up the way the Gunner had taught me. Funny I should think of that. It kept your lips from getting split on your teeth when you were hit. I'd used it in the bout with Chardy Harris, and didn't get a cut.

"Mark!" I yelled, when the crosswires touched the point of the white V. "Take it, you lice!"

Right on the pin! One of those new explosives the Navy had issued. Not very loud, or maybe that was because the six-inch had spoiled our ears for the time. But it sounded like business. Worse than a truck crashing into an iron pillar. More like a bridge splitting in half, perhaps, although I've never heard that.

I stepped down from the platform and watched. The sub's nose came up, and you could see the hole in her, see the white water pouring into her. I yelled like hell. I called those guys every name I knew. Asked them how they liked it. And I was the only one of our crew that did. The rest just stood there looking.

"Secure," said the Gunner. He motioned to me. "Run some sperm oil through that barrel when she cools. And settle down, or I'll punch you in the teeth."

I did. It didn't take long. Just a few moments, and the jumping stopped in my head and in my chest. When the skipper came aft to say we'd done well, it wasn't hard to talk to him. Wasn't hard to get to sleep at midnight, either. Oh, I went through the fight a couple of times when I was in my bunk, but soon I was asleep.

THE story spread when we reached the Bush Docks. All the gun-crew swaggered and looked a little tough as we left the ship. All except the Gunner. It was old stuff to him. But he didn't say anything to the rest of us. He stopped off with me at a place on Third Avenue, and we had two drinks. I treated, and he treated back. Then he told me we'd better not have any more, because my mother would smell it on my breath.

"Maybe you'd come along home with me?" I asked. "She'd like to see you again, Gunner."

"I don't think it would be so good," he said. "Some other time."

"Maybe there won't be another time. If we load fast this trip, we may not get any more liberty."

He said all right, and we took the subway to Bensonhurst. I played the same trick on my mother I always did—just walked into the house and called: "Hello. Anybody home?" And if she were upstairs, she'd almost break both legs running downstairs. It worked this time. And I stood at the bottom of the stairs and put out my arms so she could run into them. I let her hug me and look at

me, and when she saw my overseas chevrons—gold ones—she said: "Oh, how wonderful, son!" And in the next breath she asked if they were going to transfer me back to the Navy Yard.

She was glad to see the Gunner. She gave him a kiss, too. It was fun to watch her running about the room. First she'd sit in one chair and then in another. She never mentioned Chardy Harris, though she must have known. And after a time she said we'd have to come into the kitchen and talk, so she could make the supper.

Gunner Boone helped again. So did I for a while. But she kept looking at me so much that finally I asked if I could go over to see Marie Jackel for a while. That was all right; so I went. Marie wasn't home, but I met some of the fellows and showed them my chevrons. Not bragging. Just showed them when they asked. We talked about Chardy, and I said it was tough, but that's the way it went in this man's Navy.

MY kid cousin came over for supper. He was sixteen and mad as a pup because he couldn't get in. None of the girls would give him any time; and because he was big for his age, he had to take a lot of kidding.

"You think it will last another year?" he asked the Gunner.

"Maybe," said Boone. He winked at my mother. "Might last for ten years." He winked again as though to tell her he was kidding. "Lots of time for you, Jimmy. Lots of time."

"I wouldn't be so sure," said Jimmy. "The way you guys are doing things, there won't be anything left for me at all."

"Lots more subs left for you, Jimmy," I told him. "They'll build them in Germany just as fast as we can sink them."

"Tell us about it," he blurted. "The one you got." I was his cousin, and he wanted to do some bragging later on.

I laughed, and winked at the Gunner. Then I started to talk. How I saw it off the quarter, and then how it got caught in the moonstreak.

"It was lining up on us," I said. "Those guys thought we were cold meat. Then I got them under my wires and slammed one right into their teeth. You could hear her break. See the twisted steel around the hole in her belly. You know what it was like, Jimmy? Like a tin can on Fourth of July when you put a firecracker in it. Busted wide open. And the water was going in and spouting out again."

"Could you see the Germans?" asked Jimmy. "Were they swimming?"

That was a funny one. "Swimming?" I said. "They didn't get a chance to swim. No more chance than they gave Chardy Harris. The shell I slapped into them must have killed a dozen or more. Maybe the whole bunch." I leaned forward so I could see the kid's eyes bulge. "They were the guys that got Chardy," I told him. "Guess they didn't like it so much when we sent them along to join him."

The Gunner was sitting opposite, and he kicked me on the leg. Not an easy kick. I looked at him, and he was looking at my mother. I guess the excitement was too much for her. She was holding one lip between her teeth, and her face was moving as though she were talking with her mouth closed.

"It's nothing, Mom," I said. "We probably won't see another sub during the whole war."

"I know," she said.

"Besides," I told her. "Those guys had it coming to them."

The Gunner was making faces at me, and he looked mad when my mother put down her fork. "I meant to tell you," she said, "Marie Jackel called while you were out. She and Ethel aren't doing anything tonight, and I said you and the Gunner might be over."

"Thanks," I said. I didn't think the Gunner would want to go out with the Jackel girls. "Tomorrow night, maybe. I'll call and tell them tomorrow night, instead." I turned to the Gunner. "Flynn gave me a phone-number. He was supposed to keep a date tonight in New York, but he can't. He says you'd like these girls. They work in one of the cabarets, I think."

"Yeah?" said Boone. He asked my mother if he could have a glass of milk. That was crazy. He didn't drink milk. Mother went to the kitchen to get it. "Listen, kid," he whispered. "You shut up about that fight; see? You shut up about them Germans. And we aint going out with any New York girls. We're going out with the Jackel girls—see?"

"WHAT'S eating you?" I asked.

He leaned toward me, and his eyebrows came down until they almost covered his eyes. "Like I'm telling you," he said. "You stop talking about killing guys—see? You eat your supper, and we go out with them Jackel girls to a movie or something."

The Gunner knew the hymns, and he sang them at the top of his lungs.

I shrugged. There was no telling about the Gunner. He did funny things. He even drank the milk my mother brought from the kitchen, and pretended to like it. She gave him a little smile. Then she said: "You know, Gunner, in all the excitement of seeing my boy again, I haven't thought to say thank you for bringing him back to me. I'm grateful, though. Really I am."

"I didn't have much to do with it," said Boone. He was looking into the empty glass and watching the milk-streaks on the sides. "He's a regular old-timer, now. One of the best men in my crew."

"Yes," said my mother. "I can see that, Gunner. He's—he's a real man, isn't he?"

And she cried like the devil, and walked out of the room.

THEY LIVED

THREE men sat at a wineshop table. Above them, the upper Isère valley stretched to the passes of the Little St. Bernard; beyond, the Alps towered icily, but this quiet little village was nestled cozily out of the October winds.

"War and war and war!" said the village mayor gloomily. "Where will it end? Now the whole world is in upheaval, with fire and death and starvation everywhere! Spain is swimming in bloody ruin. All northern Italy to the Alps is in rebellion against the *fasces* of Rome. And now the African hordes move up the Rhone like a countless swarm of locusts—whither? No man knows."

"Perhaps Mancinus, who used to be a Roman, knows," said the second man, a brawny Gaul with long henna-dyed mustaches and hair. "Explain, Mancinus! Why are these Africans here? They're not marching against the Romans, who hold Marseilles and the seacoast towns, but they pour out of Spain against *us!* We pay tribute to Rome; we have a small Roman army here: but that's no reason for sixty thousands Africans to bring us fire and sword!"

Sipping his wine, Mancinus nodded, and eyed the other two. They were simple, untutored men, honest and friendly; yet his was the prestige of being a Roman, even though broken and exiled.

A fascinating novel of the World War of 218 B.C., and of Hannibal's invasion—the greatest military feat in history.

By GORDON KEYNE

BY THE SWORD

Five years he had dwelt here among these Gauls, adopting their dress and customs and speech; he still stood out from among them in looks and manner, a different being.

The uncouth garb of his tall and massive figure, the unkempt light-brown hair and beard, could not hide the difference. He conveyed an impression of vital energy and power. The deep eyes, the careless winning laugh, the strongly carven features, marked him with intelligence far above those who companied him.

"The earth teems with men; there's the secret," he said slowly. "Rome is but a little state with few allies, exhausted by her wars with Carthage; now she's at war with the entire world. This country of Gaul, and the northern forests, pour forth uncounted myriads of warriors. There's not enough land and treasure for all. Last year, in Spain, Hannibal destroyed a hundred thousand men in one battle, and scarce made a gap in the population. Gaul, Spain, Germany, provide soldiers by the million; the earth teems with men!

"These vast masses of wild fighters are helpless against disciplined legions. Rome and Carthage fight for control of Spain; now Hannibal leads his army into Gaul. Why? He means to march against Rome."

"He can't reach Italy from here." The local mayor jerked a thumb toward the mountains. "The Alps prevent."

Mancinus shrugged. "So you think. So Rome thinks. A great man might think otherwise. Why, you ask, this unwanted war? Because the time appointed by the gods is at hand. There arise insensate waves of struggle, a generation or two apart, when whole nations rush to conquest and slaughter; a mass hysteria seizes them, and they're drunk with dreams of glory and loot. They're led to it by the magnetic character of some great leader. Hannibal is such a man, from all accounts."

The two Gauls eyed one another.

"I don't understand all this," said the village chief helplessly. "We're content to farm and till and raise our families in peace and comfort. Why should this storm burst on us?"

"You Gauls are proud," Mancinus rejoined. "If the Africans seek to pass your lands, will you permit? No. Like your tribes along the Rhone, you'll fight first—and be destroyed. Why? Because the earth is too full of people. Perhaps the gods seek to thin out the race of men."

IN one corner of the wineshop sounded a stir and a rustle. Throwing off a robe of skins, a man rose with a yawn and lifted his astonishing presence before them.

"Spoken like a philosopher, Roman!" he exclaimed briskly. "But you're wrong; there are no gods. I defy the gods, I deny them, I war against them everywhere! And I'm a useful person. If one of you gentlemen will buy me wine, I'll give him first call on my services."

The three stared at him, stupefied. He was extremely tall and thin, with a bald head, a long straight nose, a long neck; immediately one thought of a stork. His keen, twinkling, birdlike eyes heightened the resemblance. He had abnormally long arms, hands hanging nearly to his knees, and was clad in rags and tatters. From his girdle hung a pouch and a lissome sling of leather.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded the local mayor.

The stranger grinned, the weather-wrinkles about his eyes crinkling whimsically; a harsh, croaking laugh escaped him.

"Pelargos, being Greek for *stork*. My father was Greek, my mother Spanish, and I've traveled the whole wide world. Beyond the Pillars of Hercules to Tartessus; in Sicily and the African shores; in the isles of Greece, in Crete and the lands beyond, my name is known. Gentlemen, you behold the best slinger on this earth!" He touched the sling at his girdle. "With this, I can bring down a soaring hawk or drop a running hare at a hundred paces. As for men—*pouf!* No armor is proof against my missiles. I've killed Gauls, Numidians, Greeks, heavy-armed and light-armed; and in Sicily I blinded an elephant with two bullets and slew his driver with the third!"

"Why, here's a lusty braggart!" Mancinus burst out laughing. "Ho, landlord! Wine for the Stork, who brags of the impossible!"

"You may change your mind about that." Pelargos surveyed him appraising. "Ha! A Roman of consular rank, looking and living like a shaggy Gaul!"

Mancinus lost his smile. "How do you know my rank?"

"By your eye, friend; by your tongue, by the set of your head. . . . Thanks to you!" Pelargos received his wine and gulped at it amiably. "Aye, I know Romans! I got here an hour before dawn and have been sleeping ever since. Do you gentlemen know that Publius C. Scipio and his headquarters staff will be here any minute? His army has gone to Marseilles and thence to Spain. But he himself, being bound for Italy—"

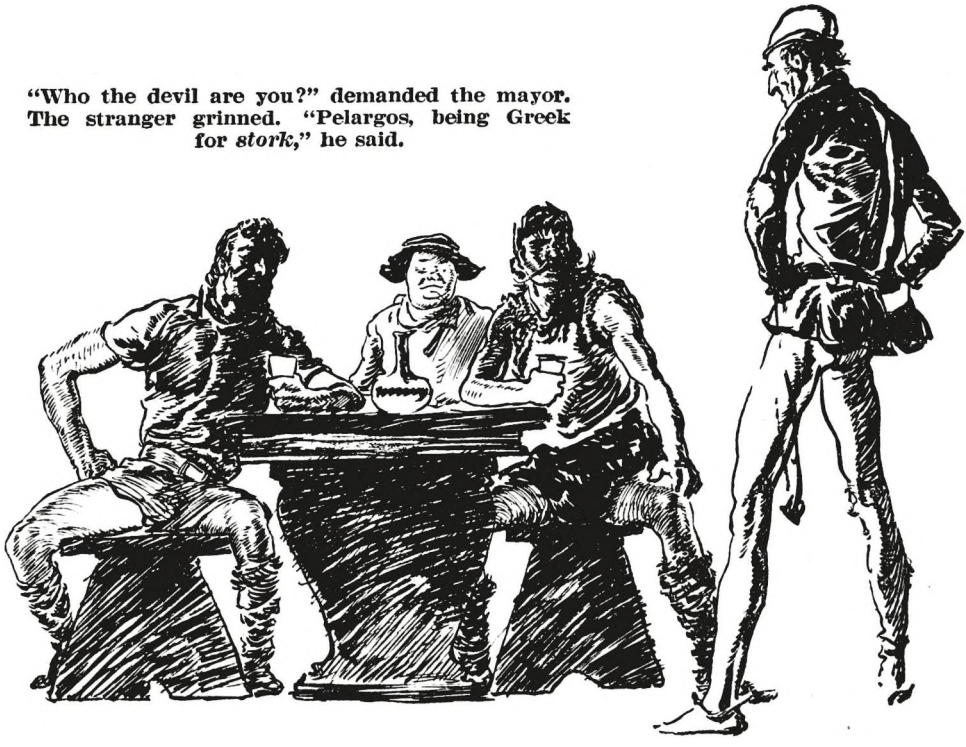
"What? Here?" yelped the mayor in dismay. "The Roman general coming here?"

"Precisely." Pelargos swigged his wine and winked confidentially. "That's why I'm here myself, having no desire for Spain. The whole army knows me. You can't hide from an army, but staff officers are fools; anyone can trick them. In plain words, gentlemen, I'm a deserter. Yes, Scipio is due here early this morning, and will probably stop for food and wine—"

The two Gauls were up and off at a run, shouting to rouse the village; a visit from the Romans was the signal to rush girls and goods to hiding. Pelargos, chuckling, eyed the impassive Mancinus and gulped more wine.

"Mancinus, they called you. That's odd! There was a Marcus Gaius Mancinus in Sicily, during the last Punic war. He commanded the Fourteenth Legion; I was attached to that legion with a company of slingers. Boy as I was, even then I was better than the best."

Mancinus surveyed the man with narrowed eyes.



"Who the devil are you?" demanded the mayor. The stranger grinned. "Pelargos, being Greek for *stork*," he said.

"That man was my father."

Pelargos nodded, as though not surprised.

"I see. He was sentenced to loss of citizenship and exile. His whole command was caught in a trap; he marched away on parole to save his men's lives. Saved my life, too." Pelargos grinned. "Your blasted Roman Senate said he should have fought to the death. I don't agree! A cousin was given his estates and rank. . . . Hm! I owe you gratitude because he saved my life, and for this wine. I believe in prudence and safety, and the gods be hanged! That's my motto every time."

"YOU'RE a profane blasphemer," said Mancinus, a twinkle in his eyes.

"What soldier's not? Bah! Every tribe and nation has different gods. What have your Roman gods done for you? Landed you here in exile. And you still love Rome, eh?"

"I hate Rome with my whole soul!" said Mancinus harshly. "Rome broke my father's heart, and he died of it."

"The old Latin virtue of filial piety and so forth, eh? But don't hate all Romans; they have pretty girls there." Pelargos peered at him, head on one side; with his bald pate the fellow did look like a stork. "Your whole life, background and ambitions gone to hell; and you still a young man in your twenties! What are you doing around here?"

"I have a farm."

"A farm!" Pelargos grimaced. "You, a soldier if ever I saw one! A farm! Hiding your face among barbarian Gauls, overcome by an inferiority complex, as we say in Greek, eh? See here!" Sudden animation lit up the seamed and weathered countenance. "I like you. I'll make a bargain with you—give you an ambition, a future, a glorious future! First, money. With wealth, a man can do anything, even repair a shattered life."

"Money? I've enough," said Mancinus. "But not wealth."

"Nor I; but I know where it's to be had for the taking. Enough to buy all Rome! And I'll share the secret with you; that's why I deserted, to get back into Italy. But there's something else." Pelargos spoke with brisk assurance. "Do you, perhaps, know the lady Drusilla, daughter of the former consul Quintus Veturis?"

"No." Mancinus frowned in retrospect. "No. I used to know Veturis; he was a Roman of the old school."

"Which means superstitious, arrogant, headstrong! Well, he's dead. He was serving with Scipio and was badly wounded some months ago; Drusilla came from Rome to be with him. She's the last of the family, and they're all afraid of her. You'd fear her too. She's one of these women who command the world by reason of their virtue and wisdom and beauty; in fact, she knows the

SCIPIO and DRUSILLA

gods intimately. You've seen the type. What she needs is to be triced up and given fifty lashes to take the arrogant nonsense out of her. Just the same, she's a raving beauty."

Pelargos paused for breath, gulped the last of his wine, and went on:

"She's with the staff; Scipio is taking her back to Rome. I'm the only person who's not afraid of her; I can handle her. Well, I was with Veturis when he died, and at the last he spilled a few secrets. I'll share those with you also, like a good comrade."

"You're drunk, or a fool," said Mancinus with some contempt.

PELARGOS grinned widely. "Think so? Guess again. I offer you wealth uncounted, which means power; and for a bride, the lady Drusilla—properly tamed, she'll be quite all right. In short, the world's at your feet! In return, give me clothes and your friendship, for I see by your eye that we'll be friends. We'll go into Italy together and conquer the world. Yes or no, my friend?"

Mancinus regarded the man steadily, somewhat startled by his winning ugliness, his confident air, his ribald cheerfulness. He took in the knotted muscle of those ungainly arms, the poise of the long, lean frame, half a head taller than other men, and the deep, steady glow of the bright eyes. He was on the point of replying, when a shout lifted outside, and a chorus of voices joined in; a clatter of hoofs resounded on the crisp October air.

"Ha! There's Scipio. I'll take no chances," said Pelargos.

He dived for the corner and seemed literally to vanish. His lanky frame folded up; the skins were pulled over him, and there was only a shapeless something in the corner. Just in time, too; for armor clanked, and a Roman staff-officer strode in.

"Wine!" he curtly addressed the innkeeper. "Let's have a look at your stock. Send some bread and cheese out to the General, while I see if you have any decent drink."

RISING, Mancinus hooked his rough woolen mantle over a shoulder and stepped outside. Half the village was crowded in the street, staring. A score of horsemen had dismounted. Scipio, a harsh and forceful figure, was standing in talk with a lady and two officers of his staff. Mancinus looked at them, and a bitter hatred welled up within him; no hatred is so deep and terrible as that caused by injustice and injury to one beloved.

Five years ago! Time slipped away. He actually recognized most of these men; some of them he had known well, in his boyhood. Shaven, steely men, hard of jaw and of eye, like no others on this earth, a breed apart; tall men, punctilious, masterful beyond belief, rather machines of iron and granite than fragile human beings, with a pride of race that was coldly indifferent to all around. Once he himself had been like that, not like the brute beast he now was. He was sharply wakened to himself; anger and horror leaped through his brain. . . .

Abruptly, all his thoughts were jarred awry. He saw her standing there with Scipio, so unutterably lovely that he caught his breath and stood agape. She was slim and white, swathed in mourning, so it was only her face he could see, but this was enough. An oval, it was lit with beauty more than earthly; a regal but laughing loveliness, with tenderness beneath its pride.

"That hulking barbarian should be in the army," said one of the staff officers. "By Jupiter, would you look at the build of him! And the intelligence! Why, he has the manner of a very Hercules!"

Mancinus was aware of quick, sharp glances, but he looked only at Drusilla. For a moment he met her eyes, blue, lively, filled with glinting lights; and in those blue depths something quickened and kindled. Color came into her cheeks as she met his gaze. Then an officer gestured at him and spoke in faulty Gallic.

"Who are you, barbarian? Why aren't you serving the eagles of Rome?"

Mancinus turned to him, and knew him, and disdained to hide his name.

"Because, Cnais Lentulus, your father and other Romans preferred that the son of Marcus Mancinus serve the enemies of Rome."

The defiant, laconic words were like a slap in the face. Astonished, recognizing whom he must be, they stared and muttered. The case of Mancinus had been a famous one. The lady Drusilla, however, took two steps toward him, looked into his eyes, and spoke in a clear quiet voice, with a perfect composure as though unaware how her words must shame these others. Romans were given to uttering their exact thoughts, without regard to the feelings of their hearers.

"You are that man's son!" she said. "Then accept my sympathy and friendship—for the sentence given Mancinus was unjust. It was only one of many things which have angered the gods. My father Veturis was among those whom your father saved. May the gods reward him and you!"

"They have. He is dead."

The harshly sardonic words rebuffed her. It cost her little enough, thought Mancinus, to fling an alms of sympathy to an uncouth man by the roadside whom she would never see again! Yet in her face he could see how unjust was this thought of his; and as she turned away, he regretted his own lack of courtesy.

She turned to her horse, drank the wine given her, and mounted. The others hastily gulped down their drink, and without further word for Mancinus, Scipio and his staff drove in spurs and were on their way again for the coast.

The Gaulish chieftain came up to Mancinus, and pointed to the road at the edge of the village, in the direction whence the Romans had come. Three crows had alighted there and were pecking away in the road.

"An evil omen," said the Gaul gloomily. "Crows follow the eagles, eh?"

"Suppose we change the omen," struck in another voice. Mancinus turned to see the tall ungainly figure of Pelargos, who had emerged from the wineshop.

Reaching to a pouch at his hip, Pelargos took something out, slipped it into the broad end of his sling, and whirled the sling about his head. The birds were two hundred yards away—an impossible shot for any sling and stone.

"The crow on the right," said Pelargos. "He has two white feathers in his tail."

He loosed the sling. Mancinus found himself unable to sight the missile or to follow its flight; but the crow to the right spilled over in a mass of rumpled feathers, and the others took wing. Pelargos broke into a run, retrieved the dead bird, picked something up and pouched it, and came back grinning widely. He held up the bird, then tossed it aside.

"I told you he had two white feathers in his tail."

This was true. Mancinus looked hard at him.

"How did you know a thing impossible to see? And with all your skill, what sort of missile did you use, that it carried so far and true?"

The merry eyes of Pelargos twinkled, at the open amazement of the whole circle.

"That's my secret," he rejoined. "If we're comrades, I shall have no secrets from you. Do you accept my offer? Are we comrades or not?"

MANCINUS was conscious of a thrill and surge within him. Destiny, destiny! This man appealed to him. Cast off the shackles of circumstance! Away with the farm, with the hopeless attempt to bury ambition; out, and fight! No matter for what, no matter where. Those merry but keen eyes wakened things dormant within his brain—suppressed desires and hopes, crushed aspirations.

After all, the world was ruled by force, by the strong hand. Life was cheap; slaves were everywhere. As he himself had said, the earth teemed with men.... Here was a person, grotesque and therefore unlike others, who offered him release from himself—seize the chance!

"Done with you!" said he. "Come along home with me."

But, as they walked together up the road to the mountain farm, he knew in his heart that it was not the company and the offer of Pelargos that had wak-

ened him to life; nor had hatred for Rome touched his ambition and roused sudden horror of himself and what he was. No. All this, and far more than this, had come from the clear and steady eyes of a woman; eyes that burned and lingered in his memory, and called him to a future.

CHAPTER II

PELARGOS seemed cheerfully and utterly irresponsible in his personal ambitions, habits and desires. By the time they settled down before the fire in the rude farm cottage, that evening, for definite discussion of the future, Mancinus had his new comrade ticketed. Pelargos had wandered and warred all over the world, and his contempt for human life or suffering was absolute; he was possessed of a humor that could be gay but was usually of a grisly cast, an abnormal capacity for liquor, and certain fundamental qualities quite out of the ordinary.

Grex, the wolfhound, took instant liking to the lanky rascal. He was a fierce and half-wild beast, with little affection for Mancinus or anyone else, but Pelargos tousled his head and roughed him about, and he responded with obvious enjoyment.

"Never feel fear, and you've got any beast in your hand, from dog to elephant," said the slinger. "Feel fear, and they know it; they sense it somehow; sweat fear, and they fly at you. Actually, it's a smell of some kind, I'm convinced."

"Never feel fear? Easier said than done," commented Mancinus.

"Precisely. I'm really a valuable acquisition for you," said Pelargos, grinning. "I do actually see farther than other men, as you noticed in the case of that crow with his two white feathers; that, also, is a gift. You may comprehend more easily that my peculiar build enables me to use a sling with peculiar force and accuracy; but here, too, my intelligence prevails. Most slingers are content to use stones or leaden balls. I'm not. Being a competent smith, I make my own missiles. Look here."

Half ironic, half serious, he fumbled in his pouch and extended what was, apparently, a mere jagged lump of iron. Upon fingering it, Mancinus perceived its odd balance, and the sharpness of its pointed faces.

"I see you get the point," punned the other, chortling. "Instead of merely hitting, it tears; at close quarters it even bites through armor. I keep a small stock of these bullets for emergencies; as I must forge them myself, it requires time and occasion."

He replaced the sharply jagged lump in his pouch. The flickering oil lamp lent his weathered, long-beaked features a sinister air, but his eyes were twinkling.

"I'll keep my promise and unfold the whole secret of the treasure," he went on, leaning forward. "You may know that the Veturis estates are in Samnium, north and east of Rome."

Mancinus frowned. "There's no such province. The name's loosely given to some of the old Latin tribes—"

"Call it Umbria, if that suits you," struck in Pelargos. "In common speech, Samnium is usually used; you're too damned literal-minded, like all Romans. The Villa Veturis is not so far from the town of Reate. Close to the estates is the grotto or cave of Lamnia the Sybil; you must have heard of her?"

"Of course. A famous witch or prophetess in ancient times; her cave became an oracle. A hundred years or so ago, the place was closed by order of the Senate. I don't know the details."

"I do. Your Roman Senate is the most superstitious body of men extant," Pelargos said dryly. "Because of some public calamity—I think it was about the time the Gauls sacked Rome—a half-witted priest declared the evil could only be remedied by closing the grotto of Lamnia. So the cave was walled up, and a curse laid on anyone who broke through. Which," he added thoughtfully, "is a bit odd, if you stop to think of it! The Roman Senate had some good practical reason for spreading this yarn and closing the cave. Can you guess it?"

"I'm not fool enough to try."

"Treasure! Some of the treasures of Rome were hidden there, from the Gauls. Then the city was destroyed; those who knew the secret died. When Rome rose from its ashes, the secret was lost. Do you see?"

MANCINUS shrugged. "What the devil has it to do with you or me?"

Pelargos chuckled. "Veturis, when out hunting, discovered a hillside opening and made his way into long caverns; he told of it in delirium, when he was dying. Because of the curse, he never went back or mentioned his discovery to a human soul. He saw the treasure, then learned this was the grotto of Lamnia, and it was finished for him. A more superstition-

ridden people than you Romans, it would be hard to find! Well, I know the secret. I know how to find this cave entrance; no one else does. And there, comrade, is wealth and fortune for the taking, with the compliments of Rome!"

Mancinus sipped his wine, frowning. Pelargos was right about Roman superstition; however, most people were superstitious, on account of the nearness of the gods, who might be found anywhere by river or forest or road. He himself somehow lacked this quality of mind.

"I share neither Roman superstition nor your atheism," he observed. "I credit the power of the gods; I also believe in the power of men."

"Ha, I knew it! A man well balanced, a man of common sense!" Pelargos slapped his lean thigh in delight. "A fit comrade for the Stork! So, then, the treasure is all explained and we've only to reach Umbria."

"If you're talking about the town of Reate, it's in the Sabine country, which is in the province of Umbria."

"A plague on your petty divisions!" Pelargos grimaced. "My friend, I'm not strong on geography. To any man who's seen the wide world, your Italy is a crowded confusion of backyards. To make all safe, say we're bound for the Villa Veturis and be done with it. So that's settled. Now, how about the woman? Is she to your taste?"

"Don't be absurd."

"What d'you mean by *absurd?* The secret of getting somewhere in life doesn't lie in looking at the ground, but at the stars; look far ahead, fasten mind and will upon some distant objective! Nothing can stop you from forging ahead to it."

"What's yours?" demanded Mancinus.

The other shrugged.

"Whatever comes into my head. I've commanded armies, won women, ruled provinces; now I prefer less distinguished roles. The man who stands out above the rest, is easiest hit. At present, I want wealth and what it'll bring. Bah! Between us, we could make you consul of Rome, if so sorry a position were worth while. This African, Hannibal, will soon destroy Rome. Wealth and a woman—there's the objective for you!"

"And for you?" persisted Mancinus, smiling. "Don't evade; what's your goal?"

Pelargos tapped the leather sling at his belt. "This makes me the equal of senator or knight, captain or consul! Any girl will do for me. Achievement I like

for itself. My goal? Damned if I know." He laughed and rubbed his bald head. "Whatever interests me. Just now, you interest me."

THE wolfhound lifted his head, cocked his ears, and growled.

"Wolves outside, Grex?" Mancinus stroked the dog's head, but Grex heeded him little. "I've enough money, Pelargos, to take us into Italy. Go to the coast and take ship, eh? I'm supposed to be in exile, but no one will pay any attention to me."

"Why not go across the mountains?"

"No road. The passes are held by wild tribes. On the other side of the Alps, the Gauls around Turin are all in revolt against Rome. Not even Scipio could go across those mountains. By the way, you said a moment ago that Hannibal would destroy Rome. For the past few months he's been pushing up the Rhone with sixty thousand men. Why think you he's aiming at Rome?"

Pelargos stared. "Why? You said so yourself, in the wineshop this morning. Marching against Rome, said you."

Mancinus laughed. "I was only talking for effect, to impress those Gauls." The dog growled again. "Silence, Grex! Let the wolves prowl and be hanged."

"Well, perhaps your heart spoke better than your head," said Pelargos. "Those Africans may cross the mountains, join the Gauls revolting there, and burst on Rome like a storm."

"Bosh! Use your wits! Any such march would be impossible for an army with supplies, baggage and even elephants, as I hear this army has. If Han-

nibal tried to fight his way through those wild tribes, he'd lose half his force."

"What of it? Human life is the cheapest thing going." Pelargos shrugged. "As you said this morning, the earth teems with men! If he reached Italy with a mere twenty thousand, those Gauls and the other Italian peoples who hate Rome would all join him."

"And Rome would wipe them out of existence," said Mancinus. "An ugly little city, but somehow a mighty force. Let's be practical and stop dreaming. When do we start for Italy?"

"As soon as you can sell this farm."

"I'm no tradesman. Devil take the farm! Shall we leave with morning?"

"Agreed. How about some decent clothes for me? I borrowed these from a scarecrow, in exchange for my uniform."

AGAIN Grex growled sullenly. Mancinus, who had no great love for the dog and distrusted his savagely wolfish disposition, ignored him and went to a chest in one corner of the room.

From the chest, he tossed garments to the bed, and followed them with weapons. Then came a leather coat to wear beneath armor, and the armor itself, a shirt of flexible steel plates. He held this up.

"My father's; good Spanish steel. I'd better try it on."

"Aye, and shave that beard," cackled Pelargos, beginning to strip. "Any veteran can tell you beards breed lice. Especially in Italy."

"We've no razor here."

"I'll trim hair and beard with my knife. You look like a wild beast!"

"Why not? It's all I am."

"Get out of that accursed mood." Pelargos, though far too lanky for the garments, arrayed himself swiftly and helped Mancinus get into the coat and buckle his armor. "You're out of the old life, into the new! Before I've finished with you, my friend, you'll be a god. Get rid of your Roman name, first off! Pelargos, who wars against all gods, now helps to create one—ha! I have it. Ramnes! A good name."

"Ramnes? Not bad," said the other. "Ramnes! Etruscan, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. Might be anything." The lanky Pelargos inspected him with a glitter. "Ramnes! Or do you cling to your Roman name?"

"Plague take it! I cling to nothing from the past, which holds only sorrow. Mancinus is dead, and Ramnes lives. A good omen! Shake on it."

Pelargos shook hands, and grinned. "There's your Roman superstition again. Get rid of all talk about omens!"

Ramnes, as he now was, laughed and made the armor fast. To his astonishment, it was small for him, yet his father had been a large man. A hulking barbarian, the staff officer had said truly. It came to him that he had lived these latter years like a wild animal, sunk in morose and hopeless despondency, bewildered and blinded to the chance of any future.

Ramnes! A good name. He threw out his arms; he had not thought much about himself, lately, but this armor made a difference. Beside this Pelargos he bulked huge, immense. Barbarian! There was a change in him tonight, and it astonished him, though he realized it only vaguely. All his Roman heritage had been swept away with boyhood and exile. In sullen flaring hatred and resentment he had tried to forget Rome and everything connected with it. He still was a man, however, and tonight a new man. How and why?

It came to him suddenly. Across the years, pride and hope and youth had all been crushed down. Today, these had leaped and burgeoned, surging up full force; this day, all he had lacked was come to him in flooding force.

"That sentence was unjust. May the gods reward him and you!"

The only words of sympathy ever given, and too late arrived to reach the broken-souled captain of Rome who was gone. A few words, a look, something kindling in the blue eyes of Drusilla. And how had he answered? Like a boor. Ah, but now he was awake! And he must find her again. He had read this message in her eyes, and it sang in his heart. He must find her again!

"And, by the gods, I will!" he muttered aloud.

Pelargos flung him a glance, surprised the expression in his face, and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Ha! Whatever it is, you'll do it, and I with you. Comrade, you've come to life; you and I together could tear Olympian Jupiter from his throne! Now let's have a whack at that long hair and beard. If you have any grease around, trot it out so we can knead it into the leather coat. The garment's stiff as a board."

"There's grease outside. I'll get it."

RAMNES! He liked that name; it had a dark Etruscan sound in the mouth. He had a suspicion that Pelargos had not chosen it at random, but it suited

him. He could never use the old name in Italy, anyway.

Outside, he found the pot of grease on the shelf, and as he came back left the door ajar, carelessly. He settled down on a stool, armor and all. Pelargos, knife in hand, hacked at the long hair and attacked the beard, jesting gayly the while.

WHILE they were thus engaged, Grex made a sudden dash for the door and forced his way out. His barking was furious and sustained.

"Let him go; he can take care of himself," said Ramnes, rubbing his cheeks. "Not bad, not bad at all! One could almost shave with that knife of yours."

"I used to, until the Gauls captured me two years ago and pulled out my beard, hair by hair, to make face match head." Pelargos, whimsically grinning, stood off to survey his work. "Well, what emerges from the shrubbery might definitely be called good, my honest Ramnes! I'll wager you've lost two pounds' weight of hair—look at it on the floor! By the way, something occurs to me."

"What?"

"This: If you're to help me down the old gods, comrade, you must flow with the stream of destiny. It came for me when I met you; it hasn't come for you yet." Pelargos broke off and cocked his head. "Strange! The dog's fallen silent."

"What are you driving at?"

"Oh, I'm not sure myself!" Pelargos relaxed, and laughed shortly. "Some men are marked out by destiny, above the common herd of mankind; men different, men fated to do strange things, different thinks! I'm one, you're another. We all roll down the same torrent of death in the end, it's true, but some of us have more intelligence than others. What do I mean? Hard to explain, hard to find words; it's something I feel."

Ramnes smiled, a bit uneasily. Then Pelargos, looking up, gulped suddenly—gulped, and froze, slack-jawed, staring. Ramnes turned his head. That talk went unfinished for a long while. . . .

The door had opened silently. A man stood there, looking at them.

A rather short man, swarthy, with dark curly beard; the rest was gold and gems. Golden helmet, a furred golden cloak much worn, and beneath it golden armor, somewhat battered; jewels flashed everywhere about him. A gaudy, jaunty, spendthrift figure, but every inch of him a soldier. In his hand was a javelin, short, steel-tipped. Close behind him crouched two dark figures, bows bent and shafts notched; the arrow-points glittered in the light.

"The gods! The gods have come to life!" gasped Pelargos.

"Steady; you're covered. Keep your heads and you'll not be harmed," said the amazing figure in mixed Gaulish and Latin. "Are you Romans?"

"Romans? No, by Hercules!" exclaimed Ramnes.

"You look it. No harm's intended; we had to kill your dog, for he attacked us. I'll pay you for him."

"Pay for him? Pay?" With a choked oath, Ramnes came half erect. The hand of Pelargos thrust him down suddenly.

"Steady!" said the slinger. "Steady, comrade! Here are Africans."

Africans! The word, commonly applied to the troops of Carthage, brought cool sanity and comprehension. Ramnes relaxed. Something more here, something greater, than a dead dog. . . . Caution smoothed his first rush of anger. From the outside night came a murmur of voices, a confused sound—horses, men. The cavalry of Carthage. War!

"You appear intelligent. You can't be Gauls?" asked the intruder.

"Nor you a god," rejoined Pelargos, his assurance fully recovered.

THE dark man laughed gayly.

"I am Maharbal, commander of the Numidian horse in the army of Hannibal," he said, pleasantly enough but with slow speech.

"Ah!" Pelargos broke into a swift guttural chatter. The Numidian's face cleared, an exclamation of relief and joy escaped him; he became animated, talking rapidly in his own tongue. Pelargos talked as fast or faster. Both of them laughed together. Question leaped upon answer, back and forth, until Maharbal half turned, made a gesture to his two bowmen, and they disappeared. He closed the door, and stepped forward.

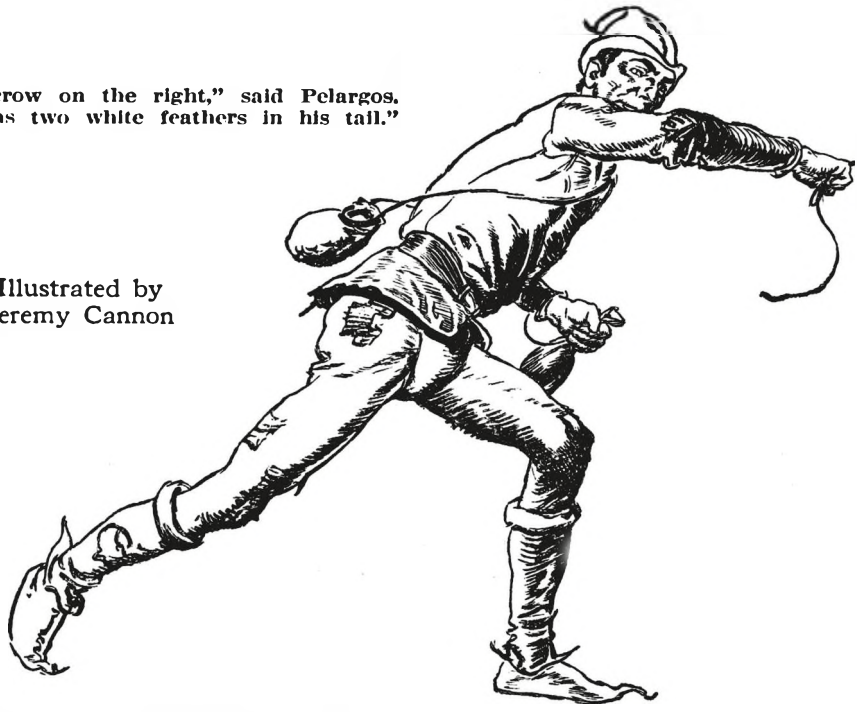
"Comrade, forget the damned dog," said Pelargos, hand on shoulder of Ramnes, with warning grip of fingers. "Rather, consider that in his death he's led us into the very stream of destiny I was talking about! This man wants to take us to his general. I've told him a bit about us—enough, that is. He wants guides; he has them, if you say the word."

"Guides!" Ramnes frowned, bewildered. "Guides? Whither?"

"To Italy," said Maharbal, quick eyes flitting from one to the other.

"The crow on the right," said Pelargos. "He has two white feathers in his tail."

Illustrated by Jeremy Cannon



"Italy, comrade!" rang the voice of Pelargos. "Here's our chance; they're here, they're here, do you understand? Africa is here! They're heading over the mountains. They're not sure of their guides, and are getting more—they want us! Hannibal and his army, do you understand? No time to argue, no time to hesitate. It's yes or no. Can you guide them?"

Ramnes came to his feet. Italy! The mere word shook him, lifted him erect, blazed in him with a wild savage comprehension.

"By the gods—against Rome!" blared out his voice. "Yes, a thousand times yes! Rome, the cruel and pitiless, the killer of good men, the ravening wolf—yes! A jest, what a jest, that I of all men should guide them!"

Harsh mirthless laughter burst from him. Grex was forgotten, everything else was forgotten in this tumultuous and ecstatic moment. The son of Marcus Mancinus guiding the deadliest foes of Rome to death-grips! Why, the whole world had turned over for him this day—his day, the flood-tide of destiny!

Maharbal stood eying him, appraising him, listening to him, then quickly smiled and put out his hand. Ramnes gripped it, and was oblivious to the swift anguish his grip caused the smaller Numidian. His face was alight.

"Rome, the enemy and destroyer! Not you, not Hannibal himself, is the enemy of Rome that I am!"

"What has Rome done to you?" demanded Maharbal, freeing his hand with a grimace.

"Nothing. But to the father I loved, everything! Where do we go? When?"

"Now," said Maharbal. "To Hannibal. We have spare horses. Take what you desire to take, and go."

So it was done, and as though in dream, Ramnes found himself riding away into the night.

Pelargos was beside him, bestriding a horse; dark men all around, Numidian cavalry, with Maharbal close beside, and tongues clacking. Hour after hour they rode, until the cold stars and the chill wind brought sanity of a kind.

Ramnes cooled to it at last. It was real. In a few short hours he had leaped entirely out of his old life, shedding it as a cicada sheds its skin. Since his meeting with Scipio's staff, the old dull hatred for everything Roman had grown into a searing flame; everything Roman, except the blue eyes of a woman.

WAR? Laughing, jesting men of Africa all around, a pair of Gauls from the Rhone, everyone talking freely—was this war? No plundering, no killing, but an iron discipline; it was not war as he had heard of it. Maharbal, he discovered, was one of their chief captains, second only to Hannibal. The army was marching for the upper Isère valley, but was uncertain of the spies and guides at work.

Italy! The word was on every tongue. Those who stopped the way would be massacred without mercy. Italy, and the loot of Rome! Once over the Alps, the Gaulish tribes of northern Italy would welcome and join them—those same tribes that had utterly destroyed Rome a few generations ago. Nothing could stop this army, nothing!

Sixty thousand men had left Spain with Hannibal, and a third of them had perished in Gaul. When Ramnes thought of those high passes, already deep with snow and habited by savage barbarians, he recoiled mentally. Madness, madness! This one word wormed at his brain. He knew those passes, those barbarians. He knew the iron legions beyond. These gay Africans with their high talk and brave spirits marched to ruin.

What of it? He would march with them, and damnation to Rome! The city once destroyed could be destroyed again. Boyhood memories of the mean, crowded buildings on the hills inside the Servian wall, rose in him; narrow, twisting streets, houses hastily run up after the Gaulish ruin, temples built anywhere. Ramnes, Ramnes! The name sang to the clatter of the dark hoofs. It had a fine solid ring, this old Etruscan name.

DAWN was at hand when they rode in upon an enormous camp whose fires glimmered for miles. The fitful flames revealed figures strange and wild and fantastic to the eyes of Ramnes; black Nubians, tattooed Berbers, Spanish slingers from the Balearic isles, heavy-armed troops of Carthage; an army that slept without tents or cover. Every man, Maharbal said, a chosen athlete inured to Spartan ways, but not a man of them the equal of their general.

Vaguely weird shapes upheaved through the gloom; elephants, nearly fifty of them, picked for size and strength. And at last the embers of an open fire surrounded by guards, two men asleep with their feet almost in the ashes; two men, wrapped in mantles against the heavy dew and the Rhone mist.

The party dismounted. Maharbal went forward to waken the sleepers; wood was slung on the fire and a blaze went up. The two wakened, yawned, sprang up—man and boy. The elder was a towering, massive figure, close-bearded, wearing a stained army blouse and an old cloak; yet he was young, no older than Ramnes. The boy was cast in the same mold.

"There we are." Pelargos was at Ramnes' elbow. He looked at the two, with whom Maharbal talked rapidly. "There's destiny, comrade. Hannibal and his brother Mago, they tell me. Find tongue, now! There's a god in the flesh if ever such a miracle happened."

HANNIBAL turned and beckoned, and spoke in Gallic.

"Come, you two! Let's have a look at you. I don't understand this at all. You're not Gauls?"

Ramnes stepped forward to the blaze, aware of the keenly probing scrutiny from man and boy. A handsome fellow, this boy, open and frank and eager.

"No Gaul," Ramnes said. "I was born a Roman."

Hannibal regarded him attentively for a moment, then turned to Maharbal.

"Get us some food. Order the light column to be ready to march in twenty minutes; your scouts in advance. The main column follows with elephants and baggage—sure there's no trouble ahead, eh? Very well."

"Now," and he swung around to Ramnes again, "let's have it. Roman by birth, eh? Talk fast, my good fellow. Either you're a spy, some scoundrel sent to trick me, or else you're a gift from the gods! Your name?"

Ramnes talked freely, as trumpets began to sing through the camp across the dawn.

Here was Hannibal, already a noted figure of romance and legend: the African leader, owner of fabulous gold mines in Spain upon which he maintained this entire army, the soldier whose one aim was to drive a sword into the throat of Rome! It was hard to credit; yet no harder than for the African to credit that this stalwart man in Roman armor could hate Rome also. He said so frankly, and Ramnes blazed out at him in harsh words. Then they both laughed, and the spell of unreality was gone. They were man to man.

If the grim vigor of Ramnes impressed the other, Ramnes himself was astounded by the quick spell that Hannibal cast over him—the fiery energy, the almost hyp-

notic wave of personal charm, power, capability.

"Enough. We'll find a place for you. Welcome!" Slaves were bringing food and wine. Hannibal caught the hand of Ramnes, pressed it warmly, and shot a glance at Pelargos. "Who's this staring baldhead?"

"My friend," said Ramnes. "I answer for him."

"Good; sit down, be comfortable, eat while you can. Now tell me what lies ahead. Can the army cross those mountains? Can you lead us through the passes?"

Amid swift questions, Hannibal slipped into a coat of mail, buckled on a sword-belt, and attacked the food. Ramnes shrugged.

"The very idea seemed fantastic madness; now, since meeting you, I'm not so sure. Yes, a crossing is possible, and I can show the road, or a good part of it, but you'll lose heavily. The mountain tribes are fierce, treacherous, savage. You'll have to fight."

"Understood. I have forty-odd thousand men. Get me into Italy with half that number, you who hate Rome as I do, and I'll promise you the sack of that proud city."

Ramnes emptied his winecup and grunted.

"Perhaps, perhaps. The walls of Rome aren't stones or mountains, but men."

HANNIBAL laughed at this. "No flattering tongue, eh? We'll get on, my friend; you're the only Roman I ever saw who went to my heart. Now, who's this fellow?" he added, with another curious glance at Pelargos.

"The best slinger in the world, my general!" spoke up the latter, who had been silent long enough. "Give me the proper slings for various distances, and I'll make a joke of your best marksmen. Further, you'll find in me an answer to every problem of army, march or battle; in short, the brains that most men lack."

"Indeed? You'll need them," Hannibal said dryly, and beckoned an officer. "Five hundred mounted Balearic slings to accompany us. Give this man whatever equipment he desires. Mago, take command of the heavy column. Ready, friends?"

The boy Mago mounted and was off at a gallop. As by fresh magic, Ramnes found himself riding amid half a hundred aides, staff officers and guides, all swept forward by the furious energy of the one leader. Somewhere amid the throng, he heard the raucous laugh of Pelargos.

Well ahead, Maharbal was gone with a few squadrons of Numidians. Behind, the light column drove along, slingers and arches and horse. Far in the rear came the heavy troops and elephants and baggage, under Mago. All up, moving, on the way, in a matter of minutes.

AS he rode, Hannibal was covering all headquarters details: aides were continually dashing off or spurring back again.

To Ramnes, surprise piled upon surprise. He had supposed this African host a wild, barbaric horde ravening on the pillage of the country. He found it the contrary; aside from the strict discipline, the supply service was organized to minute detail, and it was the army's boast that not a man had ever missed a meal.

Then, when a dozen riders closed around and began to ply him with searching questions on the nature of the defiles and passes ahead, he discovered they were engineers. They talked of heat and cold, of blasting rocks and building roads, of crossing rivers and scaling precipices, of chemicals and stress and weights. Madness? Rather, the slow planning and preparation of years. He began to see the venture, the whole venture, everything around and behind it, in a new light. The weapons, the men, the elephants, the money behind all this supplied from Hannibal's private funds—yes, there had been years in the doing. Scipio had not turned aside from a skirmish or a battle, but from an imponderable weight of fate. And this momentum was carrying Hannibal forward.

After talking steadily with other guides from Gaulish tribes, some thousands of these men accompanying the army as auxiliaries, Hannibal beckoned Ramnes forward and shot at him swift, incisive questions regarding the passes. Ramnes described these as far as the summits, which he knew personally, and Hannibal squinted at the snowy peaks.

"If you report aright, we'll find battle ahead. Tonight?"

"Tomorrow morning. As I said, you'll have nothing to worry about after nightfall. The mountain tribes come out to fight only by day, knowing that no advance is possible by night. Snow and darkness and rocky passes will halt even you."

"You have yet to know me, my friend!" said Hannibal, and laughed a little.

Long before noon, Ramnes recognized the country he knew so well, his own village, his own farm; all was deserted, for the Gauls had fled. The column rode on without halt, and he looked back at the little farm.

Pelargos brought his horse alongside.

"Someone you know, back there, comrade?"

Ramnes turned to him with a nod.

"Aye. A rascally farmer named Mancinus. He died yesterday, thanks be to the gods!"

Pelargos grinned. "You forget, comrade. There are no longer any gods; they're all dead except one."

"What one?" Ramnes laughed. "Blasphemer, you actually admit that one god exists?"

"Aye. He who conquered the Pyrenees, and who has the Alps yet to conquer, and after those the Apennines—if he'd reach Rome," said Pelargos, and nodded at the figure of Hannibal. "And if you think he's no god, Hercules come to earth again, ask the army!"

As though he had caught the words, Hannibal turned his horse and rode over to them. A trumpet blew, others made silvery echo in the distance. The long column drew rein.

"You, baldhead!" said Hannibal, his eyes twinkling. "While we breathe the horses, make good your boasts. Our Balearic slingers are the finest in existence; prove your words and you shall have a place among them."

"You mistake, African." Sliding to the ground, Pelargos rubbed himself gingerly and peered up. "Blisters on the backside don't hurt the throwing-arm; but you mistake. I want no place among your slingers."

"Then what the devil do you want?"

"Command of them."

"Very well." Hannibal lost his smile, and his eyes hardened. "Win it, or be crucified."

CHAPTER III

THEY camped that night far up the Isère valley.

The Gallic auxiliaries had made contact with the tribesmen hereabouts, and reported there would be fighting on the morrow, where the valley narrowed and was commanded by the heights on either side. Yet despite the towering Alps, the snow ahead, the certainty of death and suffering, the column could talk of nothing but the new commander of the slingers. For Hannibal had been true to his word.

Ramnes eyed his comrade curiously that night, while about the campfire the captains drank his health, and Hannibal, who drank not, praised his skill. Ramnes would have expected Pelargos to be wildly braggart, but he was not.

"You did feats today that I'd have sworn were impossible," Hannibal declared. "Take care of yourself; I need men like you. Though others perish like ants, you must live; you're worth thousands. Remember."

"I'll remember, General." Pelargos seemed sober and almost gloomy, and of a sudden Ramnes realized that it must be the effect of the wine, for the man had drunk deeply. "Ants? Aye, to a god like you, men are no more than ants; a good comparison. You're not like the Romans, who never forget they're mere men; they can't cross the street or move camp without seeking omens from the gods."

"I make my own omens," Hannibal said curtly, eyeing Pelargos as though finding new worth in him.

"Precisely." The Stork spilled a little wine from his cup. "Oblation to a living god! Your health, general!"

A burst of laughter and acclaim rose on all sides, but Ramnes caught the irony under those words.

SILENTLY he wandered about the camp that evening, listened as Hannibal and Maharbal and Mago questioned the guides—and turned away, in frowning silence. Finding Pelargos again, he stretched out beside the tall man.

"Best watch your words, comrade," he said. "You may be a great man and commander of the slingers; but I think Hannibal suspected the mockery in your oblation."

Pelargos chuckled. "Why not? He's a god, sure enough; beloved by the soldiers, sharing all they do and suffer, led by a divine genius. He can see half the world die under his heels and think nothing of it. Can you?"

"I hope I may never have to pass such a test," Ramnes said moodily.

"That makes my point; you're not a god, comrade, merely made in the likeness of a god. Some day you'll be hailed as a god—"

"Stop your damned nonsense," Ramnes growled. "Those guides are betraying us."

"I make my own omens," said Hannibal curtly.

"Eh? Impossible. Tell the general about it, not me. I distrust and defy and war against all gods—even the general! But upon occasion I can treat 'em well. Tomorrow you'll see me win the heart of this African god of ours."

"You're drunk. I tell you—"

"Tell me not, but go to sleep. Let 'em betray us; that'll mean fighting. We'll have work tomorrow; I intend to get into Italy with a sound skin and a click of silver in my pouch. Then we're off on the trail of destiny, you and I."

"But you've taken oath to serve Hannibal!" Ramnes protested.

"Bosh! I'll give him his money's worth. See that you swear no oaths, because you'd keep them. Now go to sleep; tomorrow we earn passage into Italy."

With morning, too, Ramnes found Hannibal beside him, as they broke fast; and here was sudden choice dinning at him. Choice between the vagrant witless fantasy of Pelargos, and the solid assurance of rank and command and golden future.

"What will you have of me, Ramnes?" demanded Hannibal abruptly. "I've appraised you, and you're worth while. Army rank? Name what branch of the service pleases you. Wealth? What I lack, Italy will give; but I don't lack. Power? It lies ahead for the taking. Only swear true service, and ask what you will; I think you respect an oath."

"Too much to give one lightly."

Hannibal eyed the savage rocky defiles and heights ahead, nodding thoughtfully.

"Once in Italy, I can put you to use," said he. "You're no ordinary Roman; you can be of great service. Yes or no?"

Ramnes could not miss the voice of opportunity, which made swift appeal to all the solid Roman depths of him; in the same instant, he recoiled. His brain sang with flittering glints of thought: The sardonic, ominous warning of Pelargos. Oaths that would bind him down. The blue eyes of a girl, somewhere afar over the horizon.

The stern Roman instinct in him died, before a rush of boyish, reckless impulse. He laughed gayly, lightly, eagerly, so that Hannibal gave him a frowning scrutiny.

"My hatred of Rome serves you—not I," he said, and smiled. "You're generous, and I thank you. At present, I'm guiding you over the mountains—"

"Others are also doing that," broke in Hannibal.

"Yes. I heard you talking with the guides last night. They're leading you into a trap where the savage tribes will crush you. Take the valley to the left, said they; take the defile to the right, I warn you."

Instantly all else was forgotten. Hannibal looked him in the eyes, and caught his breath, and leaped up.

"Good! I trust you. To arms!"

TRUMPETS pealed. The column broke camp and moved; Hannibal delayed, and Ramnes saw him talking with a little group of half a dozen Gauls. Something familiar about them struck his attention. With a shout of recognition he headed his horse for them, only to be swept aside

by Maharbal and the column of Numidian horse. Laughing, Maharbal caught his reins and drew him into the swirling vortex. Only the vision of those Gauls, friends from his old village, remained, and he saw them no more.

"Aye," Hannibal admitted, later. "I had them brought in for questioning—about you. I trust you on the evidence of my own senses, but I prefer to get confirmation. I got it."

All this later. For the moment, riding with the gay Maharbal, the world was tossed into chaos; the whole army was rushing impetuously forward, hurling itself up the valleys as though to conquer the shining peaks at a single charge.

At first, in this mad confusion, Ramnes thought his warning had gone unheeded, for the valley of the upper Rhone was tempting to the eye. He knew, only too well, the narrow gorges beyond, the impassable defiles, the precipices skirted by mere tracks a foot wide. Just when he gave up hope, aides came on the gallop. Maharbal was shifted to the right and the Numidians went tearing off toward the Little St. Bernard peaks.

PELARGOS proved his boasts this day, and earned his passage well. When the heights to left and right suddenly sprang to life, with blast of horn and wild yell, when huge rocks began to crash down and rend the column apart, carrying men and horses away with screaming death, it was Pelargos who led the light-armed slingers up the heights and cleared them. They fought all day along those hillflanks and the descending shades found the army still entangled in narrow defiles and faced by seemingly hopeless precipices. Late in the afternoon, Ramnes was summoned, and Maharbal with him.

Hannibal awaited them, with several other leaders of the advance and a number of the guides. Pelargos came, grimly exultant; the whole army was already chattering tales of his deeds this day, as it made camp for the night.

"The guides say we're headed wrong," said Hannibal abruptly. "To the left would have been better going, they say. Now, Ramnes, speak out."

"The guides lie," said Ramnes quietly, scratching lines in the snow. "You were headed for better going, yes; that road would have taken you on to Geneva. You would have been lost among the mountains, utterly lost! This way, the defiles open out. Tomorrow we'll come to Chambery and clear valleys along the Isère; then on to the Little St. Bernard and the summits. I've been that far. I know the way."

Clamorously the guides insisted that it was utterly impossible to gain Chambery, where lay the chief fortress and village of the local tribes. Ramnes laughed shortly.

"True enough," he said. "But if there's no opposition, your army can get through. And the trick is to gain those heights tonight, when they're undefended, and seize them."

"As I foresaw," said Hannibal, with a nod. "The council's ended, my friends; sleep until midnight. Then, Ramnes, to work!"

There was little joy that night in the camp, lost in the winding defiles. Despite the roaring fires, the advance guard was appalled by the situation; the bitter cold, the snow, the narrow ways, terrified African hearts. In the rear, the engineers were at work making the trails passable for the heavy column that followed.

Midnight. Ramnes was wakened. He joined Hannibal, Pelargos, and a number of picked captains. A hasty meal, and they set forth upon the starlight, while the army fires twinkled below.

This climb along the unlit ways was a frightful memory. There was no enemy, except the bitter darkness. Here and there, wild mournful cries resounded, and a clash of arms from somewhere below, as men slipped to their death; these noises followed persistently. Ramnes kept close to Hannibal, and this was something to boast about. Hannibal seemed imbued with superhuman and untiring energy; the supreme athlete in his own army, he was impervious to any human feeling, and his body seemed of pliant steel.

They went on and on, until the defiles began to open into the valley ahead, leaving parties of men to occupy every height. With dawn, masses of the enemy appeared, war-horns blared, and disconcerted though they were, the Gauls attacked fiercely, only to be held off by the slingers and archers, until the first parties of shivering cavalry struggled through into the open. Then the enemy broke and, with a few thousand men, Hannibal swept on up the ever-rising slopes.

NIGHT saw the fortress and town occupied, open country beyond, and messengers speeding back to bring up the heavy column of the army. Three days they lay here, the men resting and gaining strength, while scouts probed the way ahead. Here Ramnes was at work, riding

as far as the chief village of Conflans, where the elders of the Gauls decided on peace and sent back guides and gifts to Hannibal. He at once brought up the entire army in column, the elephants and cavalry in the lead. This was a two-day march, and that night, after talking with the Gauls, Hannibal showed up suddenly beside Pelargos and Ramnes.

"You know these local people better than our guides do," he said shortly. "We've scouted the gorges ahead; but I'm worried more about the people than the ground. If these Gauls intend treachery —well, what do you think?"

"What you do, evidently," said Ramnes. "The gorges up ahead are narrow defiles, bad ones. If these hillfolk mean to trap us there, they can do it; and I rather think they'll try it. The safest plan would be to camp here for a week or two and send detachments on to secure the trails and the heights."

"A week or two!" Hannibal laughed harshly. "In that time, the elephants will all be dead; the cold will kill them. We've lost three already. No! We march at dawn, and if these Gauls mean treachery, we'll fight through at all costs."

Pelargos made half-sardonic comment.

"We've lost four thousand men already; a few thousand more or less are of no moment, General. Sacrifice ten thousand lives to the gods of victory! It'll be cheap at the price. It'll cost you that many if you push through at all costs."

"At all costs," snapped Hannibal, oblivious of any deeper meaning behind the words, and issued his orders on the spot. Elephants and light cavalry in the van, this time, with the heavy infantry—baggage and heavy cavalry in the rear.

THE march pressed forward during two days, in peace; the second night, however, saw the worst stretch of gorges ahead.

That second evening brought Ramnes curious gifts from the fates. Marching order was lost; anyone joined any group that had firewood. Pelargos and Ramnes were warming themselves at their own blaze and awaiting mess-call, when others drifted in upon them. One, a lean graying man wrapped in furs, sat at one side by himself and wept; no one knew why or cared. Two others came; a Spanish archer, and the prisoner he guarded, a Roman named Lucius Alimentus.

This Roman had been brought from the lower Rhone; Ramnes had seen him more than once, but avoided him, for he was a bragging and insolent fellow, full of talk. Now he eyed Alimentus without love and kept a closed mouth in his presence.

Mess was served. The fur-clad man ate, dripping tears into his bowl. Pelargos was windy with big words. The Roman prisoner prated of what would happen when this haphazard army of Africans encountered the Roman legions.

"Ha!" said Pelargos, who had been talking long with Hannibal that day, giving him full details on the latest Roman army affairs. "Ha! I can tell you one thing that'll happen. This is the best cavalry in the world, and with the elephants opening the way, it will trample your legions flat."

"You forget that Rome has cavalry," said Alimentus with a sneer.

"Not I! Mounted legions, my good fellow; and once in the saddle, your legions aren't worth a curse. The Roman cavalry is like the elephants of Greece—there's no such thing. It's a standing joke in all armies."

Alimentus turned pale with venom. "You'll learn otherwise," he spat out. "Mancinus is building up a cavalry force in Italy now, has been doing it for the past year; and you'll see your Numidians scatter like autumn leaves before it!"

RAMNES jerked up his head at that name. "Who did you say?" he demanded in astonishment.

Alimentus turned to him.

"Ha! You speak Latin of the purest, do you? I said Lucius Hostilius Mancinus, head of that family. A man of great ability and honor."

"So?" muttered Ramnes. "I've heard otherwise."

"What have you heard, barbarian with Latin tongue?" jeered Alimentus. "Are you not the man Ramnes they've been talking about? An Etruscan name, that. Who are you?"

Ramnes ignored him. Lucius Hostilius Mancinus, eh? This distant cousin had taken over his father's rank and estates; a man of ill omen, a name of sly cruelty and unscrupulous ambition.

Alimentus, rebuffed, grumbled threats.

"You ragged barbarians will soon find how little you know of Rome," he went on. "I've met Mancinus; he's the most promising man in Rome today, of the younger generation. He's raising and training cavalry among the Samnites and other Latin peoples—"

Not trusting himself to talk with the man, Ramnes rose and strode away. He

halted curiously beside the fur-clad man, who had dried his tears for the moment.

"Who are you?" he asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for speech with you, lord."

"With me?"

"Yes. He sent me." And the man pointed at the figure of Pelargos, beside the fire. "He said to come and find you, for only the gods could help me and you had influence with the gods. Help me, lord, and I vow a tenth of my salary all this year to you!"

Scenting some ironic joke of Pelargos, Ramnes suppressed an oath.

"What's all this about, you fool? Who are you?"

"Lars Masena, chief elephant-trainer."

"Lars Masena! Ho, that's no Punic name! Sounds Etruscan."

"Yes, lord. I came years ago from Asculum, from across the Sabine hills. I was slave to a Roman, who took me to Sicily and was killed in the war; I was captured and sent to Carthage. There the elephants liked me. Now I'm chief trainer, I have money, I rank as captain—and I'd give all, all, if I only had Pinktoes back again!"

"Pinktoes!" echoed Ramnes, staring at the figure. "By the gods, what kind of a jest is this?"

"Lord, for me it is tragic." The other stood up, a lean man, old in the face but of great vigor despite his graying hair and beard. He spoke with a simple dignity. "He was the largest of the Getulian bulls, lord, and the noblest elephant I ever trained. Two days ago he died, and I've grieved for him. Now I fear lest his brother Lotus Ear go the same way, for he's been ordered into the lead tomorrow. You see, they don't know that these Getulian bulls cannot stand the unbroken defiles; they must always have a trail or a road, else they become nervous and wild. They can follow others, but not lead. And the worst is that poor Lotus Ear is delicate in the feet—"

Ramnes with difficulty restrained a laugh. Pinktoes! Lotus Ear! It was ridiculous; but it was fact, and to Lars Masena it was tragic fact.

AFTER some talk, Ramnes had the man lead him through the camp to where the elephants were bedded. Here, speaking with the officers in command and not hesitating to use the general's name, he soon had everything arranged to the delight and satisfaction of the elephant-trainer.

Then, ridding himself of Lars Masena and his gratitude, Ramnes came back to his own fire at last and found Pelargos alone.

"What's the idea, putting that elephant-trainer on my trail?" he demanded.

Pelargos grinned and gave him a cup of wine.

"Drink that and listen. The man's interesting; he has secret desires."

"Who hasn't?"

"Ah, but you don't understand! This Lars is a fellow of infinite value, looks older than he is, has brains. He knows the Umbrian country like a book. He's longed for nearly thirty years to go back there, has lived for that moment, yet loves his damned elephants too. We got drunk together the other night in that mountain town, and he opened his heart to me. I told him you'd bring all his lifelong dreams to pass."

Ramnes stared. "Eh? Are you crazy?"

"Of course. You're inhuman like all Romans, trampling on the hearts of men, self-sufficient. But it's in the hearts of men, common men, one finds miracles." In the dirt, Pelargos drew half a dozen converging lines, coming into one, and pointed to it. "There's strength, as in a rope of twisted strands. Destiny's like that, too, made up of little things coming together."

"Oh! You mean our plans?"

PELARGOS nodded. "Don't we go to Umbria? We'll take Lars; he'll be worth while."

"Why? You have reasons that you're keeping secret."

"Right. Now look how destiny works for us! First, this man; we'll be glad of him, later. Then this Roman prisoner, what's-his-name, who knows your precious cousin. I milked him of more information, after you left. Your cousin is not only in Umbria also, but he's in the very spot we're going, the town of Reate! What's that but fate at work?"

"Fate be hanged, and my cousin to boot!" growled Ramnes. "I don't want to see him."

"No matter; I tell you, here's destiny! If we get through the Alps alive, we'll see some fun down in those Sabine hills. Where did you go with Lars?"

"To arrange about his blasted elephant in the line of march."

"I thought you would; now he's a friend for life. You're not so inhuman after all."

"Shut up—go to sleep. I'm worn out."

Along the heights ran suddenly a blare of war-horns. On the slopes, on the peaks, Gauls

Ramnes rolled up and fell asleep with a cackle of sardonic mirth in his ears. . . .

Mid-morning of next day found the column deep in the rocky gorges, painfully climbing; the cavalry were far outstrung along the line of march; the elephants were uneasily picking a way along the narrow trails. Ahead, the defiles began to widen out. Then along the heights on either side, suddenly ran a blare of war-horns. On the slopes, on the peaks, in the wider stretches ahead, Gauls appeared by the thousand. Rocks began to thunder down, huge boulders that brought with them trees and small avalanches.

Amid this wild uproar and confusion, the Gauls attacked. Battle was added to destruction. Arrows and javelins rained down. In the rear, the column was broken in two; here the Gauls attacked

appeared by the thousand. The slingers and light troops went desperately at the enemy.

openly, and also at the van, endeavoring to destroy the whole force.

The elephants, luckily, terrified the foes ahead and drove them back, giving the cavalry a chance to emerge from the gorge. Men and horses were struck down by the missiles from above; multitudes of the light infantry were trampled to death by the maddened horses. An elephant was down. The stream ran crimson.

The slingers and light troops went desperately at the enemy and slowly won a way upward. Every crag, every hillside path, ran blood. Pelargos was in the thick of it, and Ramnes repeatedly saw the lanky slinger bring down enemy chiefs at seemingly impossible distances. He himself, however, had scant leisure to watch others. More accustomed to such mountain trails than most, he was in the

thick of the onset, slowly toiling upward, wielding javelin and sword with grim insistence.

It was a mad scramble, but gradually Hannibal made good his words and fought through. His column suffered horribly; as the afternoon waned, he got them out of the defile and in makeshift camp at the wider valley ahead. The fighting died away with sunset. The wounded died, or came crawling on in the darkness. The rear of the army was cut off somewhere behind; and darkness drew down as exhausted men dropped where they stood.

Then, with roaring firelight limning the the bloody scene, Ramnes saw why this army held its chief to be a god. He accompanied Hannibal everywhere, aiding the wounded, lending the surgeons a hand, bringing order out of chaos. By midnight, discipline and organization had prevailed, the troops were in some semblance of formation; and Ramnes, at his last gasp, flung himself down near Hannibal and was asleep instantly. . . .

He wakened to movement all around, and to stifled sobs close by. Sitting up, he stared slack-jawed at Lars Masena, who crouched at his elbow in the dawn-light.

"Help me, Lord Ramnes!" exclaimed the elephant-trainer, chattering with cold.

"You again! What the devil is it now?"

"No one will listen to me. The trappings for the elephants are with the baggage in the rear. I must have a blanket to pad the back of Lotus Ear, for it's rubbed and sore, and they command to load the worst of the wounded on the elephants, and no one will give me a blanket—"

"Here, take mine." Ramnes scrambled to his feet, laughed, and flung his own blanket at the man. "We may all be dead tonight—off with you!"

Lars departed joyously, a blanket being just now a treasure above price to the Africans. Ramnes turned as Pelargos approached with some food. The commissariat still functioned.

"Gulp it, comrade, gulp it!" ordered Pelargos. "We're attacking in five minutes—attacking, mind you! There's a general who knows his business."

And for once the ungainly slinger was not sardonic.

CHAPTER IV

THE Gauls ventured no further battle; none the less, the advance became a nightmare, swirling with horror. The enemy attacked invisibly, rolling down boulders that swept away men and horses, but this was by no means the worst.

Snow fell. The army, reunited once more, struggled on without fires for cooking or for heat, since there was no more wood. More elephants died, there being no way to cook the flour-cakes on which they were fed. Men died from wounds or sheer cold; many went over precipices with the baggage-animals and wagons, since of these the thundering boulders took fearful toll.

YET, wounded and stricken, the army dragged itself along. There were no guides; Ramnes knew the summit, but he had not come by this passage, and the snow made the whole country look different. Consequently there were many false starts before the best way was scouted. And with each day more men were gone, more of the baggage was missing.

Eight days of hell; on the ninth day the passes lay behind, the enemy was gone, and they staggered to the open summits at the crest of the final pass, bleeding feet turning the snow to crimson behind them. And here, during two gasping bitter days, the exhausted army rested, looked forth upon the vista of Italian plains far below, and gathered strength for the final work while scouts pricked out a possible descent. Debilitated by cold and wounds and labor, the men were like skeletons, the elephants were starved and weakened, half the baggage was lost.

"Did you hear the reports today?" asked Pelargos, as he and Ramnes huddled for warmth on the night before the march was resumed. "Now see how a god thrives on the blood of men! This general of ours came into Gaul with sixty thousand in his train. He had forty-six thousand nine days ago, when he attacked the Alps. Today the reports show fourteen thousand African infantry, eight thousand Spanish and Gallic infantry, and seven thousand Numidian cavalry; forty elephants left. The Africans and the horses are dying like flies. If we reach Italy with twenty-five thousand men, we'll be lucky. One bite for the Roman legions!"

"Perhaps," muttered Ramnes gloomily. "But the Gauls of Italy will join us."

"Granted. So much the more to perish. A god doesn't see men die; but their comrades do, their friends do! Whether your god be one person, like Hannibal, or many like your Roman Senate—do the tears of women reach their hearts? Never."

"You're bitter against Hannibal."

"I'm not. I admire him enormously, as a general; not as a god. I distrust all gods! Their chief business is to kill off mankind; I desire to live. Even your own private god of hatred is a silly thing; it breeds destruction. Comrade, I'd give my good right arm, my slinger's arm, if I could make you see the folly of the gods!"

"Aye? What would replace them?"

"Reason. Contentment and peace in life; happiness that comes with construction." Pelargos spoke with deep and surprising earnest. "I've been talking with Lars Masena; if you could look into that man's heart, you could see the reality. Now he has one elephant whom he cherishes more than life. Let's hope he loses his damned Lotus Ear soon."

"Eh? Why such a hope?" queried Ramnes.

"Because then Lars will be ready to follow his heart's desire. That elephant is, at the moment, his god. When this beast dies, he'll shed tears and become a man again—with a horizon. While a man clings to his little god, he has no horizon. He needs one. We all need one."

"I thought you an aimless drifter?"

"HERE in this damned snow, comrade, I'll tell the truth. I'm no such thing, though I pretend; aye, and jeer at fate to hold my courage up! I've a wife and two sons, taken from me during the wars. They're in Italy now, in a certain city—never mind the details. I'm on my way. You'll help me, I'll help you; Lars Masena will help us both, and we him. What was the first thing I gave you? A horizon. A woman and wealth."

"Damned nonsense," growled Ramnes, but thought again of blue eyes in warmth.

"Maybe; nonsense is a wise thing at times. You're in process, like an elephant half tamed. I need you. I'll use you, or Hannibal, or your cursed Roman Senate, anything and everything, to reach my horizon."

"Then your wife and children are, in your own words, your gods."

"No; they're human. And human desires, like that which burns in the heart of Lars, aren't gods. I'll tell you the difference. Once, in Sicily, I met a fellow from some far eastern land near Egypt. I don't know the name of it. He was a merchant from Tyre, and his country lay somewhere about there. We liked each other and talked often. He used to tell me about the god of his people, and the odd thing about it was that it was a different kind of deity. He used to tell me over and over that his god was a spirit—just that."

Ramnes laughed. "Queer kind of a god, sure enough!"

"Well, there's something to it, and that expresses what I mean; a god is a spirit. The only real god there is. Poor Lars is a humble fellow, has craved with all his soul for thirty years, and when he gets to his goal, will be disappointed; no matter. I tell you he can make or mar all we do! So much for him. For me—why did I desert from Scipio's army? Because he was sending his army to Spain. He himself was going to Italy. I couldn't go with him, which was his misfortune, so I started by myself and found you. Together, we'll be a team to drag down the gods! With Lars, we're invincible."

"Why?" demanded Ramnes. "Why Lars—a weeping, broken man?"

Pelargos snorted. "Broken, my eye! Weeping, over his dead god, yes. What chance have any of us in this man's army? None. We can't be ourselves. We're all overshadowed by a god, by the grind of events. Get free of it and serve our own ambitions! One battle, and either Hannibal will be destroyed, or he'll smash the legions. In either case, be ready to go our own ways. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Ramnes, and wondered what Pelargos could see in the elephant-trainer that was worth while. Upon the puzzle, he fell asleep.

Two more elephants were found dead in the morning, when the army marched out. An evil omen, said someone on the staff, at which Hannibal cursed all omens. But new snow had fallen in the night.

The descent was far steeper than the ascent from Gaul; it wound down the face of precipitous cliffs, the new snow had hid the old surface, and ghastly tragedies occurred every hour. With afternoon came heartbreak. The advance guard were in a gorge so deep and abrupt that the sun never reached the bottom, which was a sheet of solid ice—and went on over the edge of a precipice. Here was death for many, ere the situation was realized.

BACK along the column, trumpets shrilled, the army halted; and with sunset the engineers arrived at the head of the line. It was bitter cold. To go on, meant that a road must be built around the lip of the precipice for a good three hundred yards; the living rock had to be blasted out.

Luckily, there was no lack of firewood here, and the engineers went to work by

torchlight. Roaring fires were built along the seams of rock. These were filled with water and allowed to freeze, bursting the rock asunder; with tools, with vinegar from the baggage train to soften the rock and help drill more holes, the work went on.

By daylight, the light-armed troops could pass, but for another three days the engineers labored, patiently working farther and farther until by aid of frost and water and handiwork the way was passable for baggage and for the elephants. And as the days passed, men and animals perished from cold or from sheer exhaustion.

Six days in all before they came down into the valley of the Po, leaving a full twenty thousand behind them in the Alpine passes; human wreckage, emaciated and worn, thirty-seven gaunt elephants staggering with weakness, one of them Lotus Ear, the Getulian beast on whose neck sat Lars Masena. A single legion then would have wiped them out. Instead, they were met by the Gauls of Italy, friends and allies against Rome—met with wild rejoicings, with eager hospitality, with news of all northern Italy in revolt and cities waiting to be looted.

The nightmare horror was past. In its place was jubilation, a frenzied exultation of conquest, loot, women, plunder; small wonder that under this triumphantly rolling flood, one man was forgotten.

RAMNES remembered vaguely that last day or two of the descent, with fever tugging at his brain and his body loosened and failing; then came a blank. He wakened in a little village of Gauls, on the Orcus River; he was alone here, weak and wasted with fever, but an honored guest among kindly folk.

It was days later before he could comprehend just what had occurred.

"Lord, you were left with us; we were well paid," said his host. "One man, very tall, who carried three slings at his belt; he had a bald head. With him another man and a vast monstrous beast with two tails, who obeyed him like a dog. They said you were to wait here for news from them."

"I can do nothing else," said Ramnes, who could scarcely lift his hand.

A terrible despondency enveloped him. Mere skin and bone, all energy sapped away, his companions gone and all the vista of the future destroyed, he lived mechanically but hopelessly. The Gauls tended him with assiduous care. The days drew into weeks, he was able to sit in the wintry sun, and his strength gradually returned; but inertia gripped him.

For this emptiness and loneliness he had bartered his mountain independence far away in Gaul; a glamorous dream that was turned to ashes. Now his future was as blank as his past. After all, the whole vision had been silly, baseless. The story of Pelargos might have been a lie, about the hidden treasure. Drusilla? He smiled bitterly at the thought of her. She had gone her way, all his fancies about her blue eyes were utter nonsense, he would never see her again.

Harsh reality here, and reality hurt. It had been so easy to dream afar! Queerly, though, one thing lingered with him; that confidence in the snow on the Alpine summits, and the words of Pelargos. "God is a spirit." As he lay, Ramnes came to realize what the bald rascal had meant by his talk of warring against the gods, the material gods, and by the deity that was a spirit.

True, perhaps, but he himself had nothing, nothing. Ambition was reft from him. He was a shadow in the world of men, and he had not even a name. As health returned across the weeks, mental health evaded him; he grew more and more hopeless of the future.

The Gauls were simple, kindly folk. News? They had little. The Africans, they said, had captured Turin and were occupying the whole country north of the Po; it was rumored that the Consul Scipio had been defeated in a cavalry battle on the Ticinus. This left Ramnes cold. Hatred had died with the rest; he cared little, he told himself, whether Rome or Carthage won. If hatred were his god,

in the words of Pelargos, it had been dwarfed to petty stature. He needed a cause, his own cause, a cause that would fire his heart and soul; and he had none. The dream that had thus far carried him, was gone before the blasts of reality. Fool, to idealize a pair of blue eyes and a moment's passing meeting!

NOVEMBER went, and December was in. Ramnes was himself again in body, strength returning full flood; he was an enormous hulk of a man, listless and tormented in mind. The Gauls chivvied him, for his own good, into matching himself against them at running and throwing the javelin and wrestling; the best of them were helpless against him, yet he had no pleasure in his own powers. He had no incentive, no ambition. He took no care to his appearance, let hair and beard grow wild. And so, of a morning in late December, came Croton.

Ramnes heard the hubbub in the village, and then they brought in the man—a small, wizened, blear-eyed fellow with perpetually hoarse voice, and the metal collar of a slave about his neck. He blinked at Ramnes, saluted him, announced himself.

"My name is Croton," he said in Greek. "One Pelargos sent me to you."

"Speak Latin," said Ramnes irritably. "I've forgotten my Greek."

"Very well, lord. I've brought you a horse, garments, money, armor, and a message."

"I want none of them," retorted Ramnes. "Your Latin has a damned queer accent!"

"Perhaps, lord; I come from Reate. I was a freedman of the noble Quintus Veturis, and the manager of his estates there."

Ramnes straightened up on his stool.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. Croton repeated his words.

"A freedman? But you wear the collar of a slave!"

A snarling oath came from Croton, a vicious, hate-hissing oath.

"I keep that collar until I can return home and obtain justice. Lucius Mancinus took me as his slave, by fraud and force; he took other possessions of the Veturis family, also."

"The lady Drusilla?" Ramnes asked quickly. "Where is she?"

Croton blinked at him in astonishment. "You know of her, lord? She is coming to her estates now, poor soul! Mancinus is supreme there in Umbria; he raises men and horses for the army and has much power. There is no love between him and the lady Drusilla, though he intends to force her to his will and marry her, for the sake of her estates—"

"Wait, wait!" broke in Ramnes, putting back his unkempt hair and staring at the man. "By the gods, what trick is this? How the devil did you get here?"

"By gods and devils both," the other said sadly. "Mancinus took me with him when he led his cavalry contingents to the army, because I am skilled in the ailments of horses and he needed me. The Africans defeated us at the Ticinus River. Our cavalry cannot stand up to theirs, for our men are trained, like the legions, to fight on foot. I was captured by the Africans and saved my life by proclaiming my skill, so they attached me to the army and the bald man, Pelargos, one day heard me talking about Veturis. He had served Rome under Veturis; so he bought me and sent me here to you. I gave oath to reach you. My reward is freedom. I have the letters of manumission here, to be signed by you as witness, which makes them valid. Also the gifts for you, outside with the horses; and a letter from Pelargos. He is unable to write, but I wrote down what he commanded."

This said, Croton wiped his bleary eyes and lapsed into watchful waiting.

Ramnes caught his breath, and his heart leaped. Drusilla again! This fellow had known her and served her! And Pelargos had not forgotten him at all. Ha! The world was not so dark after all! His spirits mounted. The old sparkle crept into his eyes and his brain wakened into life.

"WHERE'S Pelargos now?" he demanded in a new voice.

"With the army, lord. The consuls, Scipio and Sempronius, have united their armies in a fortified camp on the Trebia. The Africans are camped opposite them and are eager for battle, but the Romans delay. It may come at any time."

"You spoke of a letter. Where is it?"

Croton reached under his tunic, and produced a roll of sheepskin pieces.

"There's the letter of freedom for you to sign." He laid one aside. "And my passport through the African lines, bearing the seal of Hannibal; also another for you. Here is the epistle. I write Greek, Latin or Tuscan."

He handed over a length of the thin leather bearing exquisite calligraphy in Greek. Ramnes seized it, still lost in

wonder at the apparent coincidence which had led this horse-doctor to him; but it was no coincidence, as he presently perceived. It was the quick wit of Pelargos at work. The letter was to the point:

Greeting, Ramnes. Ask this man Croton about the dagger of Mancinus, your cousin. Shave your face clean and avoid Hannibal. Join us. Lars Masena will be ready, for his god is dying. Down with all the gods! Farewell. —Pelargos.

Ramnes eyed the words, his blood running warmly. He was not forgotten, the dream was reality, the future was not empty! From the depths of despondency, he was abruptly jerked to the heights of vision again.

Shave? Avoid Hannibal? Obvious enough. So the elephant Lotus Ear was dying, and Lars was looking ahead to his mysterious heart's desire—good! Aye, he must up and ride, and lose no time about it; if battle came, Pelargos might well go the way of all flesh, by a Roman sword. Sudden excitement stirred in him, and then he looked up, frowning.

"What does he mean about the dagger of Mancinus?"

"Oh, that!" Croton wiped his wizened features, blinking, with nervous hand. "That is the dagger of Eryx. Your baldheaded friend seemed to think it interesting. What became of Mancinus in the battle, I don't know. He was going back to Umbria to raise more cavalry and to stick the dagger in the Lady Drusilla; possibly he's there now. You see, the Veturis estates are near the city of Reate, where he has his headquarters."

Ramnes felt his brain swimming.

"Am I in fever again? What has all this to do with a dagger? What is Eryx?"

Croton began to laugh amusedly.

"Lord, Eryx is a city founded by Greeks along the coast, east of Umbria; now it pays tribute to Rome but has its own rulers, or did have when I last heard."

"What the devil are you driving at?" cried Ramnes angrily. "Are you trying to say that this damned cousin—that this Lucius Mancinus means to kill Drusilla?"

"Kill her? The gods forbid!" exclaimed Croton, astonished. Then he changed countenance. "Still, she might be better off if he did kill her," he added, wagging his head mournfully. "For I've heard him say that, after sticking the dagger in her, he meant to make her a laughingstock and exhibit her to all his friends in shameless attitudes—"

Ramnes came to his feet, drove his fist at the open door before him, and the stout wood splintered with a rending crash.

"What madness is this?" he roared. "Eryx! Reate! Daggers! Exhibits! By the gods, will you talk sense or must I have you taken out and whipped by these Gauls?"

"Lord, have patience! I'm trying, indeed I am," the little man cried in alarm. "First, Mancinus not only loves the lady Drusilla, but hates her, because she despises him; he wants to marry her, degrade her, break her heart, shame her! Is that clear?"

"Go on," said Ramnes, ignoring the Gauls clustering outside the broken door.

"Second, he means to do this with the dagger. This dagger, lord, is the sovereign emblem of the old Tyrants of Eryx; who owns it, becomes the lord of that city, or so it was in the olden time. It was a gift to one of those rulers from the goddess Athene—"

"Skip all that rot!" exclaimed Ramnes.

"But, my lord, that's the point of everything!" desperately pleaded Croton. "It is a magic dagger, the gift of the divine goddess! No swordsman is secure against its magic power; whoever is pricked by its point, straightway loses all will, all resistance, and becomes the slave of the dagger. This is well known. It's historic fact. If Mancinus only pricks the finger of the lady Drusilla, she obeys him in every respect, like a slave who is made drunk with unmixed wine. This is his intent. He took the dagger by force from the temple of Tinia in Reate. Tinia is the Etruscan god whom we know as Jove or Jupiter—"

RAMNES broke into a laugh of ridicule, but his laugh froze midway. He stared at the sunlight, the horses before the door, and the clustered Gauls, and saw them not. Instead, he saw the face of Drusilla, calm and deep of eye, this woman who, in the expressive words of Pelargos, knew the gods intimately. The voice of Croton droned on, telling how the dagger had come to be in that temple and so forth, but Ramnes heard nothing.

His brain was busy; behind these words about magic, he perceived hard sense. He knew now why Pelargos had sent the horse-doctor on to him.

A dagger of magic power, given by the gods—somebody had been clever, back in the ancient days! A dagger, feeding its very point some secret and terrible drug, such as were known to priests and wise

men; yes, a simple thing enough, embellished with many a fantastic detail. And a man, powerful, unscrupulous, savage of heart, lusting after beauty and planning to drag it down into the mire.

Ramnes closed his eyes and shivered slightly; he had heard from his father what manner of man was this cousin Mancinus, a young man with the heart of a wild boar. Now, with all Italy in wild uproar and confusion of war, with the allies of Rome, the Latin states such as Umbria and the independent cities like Capua or Eryx wavering in loyalty—now was the time for a man to act. A man like this Mancinus, working for Rome with his right hand, for himself with his left. "Or," muttered Ramnes, looking out suddenly at the sunlight, "a man working with both hands for himself and for a daughter of the gods—a man like Ramnes!"

HE turned abruptly to Croton, who had fallen silent and was staring at him.

"Have you a razor?"

"Eh? Yes, yes, my lord," was the hurried response. "Pelargos said you might have need of one. I brought one."

"So? And what sort of armor did you bring me?"

"Excellent armor, lord; Pelargos tested it. Your passport says you are Ramnes, captain of fifty, attached to the elephant division. Pelargos said that upon reaching the army you are to report to someone in that division. Hm! An Etruscan name like your own—"

"Lars Masena, yes." Ramnes! Work to do, a journey to go, an ambition to seek, a horizon to reach! He remembered that Lars Masena knew all the lower country intimately; a man seeking some mysterious heart's desire across the years. Just as Pelargos sought. Just as he himself—his smile became a laugh, eager and ringing.

"I'll sign your freedom letters, then you may go. Whither?"

Croton blinked at him in a snarl.

"To Umbria, of course. My mistress will be there; she'll see justice done me."

"Hm! The town of Reate, in Umbria. Do you know of a certain grotto somewhere near your estates there? The grotto of a Sybil?"

"Lamnia the Sybil!" Croton gaped at him. "Sealed up and accursed! You know of it?"

"Aye. You have money?"

"Plenty, lord. A full purse is among your things."

"Pelargos has looted well, eh?" Ramnes laughed again, and sobered. "Go and find your mistress; give her a message from me—wait! How do you know she'll not remain in Rome?"

"Lord, the Villa Veturis is her home, and is dear to her. She detests Rome. The villa houses all the family *lares*—relics of the family, gods and shrines of the ancestors—and also the family wealth that I helped Quintus Veturis to hide before he went on this last campaign. My mistress takes after her Sabine mother, rather than after her Roman father."

"Do you know that Pelargos was with Quintus Veturis when he died?"

Croton veiled his sharp eyes and evaded. Ramnes chuckled.

"I see you do. Pelargos warned you to tell no one, eh? Good man! Well, tell your mistress that the person once named Mancinus, whom she met on the other side of the Alps comes to find her once again. That's all."

"Mancinus!" Croton looked up with prying, speculative gaze. "There was a Mancinus years ago, commander of the Fourteenth Legion; but you're young. And Pelargos said she would remember him, too. All this is very singular—that she should know him and you both!"

"Well, let's have your letters for my signature," Ramnes said. "Then off, make haste! Warn your mistress; make her return to Rome, where she'll be safe from this Mancinus."

"From this or that Mancinus?" said Croton, and shook his head. "I know her, my lord. She has the greatest contempt for that man. Her pride would not let her fear him."

Ramnes nodded, and took the strip of leather handed him.

"You should write on paper, like the Egyptians do."

"Lord, there was no paper in the camp," said Croton simply.

AGAIN Ramnes laughed. He was still laughing as he affixed his name to the letters of freedom, with a seal borrowed from his Gallic host. He was in a riot of laughter—laughter of upsurging strength and confidence and vision.

For he knew now what Pelargos had meant by all his talk of gods; and those gods were beckoning him forward to a horizon glinting with blood and steel.

The next installment of this novel by the author of "Life's a Fight, Kit," appears in our forthcoming January issue.

The Writing on

A brief steel-mill drama by the author of "Beelzebub" and "Friendship."

I LIKED Mike Stroganoff. There was a steel-mill man! Mike, as a refugee who had escaped the Russian revolution, should have been a waiter in some Parisian café. That's standard. But not for Mike. The rumble of a roll train made better music for Mike Stroganoff than the squalling of a dance band.

Michael Stroganoff was the youngest of an ancient, noble family. For nearly half a thousand years the Stroganoffs had been rich iron-masters in that incalculable treasure-house of mineral wealth, the Urals of eastern Russia. And early in the revolution he had seen his father and his two elder brothers marched out to an ore-bin wall in one of their own plants. The workers had taken over. One of them, long a blast-furnace man for the Stroganoffs, and at that time a foreman, had doomed his old employers. That day the blast-furnace foreman for the Stroganoffs was a revolutionary judge.

"My father was a hard taskmaster, Mr. Church," Mike Stroganoff told me proudly. "And he was very rich. But he acquired his wealth by building Russia, which is vast. Building it is a driving task. My father drove us, his three sons, as hard as he drove any other man; and himself harder. . . . My brother Sergei held a match steadily to my father's cigarette. Then to my brother Grigor's. Grigor said: 'Three on a match is thought to be unlucky. A silly superstition, Sergei, isn't it?' My father growled: 'You, Andreivitch! You there, by that machine-gun! Let someone else do that. You get back to those stoves and change the blast on them before the furnace gets as cold as Verkhoiansk. *Brz, now!* Before I come over there and kick the rear out of your pants!' And Andreivitch dropped a cartridge-strip and ran. A guard told us about it, laughing heartily.

"Why I was not included in the same squad with my people," said Michael Stroganoff, "I never learned. When I struggled to go with them, I was knocked down with a rifle-butt. And as I lay half stunned, I heard the ghastly drumming of machine-guns. . . .

"That night I escaped."

THE flight of Michael Stroganoff was epic. While pursuit went east and west and south, along the railroad and the rivers, Michael Stroganoff went north into the bitter Russian winter. Primitive tribes of Samoyedes gave him almost three thousand miles of reindeer travel into Siberia. After that came hardships incredible; but in the end, touching at Verkhoiansk, Petrapavlovsk, Sitka, Seattle and way stations, he arrived at Ironville, Pennsylvania. There he became a laborer at Susquehanna Steel. But very soon he was the best skull-cracker craneman we had ever had. And when the sixteen-inch cold shear was set up, Mike got the job of shear-man.

There was a time when scrap rails were broken into open-hearth charging pan lengths by dropping the skull-cracker ball upon them. And when that ten-ton pellet hit, the splinters flew. Skull-cracker workmen knew the danger and had necessary shelter. But the outsider had to be protected too; and so between the tall steel building columns, walls of concrete stretched—thick, blank and gray, and deeply pitted by the flying steel.

Nowadays we break rails safely into scrap-box lengths with Old 16, the cold shear, a squat and ponderous monster which can bite through any steel not more than sixteen inches in cross-section —cold, remember. But I recall an instance when Old 16 came down on something just too tough for him.

I was walking through the skull-cracker house that day, when I saw Mike Stroganoff moving a heavy, smooth round bar on the roll table, up to the jaws of our pet snapping-turtle.

"What's that thing, Mike?" I asked.

"Would it perhaps be hollow-forging shell steel?" suggested this shear-man, whose precise English and whose metallurgical knowledge no longer startled me.

the Wall

By
R. G. KIRK

Illustrated by Grattan Condon

"As I lay half stunned, I heard the ghastly drumming of machine-guns."

"How big is it?" I inquired.

"Diameter four and five-tenths. Section fifteen and nine-tenths," stated Mike exactly. "Within capacity."

The heavy motor, idling, hummed a confidential song and Mike Stroganoff threw in the shearing switch.

With a heavy clank the massive clutch engaged. Down came the jaw. And when it met that gleaming bar, Old 16 shuddered to the grouting of his twenty-ton bed-plates, and the ground around his deep foundations quaked. Had it not been for expert draftsmanship, I think that mighty biter-offer would have torn himself up by the anchor-bolts and split himself to wreckage. But a set of safety pins, intrinsic with the clutch, are so made as to shear off if the jaws stall. And they, thank heaven, let go with a crash, freeing the clutch, and saving a disastrous smash-up, though I'll bet Old 16's jaws were sore for half a year. That round bar had him licked. But we installed another set of safety pins, and no harm done. And we burned that adamantine bar to lengths with an oxygen torch and loaded it for the open hearth.

We burned all but one short piece, three feet or less. Mike Stroganoff kept that as a sort of souvenir.

ONE day Mike Stroganoff made a strange request—asked if I would send him some cement and lime. He wanted to repair and whitewash the walls of the skull-cracker building.

"Rail fragments now no longer volley it," he said. "Also I hate gray, pitted walls. If these were smooth and white, I should perhaps not always see my father and my brothers with their backs against them."

I saw his knuckles whitening against his thighs.

I said: "O. K., Michael Stroganoff. Cement and lime tomorrow."

When I got back to my desk that day a note lay on it, saying: *"Please see the G. M."* So I hot-footed it.

The G. M. said: "Get word around that all machinery and equipment is to be in superperfect shape tomorrow. Krpotin will be with us."

"Tomorrow? Krpotin?" I said. "But I thought he wasn't due here till next week."

"His plans are changed," the G. M. said. "Tomorrow."

This Krpotin was the Slavic big-shot who was visiting the steel plants of America. He was to order vast amounts of steel-producing equipment for the U.S.S.R., and was observing our production methods.

"It's jake with me to turn him loose right now," I stated modestly. "Superperfection is the normal status where that fellow Church is master-mechanic. But I did want time to polish my top hat; and to practice up a bit on that famous ballad about Ivan Skivinski Skavar and his princely rival, Abdul the Bulbul Ahmeer. I could get Susquehanna Steel a lot of Russian orders with that ditty."

"Doubtless the sales department has rehearsed it," said the chief.

WHEN the inspection party reached the skull-cracker house next day, our visitor was impressed by Old 16.

"A beautiful machine," he said. "It has a quality of ruthlessness which I admire. How soon could you deliver fifty like it? But first, of course, its safety feature must be seen to function. What, when a thing too difficult gets between the jaws?"

So the shear-man got the piece of four-and-a-half-inch round—part of the bar which Old 16 had found almost beyond his might. We waited, grouped beside the shear, while Mike, after considerable struggle, managed to lift it up on the roll table. I wondered why he didn't get the crane to handle it. It must have weighed close to a hundred fifty, a good lift even for a man as strong as Mike. Maybe he wanted to perform a bit before this party of brass hats.

But Krpotin, at least, was not watching Mike. Mike was only a begrimed workman. And how begrimed! His face was daubed from brow to chin with oil, resulting, doubtless, from the orders he had got to treat Old 16 with a first-class cleaning and a grease job in preparation for a demonstration of his power. You couldn't recognize the man.

Our visitor had better uses for his time than watching grimy workmen lifting bars of steel. His eyes were missing nothing on the plant. Now they were taking in the whole skull-cracker layout. But suddenly he said:

"Observe!"

He was pointing to the wall.

"A word is there," he said. "In Russian, so it seems. Not quite distinct."

He set beribboned glasses on his nose and walked directly from the shear across the floor to read. He stood a while in study. Then he turned.

"Most curious," he said. "These letters are Cyrillic. Who might have—"

Just then Stroganoff said: "Ready!"

At the sound of Mike's voice, Krpotin turned swift, startled eyes upon him. So did I—and noticed this: that Mike had wiped the dark oil off his face.

Krpotin made no move to get away from that blank, pitted wall. He merely stood and looked inscrutably at Stroganoff. I wonder if he would have stood if he had known what I knew.

I called: "*No,* Mike!" For suddenly I knew why Mike had not handled easily that heavy piece of bar. His hands had been made greasy lubricating Old 16. And the smooth, round, heavy bar had been made greasy from his hands.

I called: "*No,* Mike!" But my voice was lost in the heavy clank as the shear-clutch jolted home. Michael Stroganoff had thrown the shearing switch.

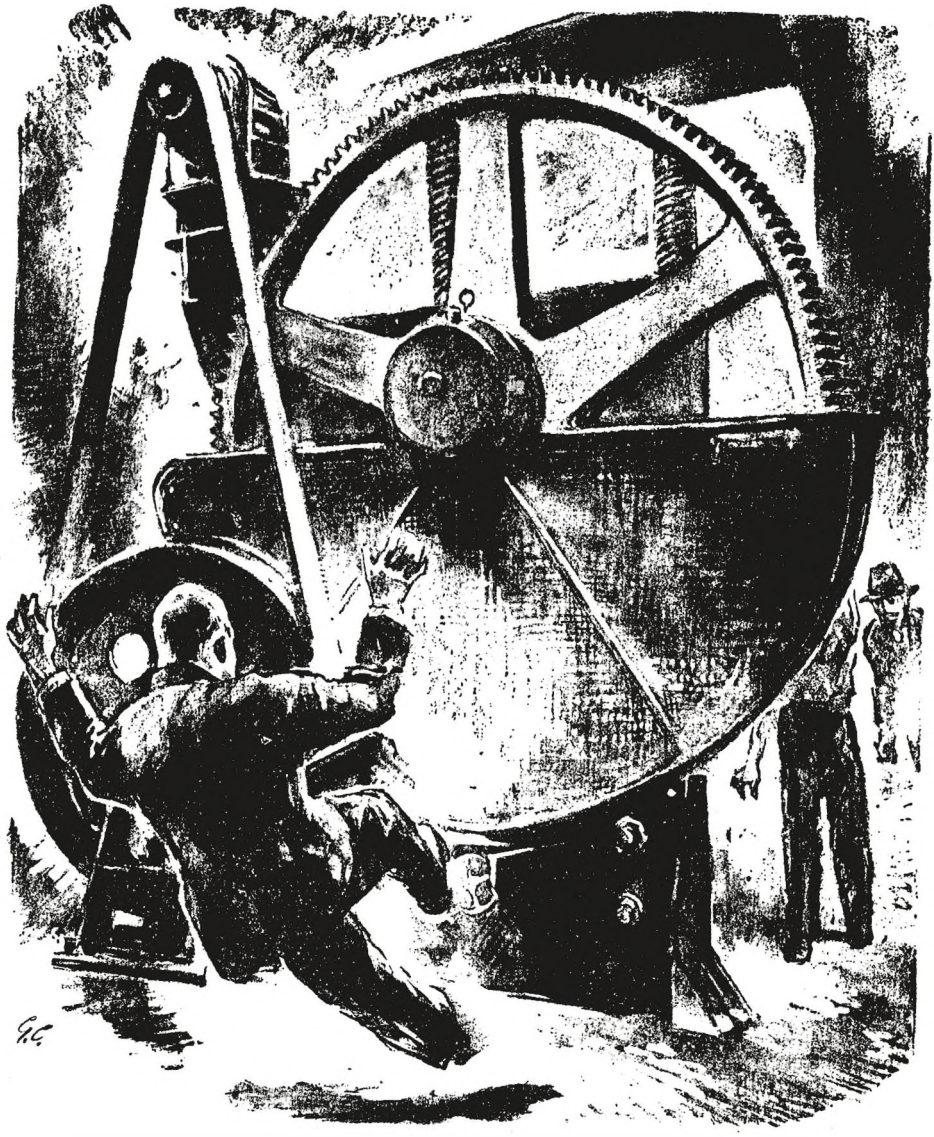
But there was no demonstration that day of Old 16's safety feature. That day the great jaws closed. And as a cherry-pit will squirt out from between the thumb and knuckle of a boy, that oily steel bar squirted from between the ruthless jaws of Old 16, and spun with ghastly speed toward the gray, pitted wall.

THAT night I found Mike Stroganoff in his small lodging, packing, as I had feared. I like Mike; and besides, a steel-works master-mechanic hates to see a good hand get away.

"Why leave, Mike?" I protested. "Krpotin's death was simply one of those accidents which are bound once in a while to happen where men are trying to control tremendous forces."

But Stroganoff continued placing his meager belongings into a battered bag.

"And what's more," I went on, "even if there should be an investigation, any word on that wall this afternoon will yield no evidence now. That heavy bar shattered a deep gouge in the concrete, erasing every letter—that is, of course, assuming Krpotin really saw a word."



As a cherry-pit will squirt out from between the thumb and knuckle of a boy, that oily steel bar squirted from the jaws of Old 16.

Stroganoff snapped the latches on his bag. Then he wrote something on a scrap of envelope. I still have that envelope. I can read it now.

ЖЕЛѢЗОГРАД

But I could not read it then. "Looks like the gypsy curse to me," I said that day.

"It is the name of a small blast-furnace town in the Government of Perm, in eastern Russia," Stroganoff explained. "Strangely, that name is also Ironville. In Latin characters, you could manage it. *Zhelyezograd*. It was from that Ironville, Zhelyezograd, in Russia, that I escaped to this one in America. We are fatalists, we Slavs. I knew that every steel man in the world would like to see the mills of Ironville, Pennsylvania. I had a feeling that in Ironville, Pennsylvania, a circle might complete itself. Then today came Krpotin. You saw how he was interested in those Cyrillic letters. Naturally. He was our furnace foreman in Zhelyezograd."

I looked again at those peculiar symbols.

"Strong medicine," I said. "It seemed as though ghost-hands took hold of him and led him over to read that writing on the wall."

"That happened," said Stroganoff.

Our sports-loving detective, you may recall, found murder at a prize-fight both in the ring and out of it. Here, at a football game, he finds theft both on the field and—elsewhere.

Illustrated by Charles Chickering

"WHOM," demanded Miss Paris, from across the groaning board, "do you like, Mr. Queen?"

Mr. Queen instantly mumbled, "You," out of a mouthful of the Vermont turkey, chestnut stuffing, and cranberry sauce, which his fiancée Miss Paula Paris had cunningly cooked with her own hands and served *en tête-à-tête* in her cozy maple and chintz dining-room.

"I didn't mean that, silly," said Miss Paris, nevertheless pleased. "And you haven't answered my question. Do you think Carolina will lick U.S.C. next Sunday?"

"Oh, the Rose Bowl Game," said Mr. Queen. "More turkey, please! . . . Well, if Ostermoor lives up to his reputation, the Spartans should breeze in."

"Really?" murmured Miss Paris. "Are you forgetting that Roddy Crockett is the whole Trojan backfield?"

"Southern California Trojans, Carolina Spartans," said Mr. Queen thoughtfully, munching. "Spartans versus Trojans! Sort of modern gridiron Siege of Troy."

"Ellery Queen, that's plagiarism or—or something! You read it in my column."

"Is there a Helen for the lads to battle over?" grinned Mr. Queen.

"You're *so* romantic! The only female involved is a very pretty, rich, and sensible co-ed named Joan Wing; and she *isn't* the kidnaped love of any of the Spartans."

"Curses!" said Mr. Queen, reaching for the brandied plum pudding. "For a moment I thought I had something."

"But there's a Priam of a sort, because Roddy Crockett is engaged to Joan Wing; and Joanie's father, Pop Wing, is just about the noblest Trojan of them all."

"Maybe you know what you're talking about, beautiful," said Mr. Queen, "but *I* don't."

"You mean you've never heard of Pop Wing?" asked Paula incredulously.

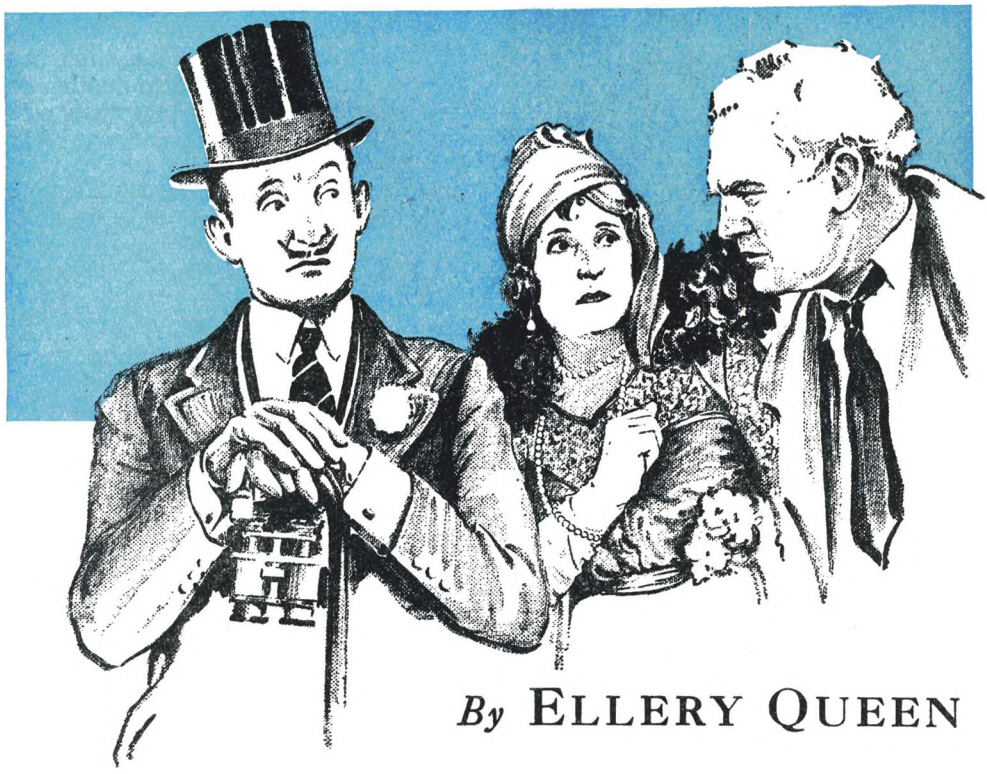
"Not guilty," said Mr. Queen. "More plum pudding, please."

"The Perennial Alumnus? The Boy Who Never Grew Up?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Queen.

"The Ghost of Exposition Park and the L.A. Coliseum, who holds a life seat for all U.S.C. football games? The unofficial trainer, rubber, water-boy, pep-talker, Alibi Ike, booster, and pigskin patron-in-chief to the Trojan eleven? Percy Squires 'Pop' Wing, Southern California '04, the man who sleeps, eats and breathes only for Trojan victories, and who married and, failing a son, created a daughter for

The Trojan Horse



By ELLERY QUEEN

the sole purpose of snaring U.S.C.'s best fullback in years?"

"Peace, peace! I yield," moaned Mr. Queen, "before the crushing brutality of the characterization. I now know Percy Squires Wing as I hope never to know anyone again."

"Sorry!" said Paula, rising briskly. "Because directly after you've filled your bottomless tummy with plum pudding, we're going Christmas calling on him."

"No!" said Mr. Queen with a shudder.

"You want to see the Rose Bowl game, don't you?"

"Who doesn't? But I haven't been able to snag a brace of tickets for love or money."

"Poor Queeny!" purred Miss Paris, putting her arms about him. "You're *so* helpless. Come and watch me wheedle Pop Wing out of two seats for the game!"

THE lord of the château whose towers rose from a magnificently preposterous parklike estate in Inglewood proved to be a flat-bellied youngster of middle age, almost as broad as he was tall.

They came upon the millionaire seated on his hams in the center of a vast lawn, arguing fiercely with a young man who by his size (which was herculean) and coloring (which was coppery), could only be of the order *footballis*, and therefore Mr. Wing's future son-in-law and the New Year's Day hope of the Trojans.

They were manipulating wickets, mallets, and croquet-balls in illustration of a complex polemic which apparently concerned the surest method of frustrating the sinister quarterback of the Carolina eleven, Ostermoor.

A young lady with red hair and a saucy nose sat crosslegged on the grass near by, her soft blue eyes fixed on the brown face of the young man with that naked worshipfulness young ladies permit themselves to exhibit in public only when their young men have formally yielded. This, concluded Mr. Queen without difficulty, must be the daughter of the great man, and Mr. Roddy Crockett's fiancée, Joan Wing.

Mr. Wing hissed a warning to Roddy at the sight of Mr. Queen's unfamiliar

visage, and for a moment Mr. Queen felt uncomfortably like a spy caught sneaking into the enemy's camp. But Miss Paris hastily vouched for his devotion to the cause of Troy, and for some time there were Christmas greetings and introductions, in the course of which Mr. Queen made the acquaintance of two persons whom he recognized instantly as the hybrid genus *house-guest perennialis*. One was a bearded gentleman with high cheek-bones and a Muscovite manner (pre-Soviet) entitled the Grand Duke Ostrov; the other was a thin, dark, whip-like female with inscrutable black eyes who went by the mildly astonishing name of Madame Mephisto.

These two barely nodded to Miss Paris and Mr. Queen; they were listening to each word which dropped from the lips of Mr. Percy Squires Wing, their host.

The noble Trojan's ruddiness of complexion, Mr. Queen pondered, came either from habitual exposure to the outdoors or from high blood-pressure; a conclusion which he discovered very soon was accurate on both counts, since Pop Wing revealed himself without urging as an Izaak Walton, a golfer, a Nimrod, a mountain-climber, a polo-player, and a racing yachtsman; and he was as squirmy and excitable as a small boy.

THE small-boy analogy struck Mr. Queen with greater force when the Perennial Alumnus dragged him off to inspect what he alarmingly called "my trophy-room." Mr. Queen's fears were vindicated; for in a huge vaulted chamber presided over by a desiccated, gloomy and monosyllabic old gentleman introduced fantastically as "Gabby" Huntswood, he found himself inspecting as heterogeneous and remarkable an assemblage of junk as ever existed outside a small boy's dream of Paradise.

Postage-stamp albums, American college banners, mounted wild-animal heads, a formidable collection of match-boxes, cigar bands, stuffed fish, World War trench helmets of all nations—all, all were there; and Pop Wing beamed as he exhibited these priceless treasures, scurrying from one collection to another and fondling them with such ingenuous pleasure that Mr. Queen sighed for his own lost youth.

"Aren't these objects too—er—valuable to be left lying around this way, Mr. Wing?" he inquired politely.

"Hell, no. Gabby's more jealous of their safety than I am!" shouted the great man. "Hey, Gabby?"

"Yes sir," said Gabby; and he frowned suspiciously at Mr. Queen.

"Why, Gabby made me install a burglar-alarm system. Can't see it, but this room's as safe as a vault."

"Safer," said Gabby, glowering.

"Think I'm crazy, Queen?"

"No, no," said Mr. Queen, who meant to say: "Yes, yes."

"Lots of people do," chuckled Pop Wing. "Let 'em. Between 1904 and 1924 I just about vegetated. But something drove me on. Know what?"

Mr. Queen's famous powers of deduction were unequal to the task.

"The knowledge that I was making enough money to retire, still young, and kick the world in the pants. And I did! Retired at forty-two and started doing all the things I'd never had time or money to do when I was a shaver. Collecting things. Keeps me young! Come here, Queen, and look at my *prize* collection." And he pulled Mr. Queen over to a gigantic glass case and pointed gleefully, an elder *Penrod* gloating over a marbles haul.

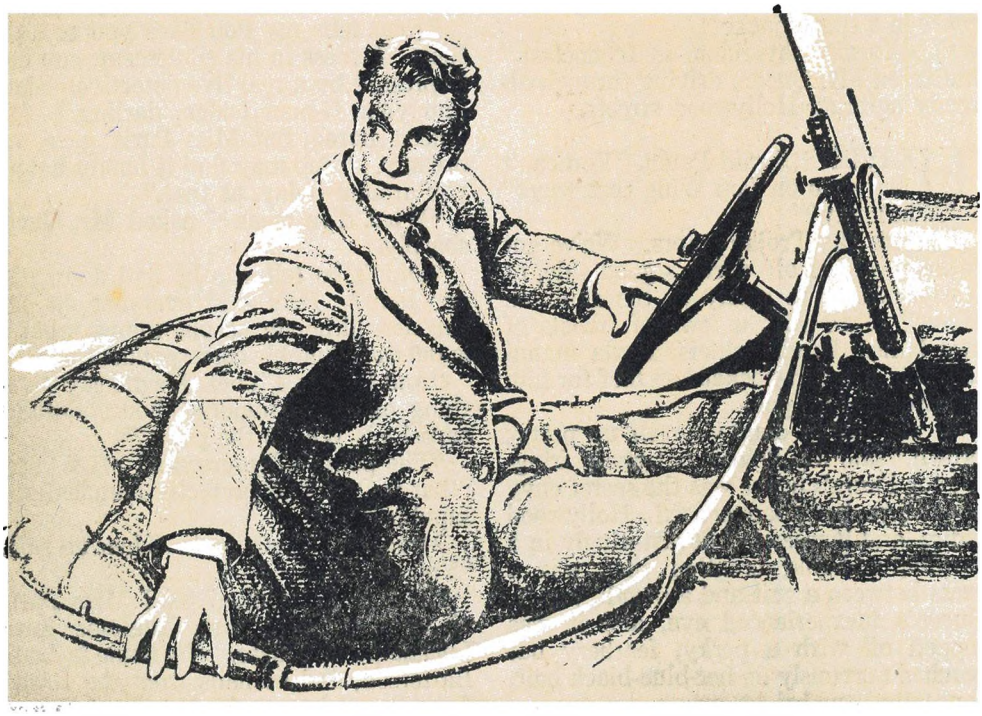
From his host's proud tone Mr. Queen expected to gaze upon nothing less than a collection of the royal crowns of Europe. Instead, he saw a vast number of scuffed, streaked, and muddy footballs, each carefully laid upon an ebony rest, and on each a legend lettered in gold leaf. One that caught his eye read "Rose Bowl, 1930. *U.S.C. 47—Pitt 14.*" The others bore similar inscriptions.

"Wouldn't part with 'em for a million dollars," confided the great man. "Why, the balls in this case represent every Trojan victory for the past fifteen years!"

"Incredible!" exclaimed Mr. Queen.

"Yes sir, right after every game they win, the team presents old Pop Wing with

Pop Wing bellowed after the roadster: "Don't forget that Ostermoor defense, Roddy!"



the pigskin. What a collection!" And the millionaire gazed worshipfully at the unlovely oblate spheroids.

"They must think the world of you at U.S.C."

"Well, I've sort of been of service to my Alma Mater," said Pop Wing modestly, "especially in football. Wing Athletic Scholarship, you know; Wing Dorm for 'Varsity athletes; and so on. I've scouted prep schools for years, personally; turned up some mighty fine 'Varsity material. Coach is a good friend of mine. I guess,"—and he drew a happy breath,—"I can have just about what I damn' well ask for at the old school!"

"Including football tickets?" said Mr. Queen quickly, seizing his opportunity. "Must be marvelous to have that kind of drag. I've been trying for days to get tickets for the game."

"What was your college?"

"Harvard," said Mr. Queen apologetically. "But I yield to no man in my ardent admiration of the Trojans. Darn it, I did want to watch Roddy Crockett mop up those Spartan upstarts."

"You did, huh?" said Pop Wing. "Say, how about you and Miss Paris being my guests at the Rose Bowl Sunday?"

"Couldn't think of it—" began Mr. Queen mendaciously, already savoring the joy of having beaten Miss Paris, so to speak, to the turnstiles.

"Won't hear another word." Mr. Wing slapped Mr. Queen's shoulder. "Say, long as you'll be with us, I'll let you in on a little secret: Rod and Joan are going to be married right after the Trojans win next Sunday!"

"Congratulations. He seems like a fine boy."

"None better. Hasn't got a cent, you understand—worked his way through. But he'll be graduated in January, and—he's the greatest fullback the old school ever turned out! We'll find something for him to do. Yes, Roddy's last game." Mr. Wing sighed. Then he brightened: "Anyway, I've got a hundred-thousand-dollar surprise for my Joanie that ought to make her go right out and raise another triple-threat man for the Trojans!"

"A—how much of a surprise?" asked Mr. Queen feebly.

But the great man looked mysterious. "Let's go back and finish cooking that boy Ostermoor's goose!"

NEW YEAR'S DAY was warm and sunny; Mr. Queen felt strange as he prepared to pick up Paula Paris and escort her to the Wing estate, from which their party was to proceed to the Pasadena

stadium. In his quaint Eastern fashion, he was accustomed to don a mountain of sweater, scarf and overcoat when he went to a football game; and here he was *en route* in a sports jacket!

"California, thy name is Iconoclast," muttered Mr. Queen, driving through already agitated Hollywood streets.

"HEAVENS!" said Paula. "You can't barge in on Pop Wing that way!"

"What way?"

"Minus the Trojan colors. We've got to keep on the old darlin's good side, at least until we're safely in the stadium. Here!" And with a few deft twists of two ladies' handkerchiefs, Paula manufactured a breast-pocket kerchief for him in cardinal and gold.

"I see you've done yourself up pretty brown," said Mr. Queen, not unadmiringly; for Paula's figure was the secret envy of many better-advertised Hollywood ladies, and it was clad devastatingly in a cardinal-and-gold creation that was a cross between a suit and a dirndl, to Mr. Queen's inexperienced eye, and it was topped off with a perky, feathery hat perched nervously on her blue-black hair, concealing one bright eye.

"Wait till you see Joan," said Miss Paris, rewarding him with a kiss. "She's been calling me all week about *her* clothes problem. It's not every day a girl's called on to buy an outfit that goes equally well with a football game and a wedding." And as Mr. Queen drove off toward Inglewood, she added thoughtfully: "I wonder what that awful creature will wear. Probably a turban and seven veils."

"What creature?"

"Madame Mephisto. Only, her real name is Suzie Lucadamo, and she quit a dumpy little magic and mind-reading vaudeville act to set herself up in Seattle as a seeress—you know, *'We positively guarantee to pierce the veil of the Unknown!'* Pop met her in Seattle in November during the U.S.C.-Washington game. She wangled a Christmas-week invitation out of him for the purpose, I suppose, of looking over the rich Hollywood sucker-field without cost to herself."

"You seem to know a lot about her."

Paula smiled. "Joan Wing told me some—Joanie doesn't like the old gal nohow—and I dug out the rest. . . . Well, you know, darling, I know everything about *everybody*."

"Then tell me," said Mr. Queen, "who exactly is the Grand Duke Ostrov?"

"Why?" countered Miss Paris.

"Because," replied Mr. Queen grimly, "I don't like His Highness, and I do like—heaven help me!—Pop Wing and his juvenile amusements."

"Joan tells me Pop likes you too, the fool! I guess in his adolescent way he's impressed by a real live detective. Show him your G-man badge, darling." Mr. Queen glared, but Miss Paris' gaze was dreamy. "Pop may find it handy having you around today, at that."

"What d'ye mean?" asked Mr. Queen sharply.

"Didn't he tell you he had a surprise for Joan? He's told everyone in Los Angeles, although no one knows what it is but your humble correspondent."

"And Roddy, I'll bet. He did say something about a 'hundred-thousand-dollar surprise.' What's the point?"

"The point is," murmured Miss Paris, "that it's a set of perfectly matched star sapphires."

Mr. Queen was silent. Then he said: "You think Ostrov—"

"The Grand Duke," said Miss Paris, "is even phonier than Madame Suzie Lucadamo Mephisto. *His* name is Louie Batterson, and he hails from the Bronx. Everybody knows it but Pop Wing." Paula sighed. "But you know Hollywood—live and let live; you may need a sucker yourself some day. Batterson's a high-class deadbeat. He's pulled some awfully aromatic stunts in his time. I'm hoping he lays off our nostrils this sunny day."

"This," mumbled Mr. Queen, "is going to be one heck of a football game, I can see that."

BEDLAM was a cloister compared with the Wing domain. The interior of the house was noisy with decorators, caterers, cooks, and waiters; and with a start Mr. Queen recalled that this was to be the wedding day of Joan Wing and Roddy Crockett.

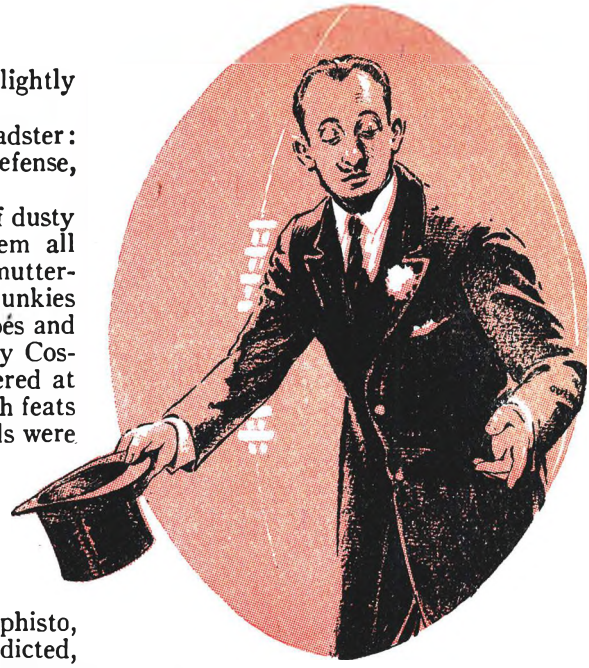
They found their party assembled in one of the formal gardens—which, Mr. Queen swore to Miss Paris, outshone Fontainebleau—and apparently Miss Wing had solved her dressmaking problem; for while Mr. Queen could find no word to describe what she was wearing, Mr. Roddy Crockett could, and the word was "sockeroo."

Paula went into more technical raptures, and Miss Wing clung to her gridiron hero, who looked a little pale; and then the pride of Troy went loping off to the wars, leaping into his roadster and waving farewell with their cries of good

cheer in his manly, young, and slightly mashed ears.

Pop Wing bellowed after the roadster: "Don't forget that Ostermoor defense, Roddy!"

And Roddy vanished in a trail of dusty glory; the noblest Trojan of them all came back shaking his head and muttering: "It ought to be a pipe!" Flunkies appeared bearing mounds of canapés and cocktails; the Grand Duke, regally Cossack in a long Russian coat gathered at the waist, amused the company with feats of legerdemain—his long soft hands were



"That ees an insult," said the Grand Duke coldly. "I demand that we all be—how you say?—searched."

very fluent; and Madame Mephisto, minus the seven veils but, as predicted, wearing the turban, went into a trance and murmured that she could see a "glorious Trojan vic-to-ree"—meanwhile Joan Wing sat smiling dreamily into her cocktail, and Pop Wing pranced up and down vowing that he had never been cooler or more confident in his life.

And then they were in one of Wing's big seven-passenger limousines—Pop and Joan, the Grand Duke, Madame, Gabby, Miss Paris and Mr. Queen—bound for Pasadena and the fateful game.

And Pop said suddenly: "Joanie, I've got a surprise for you."

Joan dutifully looked surprised, and Pop drew out of the right-hand pocket of his jacket a long leather case, opened it, and said with a chuckle: "Wasn't going to show it to you till tonight, but Roddy told me before he left that you look so beautiful, I ought to give you a preview as a reward. From me to you, Joanie. Like 'em?"

Joan gasped: "*Like* them!" and there were exclamations of "Oh!" and "Ah!" and they saw lying upon black velvet eleven superb sapphires, their stars winking royally—a football team of perfectly matched gems.

"Oh, *Pop!*" moaned Joan, and she flung her arms about him and wept on his shoulder, while he looked pleased and blustery, and puffed, and closed the case and returned it to the pocket from which he had taken it.

"Formal opening tonight. Then you can decide whether you want to make a necklace out of 'em or a bracelet or what." And Pop stroked Joan's hair while she sniffled against him; and Mr. Queen, watching the Grand Duke Ostrov, *né* Batterson, and Madame Mephisto, *née* Lucadamo, thought they were very clever to have concealed so quickly those startling expressions of avarice.

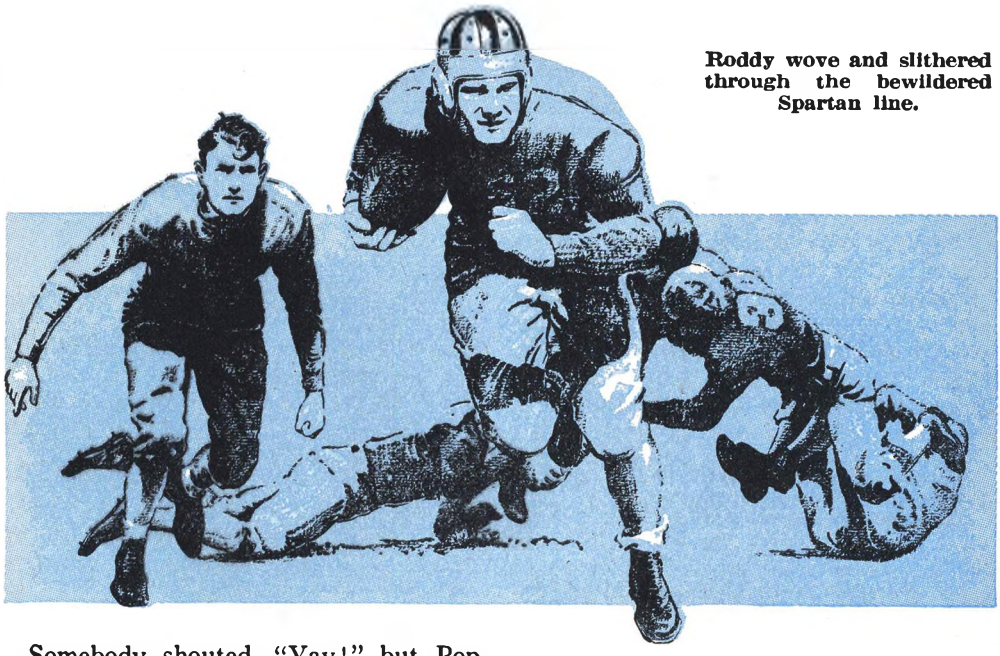
SURROUNDED by his guests, Pop strode directly to the Trojans' dressing-room, waving aside officials and police and student athletic underlings as if he owned the Rose Bowl and all the multitudinous souls besieging it.

The young man at the door said, "Hi, Pop," respectfully, and admitted them under the envious stares of the less fortunate mortals outside.

"Isn't he grand?" whispered Paula, her eyes like stars; but before Mr. Queen could reply, there were cries of: "Hey! *Femmes!*" and "Here's Pop!" And the Coach came over, wickedly straight-arming aside Mr. Roddy Crockett, who was lacing his doeskin pants, and said with a wink: "All right, Pop. Give it to 'em."

And Pop, very pale now, shucked his coat and flung it on a rubbing-table; and the boys crowded round, quiet suddenly; Mr. Queen found himself pinned between a mountainous tackle and a behemoth of a guard, who growled down at him: "Hey, you, stop squirming. Don't you see Pop's gonna make a speech?"

And Pop said, in a very low voice: "Listen, gang. The last time I made a dressing-room spiel was in '33. It was on a January first, too, and it was the day U.S.C. played Pitt in the Rose Bowl. That day we licked 'em thirty-five to nothing."



Roddy wove and slithered through the bewildered Spartan line.

Somebody shouted, "Yay!" but Pop held up his hand.

"I made three January first speeches before that. One was in '32, before we knocked Tulane over by a score of twenty-one to twelve. One was in 1930, the day we beat the Panthers forty-seven to fourteen. And the first was in '23, when we took Penn State by fourteen to three. And that was the first time in the history of Rose Bowl that we represented the Pacific Coast Conference in the intersectional classic. There's just one thing I want you men to bear in mind when you dash out there in a few minutes in front of half of California."

The room was very still.

"I want you to remember that the Trojans have played in four Rose Bowl games. And I want you to remember that the Trojans have *won* four Rose Bowl games," said Pop.

And he stood high above them, looking down into their intent young faces; then he jumped to the floor, breathing heavily.

Hell broke loose. Boys pounded him on the back; Roddy Crockett seized Joan and pulled her behind a locker; Mr. Queen found himself pinned to the door, hat over his eyes, by the elbow of the Trojan center, like a butterfly to a wall; and the Coach stood grinning at Pop, who grinned back, but tremulously.

"All right, men," said the Coach. "Pop?" Pop Wing grinned and shook them all off, and Roddy helped him into his coat; and after a while Mr. Queen, considerably the worse for wear, found himself seated in Pop's box directly above the fifty-yard line.

And then, as the two teams dashed into the Bowl across the brilliant turf, to the roar of massed thousands, Pop Wing uttered a faint cry.

"What's the matter?" asked Joan quickly, seizing his arm. "Aren't you feeling well, Pop?"

"The sapphires," said Pop Wing in a hoarse voice, his hand in his pocket. *"They're gone."*

KICK-OFF! Twenty-two figures raced to converge in a tumbling mass, and the stands thundered, the U.S.C. section fluttering madly with flags. And then there was a groan that rent the blue skies, and deadly, despairing silence.

For the Trojans' safety man caught the ball, started forward, slipped; the ball popped out of his hands; the Carolina right end fell on it—and there was the jumping, gleeful Spartan team on the Trojans' nine-yard line, Carolina's ball, first down, and four plays for a touchdown.

Gabby, who had not heard Pop Wing's exclamation, was on his feet shrieking: "But they can't *do* that! Oh, heavens—come *on*, U.S.C.! Hold that line!"

Pop glanced at Mr. Huntswood with bloodshot surprise, as if a three-thousand-year-old mummy had suddenly come to life; then he muttered: "Gone. Somebody's—picked my pocket."

"What!" whispered Gabby; and he fell back, staring at his employer with horror.

"But thees ees fantastic," the Grand Duke muttered.

Mr. Queen said quietly: "Are you positive, Mr. Wing?"

Pop's eyes were on the field, automatically analyzing the play; but they were filled with pain. "Yes, I'm sure. Some pickpocket in the crowd—"

"No," said Mr. Queen.

"Ellery, what do you mean?" cried Paula.

"From the moment we left Mr. Wing's car until we entered the Trojan dressing-room, we surrounded him completely. From the moment we left the Trojan dressing-room until we sat down in this box, we surrounded him completely. No, our pickpocket is one of this group, I'm afraid."

Madame Mephisto shrilled: "How dare you! Aren't you forgetting that it was Mr. Crockett who helped Mr. Wing on with his coat in that dressing-room?"

"You—" growled Pop, starting to rise.

Joan put her hand on his arm and squeezed, smiling at him. "Never mind her, Pop."

Carolina gained two yards on a plunge through center. Pop shaded his eyes with his hand, staring at the opposing lines.

"Meester Queen," said the Grand Duke coldly, "that ees an insult. I demand we all be—how you say?—searched."

Pop waved his hand wearily. "Forget it. I came to watch a football game." But he no longer looked like a small boy.

"His Highness' suggestion," murmured Mr. Queen, "is an excellent one. The ladies may search one another; the men may do the same. Suppose we all leave here together—in a body—and retire to the rest-rooms?"

"Hold 'em," muttered Pop, as if he had not heard. Carolina gained two yards more on an off-tackle play. Five yards to go in two downs. They could see Roddy Crockett slapping one of his linesmen on the back.

The lines met, and buckled. No gain.

"D'ye see Roddy go through that hole?" muttered Pop.

Joan rose, and rather imperiously motioned Madame and Paula to precede her. Pop did not stir. Mr. Queen motioned to the men. The Grand Duke and Gabby rose. They all went quickly away.

And still Pop did not move—until Ostermoor rifled a flat pass into the end zone, and a Carolina end came up out of the ground and snagged the ball. And then it was Carolina six, U.S.C. nothing, the big clock indicating that barely a minute of the first quarter's playing time had elapsed.

"Block that kick!"

Roddy plunged through the Spartan line and blocked it. The Carolina boys trotted back to their own territory, grinning.

"Hmph," said Pop to the empty seats in his box; and then he sat still and simply waited, an old man.

THE first quarter rolled along. The Trojans could not get out of their territory. Passes fell incomplete. The Spartan line held like iron.

"Well, we're back," said Paula Paris. Pop looked up slowly. "We didn't find them," she stated.

A moment later Mr. Queen returned, herding his two companions. Mr. Queen said nothing at all; he merely shook his head; and the Grand Duke Ostrov looked grandly contemptuous, while Madame Mephisto tossed her turbaned head angrily. Joan was very pale; her eyes crept down the field to Roddy, and Paula saw that they were filled with tears.

Mr. Queen said abruptly, "Will you excuse me, please?" and left again with swift strides.

The first quarter ended with the score still six to nothing against U.S.C. and the Trojans unable to extricate themselves from the menace of their goal-posts—pinned back with inhuman regularity by the sharp-shooting Mr. Ostermoor. There is no defense against a deadly accurate kick. . . .

When Mr. Queen returned, he wiped his slightly moist brow and said pleasantly: "By the way, Your Highness, it all comes back to me now. In a former incarnation—I believe in that life your name was Batterson, and you were the flower of an ancient Bronx family—weren't you mixed up in a jewel robbery?"

"Jewel robbery!" gasped Joan; and for some reason she looked relieved.

Pop's eyes fixed coldly on the Grand Duke's suddenly oscillating chin.

"Yes," continued Mr. Queen, "I seem to recall that the fence tried to involve you, Your Highness, saying you were the go-between, but the jury wouldn't believe a fence's word, and so you went free. You were quite charming on the stand, I recall—had the courtroom in stitches."

"It's a damn' lie," said the Grand Duke thickly, without the trace of an accent. His teeth gleamed wolfishly at Mr. Queen as he spoke.

"You thieving four-flusher—" began Pop Wing, half-rising from his seat.

"Not yet, Mr. Wing," said Mr. Queen.

"I have never been so insulted—" began Madame Mephisto.

"And you," said Mr. Queen with a little bow, "would be wise to hold your tongue, Madame Lucadamo."

Paula nudged him in fierce mute inquiry, but he shook his head.

No one said anything more until, near the end of the second quarter, Roddy Crockett broke loose for a forty-four-yard gain, and on the next play the ball came to rest on Carolina's twenty-six-yard line.

Then Pop Wing was on his feet, cheering lustily, and even Gabby Huntswood was yelling in his cracked, unoiled voice: "Come on, Trojans!"

"Attaboy, Gabby," said Pop with the ghost of a grin. "First time I've ever seen you so excited about a football game."

Three plays netted the Trojans eleven yards more: first down on Carolina's fifteen-yard line! The half was nearly over. Pop was hoarse, the theft apparently forgotten. He groaned as U.S.C. lost ground, Ostermoor breaking up two plays. Then, with the ball on Carolina's twenty-two-yard line, with time for only one more play before the whistle ending the half, the Trojan quarterback called for a kick formation, and Roddy booted the ball straight and true between the uprights of the Spartans' goal.

The whistle blew. Carolina 6, U.S.C. 3.

Pop sank back, mopping his face. "Have to do better. That damn' Ostermoor! What's the matter with Roddy?"

DURING the rest period Mr. Queen, who had scarcely watched the struggle, said: "By the way, Madame, I've heard a good deal about your unique gift of divination. We can't seem to find the sapphires by natural means; how about the supernatural?"

Madame Mephisto glared at him. "This is no time for jokes!"

"A true gift needs no special conditions," smiled Mr. Queen.

"The atmosphere—it is scarcely propitious—"

"Come, come, madame! You wouldn't overlook an opportunity to restore your host's hundred-thousand-dollar loss?"

Pop began to inspect Madame with suddenly keen curiosity.

Madame closed her eyes, her long fingers at her temples. "I see," she murmured, "I see a long jewel-case.... Yes, it is closed, closed.... But it is dark, very dark.... It is in a, yes, a dark place—" She sighed and dropped her hands, her dark lids rising. "I'm sorry. I can see no more."

"It's in a dark place, all right," said Mr. Queen dryly. "It's in my pocket." And to their astonishment he took from his pocket the great man's jewel-case.

Mr. Queen snapped it open. "Only," he added sadly, "it's empty. I found it in a corner of the Trojan dressing-room."

JOAN shrank back, squeezing a tiny football charm so hard it collapsed. The millionaire gazed stonily at the parading bands blaring around the field.

"You see," said Mr. Queen, "the thief hid the sapphires somewhere, and dropped the case in the dressing-room. And we were all there. The question is: Where did the thief cache them?"

"Pardon me," said the Grand Duke. "Eet seems to me the theft must have occurred in Meester Wing's car, after he returned the jewel-case to his pocket. So perhaps the jewels are hidden in the car."

"I have already," said Mr. Queen, "searched the car."

"Then in the Trojan dressing-room!" cried Paula.

"No, I've also searched there—floor to ceiling, lockers, cabinets, clothes, everything. The sapphires aren't there."

"The thief wouldn't have been so foolish as to drop them in an aisle on the way to this box," said Paula thoughtfully. "Perhaps he had an accomplice—"

"To have an accomplice," said Mr. Queen wearily, "you must know you are going to commit a crime. To know that, you must know there will be a crime to commit. Nobody but Mr. Wing knew that he intended to take the sapphires with him today—is that correct, Mr. Wing?"

"Yes," said Pop. "Except Rod—yes. No one."

"Wait!" cried Joan passionately. "I know what you're all thinking. You think Roddy had—had something to do with this. I can see it—yes, even you, Pop! But don't you see how silly it is? Why should Rod steal something that will belong to him, anyway? I *won't* have you thinking Roddy's a—a thief!"

"I did not," said Pop feebly.

"Then we're agreed the crime was unpremeditated, and that no accomplice could have been provided for," said Mr. Queen. "Incidentally, the sapphires are not in this box. I've looked."

"But it's ridiculous!" cried Joan. "Oh, I don't care about losing the jewels, beautiful as they are; Pop can afford the loss;

it's just that it's such a mean thing to do. Its very cleverness makes it worse."

"Criminals," drawled Mr. Queen, "are not notoriously fastidious, so long as they achieve their criminal ends. The point is that the thief has hidden those gems somewhere—the place is the very essence of his crime, for upon its simplicity and later accessibility depends the success of his theft. So it's obvious that the thief's hidden the sapphires where no one would spot them easily, where they're unlikely to be found even by accident, yet where he can safely retrieve them at his leisure."

"But heavens," said Paula, exasperated, "they're not in the car, they're not in the dressing-room, they're not on any of us, they're not in this box; there's no accomplice—it's impossible!"

"No," muttered Mr. Queen. "Not impossible. It was done. But how? How?"

THE Trojans came out fighting. They carried the pigskin slowly but surely down the field toward the Spartans' goal-line. But on the twenty-one-yard stripe the attack stalled. The diabolical Mr. Ostermoor, all over the field, intercepted a forward pass on third down with eight yards to go, ran the ball back fifty-one yards, and U.S.C. was frustrated again.

The fourth quarter began with no change in the score; a feeling that was palpable settled over the crowd, a feeling that they were viewing the first Trojan defeat in its Rose Bowl history. Injuries and exhaustion had taken their toll of the Trojan team; they seemed dispirited, beaten.

"When's he going to open up?" muttered Pop. "That trick!" And his voice rose to a roar. "Roddy! Come *on!*"

The Trojans drove suddenly with the desperation of a last strength. Carolina gave ground, but stubbornly. Both teams tried a kicking duel; but Ostermoor and Roddy were so evenly matched that neither side gained much through the interchange.

Then the Trojans began to take chances. A long pass—successful. Another!

"Roddy's going to town!"

Pop Wing, sapphires forgotten, bellowed hoarsely; Gabby shrieked encouragement; Joan danced up and down; the Grand Duke and Madame looked politely interested; even Paula felt the mass excitement stir her blood.

But Mr. Queen sat frowning in his seat, thinking and thinking—as if cerebration were a new function to him.

Pop was gazing with love at the filthy ball.

The Trojans clawed closer and closer to the Carolina goal-line, the Spartans fighting back furiously but giving ground, unable to regain possession of the ball.

First down on Carolina's nineteen-yard line, with seconds to go!

"Roddy, the kick! The *kick!*" shouted Pop.

The Spartans held on the first plunge. They gave a yard on the second. On the third—the inexorable hand of the big clock jerked toward the hour mark—the Spartans' left tackle smashed through U.S.C.'s line and smeared the play for a six-yard loss. Fourth down, seconds to go, and the ball on Carolina's twenty-four-yard line!

"If they don't go over next play," screamed Pop, "the game's lost. It'll be Carolina's ball, and they'll freeze it. . . . *Roddy!*" he thundered. "*The kick play!*"

And as if Roddy could hear that despairing voice, the ball snapped back, the Trojan quarterback snatched it, held it ready for Roddy's toe, his right hand between the ball and the turf. . . . Roddy darted up as if to kick, but instead, as he reached the ball, he scooped it from his quarterback's hands and raced for the Carolina goal-line.

"It worked!" bellowed Pop. "They expected a place kick to tie—and it worked! —*Make it, Roddy!*"

U.S.C. spread out, blocking like demons. The Carolina team was caught completely by surprise. Roddy wove and slithered through the bewildered Spartan line, and crossed the goal just as the final whistle blew.

"We win! We win!" cackled Gabby, doing a war-dance.

"Yowie!" howled Pop, kissing Joan, kissing Paula, almost kissing Madame.

Mr. Queen looked up. "Who won?" he asked genially.

But no one answered. Struggling in a mass of worshipers, Roddy was running up the field to the fifty-yard line; he dashed up to the box and thrust something into Pop Wing's hands, surrounded by almost the entire Trojan squad.

"Here it is, Pop," panted Roddy. "The old pigskin. Another one for your collection, and a honey! Joan!"

"Oh, Roddy!"

"My boy," began Pop, overcome by emotion; but then he stopped and hugged the dirty ball to his breast.

Roddy grinned, and kissing Joan, yelled, "Remind me that I've got a date to marry you tonight!" —and ran off toward the Trojan dressing-room, followed by a howling mob.

"MR. WING," said Ellery Queen. "I think we're ready to settle your little difficulty."

"Huh?" said Pop, who was gazing with love at the filthy ball. "Oh." His shoulders sagged. "I suppose," he said wearily, "we'll have to notify the police—"

"I think," said Mr. Queen, "that that isn't necessary, at least just yet. May I relate a parable? It seems that the ancient city of Troy was being besieged by the Greeks, and holding out very nicely, too—so nicely that the Greeks, who were very smart people, saw that only guile would get them into the city. And so somebody among the Greeks conceived a brilliant plan, based upon a very special sort of guile; and the essence of this guile was that the Trojans should be made to do the very thing the Greeks had been unable to do themselves. You will recall that in this the Greeks were successful, since the Trojans, overcome by curiosity and the fact that the Greeks had sailed away, hauled the wooden horse with their own hands into the city, and lo, that night, when all Troy slept, the Greeks hidden within the horse crept out, and—you know the rest. Very clever, the Greeks.... May I have that football, Mr. Wing?"

Pop said dazedly: "Huh?"

Mr. Queen, smiling, took it from him, deflated it by opening the valve, unlaced the leather thongs, then shook the limp pigskin over Pop's cupped hands—and out plopped the eleven sapphires.

"You see," murmured Mr. Queen, as they stared speechless at the gems in the great man's shaking hands, "the thief stole the jewel-case from Pop's coat pocket while Pop was haranguing his beloved team in the Trojan dressing-room before the game. The coat was lying on a rubbing-table, and there was such a mob that no one noticed the thief sneak over to the table, take the case out of Pop's coat, drop it in a corner after removing the sapphires, and edge his way to the table where the football to be used in the Rose Bowl game was lying, still uninflated. He loosened the laces surreptitiously, pushed the sapphires into the space between the pigskin wall and the rubber bladder, tied the laces, and left the ball apparently as he had found it.

"Think of it! All the time we were watching the game, the eleven sapphires were in this football. For one hour this spheroid has been kicked, passed, carried, fought over, sat on, smothered, grabbed, scuffed, muddied—with a king's ransom in it!"

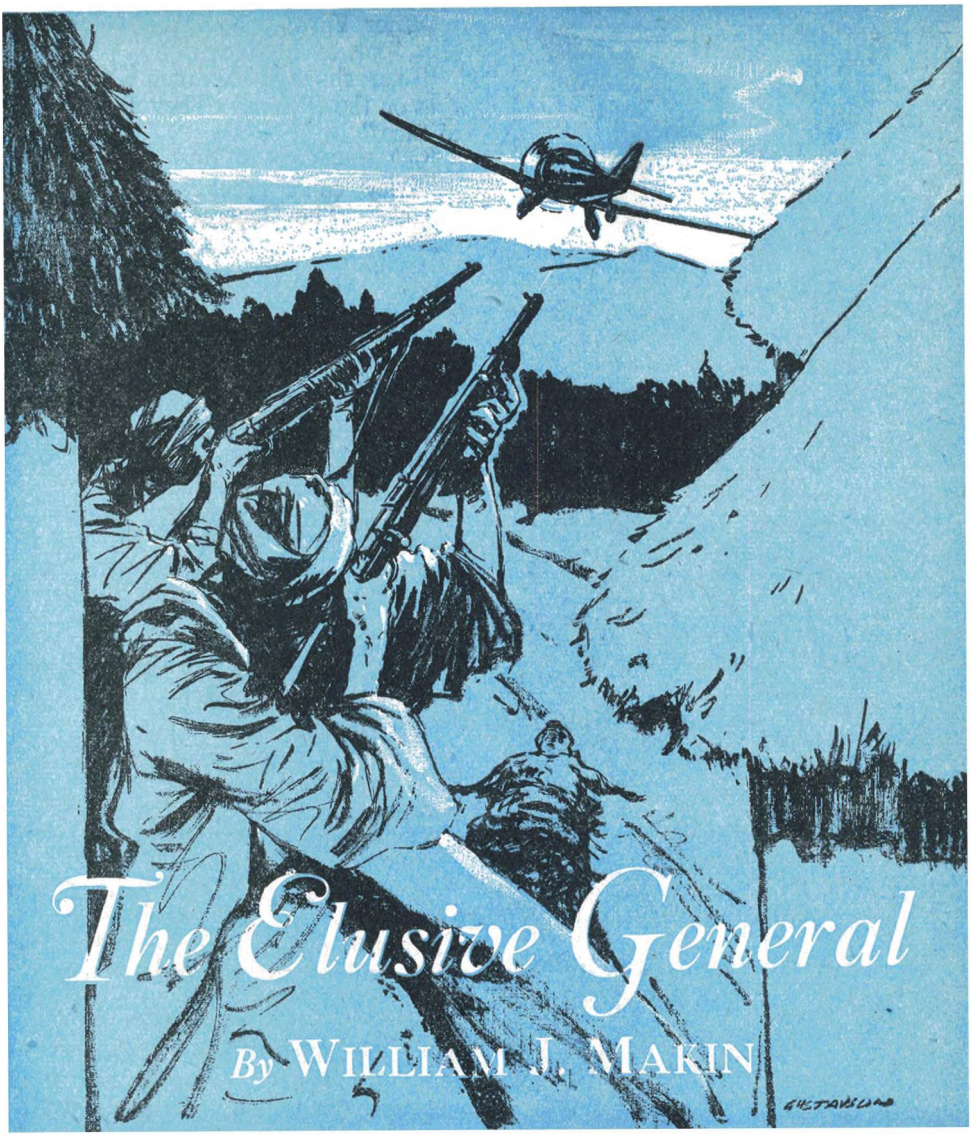
"But how did you know they were hidden in the ball?" gasped Paula. "And who's the thief, you wonderful man?"

Mr. Queen lit a cigarette modestly. "With all the obvious hiding-places eliminated, you see, I said to myself: 'One of us is a thief, and the hiding-place must be accessible to the thief after this game.' And I remembered a parable and a fact. The parable I've told you, and the fact was that after every winning Trojan game, the ball is presented to Mr. Percy Squires Wing."

"BUT you can't think—" began Pop, bewildered.

"Obviously you didn't steal your own gems," smiled Mr. Queen. "So, you see, the thief had to be someone who could take equal advantage with you of the fact that the winning ball is presented to you.

"And so I knew that the thief was the man who, against all precedent and his taciturn nature, has been volubly imploring the Trojan team to win this football game; the man who knew that if the Trojans won the game, the ball would immediately be presented to Pop Wing, and who gambled upon the Trojans; the man who saw that, with the ball given immediately to Pop, he—exclusive custodian of Pop's multifarious treasures—could retrieve the sapphires unobserved— Grab the old coot, Your Highness!—who, but Mr. Gabby Huntswood!"



The Elusive General

By WILLIAM J. MAKIN

Our famous Intelligence officer, the Red Wolf of Arabia, combats the enemy in Palestine.

"IT'S the Arab General we want to lay our hands on. A most dangerous fellow. That is why I've asked you to come down from Damascus and help us in his capture."

Major Yardley, Chief of the Palestine Police, gathered up a portfolio of documents as he spoke. The hurried, jerky movements of the khaki-clad figure suggested a man who was trying desperately to make up for lost time. He was, in fact, always on the heels of the rebels, always arriving on the scene of an outrage five minutes after it had been committed. During the three months he had held this onerous post, he had been vainly attempting to be one move ahead of the Arab rebels—and to run down the European *provocateurs* he suspected in the background.

"My predecessor?" he said, answering a quiet query. "Oh, he was riddled with pistol-shots outside the King David Hotel. Yes, the assassins got away. The General's men, of course."

The Levantine in the dark green uniform of the French Police of Syria gestured sympathetically.

"I can see, Major, that affairs in Jerusalem are much more difficult than in Damascus." He spoke in slow, correct English. "I wonder why you don't adopt our French methods."

"And what are they?"

"Please," she said, "all of you hold up your hands."

"We arrest all the likely dangerous Arabs first—on suspicion. A few innocents go to jail, of course." He shrugged. "But by crowding the jails, we make the streets of Damascus safe."

"I've always heard that the Street that is called Straight is full of crooked men," said Major Yardley, permitting himself a grim smile.

"Not today," said the man in the dark green uniform who had introduced himself as Captain Nerval, Chief of the Syrian Police. "Unless an Arab can display his papers of identity, he goes promptly to jail."

"If we did that in Palestine, nearly the whole of the Arab population would be behind barbed wire," said Major Yardley. "And our prison camps are uncomfortably crowded as it is."

"But you might find that you had captured the elusive General," smiled Captain Nerval.

"Even if we had, we shouldn't know."

"Then you haven't his *dossier?*"

"I've a hell of a *dossier,*" exploded Major Yardley. "All about his many exploits, raiding parties, and the rest of it. But not a solitary clue to the identity of the man. Not a picture, not an identification-mark. The man might be a myth, but for his bloody and successful exploits. Sometimes I think I am really chasing a myth."

"But surely there are Arabs who have set eyes on this Arab General?"

Major Yardley nodded. There was a grim look on his face.

"I can show you six men who have set eyes on the General. They met him, face to face."

"Eh bien?"

"They can't speak. They have no tongues. The General has an uncanny sixth sense for discovering informers. When he has finished with them, even if they're still alive, they are too terrified even to scribble a clue on a scrap of paper."

"Ma foi! A very sinister General."

"And that's not all," said Major Yardley, turning his back and frowning through the window at the pink sandstone buildings of modern Jerusalem. "The Arab General has organized a most successful escaping-club. He gets prisoners out of our barbed-wire camps, under the very noses of armed guards and searchlights."

"Incredible!"

"It is—but it goes on," said the Chief of the Palestine Police, turning a worried face upon the serene Levantine. "Our main prison camp, where we have the most dangerous of rebels, is at Ramleh, between Jerusalem and the coast. You came through the village in my car this morning."

"I recall it perfectly," said Captain Nerval.

"It also makes a convenient military base—full of troops, armored cars, patrols and all that. Yet within the past week an average of two Arab prisoners a day have vanished from the camp! And those disappearing prisoners are usually the most dangerous of suspects awaiting trial."

"You consider this to be the work of the General?"

"I *know* it to be the work of the General—blast him!" exploded Major Yardley. "The fellow even writes me letters thanking me for the excellent condition in which he received the prisoners. And signed like a receipt, *'The General.'*"

THE Levantine chuckled.

"He seems a gentleman well worth matching wits against. But tell me, my dear Major, in what manner can I help? You asked me to come to Jerusalem from Damascus. You very kindly sent your car to the border. Well, I am here. I am only too happy to be of any assistance."

Major Yardley flopped back into his swivel-chair. There was an imploring note in his voice:

"I sent for you, my colleague, because I have discovered one certain fact—that these men who escape are taken across the Palestine border into Syria. Usually they find a home among the Druses. There they rest and recuperate until the General has more work for them in this country. Then they are brought across the border again to do murder."

"Ah, those devils of Druses!" sighed the Levantine.

"I want the coöperation of the Syrian police," went on Major Yardley. "A swift raid upon the Druses. A round-up of suspects. You are sure to bag some of the General's men who have escaped from our prison camps. Let me get hold of some of those men. I'll soon be on the trail of the General himself and his organization."

"You are asking the impossible, Major. The last time we attempted to storm the stronghold of the Druses, we used planes, armored cars and two battalions of infantry. A company of the Foreign Legion was almost massacred. And the Druses are still firmly entrenched in their stronghold."

The Levantine lit a cigarette with an air of finality. Major Yardley bit his wiry mustache.

"Something has to be done," he muttered, his eyes upon a curt letter of criticism from the General Officer Commanding in Palestine, which lay on his desk.

"We can help in one direction, Major," said the Levantine, wafting away the cigarette-smoke with a delicate hand. "We might capture some of those men if they came down from the hills and were sent on a journey—say, to Damascus."

"They do come down," said Yardley. "They do go to Damascus. Many are sent with reports to the Grand Mufti, who is himself now in Syria."

"We keep a close watch on the Grand Mufti, as the British authorities requested," said the Levantine.

"Then keep a close watch on the messengers who go to his house," said Major Yardley. "I think you'll discover that some of them are wanted men."

"Rest assured it shall be done," said Captain Nerval, rising languidly. "And now, Major—I believe you were going to show me one of your prison camps."

"I should have been at Ramleh five minutes ago," said Major Yardley, the agonized expression of more lost time crossing his face as he gazed at the clock. "It is my usual morning inspection, and I have to try some blackguard of an Arab who was caught dynamiting the road to Jerusalem. Come along."

"It will be interesting to see your procedure, Major. I regret that my stay in Jerusalem cannot be unduly prolonged, however. I must return to Damascus tomorrow. We also have our urgent problems."

"In that case, could I press you to stay until tomorrow night? The High Commissioner, Sir Leonard Faversham, particularly asked that you come to dinner."

The Levantine smiled. "Such an invitation is an honor," he said. "And I would not dream of refusing it. Perhaps I could leave immediately for Damascus after the dinner?"

"It means an all-night drive—and a dangerous one."

The Levantine waved the objections aside with the cigarette-smoke.

"I am used to danger," he said.

"Then that's settled." Major Yardley pressed a bell. A khaki-clad policeman entered the room and saluted. "Is my car ready?"

"Yes sir. Waiting outside, sir."

"Shall we go, my friend?"

The Levantine nodded, rose gracefully, and followed the Major to the car that waited in the sunshine of Jerusalem.

SALUTED by armed outposts on the road descending from the hills, the armored car made swift progress to the prison camp at Ramleh. Guards sprang to attention at the entrance. Other men hurried to swing open the gates leading between the jagged swathes of barbed wire. Major Yardley and his companion were driven to a long, low army hut which served as headquarters for the prison. There the two men descended, and the car drove away.

"One would say that this prison camp held only Palestine policemen," smiled the Levantine, gazing round at the many khaki figures.

"We keep the prisoners well guarded," said Major Yardley. "Even so, they manage to escape."

"Where, exactly, are the prisoners?" asked the Levantine.

"I am going to have them paraded for your benefit. . . . Sergeant-major!"

There was a click of heavy steel-shod heels. "Sir!"

"Anything to report?"

"The prisoners have been numbered and found correct, sir."

"Good!" Major Yardley grunted his pleasure. "No one missing?"

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

"Not so far, sir."

"I'm disappointed," murmured Captain Nerval. "I was hoping to see the latest exploit of the General."

"It's a relief to know that we're checkmating him. . . . Carry on, Sergeant-major. Parade the prisoners!"

"Yes sir."

A stiff salute, then a series of shouted commands and whistles. From distant huts and tents scattered among the boulder-strewn slopes that was the encampment, crowds of tattered and bearded Arabs began to materialize. They drifted toward the parade-ground, watched by armed guards posted at strategic points.

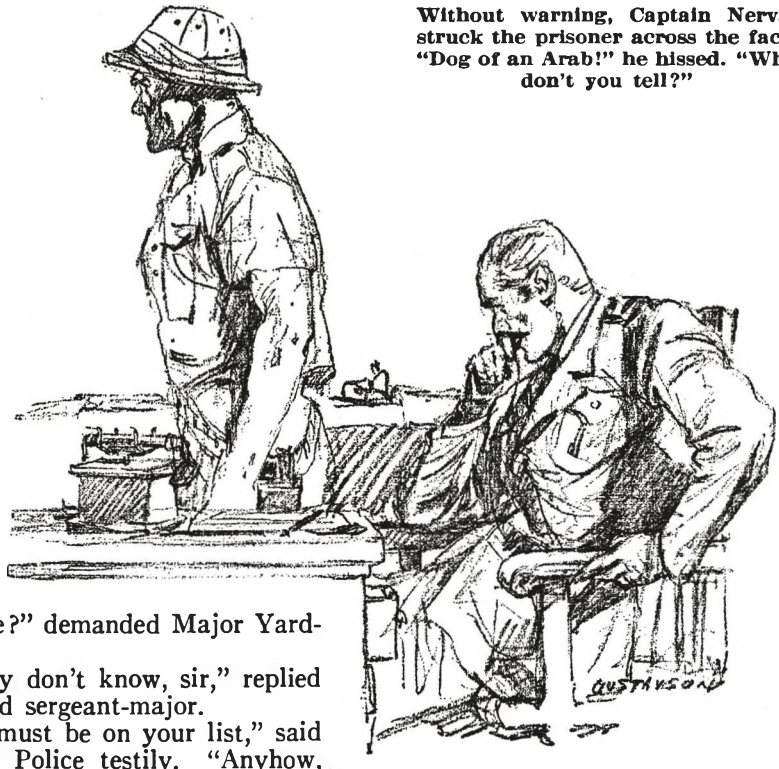
It was as though Palestine were emptying itself of beggars. Displaying their rags, their sores, their thin, hungry faces with dark, flashing eyes, the men moved with the long, indolent stride of the Arab and formed in a series of lines before the sprucely uniformed Chiefs of Police.

Still with that hurried, jerky gait of the man trying to make up for lost time, Major Yardley strode along the lines in swift inspection. He was followed by the slightly bored Levantine. The sergeant-major stamped along in the rear.

"More soap and water wouldn't do them any harm," muttered Major Yardley distastefully.

He was passing along the third line of prisoners when he stopped. Two men drooped before him. He could see only the blue headdress swathing their faces. Then one of the men lurched and pitched to the ground.

With a wrathful expression on his face, the sergeant-major hurried forward and yanked the fallen man upright again. The body sagged like a sack. He jerked the head upright, and the blue headdress fell away. The pallid features of a man who seemed almost white, his eyes closed in agony, were revealed.



Without warning, Captain Nerval struck the prisoner across the face. "Dog of an Arab!" he hissed. "Why don't you tell?"

"Who is he?" demanded Major Yardley.

"I—I really don't know, sir," replied the astonished sergeant-major.

"Well, he must be on your list," said the Chief of Police testily. "Anyhow, give the poor devil a drink. He looks all in."

Even as he spoke, the next man collapsed and fell prone. In response to a shouted command, two of the armed sentries came running toward the prisoners.

The sergeant-major looked up from the water-bottle that he had lifted to the greedy lips of the prisoner with the pallid features.

"Looks like the General's work again, sir."

"The General! What the devil do you mean?" Major Yardley, who was about to stride on, turned back.

"This man has no tongue, sir. It's been cut out. The other man is in the same state. They're not our prisoners, sir."

"Then, who are they?"

"Can't say, sir."

"But you told me you had numbered the prisoners and none were missing."

"That's right, sir. The number of prisoners *is* correct. I should say these two have been dumped here in place of two who have escaped."

The face of the Chief of Police revealed mingled rage and bewilderment. He gazed at the two fallen men who were stirring feebly in the sunlight. Captain Nerval lit a cigarette and looked on with correct detachment.

"Have you any idea who the men are who escaped?" asked Major Yardley.

"I can't say, sir, until I've checked my list."

"Then do so at once," exploded Yardley. "And get these two men into hospital. They're nearly dead as it is. Then make your report to me."

"Very good, sir."

UNABLE to conceal his irritation, Major Yardley strode back to the headquarters hut. In sympathetic silence, the Levantine followed. Inside the office, the Chief of Police brought forth a bottle of whisky, and glasses.

"Not for me, thank you, Major," said the Levantine.

"I need a drink, badly," snorted Major Yardley. "You see, now, what I have to fight against: Prisoners disappear; tortured wretches are dumped in their place. And somewhere this cursed General is chuckling to himself." He swallowed the drink at one gulp. "If only I could meet him face to face!" he glowered.

"The General certainly cultivates unusual methods," mused the Levantine. "I can quite understand your irritation, my dear colleague."

"Irritation! All I want is to lay hands on the fellow! . . . Yes, what is it now?"

The last remark was addressed to the sergeant-major, who, stiff as a ramrod, stood in the doorway.

"I'm checking up on the prisoners, sir. I hope to have a complete report before you leave."

"You had better."

"There's also the trial of that Arab, sir, the fellow we caught dynamiting the Jerusalem road."

"I suppose you're going to tell me he's escaped too."

"No sir. I have him under escort."

"March him in, then. I'll teach these dynamiters to be sorry for themselves." He poured out another drink and quickly swallowed it. "Sit down, Nerval," he added. "This may interest you."

"I am very much interested, all the time," said the Levantine.

AS he sat down, an Arab prisoner shuffled in between the stamping boots of the escort. The sergeant-major took up his position at the side of the desk, cleared his throat noisily, and began to gabble from a typewritten sheet of paper in his hand.

The Arab, in shabby burnous and with one arm limp, as though he had been wounded, gazed sullenly and defiantly before him. An unusual type of Arab. The eyes were gray. Despite the dirty face and scrubby beard, there was intelligence in the features. The lips were tightened in a thin line, as though he was determined not to speak.

"'Admits to the name of Jebel Ali,'" read out the sergeant-major. "'Was captured by detachment in armored Patrol-car 581 on duty between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Sergeant in charge of detachment reports that on nearing kilometer post 15, an explosion occurred less than ten yards ahead. Car was stopped, patrol jumped out, just in time to seize the prisoner, who was crouching behind a boulder.'"

"Any resistance?" asked Yardley.

"No sir. A machine-gun was covering him," replied the sergeant-major grimly.

"His object was to blow up the patrol-car, eh?"

"I should say so, sir. But he miscalculated by ten yards, fortunately for the patrol."

"And unfortunately for the prisoner," commented Major Yardley severely.

He turned to the ragged Arab with the limp arm, and shot a question at him in Arabic.

"Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

The prisoner made no reply. The sergeant-major dug him in the ribs.

"By the Prophet's beard, no!" came a sudden exclamation. "I fight with my brothers to rid ourselves and our country of the accursed. If we do not fight, then our children—aye, and our children's children—are doomed to be moneyless and landless, the bond-slaves of the Jew."

There was exaltation in the drawn face of the Arab prisoner as he spoke. Major Yardley sighed. The argument was old.

"Even though it is your own people who have sold this land to the Jews, and have received as much as five times its value?" he asked tolerantly.

The Arab spat violently at the ground.

"Even so," he replied. "No true Arab sells the land of his birth to an unbeliever. We fight under the banner of one who will bring peace and freedom to this land again."

"And whose banner is that?" asked Major Yardley with some eagerness.

"The General," replied the Arab briefly. Then he closed his lips tightly as though he had already said too much.

Major Yardley drew the documents of the prisoner's arrest toward him. His voice took on a careless note.

"You are aware, Jebel Ali," he said suavely, "that by order of the British authorities, any Arab found in possession of weapons or explosive materials is subject to death-penalty by summary trial?"

The Arab's face remained sullen.

"On the basis of this evidence, I can order you to be shot within ten minutes."

"I am waiting, effendi."

"You are not afraid to die?"

"No true believer is afraid to die."

Major Yardley leaned forward.

"Tell what you know of the General, and you will walk out of this camp a free man within ten minutes."

SOMETHING like a smile distorted the face of the Arab.

"Death would still be as certain as if I faced the rifles of your cursed soldiers, effendi."

"Then you will not tell?"

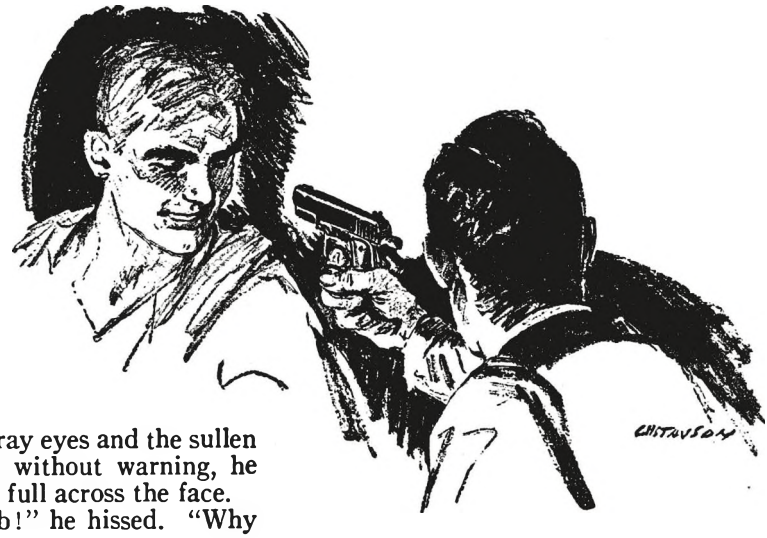
"I know nothing. I can tell nothing."

Major Yardley leaned back, baffled. The Levantine stubbed his cigarette.

"Will you permit me, my dear colleague? I should like to question this prisoner."

"Go ahead, Nerval. I'll be interested to see *your* methods."

Captain Nerval strolled casually toward the prisoner. For a second he



looked into those gray eyes and the sullen expression. Then, without warning, he struck the prisoner full across the face.

"Dog of an Arab!" he hissed. "Why don't you tell?"

A red weal appeared on the dirty face of the prisoner. But his lips were closed. Once again the Levantine struck him.

"I'll have you flogged until your flesh is in ribbons," he said in Arabic. "And only then will you be shot. Now will you tell?"

Still there was no reply.

With a sudden surge of fury Captain Nerval seized the figure in the filthy burnous and shook him. He rained blows upon him. The Arab flinched under this assault, but still he was silent. Panting a little, the Levantine stepped back.

"You are a brave man, Jebel Ali," he said suavely. The Arab made no comment. A thin trickle of blood was on his cheek. "Do you wish us to believe that you know nothing of the General?"

At last the Arab spoke:

"I know nothing," was the reply. "But I am fighting for the General, and I am ready to die for the General. He is a great man. *Insh'allah!*"

The Levantine and the Arab regarded each other closely. Then Captain Nerval shrugged, lit another cigarette and blew out the match with a gesture of finality.

"The fool is determined to die, Major," he said briefly.

"Take him away!" ordered Major Yardley. He drew the documents toward him and scrawled his signature at the bottom. The prisoner and the escort marched out of the office.

"When will he be shot?" asked the Levantine.

"An announcement stating that the execution has taken place will be posted throughout the village within the next hour," growled Major Yardley.

"So?"

"Think of it, Rodgers, half a minute for you to live!"

"But of course the damned scoundrel will be squatting in his cell picking the lice from his filthy burnous. No, Nerval, we don't shoot them in cold blood. We only threaten, and try to put the fear of Allah into those Arabs who read the announcement of the execution."

"You British are a queer, quixotic race," smiled the Levantine. "No sense of logic. Stupid, but bravely stupid."

"I suppose, in Damascus, if that Arab had come into your hands, he would have been a dead man by now?"

"Assuredly."

"Well, I think we might get something out of him yet," mused Major Yardley.

"Unless the General gets hold of him first," warned the Levantine.

"Not a chance," said Major Yardley. "I'll have that Arab watched night and day. . . . Yes, what is it, now?"

ONCE again the sergeant-major was standing stiffly before him.

"I have the names of the two prisoners who are missing, sir."

"Who are they?"

"Mirza Hussein and Abu Shusha, sir."

"The two men suspected of being leaders in the General's gang?"

"Yes sir."

Major Yardley exploded with wrath.

"Who the devil next? I'm beginning to suspect that the General and his men are guarding this camp! What about the two men who were substituted?"

"They're in hospital, sir. I've tried to question them, but they're in a bad way. I suggest, sir, that—"

There was another interruption of stamping boots. A corporal, the one who had been in charge of the escort, was talking rapidly to the sergeant-major, with a scared white face. The sergeant-major himself looked scared as he turned again to Major Yardley.

"The prisoner you've just sentenced, sir—" he gulped.

"Yes?"

"He's escaped, sir."

"What!"

"Vanished completely, sir."

"Hell-fire!" shouted Major Yardley. "He can't have got out of the prison camp in five minutes. Search the whole area with all the men available!"

"Yes sir."

"And parade all the prisoners!"

"Yes sir."

"And put every man of that damned escort under arrest!"

"Yes sir."

"And get that escaped prisoner back and report at once to me in Jerusalem. Otherwise you had better put yourself under arrest!"

"Yes sir."

Major Yardley turned to his visitor.

"Shall we go back to Jerusalem, Nerval? I'm already behind in my schedule for the day."

"By all means, Major," smiled the Levantine. "I've seen sufficient here to convince me that the General is indeed a dangerous fellow. Furthermore, I would like very much to wash my hands."

He gazed distastefully at his well-manicured fingers which had clutched the filthy burnous of the Arab who had escaped.

They entered the armored car. Swiftly they were driven toward the gateway, where a redoubled guard hurriedly saluted. The sergeant-major was left swearing softly to himself in the office.

AS soon as the car reached the office of the Chief of Police in Jerusalem, having been saluted smartly throughout its progress from Ramleh, the two men descended.

The Arab chauffeur, in uniform, drove the car toward the back of the yard, then out by another gate, and was soon speeding along the main streets again, ignoring salutes. In a swirl of dust he traveled rapidly toward the north. Then, sighting another car on the lonely road among the hills, he drew to a standstill. He jumped down from the driving seat, went to the heavy baggage-carrier at the back, and pulled it open. The sullen Arab prisoner who had appeared before Major Yardley was crouched there.

"You go on in this other car, brother," he said softly. "I must return to Jerusalem."

The man in the filthy burnous stretched himself after his cramped ride. His gray eyes looked at the other car. It was flying a small French tricolor flag. The driver of the car was dressed in the dark green uniform of the Syrian Police.

"Also official?" grunted the escaped prisoner with a grin.

"The General arranges everything with care," was the reply. "There is glory in the cause. Farewell, brother. May Allah be with you."

"And with you!" replied the Arab.

He watched the armored car in which he had traveled from Jerusalem turn, and begin to speed back along the same road. The driver of the other car waited.

"WHERE do we go?" asked the escaped man.

"I have my orders," was the evasive reply. "You may travel inside the car, but it is best that you do not show your face; it is not the face of an honest man."

"You are wise in the ways of the General," grunted the escaped prisoner. "I will rest my tired limbs on the floor of the car."

A minute later the journey was being continued toward the north. The flag and the official markings of the car flashed them through the road patrols and outposts. The man on the floor of the car had squatted comfortably. From his burnous he brought forth a sealed envelope, folded carefully. He had found it thrust into his ragged clothing when Captain Nerval had seized him and rained blows upon him. There was an inscription on the envelope in Arabic, contemptuous in its brevity: *"Obey orders without question. Deliver this at your journey's end. Failure means death."*

Nothing more. Furtively he held the envelope up to the light. He would have given much to know the contents. But he was prepared to wait. He hid the missive in his burnous again, and kept his gray eyes fixed on the passing desert scene. At one time the blue headdress flicked aside to reveal a crop of red hair. And a chuckle, such as is never heard from an Arab, escaped him.

"I never dared to hope for such a swift and direct journey to the General's headquarters," mused Paul Rodgers, an An-

glo-American Intelligence officer whose work in the British service had made him known to the natives as the Red Wolf of Arabia. "Moreover, I never thought it would be so easy to escape from the prison camp after the difficulty I had in getting into it."

THEY traveled toward the Sea of Galilee, skirting the heavy leaden lake in the sunshine, and crossed the frontier into Syria without hindrance. Then the car began to climb those desert hills which were crumbling to sand in the heat, and where the road soon degenerated into a track. At length the car passed into the sudden cool blackness of a cave—it was a perfect, natural garage.

Rodgers, carefully adjusting his filthy burnous, stepped out.

"Follow me!" ordered the driver.

They climbed a narrow boulder-strewn path among the hills. Not a solitary living thing could be seen. It was late afternoon, and within an hour the sun would be setting. Red Rodgers observed the topography through his gray eyes. At last they turned the shoulder of a hill, and saw the camp below.

It was well situated. A little natural plain cupped by the hills and carefully guarded by sentinels. These fierce bearded men with rifles had been recruited among the Druses. The camp was perfectly camouflaged, too. From the air it would have the appearance of a typical mountain village, mud huts, and with tracks which might have been made by goats driven across the flat expanse. Only when they had descended and were among the houses, did Rodgers glimpse two fast armed planes hidden beneath a thatched roofing. The planes had British markings on them. The goat tracks across the plain had been made by the machines when they took off.

In the doorways of the huts lounged fierce, fighting Arabs. Every man had a bandolier crammed with ammunition slung about his shoulders. Women peered from beneath half-drawn veils. A few mangy dogs nosed among the sand and débris. Rodgers noticed with approval that he was being led to the biggest mud hut of all, outside of which two machine-guns were being examined closely by a group of Arabs.

"Is this the house of the General?" he asked his guide.

"It is not wise to ask questions," was the muttered reply. "And there are no answers, except that Allah is great."

A moment later Rodgers was blinking in the semi-darkness of a strange interior. Although the outside had suggested an ordinary Arab dwelling, he now found himself in an atmosphere worthy of a rich merchant of the Levant. Red plush couches and chairs; a piano, to which his gaze wandered for a moment; a radio set; and an open cupboard which revealed a little arsenal of Thompson guns, automatic pistols and Lee-Enfield rifles.

"Who is this dog?" asked a harsh voice in Arabic.

Rodgers turned to find himself facing a German officer of the Prussian type: his hair cropped short, monocle fixed firmly against the eye, cheeks carefully shaven pink, and a brutal swagger in the smart uniform he wore. Rodgers was disappointed. Was this the elusive Arab General whom everyone sought in Palestine?

"I bring a message," he said sullenly.

"Who from?" demanded the wearer of the monocle, menacingly.

"I know not."

"Who is it for?"

"I know not. I was told to deliver it at my journey's end."

A sardonic chuckle came from the German. He held out his hand and took the missive. Delicately he slit open the envelope with an Arab dagger that lay on the table. He read it. The chuckle developed into a loud laugh.

"So all goes well, *hein!*" he muttered to himself, in German. Then in Arabic he asked: "Whence do you come, dog?"

"I escaped from the prison camp today at Ramleh, effendi."

"By the usual means?"

"It was the way Allah revealed to me."

The reply seemed to please the German officer.

"Why were you in prison?"

"I was caught dynamiting the road near Jerusalem. I wished only to destroy those cursed Inglezi."

"You were a fool to think you could do it alone. We teach men differently here."

"I am willing to learn, effendi."

"What was your sentence?"

"Death."

GIVING an amused chuckle, the German regarded the ragged figure before him.

"Perhaps after a few days in this camp you may wish you were back, a prisoner of the British. We have no mercy on fools or traitors, here."

"I wish only to serve the General and slay the Inglezi," said Rodgers humbly.

The German struck him brutally across the face.

"You will learn, first of all, not to speak of the leader—by any name," he snarled. He pushed the bedraggled figure away, distastefully, and called to the guide. "Take this dog away and see if you can make a fighter of him. And let him realize that it may be easy to escape from a British prison camp, but from this camp nobody escapes—except he be dumb or blind."

And roaring at his own sinister pleasantry, the German officer stretched out a hand for the bottle of whisky.

Red Rodgers was led forth into the rapidly fading light. A ragged uniform, obviously once worn by a man now dead, was flung at him. Also a bandolier and an old-fashioned rifle. He lingered for a moment near to those two planes couched in a shed. There was a strange smile on his face.

THREE hours later a slim figure crept noiselessly into the house with its room of red-plush couches and chairs. A distant heavy snoring told that the German officer had finished the bottle of whisky.

Rodgers' hand reached toward the table. A thin shaft of light from an electric torch revealed to him the missive which he had brought across the desert. He read it. It was nearly as brief as the inscription on the envelope:

Greetings:

I send this by another of our escaped warriors. I am well. These Britishers are fools. I am preparing the plan which will bring us to the gates of Jerusalem. Be watchful. I will be with you again in forty-eight hours.

The General

The signature startled Rodgers. He read the message again, and memorized it. Then, replacing it on the table, he crawled stealthily out of the room on all fours.

A few minutes later there was the shattering roar of an airplane engine in the camp. Sleepers awoke with a jerk. Rifles were seized. Figures rushed toward the shed. But they shrank back as one of the planes with British markings on it swirled forth.

The plane increased its speed. It was rushing into the darkness, bumping over the rough ground and raising a cloud of dust. Two Arabs fired wildly as the machine lifted. The next moment it was climbing into the night sky. . . .

The following evening a dinner-party was drawing to an end in the spacious dining-room of the High Commissioner's house on the hill overlooking Jerusalem.

The High Commissioner himself, Sir Leonard Faversham, sat between his principal guests. They were the Chief of the Syrian Police, Captain Nerval, and a beautiful Parisian-gowned woman of Syrian origin, Madame Nerval. Other guests included Major Yardley, a distinguished Greek archæologist, an American visitor with official connections at Washington, and an enthusiastic but ascetic-looking parson who claimed to have an inner vision as to the actual site of the Crucifixion outside Jerusalem. Other exquisitely gowned ladies filled seats between the men. The Arab servants, white-robed and wearing scarlet-and-gold sashes, moved silently and discreetly among the guests.

"And he told me I must never forget that this was the Promised Land," the American visitor was saying. "'I guess it is,' I replied, thinking of the trouble the diplomats were having with Arab and Jew. 'The much-Promised Land.'"

There was general laughter, followed by a momentary lull. Madame Nerval, at a nod from the High Commissioner, rose from her chair. The others followed suit. The ladies filed out of the dining-room with a rustle of silk gowns. The High Commissioner sat down again with a sign of satisfaction, and sent the port decanter on its circle of the table and the remaining male guests.

"ALLOW me to compliment you, Captain Nerval, on possessing a most charming wife," he said. "I found her as intelligent in conversation as she is beautiful in appearance."

Captain Nerval smiled. "I appreciate the compliment very much, Your Excellency. It has destroyed another cherished illusion of our people."

"And what is that?"

"That the British have learned only the art of fighting, and not the art of flattery."

Sir Leonard chuckled, and selected a cigar with some care.

"Then I must destroy the other part of that illusion, Nerval," he said. "For the British have never learned the art of fighting. We usually lose every battle in a war—except the last one. . . . And now, can anyone suggest a toast?"

"Why not damnation to the General, sir," ventured Major Yardley, whose

worry had led him to drink an unusual amount of wine.

"A little harsh," said the High Commissioner. "But why not? Gentlemen, the toast is damnation to the Arab General. . . . *Damnation!*"

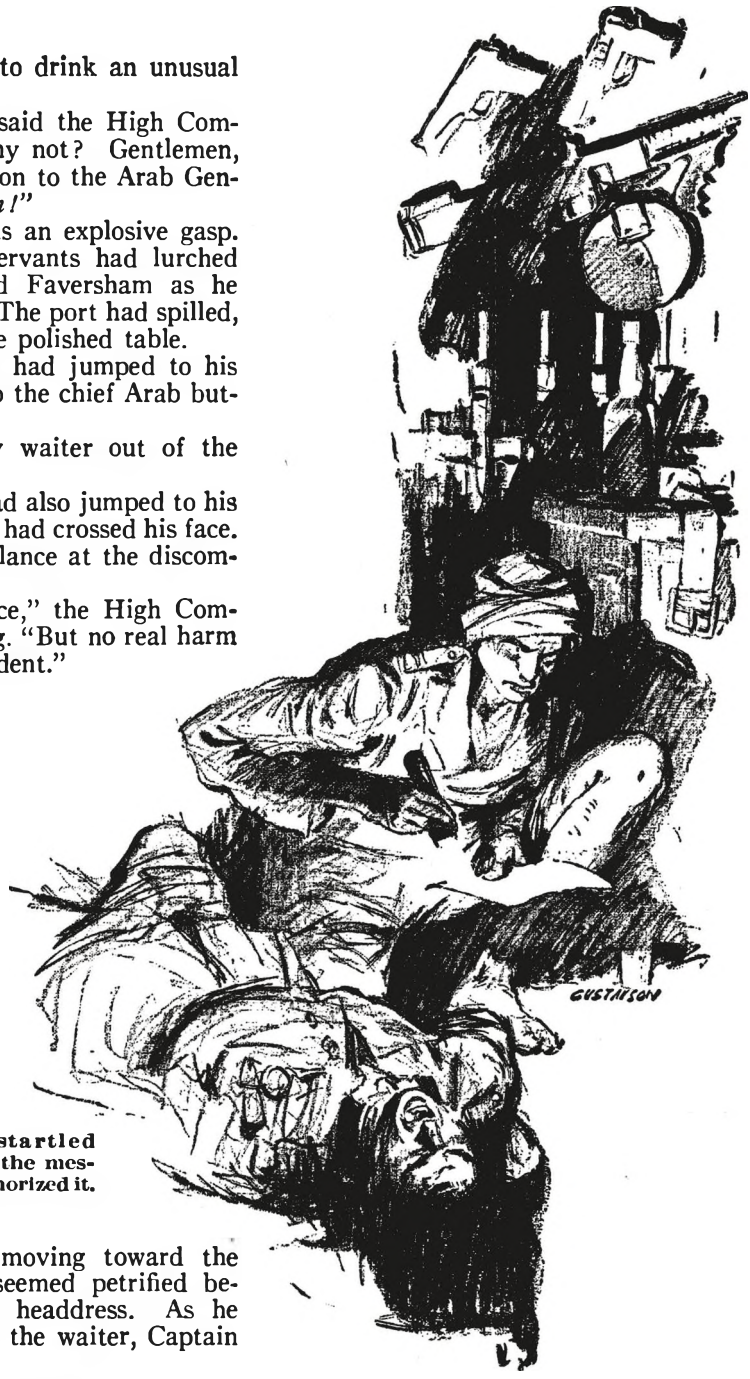
The last word was an explosive gasp. One of the Arab servants had lurched against Sir Leonard Faversham as he was about to drink. The port had spilled, and was staining the polished table.

The aide-de-camp had jumped to his feet. He signaled to the chief Arab butler.

"Get that clumsy waiter out of the room," he ordered.

Captain Nerval had also jumped to his feet. A slight pallor had crossed his face. He gave a shrewd glance at the discomfited Arab waiter.

"A cursed nuisance," the High Commissioner was saying. "But no real harm done. Just an accident."



The signature startled Rodgers. He read the message again, and memorized it.

The butler was moving toward the Arab waiter, who seemed petrified beneath his turbaned headdress. As he clutched the arm of the waiter, Captain Nerval again spoke.

"One moment! Pardon me, Your Excellency—but there is something familiar about the face of this Arab dog."

"Ah—really!" spluttered Sir Leonard.

With a queer smile on his face, Captain Nerval turned to his British colleague.

"Surely you recognize him, Major Yardley?"

The Chief of the Palestine Police, slightly flushed, gazed at the Arab held by the butler.

"Can't say that I do," he burbled. "What does it matter?"

"Surely it matters," said Captain Nerval quietly, "when you tried this man yesterday morning, sentenced him to death, and then heard he had escaped out of the prison camp at Ramleh."

"It's not—"

"It is Jebel Ali," said Captain Nerval triumphantly. "Look at the man's face! There's guilt in it."

With a chuckle, Major Yardley rose from his chair and peered at the face of the waiter.

"So it is," he nodded. "Then I've got back one escaped prisoner whom the General thought he could take from me."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the High Commissioner, recovering his cigar and helping himself to another glass of port from the decanter. "Do you mean to tell me, Yardley, that your escaped assassins get into my establishment and even serve me at table? Why, my life won't be worth a damn if this sort of thing happens."

"Your life won't be worth a damn, sir, if you drink that glass of port," came a quiet voice in English.

It was the blundering waiter who spoke.

The guests turned round to regard him with astonishment.

"Wha—what's the matter with the port?" asked the High Commissioner.

"The glass is poisoned, sir, by one of your guests. That is why I so very clumsily upset it."

This time the glass fell from the nervous fingers of Sir Leonard and smashed on the table. Everyone gazed stupidly at it.

"Better get this Arab—or whoever he is—under lock and key," said Captain Nerval to the Chief of the Palestine Police.

"This time the fellow *is* going to be shot," grunted Major Yardley. "Coming here with this fantastic yarn!"

He moved over himself to seize the man in the red-and-gold turban of a waiter. He stumbled, and shot out a hand which knocked the turban to the ground. A crop of red hair, unusually strange in an Arab, was revealed.

"Who the devil is this man?" demanded the bewildered High Commissioner.

"I regret, sir, to have to introduce myself in this unorthodox fashion," said the waiter. "My name is Paul Rodgers. I see that you have heard of me. Circumstances have not hitherto brought us together, Your Excellency!"

"RODGERS!" muttered Major Yardley. "Good heavens, and I sentenced you to death!"

"And thank heaven I escaped—or rather, thanks to the General," laughed Rodgers.

"Then you've been on the track of that devil?" asked Major Yardley, now a very sober man.

"Yes, I've been in the General's camp," said Rodgers, quietly. "I even escaped from it with the help of a British plane which happened to be there. There was just enough gas in the tank for me to reach Damascus. There I reported to the French authorities. A bombing patrol was sent out at once. I flew with them. We destroyed the General's camp completely at noon today."

"And the General?" asked Yardley excitedly.

Rodgers shook his head.

"He wasn't there."

"So the fellow has escaped us again, eh?" groaned the Chief of Police.

"No, I don't think so," said Rodgers quietly. Then he yelled: "Look *out*, sir!"

He wrenched himself free and made a leap at Captain Nerval. The Chief of the Syrian Police had a gleaming Arab dagger in his hand which he had been about to plunge into the breast of the High Commissioner.

"HAVE you gone crazy, Rodgers?" yelled Major Yardley.

"Not so crazy as you," said Rodgers, struggling with the wiry Captain Nerval. "You believed this man the Chief of the Syrian Police. You sent your armored car to the frontier to bring him safely to Jerusalem. He never came. This man took his place. This man tried to poison His Excellency. He is not the Chief of the Syrian Police. He is not Captain Nerval."

"Then where is Captain Nerval?" demanded Yardley.

"In your hospital at the prison camp. The poor devil who slumped down in front of you, and could not speak because he had no tongue. That's the real Captain Nerval."

"Then this man is—"

The Levantine held by Rodgers straightened himself. He made a bow.

"Exactly, gentlemen. I am the General. . . . Come in, my dear. It's not usual for the ladies to join the gentlemen, but on this occasion you are very welcome."

They all turned and stared in the direction of the door to which the General had spoken. It had opened quietly, and the lovely woman in the Parisian gown was standing with her back to it, pointing an automatic pistol in their direction.

"Please," she said in her slow, deliberate English. "All of you hold up your hands. I would advise it. I am considered a very good shot indeed with a pistol."

"She is, gentlemen, *sans blague,*" smiled the General. "Thank you, Rodgers. You and I meet for the first time. I also intend it to be the last time. I came here to kill the High Commissioner. My attempt to poison him was unfortunately spoiled by you. Apparently you have also wrecked my headquarters in the desert hills. I am beginning to think, Rodgers, that His Excellency is of very little account compared with you. You are, in fact, a very dangerous fellow. That I shall leave you dead behind me, will at least make my visit to Jerusalem a profitable one. . . . I'll take the pistol, my dear. Thank you. Now please go downstairs, get into the car with which Major Yardley so thoughtfully provided us, and tell the driver to run the engine. Don't worry, my dear. I'll be with you in half a minute. . . . Think of it, Rodgers, half a minute for you to live!"

The door closed. Everybody in the dining-room waited tense. They heard the engine of the car start. The General smiled and sighted with the pistol toward the Intelligence officer.

"This is only to be *au revoir* to the other gentlemen present whom I leave alive."

But even as Rodgers braced himself, something went flying through the air and crashed against the arm of the General holding the pistol. There was a loud report, a curse, and the room was filled with smoke.

Instantly Rodgers leaped forward—but the General had vanished. The door was closed and locked. The floor was littered with glass splinters of the port decanter, which the High Commissioner had hurled with unerring aim.

"The devil has escaped again!" shouted Yardley.

There was a roar from the car below, and the scream of tires as it swirled out of the gate. They all rushed to the windows.

"A fifty-foot drop to the garden, gentlemen," said the High Commissioner testily. "Don't any of you have a gun?"

"It's not usual to come to dinner here with a gun, sir," expostulated Major Yardley.

"Dammit, nothing that can be called 'usual' has happened here tonight!"

THE High Commissioner walked over to a somewhat dejected Rodgers.

"I want to thank you, Rodgers, not merely for saving my life, but also for smashing the nest of that dangerous rebel."

Rodgers shook his head.

"I have to thank *you,* sir, for saving *my* life. If you hadn't thrown the decanter just at that moment—"

"Dear me," said the High Commissioner, in alarm. "I had forgotten about that."

There was a rattle and a knock at the door from the other side. A woman's voice could be heard.

"Is anything the matter?"

"That's my wife," muttered Major Yardley.

"Do you mind turning the key, my dear?" said the High Commissioner. "I'm afraid we've been locked in."

The door opened. A group of surprised ladies stood there. Their eyes opened wide in astonishment as they saw a smashed decanter, a pool of port.

"Well!" gasped Mrs. Yardley, gazing suspiciously at her husband.

"BUT there is one thing worries me," said Major Yardley, as with Rodgers he followed the High Commissioner out of the room. "I still don't know how the General managed to get those fellows out of the prison camp."

"He didn't," said Rodgers, with a chuckle.

"Then who did?"

"*You* did. In your car. Each day after your inspection, two of the prisoners helped by the chauffeur stowed away in the back of your car and drove to freedom through the saluting guards. As I did."

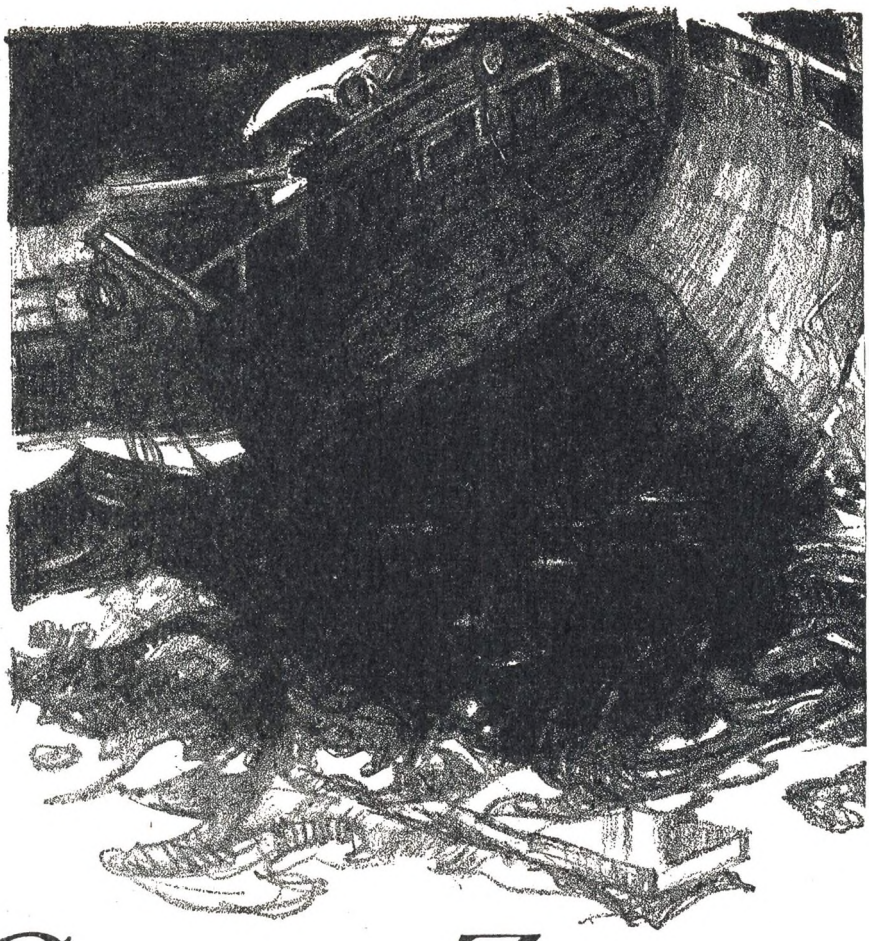
"But I would stake my life on that Arab chauffeur," protested Major Yardley.

"You mean on the chauffeur you used to have," nodded Rodgers. "Have you looked at the face of your driver during the past fortnight? No, of course you haven't. You've always stared at his back while he was driving you. And I doubt whether you really remember what the fellow really looked like. Actually, your old chauffeur was murdered—buried. The one who has been driving you for the past fortnight was placed there by the General. Hence the important part your armored car has played in these events."

"It's all beyond me," admitted Major Yardley.

"So is the General—for the present," said the Red Wolf of Arabia grimly.

More Red Wolf stories are coming. See Mr. Makin's letter on page 5.



Captain Zantro

ALONG the ancient coasts of the South China Sea, that devastating gale is known and feared as *Teet Kiey*—the Iron Whirlwind—a ruthless and overwhelming force of tremendous evil. And yet, toward morning of the seventh day following the foundering of the ship *Pimalco,* there was nowhere any sign of the great typhoon. Somehow it left no enduring mark, either upon the broad and empty ocean or in the glittering heavens overhead. The black wrack of storm, wild with high wind and torrential rain, had been swallowed up completely in the infinite: the monstrous seas, dark-rolling hosts with foaming flanks, had carelessly been dissolved in the essential serenity of the profound deep. The stars were now once more scintillating remotely, a little paler toward the dawn; but the dark flood was still black as ink with night in all the rolling hollows of the China Sea. The elemental quiet, ceaselessly restless yet ceaselessly serene, could obliterate every offense of violence. It has that greater power and that enduring virtue. There was nothing left now but the gentle gurgling of water as the long swells overspilled their white lips. That and a slow moan of wind whimpering out of north by east. No evidence remained of what had lately outraged that ocean's breadth. This may seem strange. Yet it was so. And there must be meaning to a fact like that.

No; there was no evidence at all of recent upheaval and chaos. Unless you wished to call the flimsy speck, floating on the sea's surface, evidence of that famous gale. In reality, though, it was testimony to a different thing. For that insignificant chip was the whaleboat of the ship *Pimalco,* and the shape huddled

A story no reader will soon forget.

By JACLAND MARMUR

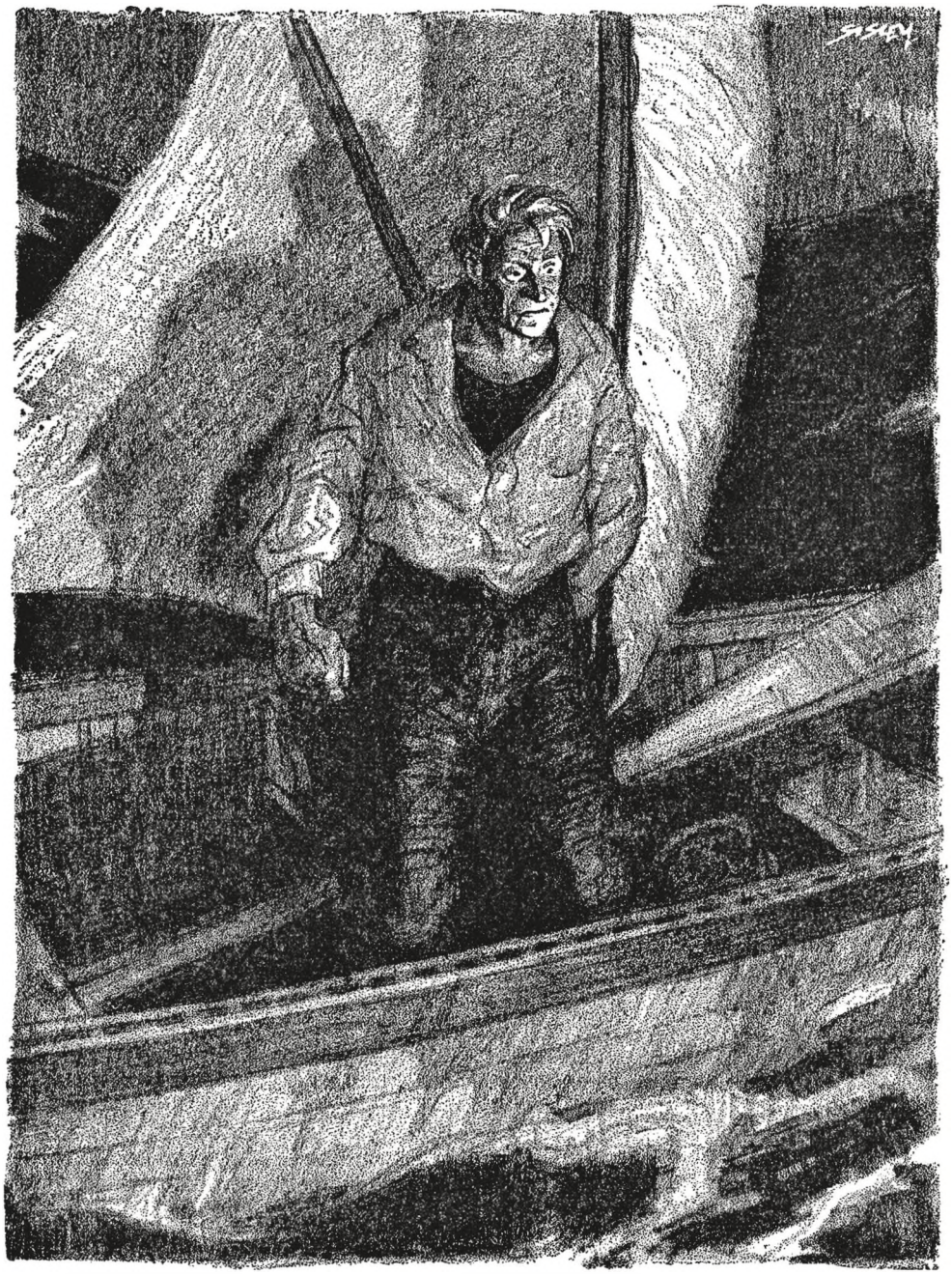
and His God

in the sternsheets was Captain Prosper Zantro with the tiller bar beneath his arm. He remained the man who was in command.

IT would at first indeed appear that the ocean to the south and west of Scarborough Shoal was empty, for the boat was puny and the figure in it motionless. Night still lay piled upon it in a dark mass as tall as the heavenly constellations. At times the small boat disappeared completely, lost in a deep hollow of the mile-long swell. But by and by it reappeared, a speck on a limitless sea, with an oblique lugsail slowly graying against the gloom. At first it was no more than a vague suggestion of unexpected color in a lifeless place. But it became gradually more tangible as the rumor of dawn crept stealthily above the rim of the eastern board.

Night was dissolving over there in the majestic hush of impending day. A pale ribbon of liquid gray faintly unrolled a horizon line. The darkness thinned: the stars retreated. The ocean became broader, more lonely: a wine-dark flood stirring restlessly. And the whaleboat resolved into certainty, its head nodding to the east: a lost thing. The shadowless light revealed pitilessly its smallness and its helplessness. But Captain Prosper Zantro, who had kept the night-long watch, still held the tiller bar beneath his arm.

He was spare and lean and gaunt, and the hair of his head was thickly salted with white. His face was lowered upon his arm in apparent exhaustion. Yet something in his attitude made it quite plain this was not a posture of despair or of defeat. He was husbanding what remained of his strength against the tor-



"I gave no order to abandon!" he said thickly. "Do you hear, Mr. Jeffries?" But there was no response. . . . The second mate had succumbed.

ment of another day, because he knew what it would be. Now he raised his head to advancing dawn. Very slowly; with dignity. And when he spoke it was a startling thing.

"Daybreak, Mr. Jeffries," he called tautly forward. "You may take over now."

It was a simple enough command to give. But the hoarse, cracked voice of human speech seemed very alarming in so forbidding and desolate a place. Captain Zantro waited. But there was no response.

"Jeffries!" he repeated. "Come along now! It's—"

He broke off abruptly. His shoulders stiffened as he peered forward. For some moments he remained motionless in that tense posture, for eyes are not trust-

worthy after seven days of torture in an open boat. Then his trembling fingers slipped the tiller bar into its becket. He drew himself half erect, crawling across the thwarts. When he reached the whaleboat's bows he knew for certain they were empty. He stared wildly at a watch hanging from a peg in the bow post. He knew it was the second mate's, and that he had carefully hung it there before he went overside. It was a thick, old-fashioned timepiece. Its hunting-case was open. Captain Zantro distinctly heard it, ticking carelessly away. It seemed to fascinate him. He looked at it for a long time, bent almost double. Then:

"I gave no order to abandon!" he said thickly to the pearl gray sky of early dawn.

HE stood up then. He looked first at the water, gurgling along the whaleboat's side. How cool, how green, how refreshing it looked! It invited a man to the peace of its profound depth where gay white bubbles offered refreshment, oblivion, an end to the torture of hunger and thirst and cruel responsibility. Mr. Jeffries had succumbed to its fascination. He had offered himself gratefully to its release in the dark solitudes of the night. Well, a second mate could do that. Captain Zantro never could. So he tore his eyes away from that madness at last and threw his burning stare defiantly to the east where the horizon of morning was.

"I gave no command to abandon!" He shook his fist at the sea in a mad, explosive rage. "Do you hear, Mr. Jeffries?" He thought he shrieked it out as a wild alarm, but his voice was little more than a harsh croak. "No!" he repeated. "I gave no command to abandon!"

He remained standing thus for some time—tall, haggard, hollow-eyed and sunbaked; lean as a spar; rocking with the ceaseless motion of the boat. She lifted to the crest of the swell and slid down the opposite flank. She slid deep down into a shadowy hollow of the China Sea. The steep wall of green-and-white-striped ocean loomed close behind him. He seemed carved against it rigidly—till it slipped stealthily away from him and another took its place, towering high above his unkempt gray head.

He watched them steadily out of wild eyes burning in a face grizzled with soiled white stubble of beard. He eyed them coldly face to face, and there was on him no sign of fright or of despair. After a time, strangely enough, the trace of a grim, ironic smile just touched his cracked lips. This was his ancient enemy. He had known it for almost fifty years. It was an enemy that knew in itself neither hate nor love, neither good nor evil—except as a man gave to it what his own nature could. It was a better enemy to have than a man in a foreign uniform. It was soulless unless you gave it a soul. It was heartless unless you gave it a heart. It was purposeless unless yourself were capable of endowing it with some meaning of your own. It existed: that was all. Like the second mate's watch. Ticking thoughtlessly on to mark the passage of time until its spring ran down. So Captain Prosper Zantro burst out laughing—and stopped at once. He would wind up that watch, he thought. It seemed a good thing for a man to do. As long as he could, he would wind it up.

Weakly and with great care, he crawled back to his post in the sternsheets. With frugality he drew a few teaspoonfuls of slimy water from the dregs of the breaker under the thwart, and wet his lips. Then he trimmed in the lugsail, tending the sheet and peering down at his little compass box. And he took the tiller bar—symbol of his craft and his fidelity—beneath his arm once more.

His course was east—true east for the Singapore-Manila steamer lane in the season of the northeast monsoon. Ahead of him the horizon violently exploded in a bombshell of color and light. Blinding day broke brutally over the empty vastness of the China Sea again. The whaleboat of the foundered ship *Pimalco* was solitary in the midst of it. There had been three others in her; and each one's passing, whether by death or by defeat, the shipmaster faithfully noted in his log. There was no one left now but himself. Captain Zantro was alone. He was alone in an open boat. He was alone at last with his enemy and his God.

AS day wore on, he patiently kept his post, staring blindly into distance. His seamed face was emotionless, without passion, without hate, without bitterness. This was because he understood the true nature of the elements which had for fifty years sustained his life, and which now would most certainly destroy him. He just sat there, shielding himself as best he could from the cruel sun, from the indifferent sea and sky, tending his last command with the same fidelity as his first. Because a second mate could slip overside to find release in cold oblivion,

but Captain Zantro never could: he remained until the end the man who was in command.

The small boat kept slowly scending the steep hills of the China Sea and sliding quickly down, ceaselessly rocking with her head to the east. Sometimes the man was in shadow, sometimes in blinding light. Sometimes the gray-blue walls of water reared sleekly at his back, tall and coldly overpowering; sometimes he was sent flying aloft on the crests, silhouetted vividly against an empty space. For the typhoon had vanished utterly. There was no sign of it anywhere. You would imagine so wild and fearful an evil could never find existence on such a peaceful sea and under such a cloudless sky. Captain Prosper Zantro thought of many, many things.

WITH the tiller bar beneath his arm, he himself was motionless, though the boat kept bouncing wildly and the sea and the wind kept blubbering. His fine white head, unkempt now, with haggard cheeks and hollow sockets under shaggy brows, remained unstirring as a strange carving out of solid teak. Except that his feverish eyes kept blinking. Steadily now and again with his thoughts. Almost like the eyes of a wild man captured in a cage. But Captain Zantro marveled at the sharp lucidity of his brain. Never before had he seen and understood so very many things with such fine, such brilliant clarity. How odd this was! How serene and penetrating his mind had now become, untroubled by large vexations or by petty prejudice. Things unrolled before him as if from a clean white scroll: his sixty-four years of life and their meaning; bright scenes of his youth and his manhood; of his joys, his struggles, and his small defeats; the patient, lovely face of Mathilde, his wife; the children, how they looked when they were small and helpless and very innocent. . . . What a lovely thing good living on the earth could be!

He blinked his eyes again. Things were indeed very plain to him now. It is part of a seaman's skill correctly to gauge and estimate the strength and endurance of sea and wind and men. He does this calmly, almost without volition. And Captain Zantro knew for certain that he could not long survive. It did not appall him. His expression never changed. But he thought to himself that a man is not a beast. A beast dies and returns to the earth and there is an end of it. But a man must leave some mark, some sign of faith or repentance, some signal of hope or love, some memory, some work, or some man-child to keep alive that wild, insistent human need for immortality. This a man must do, each in his own particular way. Because a man is not a beast. And there ought to be testimony to it somewhere on the wide earth beneath the broad, indifferent heavenly dome. Even Mr. Jeffries felt he had to leave his old-fashioned watch to tick away the time as long as its spring had tension left.

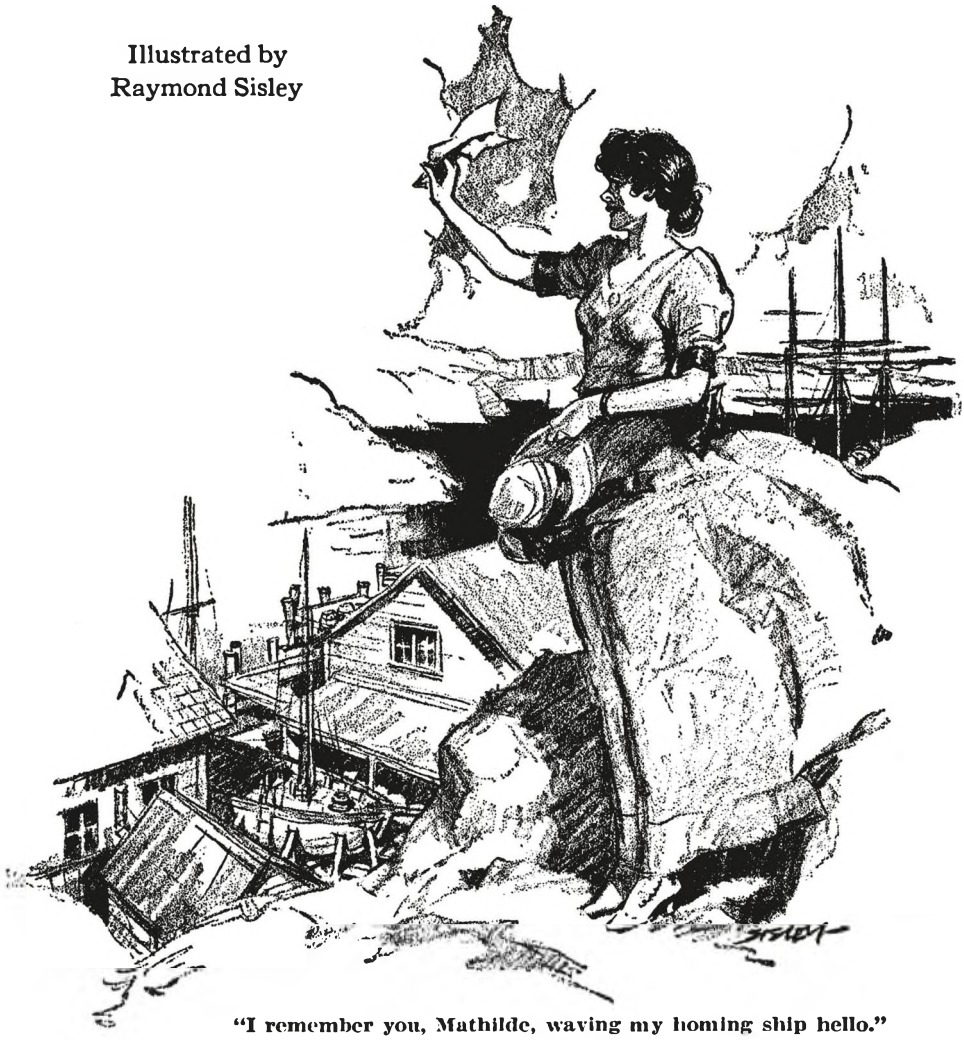
So Captain Prosper Zantro stirred. Fumblingly, he slipped the tiller bar into the becket, gauged the running sea, the trim of his sail to the unsteady breeze. Content with the way of his last command, he sought out his logbook from under the stern thwart. With trembling fingers, like a man with a very precious treasure, he unwrapped the canvas in which it was, and opened it to the last pages which were not yet written upon. Several of these he tore out, and hunted for his pencil. After a time, he found it. Its point was gone, so he sharpened it with terrible care, using his sheath knife awkwardly. In that task he found some large satisfaction. This was good, he thought. Yes; he was sure this was the proper thing to do. In indelible pencil he would write down his creed, his vision, and his hope. Surely a man of sixty-four would have some word of value to pass along before he was utterly washed away. Because a man is not a beast, and he must leave behind some faithful and enduring thing.

Without hesitation, Captain Zantro put down first an address somewhere on the rocky coast of Maine, nine thousand miles away. He printed it carefully in large letters so there should be no mistake. And his latitude and longitude, as near as he could reckon—a pin-prick on a wide and empty sea. And then, without thinking, because he instinctively knew to whom it was he must address himself, he began.

"MY darling Mathilde," he wrote, grateful that his fingers had ceased their trembling and that his handwriting was clear and concise and small as it had always been. "My darling Mathilde. . . .

"The weather," he put down in sailorly fashion, "the weather is clear and fine, with a moderate easterly swell. Wind light, northeast by north, but freshening. I have no hope whatever of crossing the

Illustrated by
Raymond Sisley



"I remember you, Mathilde, waving my homing ship hello."

steamer lanes in time for my rescue alive. But I am not alarmed or disheartened. I wish to speak to you, Mathilde my dear, while my mind is still fresh and clear. Because in several days I have no doubt my whaleboat will be picked up. She is a fine seaworthy little boat, though I myself cannot expect to last that long. But in good time I know this will come to your hand.

"Tony Jeffries, my second mate, told me yesterday that Joe Plutarch, who is chief officer of the ship *Milano,* owes him a debt of two hundred fifty dollars, and he wishes this to be given to Lottie Welch, the girl he was going to marry. I charge you to see to it, Mathilde. It is a sailor's last wish, spoken to me in an open boat, and it will hold as his legal will in any court of law. Tony died last night. I am quite alone now, but I will do my best. The boat handles easily.

"I will say nothing of the foundering of my ship *Pimalco* in a typhoon seven days ago. She had more than she could bear. I regret mostly my books; my Spinoza, my Shakespeare, my Don Quixote, my Huxley. They were dear to me. But there are more important things that I wish to say, and I must hurry before it is too late.

"This is a splendid place in which to die. I could ask for no better. It is spacious and wonderfully clear here: I am among things I understand. I know for certain it is not the sea which will destroy me, but my own humanity. If I had food and water I could last it out for ever. Perhaps that is why I feel no bitterness at all. The sea and the gale has no enmity for me or for any man, nor any affection. It has its own natural, unthinking functions to perform, and that alone concerns it. It is quite indifferent to such little midges as we are. I understand that this is quite proper. I have long accepted it as fact. A sailor's struggling against it has, I think, a different

meaning than that. And I have been thinking such things as this because I am very lonely for you, Mathilde, and because it seems to me a man ought to put an intention to his life before it comes to an end. You see, I am facing my own God, and I cannot address myself to Him because His fearful language is unknown to me. So I must speak to Him through you.

"That, I believe, was meant to be the very particular privilege and glory of all womankind. Women are mirrors, perhaps, through which the spirit of a man may catch at a fortunate time some fleeting glimpse of immortality. It is that eternal force and that eternal need men are driven to worship in you, not the creature herself. She is but a symbol and an instrument of that greater splendor. Surely, it is high purpose enough, and it ought not to be greedily betrayed.

"It is strange I have never spoken to you this way before. But we had such little time, Mathilde. We have been thirty years and more married, you and I. Yet all our days and nights together in that time would not count up to a single year. Sailors and sailors' wives have that peculiar problem and that particular lot. It is not to be too much regretted. It could teach tolerance, honesty, gentleness, and a great abiding faith. I know it has for you, and I think it has for me. There is in it a secret strength. It has taught us to hold fast together, though we very often stood alone. And every human creature, to earn his proper stature and his proper dignity, must sooner or later learn that thing. He must learn how to stand alone. So I am grateful and content. I have so many fine, bright memories.

"I remember my boyhood on the shores of Machias Bay. I remember my father's farm, the rocky majestic land of Maine out of which living is not an easy thing to wrest. I remember there were too many of us for that stony land to support, and how they named me Prosper as an omen of good for my life, knowing I should have to find it dangerously on the sea. They were wise, my people. We all strengthened and survived. I remember that coast; it is dear to me: Its magnificent, ragged shore of stone and mighty crags enduring against the great winter gales of those latitudes. What a wild and brutal noise the wind does make, driving the sleet in great broad sheets against the lighted land! I remember the ships I sailed along that coast and away from it; cargoes of good granite and fine lumber to all the ports of earth to build habitation and beauty for the sons of other men.

"And I remember the look of you, Mathilde, so many years ago, standing on a marble boulder of the foreshore, waving my homing ship hello. How lovely you were with the summer seabreeze on your face and all your dresses molded against you in the wind like the picture of a young man's dream. I have seen you that way all my life on the quarterdecks of my ships. I have seen you that way when the weather was fine, when the night was cool and noisy with the burbling of the sea, when the southern constellations were extraordinarily brilliant overhead and all the canvas bellyful of wind. I have seen you that way when the heavens were foul with the wrack of a mighty gale and my deck was shoulder-high with the thunder of the sea. And I saw you that way very clearly when I lost the *Pimalco* seven days ago.

"You are very dear to me, Mathilde. I love you very much, though it seems I have not told you so for much too many years."

THAT was what the old man wrote, alone in the sternsheets of an open boat floating in austere solitude upon a boundless ocean of purple flecked with runnels of white. His back remained bent to the blistering sun. He was completely intent on his task, writing feverishly, with wild and burning eyes. How small and insignificant he was, humped beside the tiller bar in the uneasy shadow of the sail, a midge tossing the bravery of human aspiration aloft to an empty and heedless void. The whaleboat of the foundered ship *Pimalco* was no more than a puny speck, lost at times completely in the deep hollows of the swell, and at times poised dangerously on the crests. She rocked ceaselessly, yet without apparent progress. And Captain Prosper Zantro wrote on, heedless of everything but his strange, impelling urge to expression.

When he looked up once, startled at an unusual noise his canvas made, he found the wind was backing farther to the east. So he tended the lugsail sheet and steadied the whaleboat's head by his teetering little compass card. He was amazed to find the dusk creeping toward him from the east and a heavenly planet beginning to glimmer there in bright ascendance. He had a difficult time lighting his lantern with what remained of the oil. He was angry with it. Why should his

fingers tremble so about a simple task like that, yet be so steady while he wrote? But he managed it at last, with four matches still to spare: and he wedged the lantern securely, close to the compass box.

He tried for a little water. It drew out heavy as scum, the dregs of his cask. It was barely moist, and he found he could not wet his lips when he tried, for the thickness of his swollen tongue. It was no matter. He took out Tony Jeffries' watch, and he wound it up. Carefully. Like a ritual. Because he meant to keep it going. Just as long as he could. It seemed as important as that. The execution of a sacred trust. Then Captain Prosper Zantro dropped weakly to the bottom boards, groping for his paper and the stump of his pencil once again.

The whaleboat had a steeper angle to her now, leaning more tautly against the wind. Night rushed out to meet her, and all the glittering stars. The mile-long swells passed under her with unhurried speed, shining and angular, steeply rising in her wake for a moment before rushing silently far away beyond. The shipmaster's lantern remained alight, a feeble glim in a void of outer darkness. And by its dim light he wrote on, without pause and without hesitation, holding his final communion with his own particular God.

"I have contended with these oceans and the great winds that blow across them," he went on rapidly in his quick, concise hand, "for almost fifty years. In that time a man should know something of them, and I think, Mathilde, that I do. You cannot conquer a gale: you cannot overcome the sea. Such talk is childish folly, and not for the minds of mature men. It is possible only for human skill and daring to circumvent or to outlive them. But whether you do or do not, they are completely indifferent, as they are to me now. They go their ordained way: what man's feeble purpose was is no concern of theirs. And this is just. This is proper. I have no complaint to make of it. A man must give his own life its own beauty and its own meaning. Nowhere else is it ever to be found but in the effort of his own creation. That which each man loves, Mathilde, he must himself create, for nowhere on earth will he find it exists to the desire of his heart.

"I have seen the beauty of the sea, and all of its terror. I have seen its might and known its majesty. I have known great ships and I have earned the right to speak their splendid names. Wild with wind, I have commanded some of them, boiling down their easting in the forties, with canvas scattering the stormy scud aloft. And I have known the peace and the great comfort of my homing when your dear face told me I was for a time at last secure. It is all the security I ever had, Mathilde: it is all the security I ever needed or desired.

"Now in the end I wish to give some meaning to my long contention with this sea. It is a strange impulse, yet I cannot deny it. It overwhelms me. I cannot endure to be washed away without mark or sign remaining. For there is immortality somewhere in the hearts of good men and it ought to be sought out and passed on, no matter how feeble it may appear to be. My death is nothing. It does not dismay or affright me. It is fulfillment, not frustration. I do not find it tragic as is the stupid dying of young boys in war or violent human outrage who murder first their own gods and their own decencies long before they murder each other. My own questing is at an end. I have found what each man must some day find for himself. I have found that my God is a part of me: we are indissoluble.

"Here where I am it is night now. High above my head swing all the constellations that have been my intimates for many years. Times without number have they given me comfort, companionship, and guidance. They have never failed me when they were in sight: I am sure they will not fail me now. There is heat lightning flashing across the vastness of this dark sky—great jagged livid tongues of it, spasmodically lighting up great secret continents of cloud. It is more beautiful than you could ever imagine, Mathilde my darling. And I am here to see it for the last time, how it reveals the large ocean, dark and running, with lifting crests and yawning hollows in between. It reveals my whaleboat, too, no doubt, and me in it. And how small and puny we must look in all this endless, empty majesty. But there is no slightest sign anywhere of the great typhoon that did to death my ship *Pimalco,* her fourteen men, and now her master."

HE gazed about him in the darkness, as if in fresh wonder at this thought. Then he resumed:

"No; there is no evidence of it at all. I have been thinking of that, and I find it strange. So brutal a whirlwind ought to leave some mark upon the ocean's face.

But there is none. So tremendous and overpowering an evil should leave some sign of its passing. But there is none. It is vanished completely. The sea is moderate. The wind is fresh. The weather is clear and fine. You would think surely a terror such as that could never find existence in a place as serene and orderly as this. Yet it will recur. We know it will recur. And again that ruthless and overwhelming evil will leave no lasting sign of its failure or its success. Not on the sea's face; not in the heavens' vault. They are indifferent to it, and by it untouched. Its mark is made in a different and a more secret place. Its mark is made nowhere except in the heart and in the spirit of the men who in silence and in solitude contended with it. That is its value and all of its meaning! This seems to me to be quite plain.

"It is the sum of my life, Mathilde. So simple a thing as that. I find in the end that my service has never been to ships, to shipowners, or even to the sea. They are unimportant in themselves, as indifferent to me as the ocean to its own great storms. My service has always been to Myself, to that thin and shining thing which I must call my God because I know for it no other name. Out of that service alone I have won whatever of integrity is mine, whatever of human dignity, whatever of meaning there is to the sixty-four years of my life. The rest is of little value and no importance.

"So I charge you, my darling Mathilde, to tell this to John Prosper, our son, who is soon to take upon himself, if he has not already done so, the command of his first blue-water ship. I conceive it to be a most important part of my small inheritance to him. . . .

"I am growing extremely weak, Mathilde, though my mind is wondrously clear and fresh. I send my love to all the children. It is strange I cannot now think of them as fully grown. They appear to me to be still young, with bright little faces, and wide and innocent eyes. They were lovely children, Mathilde. Do you embrace them for me, please.

"I must make an end now, and quickly. I can write little more, for my strength is passing. Perhaps I shall see the dawn just once again. I should like that. The dawn at sea is a lovely sight. The sea is so still and quiet then, and all the wide earth is expectant of good things. Do not be alarmed, Mathilde. This is a fine place in which to die. It does not dismay me. I wish now only to tell you what I have never told you often enough. I love you very much. You are very dear to me. It is a rich, slow-growing love of tolerance and maturity of which I speak. You have been womanly all your life. You always accepted quietly everything which that implies. I know my great good fortune, and you have brought much honor and great dignity to me.

"There were times when I was lonely and heartsick in a far off place, because that is the way of a sailor's life, and I have never known any other. There were times when I could not longer endure the loneliness of fevered nights, times when my humanity was a great trouble to me. I would not cringe before you now. Because in addressing you, my darling Mathilde, I speak face to face with my own particular God in what feeble language I have at my command. Against you I never intended evil or offense.

"I am thinking of you now, as for so many years I have. I have only an unbounded gratefulness and a deep humility. I wish you to believe me, my Mathilde, until the very end to be

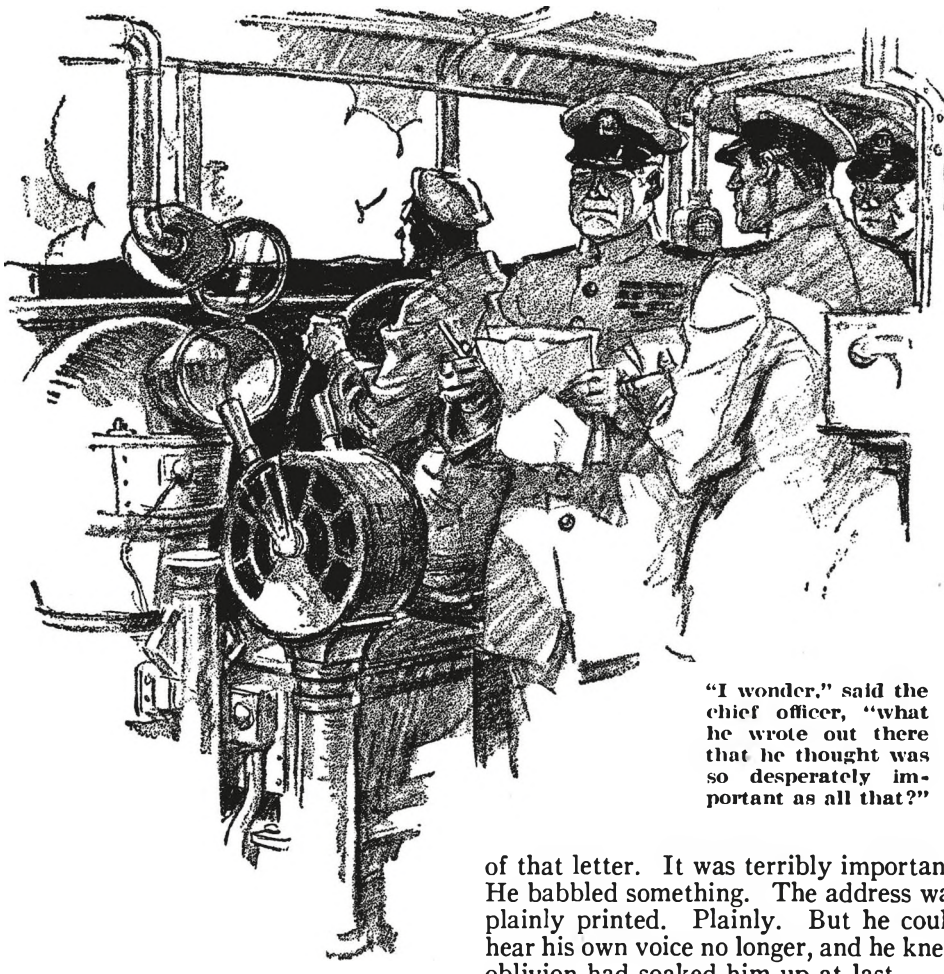
"Your faithful,

"Prosper."

Captain Zantro had great difficulty with his writing toward the last. He felt his mind was wandering and his sight beginning to dim. It played queer pranks upon him. He had hallucinations. Of ships and men he had known. Of scenes with Mathilde in his joyful youth. So he hurried on, scrawling rapidly, feverishly, with his sunken eyes aflame. Because he knew for certain that all his strength was fast ebbing and all his vitality quite at an end. His hand flew desperately across the paper in wild alarm to have done before it was too late. But knowing he had managed it, his black, cracked lips twisted in a crooked smile of triumph.

With extreme care he folded the sheets he had for so many hours labored upon. His hands were trembling violently. He could no longer control them, and he no longer tried. But he put the folded papers, together with his pencil plainly to mark the place, between the covers of the logbook of the foundered ship *Pimalco* where they were certain to be found.

He remembered little else. For with this done, he felt a tremendous wave of relief and serenity surging over him. He was at peace. He felt refreshed, but his weakness was unbearable. And he fell head and shoulders over the tiller bar, ready for oblivion. He had no knowledge



"I wonder," said the chief officer, "what he wrote out there that he thought was so desperately important as all that?"

of darkness or dawn or daylight. Vaguely he felt the whaleboat's motion, rising and falling and rocking ceaselessly. He thought he smiled indulgently at that persistent memory of his lifelong craft. And he knew for certain that Mr. Jeffries' watch was ticking on. He heard it plainly, very loud. And he thought quite lucidly that that was good. He had kept it going. What more could be expected of a man? It was a personal victory of no small repute. He had kept it going until the end. Mr. Jeffries should never have gone overside that way. He had no right. He wasn't in command. . . .

It seemed to the shipmaster there were familiar noises all around him now. He thought he heard the slap of the sea against the gunwales of a boat, and rowlocks thumping between wooden tholepins: A pleasant sound to a sailor's ears. And he was certain that he heard the noise of human speech in an idiom he understood. These must surely be the heavenly hosts. How odd they should talk as sailors would! He must tell them of that letter. It was terribly important. He babbled something. The address was plainly printed. Plainly. But he could hear his own voice no longer, and he knew oblivion had soaked him up at last.

THE P. & O. liner, bound toward Manila out of Singapore, swung her flat wake in a wide swath upon the oily swell, returning to her course as the sun exploded in the east. Her chief officer, who had just picked up the sole survivor of a foundered ship out of a drunkenly swinging whaleboat, came thoughtfully up the ladderway to the bridge.

"He's out of the ship *Pimalco*, sir. Her master, I judge," he reported quietly to his captain. "Foundered in last week's typhoon, no doubt. I'm sure I'd never have sighted that small boat at all, if it weren't for that lantern he had in his sternsheets there. The lamp oil played out. It was smoking dreadfully. That's what I saw."

The captain nodded, and turned his head as the ship's doctor came aloft.

"Well?" he asked.

"I think perhaps I can pull him through. Tough as iron nails, those windbag men." The surgeon had something in his hand: Sheets of paper, folded crookedly. He

looked down at them, frowning deeply. And then he looked up again. "He kept babbling drunkenly before he went under, sir. Half maddened, I guess. And I don't wonder at all. Raving about a letter for his wife. Terribly important, by what the old duffer kept croaking. Wrote it all down, he insisted, in indelible pencil. Of the utmost importance. Must be delivered. He marked down the address, he said. Then he went out cold."

"Well?" the captain asked. "What's so odd about that?"

"This is it," the surgeon said.

And the captain took what he handed across. There were many pages, torn from a ship's logbook, and the piece of a wooden fid that had been whittled down to a pencil-point. He unfolded the papers methodically, turning each one over and over and bringing them close to his face. There was the imprint of much scrawling upon them, blank impressions running crookedly at wild angles across each sheet. But there was no single intelligible word to be read.

The master looked at the sum of Captain Zantro's labors, at the summation of an honest sailor's life, for long moments. And he looked across the sea to where sunrise flamed. He seemed to be considering, severely and in silence, the intention and the import of this thing while neither his chief officer nor the surgeon spoke.

There was nothing whatever to be read in the letter Prosper Zantro wrote. Perhaps there was essential justice in that. Perhaps what he had to say was much too revealing, and such things as that are not meant to be lightly tossed about before the sight of common men. Perhaps he who unafraid had plumbed the deep and been for a moment face to face with that blinding light should come back in humble silence, and in that silence go his way. But the chief officer could not help but mumble his curiosity.

"I wonder," he said, "I wonder what he wrote out there that he thought was so desperately important as all that?"

But the captain of the P. & O. liner, being English out of Kent, may have sensed the propriety of silence before a thing he could not fully understand. For he never turned his head at that query, but continued to peer with narrowed eyes toward that shining place where the sunrise was.

"Poor devil," was all he said sternly at last, and with controlled quiet. "He must have had a most horrible time. . . . Let her go full speed, Mr. Tarleton. Both engines, please."

Douglas

> "We understand from our correspondent at the front that tremendous consternation has been caused among the Boers by our observation balloons, which are proving of great value in the South African terrain."
>
> —London *Graphic*, January 5, 1900.

"I SAY, old chap, this will amuse you no end!" Captain Smythe-Gore handed the months-old London paper to his companion and indicated the paragraph. "The idea of anything causing consternation among the Dutchmen—a bit thick, eh? You'd not be guilty of sending such a dispatch to your American newspapers."

Douglas read the mention with an ironic smile. He was a lean, hard, intent man with humorous wrinkles about his eyes and a devil-may-care glint in their blue depths.

The two were at tiffin. The open tent-front, from this post at the edge of the hills, gave view of the far-stretching veldt beyond, broken by occasional kopjes or bald rises. From somewhere to the right and far out of sight came a tremulous mutter of heavy guns.

"No; whoever sent that in, was using his imagination." Douglas laid down the newspaper. "He's as badly off in one direction as you are in another."

"Oh, come!" protested Smythe-Gore amiably. "Because I say these dashed balloons of mine have taken all the romance and go out of war? But it's a fact: observe; telephone; move pins on a map; crash go the guns—and crash goes all romance. And to think I might have gone in for the Guards!"

"In which case the Boers would have sent you home in a wooden overcoat," said Douglas.

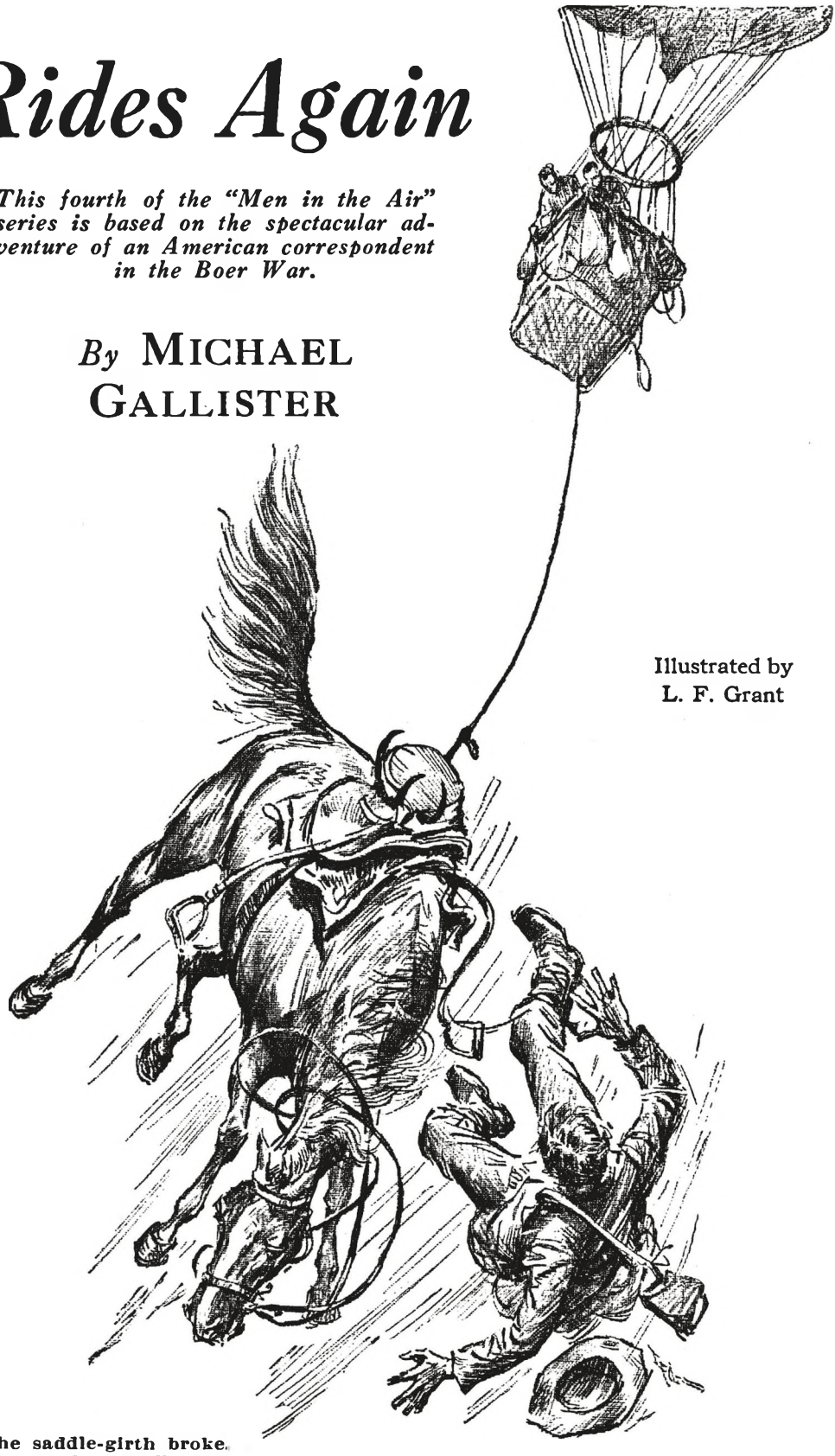
This expression, when he had grasped its meaning, delighted Captain Smythe-Gore. He was interested in this American correspondent and pleased to have him as a guest. By the war-college theories, the balloon observation unit should have been two miles behind the lines; it was actually on the very front itself. Douglas had been allowed to come here on

Rides Again

This fourth of the "Men in the Air" series is based on the spectacular adventure of an American correspondent in the Boer War.

By MICHAEL GALLISTER

Illustrated by L. F. Grant



The saddle-girth broke. Horse and man fell away.

condition that all his dispatches should be read at base headquarters. Behind this was a reason.

A professional aëronaut of no little fame, he had been given a commission with the balloon corps in Cuba, two years since. Wounded and out of the war, his work as makeshift correspondent had pulled him into fame anew. Now, in South Africa, the high command wanted no advice, particularly from American correspondents; but they were by no means averse to picking up helpful information in a quiet way. All of which Douglas quite understood, and it amused him. Things were going badly, very badly; and the British were desperate.

DOUGLAS liked Smythe-Gore, who was something of a genius in his awkward blond way. He liked being at the front, and above all this particular portion of the front, which was off by itself far on one flank, and keeping an alert eye on the enemy communications.

"There's only one possibly worse thing than these bally gas-bags on a string," said Smythe-Gore, passing the cigarettes. "And that would be a gas-bag without a string. For any practical use, that is to say."

Douglas broke into a laugh.

"Excuse me, Captain, but you're talking to an old balloonist! In the proper hands, a free balloon can accomplish wonders; it can descend, go up, swoop at a given point, ride just off the ground —anything you like. Captive, I grant you, it's a gas-bag on a string. But a free balloon can be handled with nicety. I've done it. I know. Why, it can be put down within a five-yard circle! In a light air such as we have today, I'd guarantee to come down in a balloon, pick up one of your men out yonder on the veldt, and take him back to two thousand feet with me!"

"All poppycock," said Smythe-Gore. "Beg pardon, old chap, but that's what it is, you know. I've studied aëro-dynamics and all that jolly rot; hard enough to control these bags on a cable, but free, they're just hopeless."

"Give me one of your bags," said Douglas, "with what's needed for a free ascension, stick a man yonder on the veldt, and I'll prove my words."

"No! Really? Ten guineas that it can't be done!" exclaimed Smythe-Gore.

"It's a bet!" retorted Douglas. "Get me a grapnel and line, with plenty of ballast, and I'll ask no more."

"The supply service can furnish anything on earth." Smythe-Gore seized pad and pencil and wrote out a requisition. "Have everything here tomorrow. I say, though! It would be against all regulations to give you the balloon—we only have the one here, you know!"

"You'd balance regulations against a really sporting event?"

"Hang it all—"

Douglas was prompted merely by a wicked desire to make the Britisher pitch regulations overboard; and eventually he succeeded, for sporting blood won the day. The requisitions were sent in, and Smythe-Gore took his guest to see the unit at work.

The American offered to go up with him, and Smythe-Gore was delighted. A three-hour stretch in the air became monotonous. At the moment the Captain was the only officer with the unit, both other officers having been wounded two days ago in a surprise attack by the Boers.

To Douglas this outfit was of the greatest interest, since it was using a feature entirely new to him. The English balloons were larger than customary, being of nearly a thousand cubic meters; cylinders of compressed hydrogen replaced the old field generator, so that the chief apparatus consisted of the winch and cable. It was in the use of a kite, however, that the novelty lay.

The deep and narrow basket employed by the English balloons barely permitted the two men to crowd in comfortably. With its huge lifting power, the bag shot up immediately, and the chugging rattle of the winch was soon lost. The earth dropped away. Before them the empty veldt lay outspread across the horizon.

WHEN Smythe-Gore had made his preliminary reports and could lay aside his binoculars, he noted the interest of Douglas in the kite. This was a large spread of silk on crossed bamboos, made fast to the windward side of the bag.

"Not bad, not bad," said the Captain complacently. "Wind of any force tends to blow the bag over and down; we turn the wind into an assistant, by means of the kite, whose inclined surface helps keep us up. You see, the last vestige of romance is dead! Even the winds of heaven are turned into a bally mechanical device."

Smythe-Gore was quite in earnest. At Woolwich he had soaked himself head over ears in air theory and practice, pure-

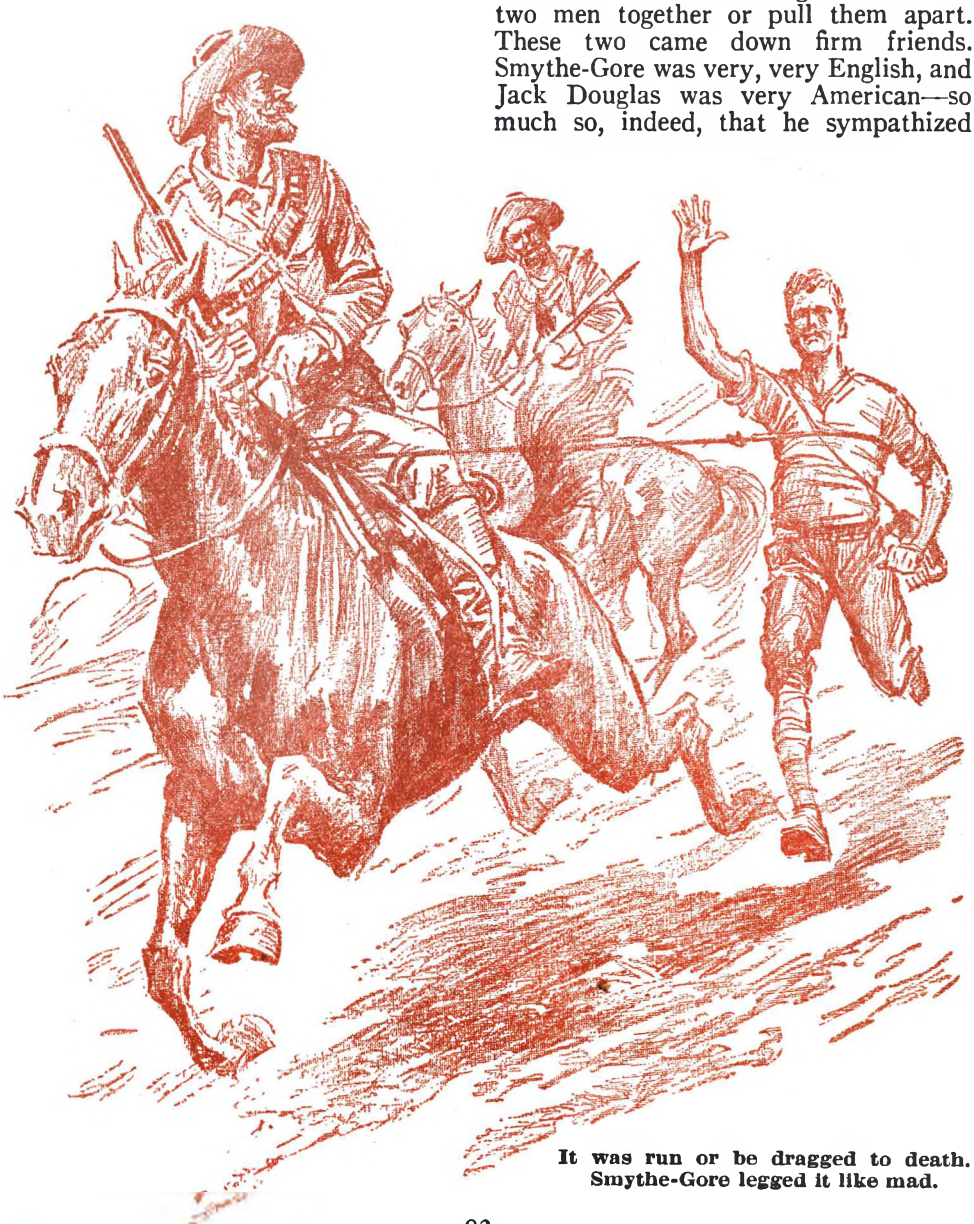
ly from the military point of view. Between balloons and machine-guns, he was convinced that all the old glamour and romantic appeal of war was doomed and done for. His plaint was entirely sincere.

"You, old chap, are a Douglas," he said. "The very name throbs with historical romance and all that sort of thing. When a Douglas rode the Border, the name was like a clarion. And now what? Observe; telephone; send a helio flash. A commando rides here, or guns are being moved there. Jerk the string, and down you come. War isn't what it used to be. The world's going to the dogs."

"You'll look fine, sitting in a club window on Piccadilly and repeating that," said Douglas, laughing, "while I'm filing war-correspondence from all over the world! Seriously, you're dead wrong. You just don't know much about the possibilities of a balloon."

This was straight talk for one of Her Majesty's finest to swallow from a bally American, but Smythe-Gore took it, and demanded why. Douglas told him, but could make little impression. The other man was a military automaton, blind to all else.

A three-hour stretch at fifteen hundred feet, cooped in a basket, will do more than a solid month on the ground to draw two men together or pull them apart. These two came down firm friends. Smythe-Gore was very, very English, and Jack Douglas was very American—so much so, indeed, that he sympathized



It was run or be dragged to death. Smythe-Gore legged it like mad.

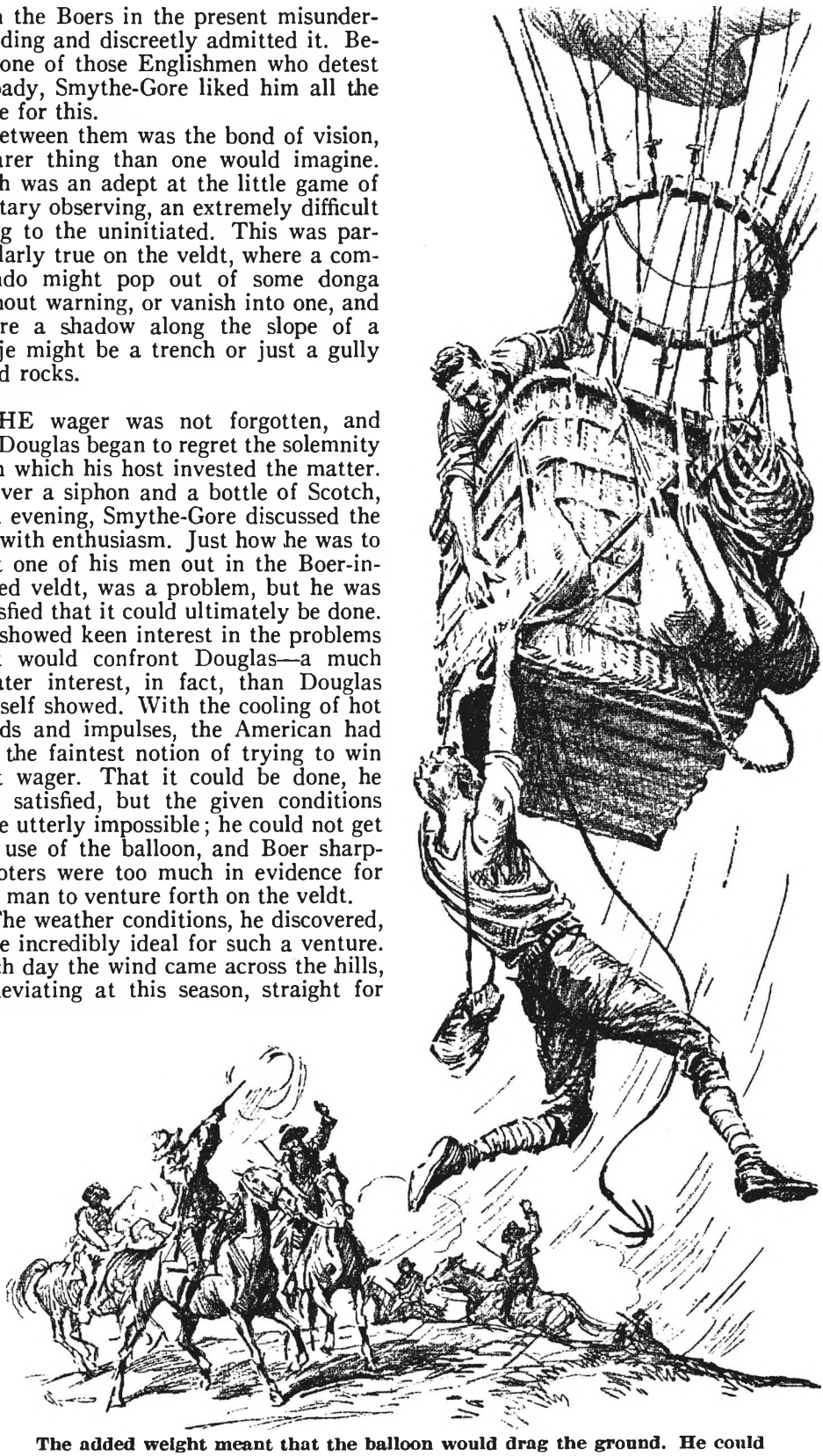
with the Boers in the present misunderstanding and discreetly admitted it. Being one of those Englishmen who detest a toady, Smythe-Gore liked him all the more for this.

Between them was the bond of vision, a rarer thing than one would imagine. Each was an adept at the little game of military observing, an extremely difficult thing to the uninitiated. This was particularly true on the veldt, where a commando might pop out of some donga without warning, or vanish into one, and where a shadow along the slope of a kopje might be a trench or just a gully amid rocks.

THE wager was not forgotten, and Douglas began to regret the solemnity with which his host invested the matter.

Over a siphon and a bottle of Scotch, that evening, Smythe-Gore discussed the bet with enthusiasm. Just how he was to post one of his men out in the Boer-infested veldt, was a problem, but he was satisfied that it could ultimately be done. He showed keen interest in the problems that would confront Douglas—a much greater interest, in fact, than Douglas himself showed. With the cooling of hot words and impulses, the American had not the faintest notion of trying to win that wager. That it could be done, he was satisfied, but the given conditions were utterly impossible; he could not get the use of the balloon, and Boer sharpshooters were too much in evidence for any man to venture forth on the veldt.

The weather conditions, he discovered, were incredibly ideal for such a venture. Each day the wind came across the hills, undeviating at this season, straight for



The added weight meant that the balloon would drag the ground. He could hear the plop of balls piercing the basket.

the veldt; a steady wind, not too strong, not too light. Any hour, of course, might bring rain and storm in place of it, but for the moment all was perfect.

Turning from the wager, they talked air far into the evening—or rather ballooning, of which the soldier knew little, the correspondent much.

"Your balloon, like all the modern ones, is perfectly round, and that's a pity," said Douglas. "That's why, if turned free, a balloon spins—we've attained too perfect a balance these days. On a rope, of course, it doesn't spin. Or if— *Hello!*"

"Something wrong?" asked the Captain. "Ants, perhaps?"

"No; ideas." Douglas grinned and lit a fresh cigarette. "Back in the old days, when air travel meant skimming the earth as closely as possible, they discovered that a trailing rope dragging the ground would materially help in handling the balloon. Hm! It'd work to a marvel out yonder on the open veldt! The rope serves as ballast, you know. And it might retard the bag sufficiently to let your kite serve as a sail, which it otherwise wouldn't, since the bag goes with the wind."

"Ha! Parachutes!" exclaimed Smythe-Gore. "Why not drop parachutes on these dashed Boers, each one with a dynamite package, what?"

Douglas shook his head amusedly. "It's been tried. Somewhere in Italy—I think the Austrians tried it, in the early days. The wind changed, and the explosive presents dropped back on their own camp. . . . Well, are you going up in the morning?"

"Absolutely. Nine o'clock—always at the same hour. Had word today that officers and men will be along shortly to replace our vacancies; jolly good thing. I'm fed up with going it alone."

"Nine o'clock, eh? First thing you know, the Boers will get on to you and stage an attack about eight-thirty. The balloons may not have caused any consternation among 'em, as that London paper of yours declared; but you can bet they hate your gas-bags vividly! If I was on the other side and had a couple of commandos to spare, I'd guarantee to spike the guns of this outfit in a hurry."

"Oh, I say!" protested the other amiably. "How would you go about it?"

"Penetrate your exposed flank over here, circle around, blow this outfit of yours all to hell, and ride back into the veldt."

Smythe-Gore was amused to laughter by the suggestion. On a dozen counts of strategy and tactics, it was roundly impossible, he insisted.

"All right, all right," conceded Douglas. "Last December you lost three battles in one week, just because the Boers didn't give a damn for strategy but wanted to win! Theory doesn't work in the field. It didn't work with us in Cuba, either. All the good we got out of our balloon corps was to show the Spanish where to fire—and believe me, they poured it in hot."

Smythe-Gore, whose sporting blood was hot for lack of opportunities, offered to bet a dozen guineas that this impossibility would never happen. Douglas warily refused; but he let himself be badgered into raising the original wager to twenty guineas. A hundred dollars was a lot of money; but on the other hand he had no intention of trying to win it, so the risk really was no risk at all.

And on this, they saluted the Southern Cross with a nightcap of whisky, and retired.

MORNING found Douglas up betimes and heartily enjoying himself. The balloon corps was flanked by a heavy detachment of cavalry, whose theoretical job was to keep off any raiding commandos of Boers and to sweep out and pounce upon enemy communications when occasion offered. With this in view, the lines were so disposed that all attention was centered upon the open veldt out in front; so, naturally, was the artillery in connection. Douglas eyed the horse lines to the exposed rear and turned away with a shrug.

He rejoined Smythe-Gore, who had received orders to examine the veldt thoroughly. Scouts had reported Boers concealed, in some number, in the dry arroyos or dongas which were invisible to the eye and could hide vast bodies of men.

The balloon was being given a fresh dose of hydrogen from the pile of steel tubes. The men were at work on the winch; the sergeant was examining the basket and cable. Shrewd, cheery Britishers, these, trained in the Woolwich air school, and very uncertain about the status of this cool, lean, brown guest in mufti; since he had gone aloft with the Captain, he must be an officer of some kind. So Douglas ranked a salute, much to his delight.

To one side of the winch, he stopped short. Here was a pile of sandbags, with

coils of rope of various sizes, and a large grapnel attached to a strong but limber line. He was staring at the pile with dismayed certainty of what it must mean, when Smythe-Gore came up and clapped him on the shoulder.

"There's your bally stuff, old chap! Just arrived. Now, when we—"

The sentence was never finished.

In upon the words broke a *rap-rap-rap* from somewhere to the left, then a burst of rifles all at once. The morning air thrilled to a ripple of shouts. The silver voice of a bugle began a call and was checked midway. Rifle-fire again. A man, one of the cooks, sprang into sight with blood on his face and a yell on his lips.

"Blimy! They come up out o' the earth!" he shrieked.

THEN everything was drowned in a thunderous rush, a pounding of hoofs that shook the earth. Everywhere appeared horses, stampeded, blind and mad with panic, hurtling through the lines. The cavalry mounts, the artillery horses, all of them; and with them others, shaggy Vaal ponies, ridden by shaggy slouching men who drove the stampede on and turned all the front lines into hell.

Behind, ragged rifle-fire again, sweeping closer. Here, the world was in utterly mad confusion—tents falling, men down, shots ringing, as the stampede swept through the lines and down the slope beyond to the open veldt. Douglas unashamedly sought a niche among the rocks and made himself small within it.

Now came the main body of Boers. They had swept around or slunk around in the dongas, and burst out from the rear, sweeping the horses ahead of them, and riding at an angle through the camp, spreading out, shooting as they rode. Scarcely a shot answered them. Here and there an officer showed fight, with revolver or sorry saber, only to be shot down or else caught up and flung struggling across the back of a horse and taken as a prisoner. Khaki figures dotted the shaggy mass. The Boers were obviously after officer captives.

A party of them rode through the balloon corps camp. A clump of the men showed fight and were ridden down. Rifles whanged out; men dropped, screamed, fell among the fallen tents. The Boers pointed at the balloon, stared curiously at it, but rode on without pause. On and out, straight out at the veldt, contemptuous of pursuit or of artillery—and rightly so. There was none to pursue, except on foot. And even were the artillery in shape to open, those khaki figures were hostages that prevented fire.

Douglas cautiously emerged—only to duck hastily into his niche again. A new burst of shooting, a clatter of hoofs. A dozen Boers, who had delayed to plunder, came with a rush and were slowed by the clutter of tents and equipment.

Smythe-Gore was there, in the open, whirling a perfectly useless saber, his tunic half ripped away, his yellow hair blazing in the sunlight. Two Boers rode on him, laughing lion-bearded men with wide hats. One slapped the saber with a long rifle and sent it flying. The other dropped a noose over the shoulders of Smythe-Gore and drew it taut, then started for the veldt. It was run, or be dragged to death. Smythe-Gore legged it like mad.

They drew away down the slopes with bursts of jeering, insulting yells. The foremost ranks had begun to vanish. A strange thing to see in the morning sunlight, there one moment and gone the next, as they melted into invisible dongas that swallowed men and horses—whole groups vanishing before the eye, and their plunder of horses and other loot vanishing with them.

Some remained, however, with the prisoners, deliberately slowing to a walk or even halting at times. The artillery could not fire on their own officers and men; the guns were spiked by those khaki figures, even had the breech-blocks not been damaged or taken by the raiders. There were no cavalry to pursue. Troops afoot dared not pursue. The rifles along those hidden arroyos would pick them off like flies. A glint of metal from the nearest kopje showed that Boers were there, waiting, challenging the others to come out.

DOUGLAS emerged. He was aghast at the complete confusion and disorder around. Any attack in force at this moment would involve disaster; the officers knew it, and frantically worked to get the lines prepared. The beautiful precision of this raid was a superb thing, and one Douglas could appreciate. The Boers had lost half a dozen men, no more—a cheap price for the hundreds of horses taken and the blow struck.

Then the American was aware of the air-corps sergeant plucking at him.

"Isn't that the Captain, sir?"

Turning, with the cries of wounded men all about, Douglas looked along the

pointing finger, at the veldt. Half a mile away, to a mile, moved the slow parties of the rear-guard, disdaining to seek shelter, with the khaki figures of the prisoners. Closest of all was the group that had caught Smythe-Gore. He had, somehow, broken away from them.

He was running, his yellow hair making him plainly visible. The Boers were playing a game with him; they let him run, then closed around, rode him down, made him leap and dodge frantically. Other parties of Boers had halted to watch. Hats were being waved, rifles brandished. Two or three smoke-spurts showed. Smythe-Gore was caught with a rope and dragged a little way, then allowed to break free again. He did so, stubbornly.

"Quick, Sergeant!"

Douglas, his brain ablaze, stopped to reckon with nothing. His voice barked; he was running, the sergeant with him, dodging the wounded men. Before the pile of sandbags, the American halted.

"Call your men—at once! Into the basket with those bags, with the rope, everything! I'll arrange this grapnel and the coils of line—move, damn you!"

"The balloon, sir! They've shot 'oles in 'er!"

"So much the better." Douglas was scrambling for the basket now. "I don't want so much gas. Move!"

The sergeant's voice blistered his men, who came on the jump. No questions asked; authority had spoken. Douglas, with the grapnel and line, was hooking it to the basket and making the line fast. He was in the basket now, opening the escape-valve. The sandbags thudded in around him, the coils of rope.

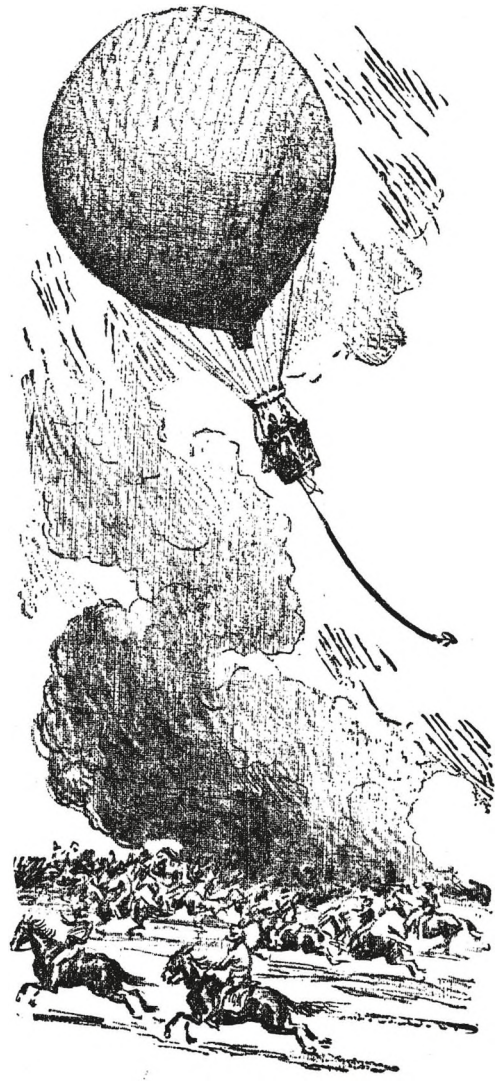
"Put your men on the hand-lines and cast off the cable, Sergeant."

Obedience was prompt. Douglas hoped against hope that the weight of ballast and the loss of gas would keep him from going too high at the first jump. Half a dozen Boers had emptied their rifles at the bag. This would help. Only shrapnel could avail to bring down a balloon, and only a direct burst of that.

"The cable's disengaged, sir."

"Good. Cast off everything."

The men on the lines stepped away.... They were gone. The earth was gone. Douglas, leaning over the basket-edge, saw the hillocks and the men and disordered camp fall away. With a thrill, he saw his prayers answered; the bag was not ascending, after that first jump. It had lost sufficient gas; he closed the



valve. Down and down until the ground was close, a hundred feet. He glanced at the instruments. Ninety. Excellent!

Working now with the coils of heavy line, his gaze swept ahead. There was much to do and scant time to do it. The line fluttered out. The bag sank a little more. Fifty feet. Sweeping directly before the wind, directly on that nearest clump of horsemen. Not fast, not too fast.... Ah, that was just right!

The heavy line was out; he hurriedly bent on another coil with random knot. Out, and dragging, slowing the bag, twisting along the earth. Hurriedly he followed with the grapnel. There was little on which this could catch, but brush might do the work, or a lucky bit of rock.

He looked ahead. Half a dozen Boers were spurring out as though to meet him, rifles ready. Rifles! He blinked, sud-

denly realizing what this meant. Rifles, in hands that never missed! Well, by the Lord, they must miss now! Hurriedly he reached for the valve and opened it wide, cast off more line on the grapnel. The half-dozen were coming for him on the gallop.

The bag sank. It dived, in fact, as the grapnel caught for an instant. It was down almost at ground-level with slow, inexorable onrush. The horses went crazy before it. A rifle spoke, another rifle, others from farther away, but the horses scattered and fled in blind panic.

IN a sudden burst of relief Douglas saw below the widening yellow streak of a donga, a deep arroyo starred with rocks. The bag was following it with the wind-currents, naturally. It twisted and deepened. Directly ahead, a few hundred yards, was Smythe-Gore. He was running; now he was down, almost at the edge of the arroyo, the clump of Boers all about him.

Douglas was cool, desperately cool. All the years of training were at his fingertips; what he was doing required nicety, the instantaneous calculation that comes of long experience until it is second nature. No time now, not an instant, to calculate! He saw ahead what he could do, as the driver of an automobile sees ahead with exact timing and precision—if he be a good driver. Douglas was an expert at this work.

The basket was not twenty feet from the ground. He shut the escape valve, and hauled in the grapnel, ready to send it to the spot he saw. To be sure, it was sheer luck that the wind had taken him to Smythe-Gore; but it was what he did with this luck that would count for everything.

Vaguely he was aware of cottony bursts of gun-smoke, of prancing, dashing horses in panic, of bullets like insane bees whining about him. He saw the wild, tortured, staring-eyed face of Smythe-Gore looking at him, saw how the man was panting with gusty breaths. With precision, he cast the grapnel and it headed for the center of the donga.

"Be ready!" he shouted. "Ready! Grab when she stops!"

The bag swayed. Douglas braced himself for the shock; it would be momentary, no more, for the grapnel must tear loose from that earthen bank. Now it came—here it was! A jolt. The basket hit the ground. Smythe-Gore flung himself at it bodily. Douglas was jerked from his hold. In on top of him, squirming through the ropes, came Smythe-Gore.

Here was crisis. That added weight tumbling into the basket meant that the balloon would drag the ground. Already the grapnel was jerking loose, the bag was flopping onward; they would both be dragged to death. Frantically, with a frenzy upon him, Douglas cast loose the dragging rope, hauled a sandbag up and over, then another.

He had a vision of horsemen coming in from all directions, rifles spitting; he could hear the *plop-plop* of balls piercing the bag and the wicker basket. All in one fraction of an instant. Then Smythe-Gore, finding his feet, hove a third bag over the edge.

The balloon bounced upward.

Done, by heaven! Holding to the ropes, Douglas gazed down in wild exultation, drunk with his own achievement. He had halted, had picked up the captive, was in the air again—a fifty-foot bounce, the grapnel loose and dangling. He turned to the gasping, wordless Englishman and pointed.

"Look! We'll clear the rest of 'em—catch hold of that grapnel line!"

WITH an inarticulate, gasping yell, Smythe-Gore obeyed. Douglas, in his excitement, meant that the grapnel should be brought in, but did not say so. Then he forgot it. His hand, gripping the basket-edge, was all red, scarlet. Blood? From where? No matter. He forgot this as well, in the urge ahead.

Straight down upon the main body of the rearguard the balloon was driving, dropping as it swept along, barely twenty feet in air now. The horses were scattering. The prisoners were squirming off or were tossed away. Rifles were banging, but men on frenzied horses cannot aim. Then there was a shock, a sickening sway, and from Smythe-Gore a wild and roaring laugh.

"Yoicks! Look, Douglas, *look!*"

Douglas looked, and his heart stopped. Horse and man, hooked together, by the edge of the saddle—on the grapnel, on the line, dragged into air, then down again as the weight brought down the bag! Horse and man, screaming, tumbling, a thing of horror. As he looked, the saddle-girth broke. Horse and man fell away, the saddle fell away, the grapnel was clear.

A bullet, a dozen bullets, came singing. Douglas got the Englishman at work.

The sandbags went over. The balloon was up, now, away up at one vast leap—two thousand feet up in the silence, spinning slowly. The world had gone.

THE two men looked at each other, stupefied by this silence, absence of motion. To find themselves thus suddenly alone in space was a shock.

"Why, dash it, you're hit!" cried Smythe-Gore, with abrupt realization. He seized Douglas by the coat. "Careful, now—let's have a look, old chap."

Curious to see where that blood came from, but feeling no pain, Douglas wriggled out of coat and shirt. His arm began to hurt. He stared at it in surprise: A bullet-rip from elbow to shoulder, the flesh and skin ragged, pumping blood. A second gash across his ribs, a mere skin-break.

Smythe-Gore fell to work, efficiently, with strips of the discarded shirt. He got the hurt bandaged, and then it really began to pain. Douglas grunted.

"What about you? Hurt?"

"No, no; mere bruises. But see here, what's to become of us?"

Douglas made no reply. He did not care a hang what became of them; he felt sick and weak. They would drift over the Boer territory, of course, and come down when forced. With an effort, he got out cigarettes and lit one. The Englishman cried quick protest, but Douglas paid no heed. There was no danger, he knew. Even if the escape-valve were open, the hydrogen could only catch fire after it mixed with the air; a lighted match thrust into the bag would be extinguished. He pulled at the cigarette gratefully, while Smythe-Gore craned over the edge of the basket.

The sickness, the weakness, increased. Douglas dropped the cigarette overboard with distaste. He was aware of the other man straightening up and turning to him in amazement and wonder.

"I say! You're a marvel, Douglas—'pon my word, you're a marvel!"

"Eh?" Douglas managed a faint grin. "It was rather neat, I admit. More luck than anything else, though."

"But look—look where we are!"

Douglas obeyed, mystified. The balloon had ceased to spin, for the moment. Looking down, he saw that the whole veldt was clear of horsemen. A few khaki specks were in sight, making toward the British lines. . . . Ah!

He realized with a jerk why Smythe-Gore was so agitated. The balloon was not out over the veldt. It had retraced its course, apparently against the wind; now it was over the wrecked lines again, over its own camp. A faint sound of gusty cheering lifted from the staring faces below.

Douglas began to laugh. He comprehended perfectly what the other man could not—that terrific bound into space had brought the bag into an upper current setting back against the lower breeze.

"Oh, it's a way we have in America," he said between laughs. "Never do a thing halfway, is our motto. Land you back exactly where we started from—open the valve, like a good chap! Open the valve; then stand by to pull the rip-cord. Not till I give the word, mind!"

The other obeyed; and, already dropping, the balloon went down more rapidly. Douglas gritted his teeth and forced himself to look down, concentrate, calculate. They were behind the lines, and the lower breeze was setting them once more toward the veldt. He must avoid a wreck at all costs—it would spoil his reputation as a worker of miracles. He began to laugh again, half hysterically, and with his one hand paid out the grapnel line.

"Right! We'll land within a hundred feet of the winch," he said, and tried to conquer his own amazement. "Look there! Coming down fast. Shut the valve—*quick!*"

SMYTHE-GORE obeyed and stood by with the red-painted rip-cord that would open the whole bag and collapse it.

"The grapnel will catch in the tents and wreckage," explained Douglas. He was going to pieces and knew it; everything was growing black before him. "The bag will stop; we'll swing toward the earth. That's the moment to rip her wide open. Sorry, damn it—my knees are buckling—"

Clinging with his one hand to the basket-edge, he came to his knees.

"Smythe-Gore!"

"Yes, old chap? Buck up, buck up! We're nearly there!"

"Oh, I'm all right. Just wanted to remind you—something about romance—about Douglas riding the Border—oh, yes! The bet! Won the wager, if you notice. The twenty guineas—"

Douglas collapsed suddenly and lay insensible, as the balloon settled down.

"The bet is yours, and jolly well won!" cried Smythe-Gore, and pulled the rip-cord.

Our Huckleberry Finn of Wyoming brings his quaint pilgrimage to an exciting climax.

By JAMES EDWIN BAUM

The Truth about

The Story Thus Far:

IT all began when I was riding on a train with my father, and at a little station in Wyoming two men came up to us, and arrested Pa, and took him off the train.

Pretty soon a tall man, a ranchman, came and sat down by me, and talked to me, and said wouldn't I like to come with him and live at the U Cross and learn to be a cowboy. That sounded pretty good; once before when Pa and Limpy Joe and Weasel had got into trouble, I'd been taken to an Orphan's Home, and I hadn't liked it.

Well, it was just about perfect at the U Cross. I had my own pony Sinful to ride; and Aunt Emmy—that was Sam's wife—was powerful good to me. Lester Touch-the-Clouds the educated Indian cowboy taught me sign-talk; and Beavertooth told me the gaudiest lies; and Old Stan and Bignose George and Lester won a horse-race against a ringer race-horse the town folks had.

But something one of the race-horse men said about blood-lines and sons always taking after sires worried me a whole lot, for it made me realize that I was bound to take after my dad and be a criminal—maybe a murderer, and bring down trouble on these folks who had been so good to me. And about this time the feeling between the cattle-men and the sheep-men came to a head, and one night Lester came in wounded; some men had bushwhacked him, and he'd shot one of them.

So it was thought best for Lester to hide out for a while with his Indian cousin Bird's Nest; and Sam give it out that Lester had been killed. And I got so scared about growing up to be a criminal and maybe murdering Beavertooth or Old Stan that I run off and hid out with Lester and Bird's Nest.

Well, we rode a long ways, and a lot of things happened; the worst was a fracas we had with a professional killer named Tom Hands that was on his way to get a job in the sheep and cattle war. Lester run him out of camp, and he swore he'd get even. . . .

Gilead Skaggs

Then one night I rode into town to trade skins for grub, and I stopped at a tent where a revival meeting was going on; and—*the evangelist was my father!*

I tried to duck out, but he spied me and grabbed me and hugged me and took me to his room with him. We talked half the night, and I told him about everything. He really had changed a lot since he'd "seen the light" as he called it; but he was just the same old hell-roarer about religion as he'd been about sin. Nothing would do but he must go back to the U Cross with me and thank Sam and the rest for taking care of me. I was afraid trouble would come of it; for he was hell-bent on making everybody else get religion too; he tried to reform one man in town with a club and got bruised up some himself. And on the way out to our camp with me, he tried to put the fear of God into a drunk man named Hopple, but Mrs. Hopple took the job off his hands right competent.

Well, Lester liked the old man all right, though Bird's Nest didn't; and we set out for the U Cross; on the way we'd heard that the man Lester had shot didn't die and was a rustler anyway so it was safe for him to come back. A lot of things happened on that ride, and once the old man nearly got lynched for a horse-thief because he was riding a horse Lester had borrowed for him after his own throwed him off.

We camped the last night with old Snoozer Jim, the sheepherder that everybody liked and who had those wonderful dogs.

When we started out the next morning Pa forgot his Bible, and I rode back to get it. Just as I come over the rise, I saw a man on a buckskin horse ride up to Snoozer Jim and pull out a gun. It was that hired professional killer Tom Hands, and he shot poor old Snoozer Jim and his dogs without giving them a chance. *(The story continues in detail:)*

I KNOW now why Hands shot the dogs first. Hard and tough as he was, he couldn't quite kill an unarmed man who

faced him as brave as Jim had. When he shot Dolly and Buster, Jim done just what Hands wanted him to do. When Jim made that rush for him—*then* he could bring himself to shoot!

Well, when I see that awful thing and knowed that poor old Snoozer Jim was dead—dead forever, and wouldn't never move, or speak, or laugh again—everything went black around me, and I half slid and half fell off Sinful and didn't know nothing for a spell. When I come to, I heard a couple more shots, and I got up from the ground and caught Sinful and rode back to the opening in the trees and looked again. There was Jim still sprawled face down in the ashes of the dead fire, and Dolly and Buster stretched out beside the wagon. I heard another shot, and I see Tom Hands loping his crop-eared horse through the sheep, scattering them every way and taking a crack at one every few jumps for luck. And each time he throwed down with that six-shooter, even if his horse *was* loping fast. another sheep was curled up! I reckon he shot four or five times before he turned and rode out of sight into the timber, and he never missed once!

AFTER Hands was gone, I gouged Sinful with the spurs and took after Lester and the old man and Bird's Nest. I didn't dare go down to that camp! I was sure Jim was dead and past help now, and I was afraid Hands might come back to burn the wagon or something. It was almost noon before I caught up to our outfit. When I got there, spurring through rocks and sagebrush and trying to tell everything all at once, they thought I was crazy. But when Lester jumped from his horse and yanked off the pack and grabbed all his catridges and shoved them into his pockets, I calmed down some and told him that Tom Hands must be already halfway to whatever cow-outfit he was a-working for. So, after Lester thought some, he give up the idea of overtaking Hands. He didn't *say* nothing. Injuns is awful silent at a time like that. But I knowed well enough what he had made up his mind to do. He didn't have to tell *me*.

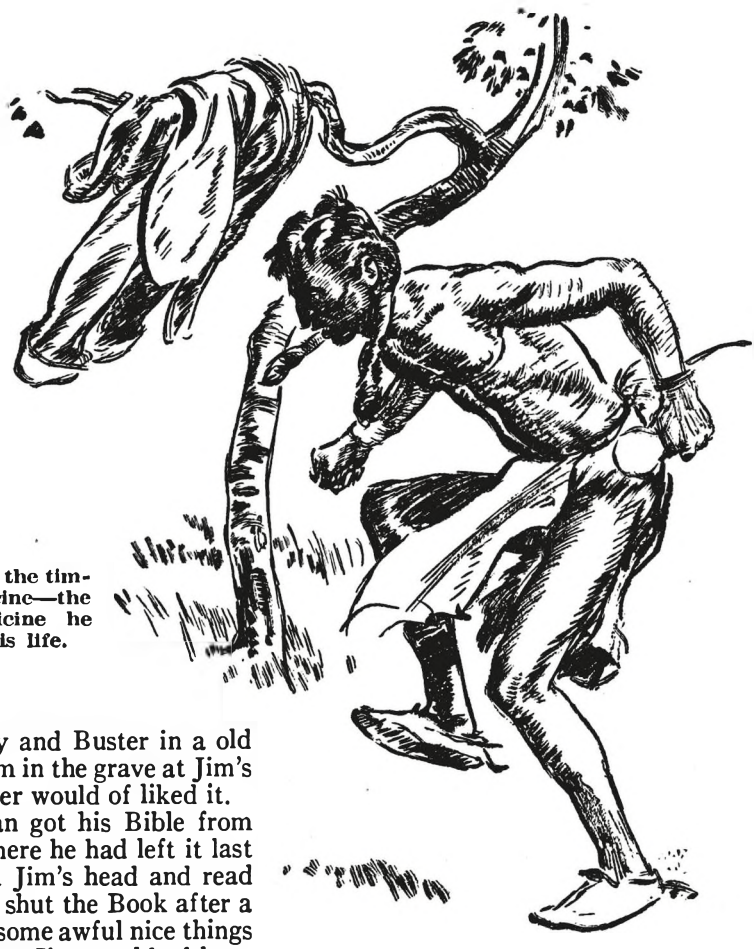
Well, we turned around and rode back to Snoozer Jim's camp. We found everything just as I had saw it from the ridge. Tom Hands hadn't come back, and most likely nobody else would happen along that way for two or three weeks. I never want to see another camp like that one! I don't know as I'll ever get over the sight of it, and the sorrowful—forlorn—*feeling* it give you. I didn't look at Jim close. I just couldn't. But Lester said he was shot plumb center, between the eyes. I looked at Dolly and Buster, though; they was shot as near center as you could lay your finger!

When I thought how fast Tom Hands fired his first two shots, and how careless and easy he took it when he shot poor Jim, and how fast Jim was a-coming at him, and how he had knocked over them sheep, one after another without a miss, and his horse loping and them a-running —I knowed that even if he was lower than a snake's belly in a forty-foot well—Tom Hands was the awfullest dead-shot that ever come to this, or *any* country! And I didn't forget, either, how still that crop-eared buckskin horse stood when Hands fired them three center shots in Jim's camp. Oh, he was trained to the minute, that horse was!

When I thought how Tom Hands could shoot, I got awful scared about Lester. Lester was a good shot with a rifle, but he hardly ever used a six-shooter. And he weren't as good with a rifle as Sam. And even Sam couldn't hold a light to Tom Hands when it come to snap-shooting with a six-shooter; nobody could.

Right then I begged Lester to go back to the hills, as him and Bird's Nest had planned to do at first. I was more than willing now to lead the old man to the U Cross alone and take all the blame they could pile on me. Even though Hands and Lester was on the same side in this range-war, that wouldn't make no difference to Hands, after Lester had took away his catridges and kicked him out of camp. And now, after what Hands done, it wouldn't make no difference to Lester, neither. Hands would kill Lester on sight if he could, and Lester would do the same by him. So I done the best I could to get Lester to hit for the hills and stay there till the range-war was over and Tom Hands pulled out for some other country. But Lester wouldn't even talk about it. His jaws was clamped down, tight as a bear-trap.

THE old man come right to the front when we got to Snoozer's camp. He rummaged around and found, under the wagon, the spade that Jim used to scrape coals from the fire to set his Dutch oven in, and him and Lester took turns digging a grave. When they got it dug they wrapped Jim's body in his blanket and took a saddle-rope and lowered it into the hole, careful and easy as could be. And



Bird's Nest was in the timber making medicine—the powerfulest medicine he ever made in his life.

they wrapped Dolly and Buster in a old soogun and laid them in the grave at Jim's feet, the way Snoozer would of liked it.

Then the old man got his Bible from the sheep-wagon where he had left it last night, and stood at Jim's head and read some out of it. He shut the Book after a while and told God some awful nice things about Jim. I reckon Jim would of been plumb dazzled by that prayer if he could of heard it. He said that Jim always had been just naturally full of grace; if Jim was smit on one cheek, the old man said, he always give whoever done it a free chance at the other cheek. Which didn't sound any too reasonable to me. And he said that Jim was so downright *good* that he wouldn't even accept a present from a friend, a present as little and no-account as a beaver pelt or a handful of Injun arrows. And he said Jim was the last man in the world to dote on his neighbor's ox or his horse or his wife. I reckon no sheepherder, before or since, ever was give such a send-off.

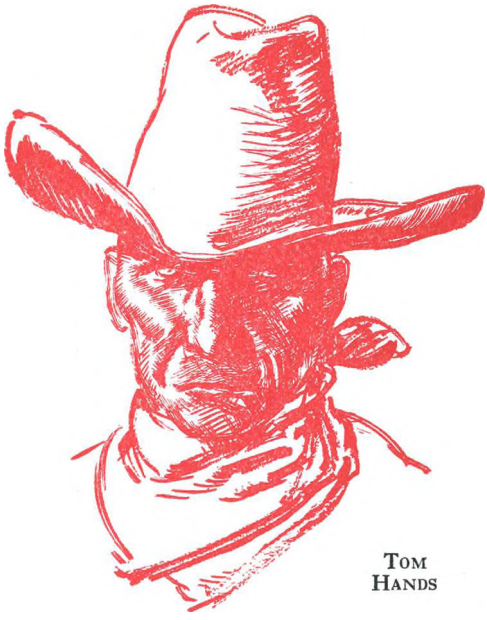
I didn't stay at the grave to watch them cover him up. I couldn't stand that. I sneaked away to a clump of quaking-asps and bawled and bawled; I couldn't help it, and I weren't ashamed of it. After a while Bird's Nest come and set down beside me. He didn't say nothing, just set there. Well, after maybe ten minutes I quit bawling and says:

"Where was you, Bird's Nest, while they was gouging out the grave? You never helped once with all that tough spade-work. I didn't see you around nowhere."

Bird's Nest said he was in the timber making medicine—work a whole lot more important than scooping out a hole in the ground. He said he had made the powerfulest medicine he ever made in his life, and weren't through yet; every day until Tom Hands' and Lester's trails crossed, he would make more medicine; he would have such a big herd of friendly watch-dog sperits on Lester's side by that time, he said, and such a blood-hungry bunch of bronco sperits a-laying for Tom Hands, that Hands wouldn't have no more chance agin Lester than a ham-strung fawn would have in a pack of lobo wolves.

I told him that if he had saw Tom Hands shoot, the way I did, he would know that Hands had the most powerful medicine any man *ever* had. If Hands and Lester tangled, I said, all this medicine *he* was making wouldn't amount to shucks! It wouldn't be strong enough to whip the medicine in Tom Hands' trigger-finger alone!

Bird's Nest was pretty much disgusted with me. He asked if I had forgot al-



TOM HANDS

ready how Lester got the drop on Hands in the tepee and took away his catridges and kicked him out of camp with his empty guns? I says:

"But Tom Hands' guns was empty after Lester taken his catridges, weren't they?"

"Yes, but—"

"Stop right there," I says, "or you'll muddy up the trail so nobody can't foller it. The point is, Tom Hands' guns was empty. And anybody, even a gopher-brain, knows that Hands' medicine won't work when his guns is empty. But the main point is, how can you, or me, or anybody, empty them guns a second time without getting knocked off, and fix it so Lester can catch him when his medicine won't work? That's the point!"

Well, when I said that, Bird's Nest set still as the hillside he was hunkered on. His black eyes squinched down almost shut. He never moved a muscle for a long time. I reckon I've said a dozen times that you can't tell nothing from a Injun's face, and it's true, mostly. But now I could tell that Bird's Nest was thinking, and thinking awful thundering deep too, at what I said. He didn't hear me when I spoke, no more than he did the time his heart was bad.

At last he come alive and got on his feet. I asked him what he had ciphered out with all that thinking. He said I had give him an idea for a new kind of medicine, a kind of medicine which, if he could only get a chance to work it, would draw the fangs from Tom Hands' trigger-finger! He wouldn't tell me what that medicine was like. And when I offered to get some fresh sacred white-sage to make it with, he said the new medicine didn't have anything to do with sacred white-sage, or sacred nothing! All he needed to make *that* medicine, he said, was a few of Tom Hands' catridges.

"Well then," I says, "how about the catridges Lester took from Hands' six-shooter that day in the tepee? He still has 'em in his war-bags. Tell him why you need 'em. He'll cough 'em up, and be glad to."

Bird's Nest said he dasn't tell Lester why he wanted them catridges, because the medicine wouldn't work if anybody knowed about it but himself and me—and maybe Old Stan; so he would sneak a handful when Lester weren't looking. But if I told Lester, or anybody, that he had them catridges, the medicine would fizzle out and Tom Hands would kill Lester. So I promised I wouldn't say nothing.

Bird's Nest explained that when we got to the U Cross, he would take Old Stan off in the brush, alone, and smoke the pipe with him and show him them catridges of Tom Hands. And he would ask Old Stan to help him make the medicine; there was one part of it he didn't know how to go about, himself, and he had always heard that Old Stan was the foxiest of anybody. After him and Old Stan had smoked long enough, he reckoned then he would know how to go about it. Oh, he was crafty and weasel-footed about that medicine, and I couldn't get nothing more out of him.

WE didn't stay in Jim's camp that night—Bird's Nest wouldn't *think* of such a thing, and I wanted to get just as far away as I could. So after the old man took the ax and cut a big limb and drug it up the hill and made a cross and hammered it down solid at the head of Jim's grave, we pulled out.

After we had rode a few miles and the old man was in front with Lester, Bird's Nest told me he weren't *scared* to stay in Jim's camp for the night; that weren't the reason he had urged Lester to get agoing. But we owed it to Jim to give the sperits plenty of room to fight in, because tonight they would stage a big medicine-fight to see who would get Jim's ghost. If the watchdog sperits won out, Jim would wake up somewhere along the trail to the Sperit-land. But if the bronco outlaw-sperits was too strong, then—but Bird's Nest wouldn't talk about that.

But he told me that while he was working so hard making medicine agin Tom

Hands, he hadn't forgot to chant to the sperits everything good about Jim he could remember. He had gone a heap further; he had stretched them good things all they would stand, and even made up a few more on his own hook, to put Jim in solid.

Oh, he told the sperits a plenty. He told 'em that Jim was a way-up, thundering big chief, chief of all the sheepherders between Wind River and the Big Muddy, crafty as bullsnakes and feerocious as lobo wolves agin anybody that bothered him. He made 'em think that old Snoozer amounted to something. He went on and told 'em that Jim had peeled off any number of scalps in his day and counted *coups* galore; that he had stole more ponies and more women in his time than he knowed what to do with. He laid it on pretty thick at the end. He told 'em that Jim was a regular whirlwind when it come to fighting, and killing, and blood. And he said that every man, white or red, between the Big Dry and the Bad Lands, dropped everything and jumped out mighty quick to round up his ponies and his women and take to the timber any time old Snoozer painted himself for war and slapped the red hand, the war-sign, on his pony's flank.

Well, I knowed that would save Jim from being snatched off to the white man's heaven to float around in a white night-shirt for a million years. I was glad of that. But I was afraid Bird's Nest had went too far, and the sperits would know he was lying. He said not to worry, that he knowed his business and wouldn't lay down to nobody when it come to knowing what the sperits liked to hear about a man, and how much they would swaller. And he explained that one sign, so far, was extra good; the sky was too clear today for a storm. And if no thunder and lightning come for three days, then we could figger Jim's ghost was safe; the bronco-sperits can't get no holts on a ghost unless they can wheedle some help from the Thunder Bird. Bird's Nest wanted to kill one of Jim's horses so his ghost could ride to the Sperit-land. But Lester wouldn't stand for it.

That night, after we made camp and had supper, the old man looked at the stars and the moon a-shining bright as could be, and says:

"It aint exac'ly orth'dox to say so, but after a burial I am always easier in my mind if the weather stays clear for a spell. When a shrinking, naked soul passes to its reward, and thunder and lightning rip things wide open, it always seems to me that Lucifer is raging and gnashing his teeth to see a saved soul escape his clutches and wing its way to glory. And knowing the turrible power of Lucifer and how downright crafty he is, I feel a shiver of fear. I can almost see him in them lightning flashes, frothing and raging like a wild beast—a mighty dreadful sight."

From what both the old man and Bird's Nest said, I was sure Jim's ghost would have a pretty rough trip of it. I would of give a lot if Lester had let Bird's Nest send a horse after him. A ghost on a ghost-horse, like anybody else well mounted, would have a better chance to outrun the Devil and the bronco-sperits on any kind of ground. It was easy to see, they had shoved so many ideas in Lester's head at that college, rammed 'em in and tamped 'em down solid, that they come pretty near ruining him for practical things.

CHAPTER XVI

THE next afternoon we climbed a long ridge and looked over. There in the valley below was the U Cross. I was so glad to see the old ranch again, that if somebody had give me the choice, right then, between the U Cross and the Happy Hunting Ground with all its buffalo and its handy squaws loafing around, always ready to fetch you buffalo meat and rustle you up stuff, I would of took the U Cross.

The old log house was still snuggled down under the big cottonwood trees like it had growed there, and smoke was curling, soft and lazy, from the chimley. The same vines crawled up the side and over the roof like a green waterfall. After so long in the dark mountain timber and on the gray sagebrush plains, that soft green made me think of the old man's Promised Land. The log barn and the corral, and the high willers behind, where they chained the bear for Steeldust to smell, and the clear creek, that always chuckled and laughed at you—everything added together was so beautiful it made that same old cow's cud come a-shoving up in my neck the way it did the night I rode away in the cold moonlight and thought I was leaving the U Cross forever.

Well, I was wrong about leaving forever, as I was wrong about the old man's blood a-hounding and prodding me to jump out and butcher the neighbors. I had been wrong about a couple of other

things too, maybe, in my life. But I had learnt so much from Bird's Nest that in spite of a few mistakes I knowed I was a long ways ahead. Lester was almost as glad to get back as I was, but Bird's Nest looked down into the valley as if he weren't even interested. I reckon a good tepee with a band of fat ponies grazing near it, and a covey of squaws that knowed their business, would of looked better to him than *any* ranch.

THE old man stopped his horse and swung a leg over the saddle-horn. He looked at the U Cross for a long time, and I knowed he must be surprised at how green and peaceful everything was. If he sniffed around for butchered neighbors stretched out or stacked up like cordwood, I never noticed it. And I hoped he had forgot that lie I told him. I says:

"The old U Cross is so quiet and peaceful she's just a-coaxing us to come down there and lay in the shade."

His burnt eyebrows squinched close together, and he says:

"Have you forgot that treach'rous creek-bank I told you to ponder about, Gilead? How smooth and harmless it looked, just coaxing somebody to walk there? And how it caved in sudden and slid me into the creek, exactly as Satan traps a unwary soul and drops it into the Abyss?"

"No sir. I aint forgot it. I been a-pondering it some."

"Well now, Gilead, you should ponder this treacherous peacefulness before us, and remember that Lucifer maybe stalks in and out the doors of that log house like he owns it; the same as he done at the Hopple farm."

But I weren't scared now of Lucifer and all the bronco-sperits. Now that we was safe at the U Cross, they wouldn't have no show to bust in and come at us; them spooky things can't pester you worth nothing unless they catch you off in the dark timber alone. And when Sam and Old Stan was around, I knowed I would have a easy, safe feeling. No, I weren't scared of the Devil and *all* the bronco-sperits now. But Tom Hands give me a chilled, shivery feeling whenever I thought of *him!* When you remembered that Tom Hands was loose in the country, it left you about as comfortable as you would be if you woke up some night, and a rattlesnake was loose in your room, and you had to tiptoe across the floor, barefooted in the dark, to get a match before you could find a club.

Well, I could waste plenty of time telling how glad I was to get back, and how Beavertooth Charley and Bignose George was shoeing a horse when we rode in, and how I galloped up behind George, and when I almost run over him, yanked Sinful back on his haunches and set there grinning, wide as a barn door, expecting George and Beavertooth to rare up and fall over backward with surprise. But George never even looked around, and Beavertooth went on with his work as if I was a million miles away. I set there a-grinning, but they didn't seem to know I was anywhere in the State. Then I let out a loud cough. Beavertooth looked under the horse's belly at George, and says slow and drawly, as if he was asking for a match:

"George, I believe I see a little old jug-headed pony loafing around behind you. At least I heerd one cough just now, like he had the heaves. But there aint nobody on him—except maybe one of them germs the doctors blame everything onto; leastways nothing big enough to see from here."

George straightened up and turned around and faced me. He was so close I could almost reach out and touch him. He craned his neck first to one side then to the other, like a chicken looking for a grasshopper that dodged him. He squinted and shaded his eyes with his hand, a-looking straight at me.

"It's a pony, all right," he says; "and I don't see no germ or nobody else in the saddle, unless—well, a extra small, runty germ might be a-bushwhacking behind the saddle-horn."

You bet I knowed better than to set there and give 'em any more time to talk! I let out a Injun whoop that Bird's Nest had learnt me; and when I done it, the horse they was shoeing busted loose and took out over the flat like a whole tribe of Injuns was after him. So then they snaked me off Sinful, and Beavertooth held me over his knees while George reached for a pair of chaps and whaled me some. But we was all laughing so hard I never even felt it.

I COULD use up more time, too, telling how Aunt Emmy come rushing out to the barn and took on, crying and laughing at the same time. It takes a woman to manage both at once. A man can't do it. Then the General come a-tearing up. He was so big and strong for a dog, and so terrible glad to see me, that after I got through with him my clothes was tore

and my face was washed cleaner than it had been since I left the U Cross.

Old Stan come hobbling in next. He stood off and sized me up and says:

"You look like you managed to keep your belly full of good strong dirty Injun grub while you was dodging around in the hills, Gillie. You've growed a heap; it's plumb disrepitable, almost brutal, the way you have took on size." And he led me over to the bunkhouse, where we had a nail in the wall to show how tall I was. I had growed almost a inch. But Old Stan says:

"Size don't get you nothing. It's *where* you take on size that counts. If it's in your brains, yes, that aint to be sneezed at. If it's in your hoofs and laigs only —then you might as well stay like you was." It was plain to me all right where some of it was, when I thought of all I had learnt from Bird's Nest.

SO then they shook hands with Lester and told him how glad they was to see him back. He made everybody acquainted with the old man, and there was a lot of shaking hands and scrambled talk, the way there always is when strangers come around; but I didn't stay and listen to it. I pulled my hull off Sinful and turned him loose with a slap on the rump. Then me and the General moseyed out in the willers and run a fat gopher down his hole, and I begun to feel as if I hadn't ever been away.

When I come back for supper, Sam had just rode in from the upper pasture, and him and the old man was about to set down on the front stoop friendly as ever you see, so I knowed the old man hadn't started to point the Way yet and lead everybody to Grace. Well, when I see Sam standing there in his old, worn chaps as calm and slow and easy as he always was, that cow's cud kind of bothered me again, for some reason. But pretty soon it dropped down where it belonged, and Sam come off the stoop and picked me up and throwed me in the air like I didn't weigh no more than a baby. Sam was stronger than anybody. He says:

"When you up and quit us, Gillie, I knowed you'd come back as sure as I know you'll come down now." And he give me another toss and caught me, easy as nothing.

Aunt Emmy called pretty soon and said supper was on the table. She didn't say: "Come and get it." I reckon that wouldn't be the way to say it with company here, and him a preacher. Bird's Nest had hurled up the tepee under a cottonwood tree, and he wouldn't come. Lester called him twice in Injun, but he shook his head. He weren't taking chances eating with forks and spoons at a table. He had his fire going and some jerky simmering in the pan. I didn't ask him why he shied off from a table. He knowed so much and some of his reasons was so deep, they took plenty of ciphering out before you could understand 'em. I didn't take time now.

Well, when we got to the table, the old man looked around pretty strict and stern. Everybody set down, and George picked up the platter with a few antelope steaks and shoved it under the old man's nose. But the old man looked clean over the top and give a cough that let you know something was going on around here that hadn't ought to be going on. But nobody took no notice except me and Lester. We kept mighty still.

The old man picked up a fork and rapped it a few times on the table. Then Aunt Emmy seen what was on his mind.

"Well, for land sakes, Sam Bowman!" she says. "If you aint gone and forgot to say Grace!" And she give Old Stan a kind of twinkling look. Old Stan turned on Sam pretty fierce:

"Sam, I'm plumb surprised and shocked at you! Go ahead, Sam. Say it. And you better make her a good one, after letting her slide like you done!"

But Sam was too smart for 'em. You bet nobody couldn't put the bee on Sam! He turned to the old man and bowed.

"Mr. Skaggs, I forgot to tell you before we come in: we have a old custom here at the U Cross; a visitor is always give the honor of offering up the blessings before we fly at the grub. And that goes for every meal while he's here!" And Sam throwed a quick grin, on the offside of his mouth, at Old Stan and Aunt Emmy.

IN two shakes the old man was going full blast. He told the Lord we was ever so much obliged for the grub. That would of been all right if he had quit there. But the grub was only a starter. He branched out and thanked the Lord for hiding our tracks from Lucifer and steering us safe around all the traps and deadfalls Satan lays out for everybody. We had ducked all them things successful, he said, and here we was at last, safe and sound, and almighty thankful of it.

It took so long that Aunt Emmy sneaked the meat platter and the dough-gods off the table and stuck 'em back in the oven to keep warm. But he wound

up at last and looked around and beamed. It beat any other prayer for length that he had give on our whole trip.

I NEVER heard folks at the U Cross talk so downright stylish as they done that evening at the table. You wouldn't of knowed Beavertooth and George, they was—well, they was so sugary-sweet! If the old man asked for the beans or another dab of dried apples, Beavertooth and George almost fought to see who could get it first to pass. It's a wonder they didn't founder him. Beavertooth could be pretty crafty at times, and I thought maybe I better tell the old man the very first chance I got, not to believe nothing, under no circumstantials, that Beavertooth might tell him.

Well, pretty soon Aunt Emmy begun talking about a widow-woman who was a-visiting at one of the neighbor ranches, old man Critchlow's place; the widow was a sister or something of Mrs. Critchlow. Aunt Emmy said the widow's husband had up and died off on her pretty recent, and she come here to visit her relatives and get comforted and try to forget it. She was powerful grief-struck and overcome by her monstrous great loss, Aunt Emmy said.

Then George says: "Yes, I never see nobody before knocked so plumb flat with downright old-fashioned grief. Her petered husband must of been so all-fired good to her when he was alive, that now any ordinary man would look like a dirty deuce in a brand-new deck, compared to him. I was thinking of riding over there again when I get time, to see if I could maybe cheer her up some."

"I feel terrible sorry for any woman," Aunt Emmy says, pretty sad, "who loses such a unusual rare and good man as poor Mr. Hopple must of been."

I looked at the old man and he looked at the meat-platter. Beavertooth grabbed it and passed it before you could wink your eye. The old man took some, kind of thoughtless. I bet he didn't want it, no way. Then he says:

"Do you mean a Mrs. Hopple from over near Pilot Nob, Idyho?"

Aunt Emmy says: "Yes, I think that's the place Mrs. Critchlow said her sister come from."

Then I see all right that she was old drunk Hank's wife Mirandy, what he had called "the wildcat woman." And I knowed the Devil had jumped in and grabbed Hank off, the minute the old man's back was turned. Yes, Lucifer had garnered in old fat Hank for sure; and right this minute maybe he was a-toasting him over the coals on a redhot pitchfork, a-turning him round and round to get him browned even on all sides. Well, the very second I thought of Hank roasting, I smelt meat a-burning. I give a quick look behind me, pretty scared, but I see it was only smoke from a antelope steak Aunt Emmy had left on the stove.

The old man's eyes took on a far-away, moony look again like Bird's Nest's eyes when he blowed on his homemade flute. He says, slow and hazy, like he couldn't hardly remember:

"It seems to me we met a Mrs. Hopple at a farm where we stopped for water. She was kind to us wayfarers in the wilderness, as I remember—if I aint gone and got her mixed in my mind." Then he set up straight and businesslike, and says:

"If this pore woman is in such dire need of consolation, it is my duty to see her, and—Gilead, do you know the way to the Critchlow place?"

"Sure. It aint only a cat-hop, about six mile."

"I think, then, I *ought* to ride over there tomorrow morning. So if you will be ready in the morning, Gilead, we will go and do what little we can."

Aunt Emmy said that was downright noble, and only went to show how bad the country needed somebody who would jump out and bring consolation to a heart broke down by grief, no matter how he might hate to do it.

Beavertooth says: "Yes, what this country needs is somebody who sees his duty and goes out and grabs it by the ears, and don't figger the wear and tear on his own feelings. Somebody like them fur-lined, blubbery Saint Bernard dogs you hear tell of who high-tail it out through the snow to bring consolation in little kegs to lost travelers."

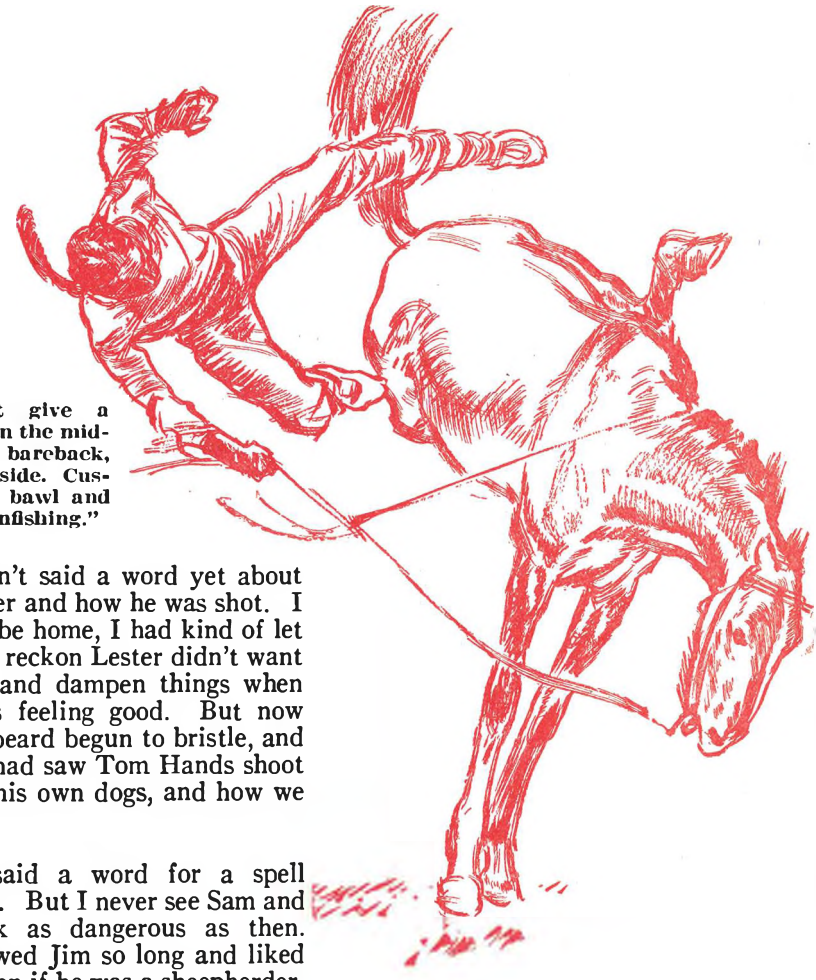
"I could use a middling-sized drove of them dogs right *now*," George says. "Yes sir, I could use 'em in round numbers."

But Aunt Emmy shoved in:

"I *do* hope you can do her some good, Mr. Skaggs."

The old man looked powerful unselfish, and says: "I hope so."

"I seen the Widow Hopple out horse-riding the other day," Beavertooth said, "with a man named Tom Hands, who old Critchlow hired soon after the sheep-war busted out. I don't take to Hands much, myself; but if he can make the widow forget her thumping big loss, why, I reckon it's all right."



"Bird's Nest give a jump and lit in the middle of Custer, bareback, from the off side. Custer let out a bawl and went to sunfishing."

Nobody hadn't said a word yet about poor old Snoozer and how he was shot. I was so glad to be home, I had kind of let it slide. And I reckon Lester didn't want to drag it up and dampen things when everybody was feeling good. But now the old man's beard begun to bristle, and he told how I had saw Tom Hands shoot poor Jim like his own dogs, and how we buried him.

NOBODY said a word for a spell afterward. But I never see Sam and Old Stan look as dangerous as then. They had knowed Jim so long and liked him so well, even if he was a sheepherder, that this news was a terrible bad jolt. At last Sam whanged his fist down.

"It's time to wind up this war and rid this country of hired killers! Our fight aint agin sheep-men, no longer! It's agin profeshnal killers on *both* sides!" Then Sam looked at the old man for a minute:

"Mr. Skaggs, you better forget about your trip to the Critchlow place while Tom Hands is there. I wouldn't put nothing by him. I reckon the widow can stand her grief for a spell longer. We'll take steps agin that Hands pretty pronto, and *then* you can go over there."

The old man drawed himself up:

"What you have just said, and what Charles, here"—and he nodded at Beaver-tooth Charley—"says about Mrs. Hopple fratronizing with a murderer, makes it all the more necessary for me to reason and exhort with her. My son and I will go to the Critchlow place in the morning."

You can bet all you're a-mind to I would do anything to keep from going near that Tom Hands! But I knowed there weren't no stopping the old man.

It was still daylight when I went out, and I see Bird's Nest squatting by the fire in front of the tepee under the trees. So I drifted over and set down beside him.

Well, pretty soon Lester and Old Stan come out. They walked down to the tepee, and then Lester went to the bunk-house for something. The minute he left, Bird's Nest jumped up and took Old Stan by the arm and led him down in the willers by the creek; he said he had something so all-fired big and important to tell that it wouldn't keep no longer. They wouldn't let me go, and there weren't no use a-trying to foller and hear more about that new medicine; you couldn't sneak up on Bird's Nest. He watched his back-trail like a bull elk.

After a while Old Stan come to the edge of the brush and called me. I run down, and he says:

"Now Gillie, set down. I want to ask you a few questions that maybe Lester's life depends on. So be careful and answer straight. I want to know how good Tom Hands can shoot. Tell me exactly what you seen him do with that six-shooter when he killed Snoozer Jim."

So I told how easy and careless Tom Hands throwed down on the dogs first,

and shot twice so fast it sounded almost like one shot, and how both bullet-holes was as near center as you could lay your finger. Then I told how cool Hands took it when old Jim jumped for him, and how fast Jim was a-coming, and how that bullet, too, was plumb center. And I told how I seen Hands curl up four or five sheep, with his horse loping and the sheep a-running; and how he never missed.

When I got through, Old Stan shook his white head and muttered half to himself:

"It don't seem human. It aint natural. Bird's Nest is dead right! Lester wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance agin such shooting. Talk about a even break!" And he snorted: "There aint no such thing as a even break agin a man who can shoot like that!"

He hobbled off to the blacksmith shop, and I follered, but he didn't pay no more attention to me. He talked out loud to himself while he was looking for something among the tools. He talked to himself pretty often lately. I reckon any man, when he gets so plumb old, figgers there aint much time left to say things, so he better hurry up and get 'em said whether anybody is listening or not. He shook his head and says to himself:

"I never thought I would sink to no such a low-flung level as to do such a thing! But I'll do it for Lester—and to play even for old Jim. I'll do my part, and Bird's Nest can do the rest." He took a pair of pliers and hobbled back to the willers to find Bird's Nest.

THEY stayed in the brush a long time; but they come out at last, and Old Stan took the pliers back to the shop. Bird's Nest set down by the fire again, so I went over and set down beside him:

"Did Old Stan show you how to make that new medicine with Tom Hands' catridges?"

I see a glitter in Bird's Nest's eye that weren't there as a rule. He was a-whittling on his plug to load his pipe, and he looked up and nodded his head. But he said that weren't all there was to it by no means. The most trickiest and risky part was to get the medicine-catridges into Tom Hands' six-shooter. And he said it had to be done tomorrow, because Lester had told him he was going after Hands in a day or two.

I told him that Hands was at the Critchlow place, and me and the old man was going over there in the morning. He didn't say nothing more, and I moseyed back to the house.

I went to bed early—for I weren't feeling any too good. I got chilled with the cold whenever I remembered I would see Tom Hands tomorrow, most likely, and maybe even talk to him.

ABOUT daylight next morning I heard the bawl of a pitching horse and a few yells, and then hoofs pounding on the hard ground as a horse galloped away. I run out and see Custer, Beavertooth's private race-pony, tearing over a hill with the bridle-reins a-popping. Beavertooth and George was stooping over somebody on the ground. When I got there, I see it was Bird's Nest. Custer had throwed him and busted his leg!

Sam come out in a minute, and when he see Bird's Nest's busted leg he was mad as a grizzly with the seven-year itch. He slammed a black look at Beavertooth and George:

"*Now* what have you snakes-in-the-grass been a-ribbing up on this Injun?"

Beavertooth was tamer than I ever see him. And when Sam ripped into 'em, they looked abused and picked-on. Beavertooth says:

"Why, Sam! Don't blame *us*. *We* aint done nothing. Bird's Nest come out a few minutes ago mighty secret and owlish, and asks can he take a fresh horse to ride to the Critchlow place. He's in a big swet, like he aint got a minute to live. So me and George says: 'Sure thing, Bird's Nest, old socks. Take Custer. He's fresh enough.' He was in such a hell-awful hurry we wouldn't of felt right loading him down with warnings and wasting his valuable time. He give a jump and lit in the middle of Custer, bareback, from the off side. Custer let out a bawl and went to sunfishing. The idea of gentle old Custer taking on like that!"

I reckon he added the last part so Bird's Nest wouldn't think he had been jobbed, and lay for 'em after his leg got well. Custer always bucked, every time he was rode.

Sam was pretty frigid about it:

"So you just *had* to stand here like a couple of blurred dummies and let him fork that snaky pony bareback? You was too polite—and oily—to waste his time a-telling him what you knowed that horse would do!"

It was the first time I ever see Beavertooth look downright hangdog:

"Well, you see, Sam, me and George figured it weren't our fault if Injuns holds prejewdices about saddles and which side to mount from. This is a free country,

and Injuns has a right to their notions. So we—"

"Oh, choke it off! The thing to do now is to get him to bed and send for the doctor."

All this time Bird's Nest was a-laying on the ground quiet as could be. You never heard a yip out of *him,* no matter how his busted leg hurt. They rushed off to get some boards to pack him to the house on. The minute they left, Bird's Nest pulled out the buckskin bag he had made for the beaver-castor a long time ago, and shoved it into my hand. The medicine-catridges was in it now, with the beaver-castor, which didn't smell any too good. He was terrible roused up, and said that now, since he was laid up, *I* had to get the medicine-catridges into Tom Hands' six-shooter somehow! And I had to do it today when me and the old man went to the Critchlow place where Hands was at. Bird's Nest said I was the only one now who could save Lester.

I took the buckskin bag and shoved it into my pocket. I felt terrible sorry for Bird's Nest, and I told him I would get the medicine-catridges in Tom Hands' six-shooter if it was the last thing I *ever* done. I said this to comfort him, but you bet I didn't *believe* what I said. Not for a minute!

CHAPTER XVII

IT took the old man quite a while to get ready that morning. He borrowed Sam's best pants, and a clean shirt from Beavertooth, and fussed with his face a good deal, where it was just getting well from the time the horse drug him. But at last we started for the Critchlow place.

I was more gloomier than I ever was before. Lester's life depended on me finding some way to get them medicine-catridges into Tom Hands' six-shooter! And I couldn't think of no way to go about it. No killer ever took off his belt and gun in the daytime, and after I had saw him shoot—why, I would no more try to snitch that gun from the holster than I would steal the cubs from under a she-grizzly's nose! George told me once that profeshnal killers have a extra sense, like a wise old dog-wolf. They can *feel* danger when it comes close. They don't have to see it, or hear it, or even smell it. They just *know* when it's there. If anybody had medicine that strong, I knowed Tom Hands would have it. No, I couldn't see no possible way to get them catridges into his six-shooter. I was sure that Lester was as good as dead right now!

I had plenty of time to think it over while me and the old man rode along; he was almost as silent that morning as a Injun. But once, when Sinful took a quick jump over a sage-bush, the medicine-catridges in the buckskin bag in my pocket rattled pretty loud. The old man frowned, and says:

"I wish you wouldn't lug so much trash in your pockets, Gilead. It shows you aint a-pond'ring serious matters. You don't seem to know yet that life is only a test, a tryout, to see if you deserve a place in heaven or are fit only for hell-room. You don't suppose the Saved in Glory waste their time in the Promised Land on frivolities?"

WELL, I knowed all right how they wasted a couple of million years floating around on a cloud thumping at a harp. But I didn't say it; I said:

"No, I reckon they aint got much time for little no-account things. But I been a-pond'ring everything pretty regular, Pa." Then I thought maybe I better talk about something else:

"I meant to tell you last night, but I forgot; you ought to be ever so careful and remember not to believe nothing—under no circumstantials—that Beavertooth or George tells you; walk around them two like they was a swamp—Beavertooth, 'specially."

"Just to show you, Gilead, how little you understand the more dismaler insides of the human soul: Last night the unhappy Charles, or Beavertooth as you all call him, come to me in a deplorable state of dread and dismay. Overcome by repentance and despair, he confessed and laid bare his naked quivering soul—and just in time, too. Never in all my experience have I listened to—"

I says: "That Beavertooth is the awfulest liar, and if he has been a-loading you up—"

"After you have toiled in the Vineyard yourself, Gilead, you will know from experience that no man would confess the bloody murder of his young—"

But just then Sinful shied at a pile of bones where a old cow had winter-killed. And when he jumped sideways, the medicine-catridges in my pocket rattled again.

"Gilead, let me see that trash in your pocket," the old man says.

Before I could think of a way to duck out of it, he spoke pretty sharp:

"Did you hear me, Gilead?"

I says: "Why, I supposed everybody had heard of *that* business!"

So I pulled out Bird's Nest's buckskin bag with the beaver-castor and the medicine-catridges and handed it over. I couldn't do nothing else.

"If *I* carry this, it won't keep you from pondering a few things I have told you." And he shoved the skin bag in his pants pocket. He hadn't saw the medicine-catridges or the beaver-castor or even smelt it. I reckon he had a cold.

Now that the catridges was in *his* pocket, I was dead sure the last chance to save Lester was gone forever. I never felt worse. And then on top of that—we come in sight of the Critchlow place.

FROM that minute I was so scared we might meet Tom Hands and maybe I would have to talk to him, that all I could do was keep an eye skinned for Hands. Nobody was loafing around outside when we tied our horses to the hitching-rack, but I follered the old man to the door pretty close. I would sooner of met old Lucifer himself coming down the middle of the road, than Tom Hands. I knowed Hands wouldn't think no more of shooting down a man—and maybe a boy—than he would of butchering a sheep; and I weren't quite sure about the Devil.

Well, the old man knocked, and Mrs. Critchlow opened the door. He told her his name, and said he was acquainted with Mrs. Hopple, and wanted to see her.

"Come right in, Mr. Skaggs, rest your hat and make yourself to home. —Mirandy! Oh, Mirandy!"

I could see Mrs. Hopple come a-bouncing down the hall; there weren't no droop to her shoulders now, and she was humming a lively tune. But the minute she got near the front room where we was, she quit humming and bouncing, and her face got sad like people's faces at a revival just before everybody begins to holler hallelujah. By the time she crossed the room to shake hands with the old man, she was so limp and droopy, you wondered why she didn't melt and run down over her shoes and end up in a pool of grease on the floor, like a melted candle. She out with a lacy handkerchief and dabbed her eyes. I reckon grief at her great loss sneaked up and overcome her just then.

She knowed the old man right away and called him Brother Skaggs, like she done at the farm. And she give me a wettish smack and said it was angel-kind of me to come with my big handsome father to see a pore widow-woman whose whole life was tore down and nipped in the bud at one fell swoop by the Grim Reaper.

Then Mrs. Critchlow got brisk and bustly, and said if we would excuse *her*, she would hustle back to the kitchen and take a squint at her bread in the oven.

By this time the Widow Hopple was so plumb different from when I see her coming down the hall humming and bouncing, that I couldn't hardly believe it was her. And she was so meek and sorrowful and damp, you'd never know she was the same handmaiden-of-Lucifer who had stood up

to the old man like a she-wildcat back at the farm, and told him she wouldn't cough up that whisky bottle or take orders from him or nobody else! She *looked* as strong as she was when she half-carried old drunk Hank from the buggy into the house. But when she took hold of a chair, I reckon she weren't strong enough to move it. She tugged at that little chair, and sighed and give up:

"Brother Skaggs," she says, "I'm afraid it's too heavy for me. You are so strong, would you—" I was closest, so I grabbed it and heaved it up with one hand, easy as nothing. But the old man took it away:

"Never mind, Gilead. *I'll* be glad to do it for Mrs. Hopple." He set it down and brushed off the seat careful as anything, but there weren't a speck of dust on it nowhere. She thanked him tearful, and fanned herself some with her lacy handkerchief and sniffled a little on the side.

The old man stood with a hand on the back of her chair and leaned over and asked if he might offer his most heartiest sympathies and consolements in the midst of her grievious bereavements.

She allowed it was mighty lovely of him to *offer* 'em, but she was afraid it wouldn't do no good. And she reached up and give his hand a little pat.

"But it is a comfort to have you here, Hosanna. You see I remember your first name. Such a glorious name—*Hosanna.* Would you mind if I call you by it—always?"

I had never thought much about the old man's name before, except that I had always been kind of ashamed of it. But when you heard her roll it out so low and draggy, you *couldn't* be ashamed of it! The old man was pleased as could be, and he give me a sideways look and says, pretty stern:

"Gilead, I wish you would wait for me at the barn, or the corral, or the wagon-shed—somewhere outside."

I was deadly scared to go out there and rummage around alone and maybe run smack into that murderer Hands. So I says:

"Can't I stay here for a spell, Pa? I won't bother nobody."

The old man never *said* nothing more. But his eyes drilled into me from under his burnt eyebrows, and I knowed enough to go, then.

So I drug myself out and went and loafed around the corral. I hoped he would have some luck mopping up her grief. I felt almighty sorry for anybody as woeful as she was; I reckon it aint nothing agin you if you can't help feeling sorry for some one. But it didn't seem to me that any fat sot, specially old drunk Hank, was hardly worth so much downright, hard-working grief. Of course, maybe I don't understand about grief.

WELL, I didn't have time to think very long about grief, or Mrs. Hopple, or the old man, or nothing. A horseback come jogging slow toward the ranch. I ducked behind the corral-poles, and when he come closer I see it was Tom Hands on his buckskin horse!

I almost give up right there; it was a terrible hard thing for me to wait and not dodge back into the house—but I done it! He rode in slow—I almost never seen him ride fast; and when he come close, my legs went back on me and felt weak as spiderwebs. And when I remembered how he had throwed down with that six-shooter so easy and shot old Jim plumb center, my legs got so bad I had to set down behind the corral poles. He didn't have no idea I had saw him butcher poor old Snoozer, and I hoped, if I kept my mouth shut, maybe he wouldn't beef me for just setting there and *keeping* it shut and not bothering nobody.

I was so well hid, hunkered down beside the corral, that Hands didn't see me. But the crop-eared horse, when he jogged past, smelt me. His front legs stiffened, and he let out a snort and jumped sideways like a buck deer! Hands weren't expecting it and was setting careless in the saddle. Most men, even the best riders, would of been shook loose and maybe throwed by that snaky side-jump. But Tom Hands never even slid off balance; it seemed like he had growed to that saddle and never been out of it in his life. And before the horse even landed from that jump, the heavy six-shooter was out and covering me. I never see speed like that!

The only thing I remember next was the hole in the muzzle of that six-shooter. It looked as big and black and round as a empty keg that horseshoes come in. And it seemed to be yawning, and almost grinning, and *looking* for me! I didn't have time to know I was a gone fawnskin before that gun was sliding back in its holster again and Tom Hands was a-cussing me out; and none of your slip-shod, skim-milk, warmed-over cussing, but sound, bed-rock cussing with body to it; hot and sizzling and almighty smoky. If it was true that you can wither up and peter out from cold feet and the

shaking tremors, I would be dead as old Jim right now. But I see in another second that I weren't dead, and I hear Tom Hands a-ripping it into me.

"What d'you mean, boy, a-bushwhacking behind them poles like a poison spider? Why don't you stand in the open where a horse can see you? Them sneaking ways'll get you killed off sometime, and that'll learn you!" And he wound it up with the gaudiest words I ever heard. Nobody could hold the light for Tom Hands when it come to cussing. But you bet I didn't go back at *him* like I done at that cowpuncher when they almost strung up the old man. I just kept my mouth shut, thankful it weren't a bullet.

His horse was standing still when he got through, and he set there sideways in the saddle a-looking me over and stroking his horse's neck. He knowed he had saw me somewhere before, and now he remembered:

"Oho!" And his wide mouth stretched in a slow withering grin that give me a good look at his teeth. "You're that runty, pestering little maggot a-slinging on airs so brash in camp with them Injuns, aint you? I know you. Well, where at is your partners now—them two flashy, star-spangled gut-eaters?"

I was too scared to answer. He quit grinning and snapped out:

"Answer up, or I'll get down and fan the wampus off'n you. Where is them two sneaking yeller-bellies? I aint shot it out and settled their hash yet—and the big one has got some catridges of mine that I want back with intrust. He's the one I want, special. But I'll make a spread of it and send the young one along for company."

I swallered something: "I aint saw neither one for a mighty long time, Mr. Hands. I been on a trip over in Idyho. Honest Injun I aint, Mr. Hands."

"You aint what? Been on a trip to Idyho or saw them Injuns, which? And don't say, 'honest Injun.' There aint no such thing as a honest Injun. There's such things as dead Injuns. Them kind come the closest."

Tom Hands was the only man I ever see that I couldn't hardly even lie to. He seemed to know what you was thinking; at least his eyes looked like he knowed it, and like he had thought of it a long time before you did. Just then his right hand went back to his hip, and I froze, so plumb scared I couldn't move. But his hand come up with a plug, and he took a gnaw at it. I see then that the two wolf-teeth in his upper jaw was extra long and yaller. George told me once that long wolf-teeth was a sign of something—but I couldn't remember what it was.

"Come! Cough it up! Don't set there like a toad. Where is them Injuns?" And he cussed me again, slow and careless this time, like he weren't getting much comfort out of it. But after he finished, he seemed to feel better, like you always do when you cut loose and get something like that out of your system. It done him so much good that his voice was low and almost friendly when he said:

"Cough it up, Angel-face. Where is them Injuns hiding-out?" He stroked his horse's neck again. My, he was kind to that horse.

I see he weren't dead set on butchering me, at least not right now, so my legs got better. But I had more sense than to stand up. I never yet heard of nobody, nowhere, shot on the set. I dasn't tell him where Lester was. I *had* to lie about that, and I knowed if he seen through it, he would haul off and snuff me out just for luck, and never give it a thought. I made up my mind to take a terrible big chance and lie about Lester, and then stick to the truth, dead-center, in everything else I said.

"I left 'em over in Idyho, Mr. Hands. They said they was shoving on south to the Mexico line to try a whirl at smuggling Chinamen across the border. They said they could make plenty of money raising Chinamen."

"*Raising* Chinamen?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Hands. They was aiming to raise 'em, o' course, after they got 'em safe across the border."

HE looked at me pretty sharp, and then grinned and coughed behind his hand. Then he says:

"You *don't* tell me? Well, well! That's one dodge I aint tried yet. How was they figgering to handle that Chinaman-raising business?"

He swung off his horse and set down on his heels beside me with the reins in his hand. The six-shooter that killed Snoozer weren't a foot from my hand. But I wouldn't of touched it—I *couldn't* of touched it, for anything in the world. He spoke so nice and friendly now, I couldn't hardly believe this was the same blood-spattered killer. I never thought Tom Hands *could* act decent, like anybody else, even for a minute.

One time at the ranch Sam was reading in a old newspaper about some men

caught smuggling Chinamen across the border. I asked Beavertooth why anybody wanted Chinamen, anyway. He explained how they always used 'em to start Chinamen-ranches, so I knowed all about it. Well, I had got off my lie about Lester, and I was still living. I felt a lot safer now because I could stick to the truth. So I told Tom Hands about that Chinaman-raising business like Beavertooth told me. Of course I couldn't tell any such fool story now; but then I'd never even seen a Chinese person, and I didn't know that the Chinese are mostly mighty fine people and have made a sure-enough brave fight against the Japanese. I've noticed that people don't make jokes about people they really don't like, so I reckon Beavertooth liked the Chinese even when he was joking about them to fool me. . . . Well, I goes and repeats it all to Tom Hands. I says:

"Why, I supposed everybody had heard of *that* business! Well, before you haze your Chinamen over the border, you scout for a good range to hold 'em on. You don't look for grama-grass like you do in the cow-business. What you want is a range near a sizable town, a town with plenty of rats in it. The most trouble you have is catching enough rats. Oh, you can get plenty of common, scrub rats. But a Chinaman won't eat any old rat that comes shuffling along. A Chinaman is squeamish and fussy about his rats; he's as stuck-up and high-toned as all get-out. A rat has to be just so, fat and tasty and handsome, before *any* Chink is even interested. Towns with prime rats as fancy and gilt-edged as that, is scarce now, Beavertooth says."

"Well I'll be a ring-tailed son-of-a-gun," Tom Hands says, "I never reckoned a Chink *could* be so finicky about his vittles. How do you brand your Chinks so nobody can't rustle 'em? There must be Chinaman-rustlers, the same as there is cow-thieves?"

"Most breeders slap the iron on the left flank. And you bar pants, so you can see the brands plain in a herd. Beavertooth says you never heard such a squalling and bawling as goes on at branding-time; calves aint in it. And he showed me a old laundry-bill with the crazy chicken-track brands they use. You ship your Chinks to laundries in box-cars, and you get two crops a year, like you do with sheep; the *in*-crease and the wool."

I never see a man more interested.

"Yes," he says, squinting up at the sky, "there must be important money in that Chinaman-raising business, all right, boy. But—"

Just then the front door opened, and the old man and the Widow Hopple come out. She stood at the door and waved him good-by, and she was a-beaming all over, now. *He* looked pretty frisky too, for him.

When Tom Hands seen the old man, his head come up straight, and surprise spread over his face. He give a low whistle and kind of catched his breath.

"Well, I'll be a half-African tar-baby, if it aint old Hosey!"

CHAPTER XVIII

TOM HANDS stood up with the bridle-reins in his hand, and I see he had plumb forgot about the Chinaman-raising business now. I was downright thundering surprised to see that he knowed the old man. I wondered if they had been friends when the Devil was laying out charms, and baiting his traps, and boosting the old man into all that rosy dissipation years ago, which he had told about at the revival.

Hands muttered to himself:

"Sure as you're a foot high—it's the same old Hosey. But changed some—and white-headed as an old badger!"

The old man left the widow at the door, but after a few steps he turned and looked back and waved with his hat in his hand. She flapped a fin at him, and fluttered her lacy handkerchief, and chirped:

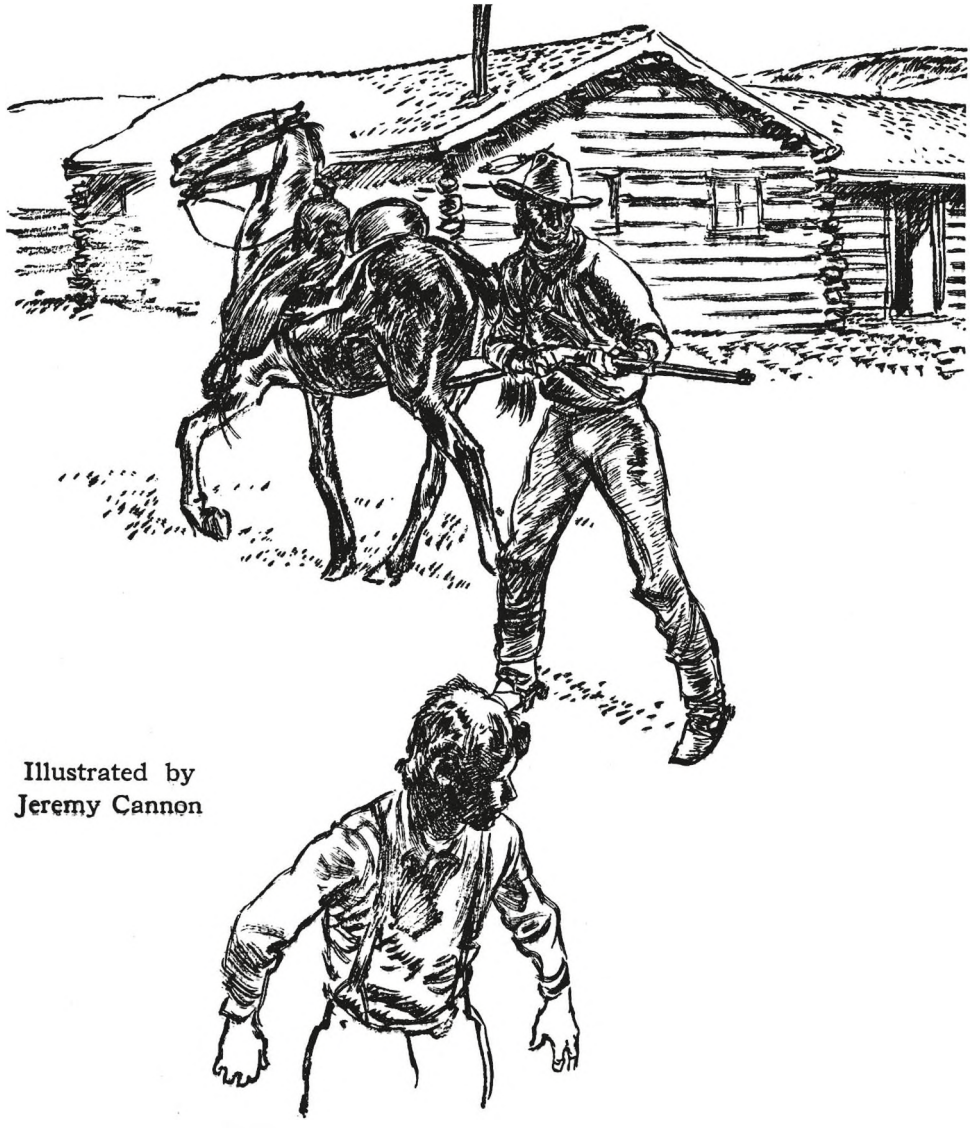
"Remember your promise to come back soon, Hosanna."

Tom Hands' mouth tightened in a straight line when he heard that!

The old man, still looking back, called out something pretty chipper and coltish for him; but I couldn't hear all of it. The handmaiden waved again and went into the house, and the old man turned and come toward the corral. When he got closer, he looked at Tom Hands—and stopped dead-still for a few seconds. Oh, he knowed Tom Hands then, all right! But the old man squared his shoulders and come a-marching straight to us, and his face was as stern as ever I see it. Tom Hands just waited, quiet and watchful, a half-grin on his face, and his right thumb hooked in his catridge-belt.

The old man stopped in front of him and looked him in the eye:

"Buck Cherry," he says, "I don't know if I am glad to see you or not. That depends. If you have cast out Satan and



Illustrated by
Jeremy Cannon

put him behind you, and give up the old beastyul ways forever—then I am glad to rejoice with you. But if you aint saw the Light and shook-off sin, and changed your ways forever—then I don't want no more traffic with you!"

The slow grin on Tom Hands' face had been growing wider and wider while the old man talked. When he finished, Hands grabbed his right fin and give it a pump, and now he was shaking all over, tickled as could be about something, but holding it in, silent and secret, like him and the old man had a big joke between 'em.

"Hosey, old-timer," he says, "you always was all broke out with schemes and dodges; most of 'em half crazy, I always thought. But this Holy Joe act aint crazy. No, it's smart. And you do it as smooth as ever I saw it done." Then Tom Hands quit grinning, and his pale eyes bored into the old man:

"But I see you've been a-dragging your lariat around my widder. That won't do, Hosey. Of course you never knowed till this minute that I seen her first. I've got plans for her—and her Idyho farm. I'm just a-telling you—so you'll know."

"And I'm a-telling you, Buck Cherry, that the man you knowed behind the bars,"—and he tapped himself on the chest,—"where the Almighty put him and kept him, and so stopped him from wallering in worse crimes—the man you knowed in that cell weren't the real Hosanna Skaggs. After you and them others broke out, I am proud to say the light come down to me straight from the Throne. And I want you to know—"

"Forget it, Hosey." And Tom Hands squirted tobacco-juice on the ground. "Forget it. You've done showed me how good you can pull off the Holy Joe act. You don't have to keep it up no longer.

Lester stood with the rifle held low. Tom Hands tensed up and I heard his mutter: "Well, if it aint that Injun I'm a-looking for!"

And don't call me Buck Cherry! Be *sure* you don't call me that! My name is Hands now—Tom Hands. You nor nobody else ever seen Buck Cherry after that jail-break, remember that! Be *sure* you remember it."

WELL! When the old man knowed this was the killer who had shot poor Snoozer in cold blood, I never see such a terrible look as come out of his eyes! If anything could of set that killer back on his heels or fazed him, them black eyes would of done it. The old man couldn't of looked more grim and rock-bound if the old Devil himself had been a-standing there in Tom Hands' shoes. I reckon he forgot the risk he was running. I reckon he forgot everything but old murdered Jim. He pointed a finger straight at Tom Hands' face, and held it pointing there while he talked. His voice rumbled, scary and deep, like it did that night in the revival-tent. It would of withered up anybody but Tom Hands.

"Buck Cherry, your hands is red with the blood of a murdered sheepherder! You done it for gold, and the smell of that gold is a stench in the nostrils of God and man! Lucifer and the Powers of darkness—"

"Come out of it, Hosey, you old loon!" You bet Tom Hands see now that the old man weren't fooling or putting it on about having the Call! Hands' eyes narrowed down, and they was so thundering cold they give me the shivering-tremors again:

"Come out of it, you old loon! You're unhinged in the head."

His voice was hard as a new file. Then he began cussing, slow and terrible. And I could feel something clammy, like the underside of a frog, creeping up the middle of my back. My hair began to itch me, and I knowed it was fear for the old man's life. And smack in the middle of that cussing, the old man ripped out:

"It is my plain duty to the Lord Jehovah to see that you hang for that murder! And I never went back on my—"

"I'm a drunk Siwash, if you aint cracked as a coot with that magpie chatter about you and old Billy God! So you think Him and you is partners now, hooked up together a-pulling the same wagon? And you know about that killing, do you? Well, then you can flop down on your knees right here and tell Old Billy to buckle in and hit the collar. He'll have to drag that wagon in single-harness. He won't have no side-kick when *I* get done with you."

"Blasfeme all you're a-mind to. It won't—"

When the old man got that far, I looked for Tom Hands to butcher him any minute. Hands wouldn't dare let him off that ranch alive, now, if he could help it! And when the old man said again that he would see him swing for that murder, Tom Hands let the bridle-reins drop. His light-colored eyes was just little slits, and his right hand went back in that smooth, graceful motion and come forward with the six-shooter that killed Snoozer Jim.

WHEN I see that pistol-barrel gleam in the sunlight, I don't know why I didn't keel over. But the old man faced it without a quiver, with his jaw stuck out and his eyes a-blazing! He didn't look no more scared than he had when the cowpunchers slung that lariat around his neck and the other end over the limb. He went on in that same rumbly, awful voice with his finger pointed straight at Tom Hands' face. His hat was still a-hanging limp in his other hand by his side.

"It is my duty to see that a murdering—"

The six-shooter roared so loud it almost made me deef for a minute! Tom Hands shot from the hip, and the old man's hat left his hand like a big wind had snatched it away. It went a-tumbling and whirling along the ground. Another bullet hit it and rolled it faster.

The old man never moved.

"You can murder me too, Buck Cherry, but that won't wash out the other unrepented—"

A third shot boomed out! This time Hands cut the dirt between the old man's feet, and the bullet throwed a shower of gravel a-rattling over his shoes. The old man lifted one hand, and I see a small blood-mark on the back of it; a piece of flying gravel must of hit it. He shoved that hand out of the way into a pocket. Tom Hands got madder than ever when he see the old man wouldn't scare. He seemed plumb set to *make* him scare before he killed him. He lammed loose with two more shots that just grazed the old man's shoes. The last knocked a stone agin his ankle so hard he almost lost his balance, and I thought for a second he was shot and it was all over. But Hands weren't ready to kill him yet, and when Tom Hands fired a shot, the bullet never hit anything he didn't *want* it to hit.

The old man took a sideways lurch and yanked his hand out of his pocket to get his balance again. And when his hand come out, the little buckskin bag that he had took from me on the way over come a-flying out and fell to the ground at his feet. It popped open, and the medicine-catridges and the beaver-castor rolled out on the dirt.

Tom Hands looked at them catridges, and then up at the old man.

"Catridges! If I'd a-knowed you had a gun, I wouldn't of fooled with you!" And this time he raised the six-shooter, and I knowed he would shoot to kill.

"He aint got no gun!" I yelled as quick as I could. "Them is the catridges the Injuns taken from you that time in the tepee. I give him them catridges. Don't do it, Mr. Hands!"

"Oho!" And Tom Hands grinned like he knowed all about everything. "So you snitched my catridges from your Injun partners, did you? Well, I'll take 'em. Pick 'em up, boy, and hand 'em over."

Things had been a-happening so fast, and I was so scared, that I couldn't hardly move. He ripped out:

"Did you hear what I said? Pick 'em up and hand 'em over!"

YOU bet I jumped when he said it a second time! While I was gathering them catridges, I remembered how Bird's Nest and Old Stan had made medicine over them last night in the brush. I was almost sure Tom Hands' own powerful medicine would warn him not to touch 'em. But there was only one catridge left in the six-shooter now, and Tom Hands took five of the medicine-catridges I picked up, and shoved them into the six-shooter.

With the pistol full again, he hitched up his belt with a jerk like he was all set to make the old man plead and beg for his life this time. And now his voice was so silky and deadly it made that frog-belly chill crawl up my spine clammier than ever:

"Now, we'll see if Old Billy God will come a-roaring down here and lend a hand to His harness-mate Hosey Skaggs,

who heard the Call and went out and hamstrung the Devil and fit old Lucifer and done so much for *Him*. We'll find out, right now, if He'll lend a hand to a partner who needs help—for if ever a old loon needed help, you need it now!"

THE six-shooter roared, and I see a rip come in the loose, flapping leg of the pants the old man had borrowed from Sam. But he stood straight, and his face was set and craggy. I never seen the Rock-of-Ages, but I reckon the old man's face looked like it.

Tom Hands raised the six-shooter again, but just then I heard a scream, and here come the Widow Hopple a-swarming over the ground like a race pony! She run straight to the old man and throwed her arms around his neck and hung on, a-moaning something about was he shot, or wounded, or hurt. But she let go in a jiffy and whirled on Tom Hands. And the way she lit into him with her tongue and give him a dressing-down beat anything I ever heard! And she didn't use a single cuss-word, neither. Why, I never thought you *could* dress anybody down half so good with cuss-words. Tom Hands didn't take no more notice of her than if a sheep was blatting; but I reckon even he dasn't *shoot* a woman. I can't tell what Hands would of done about her, because at that minute I heard the pound of galloping hoofs, and Lester come spurring around the corner of the house on a dead run! An old road come into the Critchlow place from that direction.

At first Tom Hands didn't know who it was, I could tell by the puzzled frown under his wide hat brim. He slid the six-shooter back in its holster and stood with his right thumb hooked in his catridge-belt again. Lester galloped past the hitching-rack with a swirl of dust following his horse like a little cloud, and I see the eagle-feather on his hat a-waving in the wind.

Lester neck-reined his horse to the left and yanked him back on his haunches and swung off. He hit the ground with his horse between him and Tom Hands, and I see Lester's thirty-thirty rifle come sliding from the scabbard.

Any man with Tom Hands' experience knowed such actions meant trouble. But his thumb stayed hitched in his belt; he didn't make a move, yet, to go for his six-shooter. I never see a man so certain-sure of himself. Oh, he knowed he could jerk that six-shooter and plant a bullet plumb center before any other man could raise a rifle or line-up his sights!

Lester dropped his reins and the horse trotted away. Lester stood alone with the rifle held low in his two hands, and when I see him give that killer such a even chance, everything inside of me bogged-down and quit working for a spell. Tom Hands tensed-up, and I heard his mutter:

"Well, if it aint that Injun I'm a-looking for!"

Lester begun walking straight toward him. Hands stood as still as the corral-posts behind him. I never see a man stand as stock-still, and watchful, and ready! A big green horsefly lit on his cheek, but he never moved a muscle to drive it off; that horsefly stayed there a-biting him and sucking his blood, but he never gave a sign that he even felt it.

Lester's face was twisted and gnurly, like Bird's Nest's the time he tried to kill Hands in the tepee, and his eyes was a-glittering and burning in his head. But Tom Hands' eyes was even scarier. They was so still and cold they made me think of the pale blue ice you see high in the mountains where ice never melts.

LESTER stopped about thirty feet from Hands. I reckon he thought he could swing up that rifle and shoot before Hands could reach back to his holster. But Lester hadn't saw Tom Hands draw that six-shooter like I had.

Lester spoke:

"You aint up agin a unarmed sheep-herder now—"

Before Lester finished, Tom Hands' six-shooter gleamed alongside his hip! I don't know how he done it! His hand didn't move that I could see. His thumb had been hooked in his belt—and before you could blink, the six-shooter was out! At the same time a fizzling sputter come from that six-shooter, and a split-second later Lester's thirty-thirty boomed, deep and strong. Tom Hands took one staggering step forward and swayed. But before he fell, he shoved that pistol a foot or two nearer Lester's belly. I heard another fizzling sputter, and the six-shooter dropped to the ground. Hands crumpled down beside it, limp as a bundle of wet rags. I see a big splotch of red on the front of his shirt.

Lester throwed in another catridge, but he see that Hands was almost done for. Lester weren't touched.

Before I had time to wonder about the fizzling, sputtering sound that come from Tom Hands' six-shooter instead of the

Hands lifted himself, ever so little, and says to the horse: "Shake hands once more, Pete." And the horse lifted a front foot like a dog, and whickered, low and trembly.

usual loud roar, or to be glad that good old Bird's Nest had made his medicine so strong over them catridges, you can drownd me if the Widow Hopple—who had just this minute got through giving Tom Hands the awfullest dressing-down—if she didn't let out a yip and run over and flop down beside him and lift his head and hold it in her lap!

And the way she glared at Lester and lit into him, calling him a butcher and a murderer and everything she could think of, why, you wouldn't believe it! She give it to him as bad as she had called down Hands for burning the ground around the old man's feet! I reckon Hands had been pretty smooth and nice to her, and o' course she never knowed he had butchered old harmless Jim and never give him a show. So maybe you hadn't ought to blame her too much.

THE old man walked over to Hands and looked down and says:

"It is written: he who lives by the sword is bound to perish by the sword. I will ask the Lord to be easy on your soul—"

But Hands lifted his head from the handmaiden's lap and says, weak and faint:

"You aint so bad, Hosey, only a little cracked. But you aint got no more pull with Old Billy God than I have. So forget it. Lead my horse over here. That's all I ask of you."

I run and got the crop-eared horse and led him close to where Hands was sprawled on the ground. When I got there, his head had sunk back on the widow's lap and he was breathing fast and heavy. His eyes rolled sideways till they lit on his horse, and then they stopped, just a-doting on that horse for the longest time. I held the bridle-reins while the horse stretched his neck and sniffed at the fresh blood on Hands' shirt. He was deadly scared of that warm blood-smell, but he was too well trained to pull back, so he stood a-shivering. Hands lifted himself, ever so little, and tried hard to make his voice strong like it always was. He says to the horse:

"Shake hands once more, Pete." And he cussed that horse soft and gentle and loving; he cussed him so kind and loving that the widow begun to sniffle. The horse lifted a front foot like a dog, and whickered, low and trembly. I never see nothing like it!

Hands tried to reach that lifted hoof, but he couldn't do it till the widow boosted him and lifted his arm. He took Pete's fetlock and held it a long time, like he hated to let go. But after a while he was too weak, and let go and sunk back. I bet that horse was the only living thing Tom Hands ever cared shucks about. He rolled his eyes around till they lit on me. It was terrible hard for him to speak now, and the red splotch on his shirt was spreading wider every minute. He managed to say:

"Boy, from now on—Pete is yourn. Don't never let nobody else on his back." A twinge of pain rippled across his face, and now it was a maggot-gray color through his tan, and reminded me of the ashes in old Jim's dead fire. He could talk only in a raspy whisper:

"If you—ever abuse—this horse—I'll come back—and I'll hant you as—long as you live!" His voice was downright scary even if it was so weak you could hardly hear it.

"I never abused no horse, Mr. Hands," I said. "I'll treat him right. I will, honest I will." I don't know why, but I was almost bawling when I said it.

Tom Hands looked satisfied:

"That's all—I wanted—to know."

And now you can drownd me again if the little sun-wrinkles around his eyes didn't squinch-up, and his mouth get a whole lot softer in a grin! It was a weak and sickly grin, but it was a grin. He was hardly able to whisper loud enough for me to hear even when I bent down:

"Now, boy, tell me—some more—about that—Chinaman-raising—business. Pants—is barred—you say—so you can read—the brands—in a herd—" And something that sounded like a raspy laugh shook him from head to foot. He gurgled up blood, and his head fell forward on his chest.

Tom Hands was dead.

I DIDN'T know, yet, that he was dead, but the crop-eared buckskin horse knowed it! He let out a snort, shrill and high, and rared straight up till he almost fell over backward. When his front feet come down, he stood there trembling again, and he whinnied the loudest and longest I ever heard. A wild, spooky note was in that whinny and his eyes bugged out as he stood quivering and staring. I don't know whether it was the Devil or the bronco-sperits he seen come for Tom Hands' ghost right then. But he seen *something!*

The handmaiden was crying a little now, so the old man took her to the house,

where they met Mrs. Critchlow near the door; he left the two women together and come back. And pretty soon old Critchlow rode in from the pasture where he had been fencing a haystack. Critchlow was a puny, meek, red-eyed little man and said he was glad Lester had snuffed out Tom Hands. He said Hands had been bossing *him* around the ranch lately and acting like he owned the place, or expected to own it soon. He had wanted to fire Hands for a long time, he said, but was a-scared to do it. He had a pretty strong hunch that Hands intended to pick a fight with him when he got around to it. Critchlow owned up that he weren't much of a fighter, himself, and he said if Hands had picked a fight with him—then Hands *would* of owned the ranch for sure.

Critchlow weren't much on pride, but he had plenty of sense.

He wanted to shake hands with Lester for beefing Hands, but Lester wouldn't talk to nobody. Oh, he knowed now that something was wrong with Tom Hands' six-shooter when they fought. He seen, plain enough, that Hands beat him to that first shot by a half-second; he knowed the only thing that saved his hash was that spluttering, fizzling, no-good catridge. He puzzled over Hands' six-shooter while Critchlow and the old man went after a couple of spades to dig the grave. He took the medicine-catridges from the pistol and turned them over and over in his hand, a-trying to figger it out. He shoved the catridges back in, aimed the six-shooter at the ground and pulled the trigger. The same fizzling sputter come out.

Lester knowed a heap about guns and catridges, and when old Critchlow come back, he borrowed a pair of pliers and yanked the lead bullet from a catridge. It was almost plumb empty of powder! Only a few grains dribbled out! There weren't hardly enough powder in that catridge to shove the bullet to the end of the barrel!

YOU bet I see then what Bird's Nest meant when he said all he needed was a few of Tom Hands' catridges to make a new kind of medicine strong enough to draw the fangs from Tom Hands' trigger-finger! I see now why he didn't want sacred white-sage or sacred nothing to make that medicine! And I see, too, why Old Stan went after a pair of pliers when him and Bird's Nest was a-making that medicine last night in the brush!

When Lester seen that the catridges didn't have no powder and so Tom Hands never had a show agin him, he was crazy mad. If he'd knowed who was to blame for it, well—I reckon Bird's Nest, and Old Stan too, would of come near coughing up the ghost! O' course, the thing that made Lester so unreasonable mad weren't nothing but the white-man notions they had loaded him up with at that college. Bird's Nest, or any other Injun in Lester's lucky place, would grin and give a satisfied grunt, and count a *coup,* and peel off a scalp for himself and be mighty thundering glad to get it so easy and painless. When I see how dangerous-mad Lester was, I weren't such a fool as to blab what I knowed, even in the sign-language.

CRITCHLOW, and the old man too, was pretty surprised at them medicine catridges. They figgered and figgered, and talked and gassed about how they come to be empty of powder. Old Critchlow told how downright careful Tom Hands always was. He said Tom Hands was one man who was too smart to be jobbed. Critchlow studied and studied and then spoke up and said there was only one answer to it; it was Fate done it.

"When your time comes," old Critchlow said, "you can't sidestep Fate no matter which way you jump. And you can put it down and go to sleep over it; this was a straight case of Fate."

When Critchlow finished, the old man leaned on his spade and thought. After a while he said he reckoned old Critchlow was right but had missed the main point. And the main point was: that Fate was just another way of saying the Hand-of-God. Old Critchlow blinked and allowed that maybe it was so. He didn't argue with the old man. He had more sense than you might think, to look at him.

If the old man remembered taking them catridges from me on the way over, and watching me pick 'em up from the ground right under his nose and hand 'em over to Tom Hands, he never said nothing about it. He might of forgot. Or he might of been foxier than I thought, when he seen how feerocious-mad Lester was, and kept still to save trouble. I couldn't tell which, and I didn't dare ask him.

Well, we planted Tom Hands all regular, and the old man give him a send-off—a pretty soggy two-bit send-off. When that was done, he went to the house and stayed inside a long time. Me and Lester and old Critchlow set down with our

backs to the corral and talked while we waited for him to get ready to start back to the U Cross.

AFTER a while Lester felt better, and says:

"How long has your wife's sister, the Widow Hopple, been a-visiting at the ranch, Critchlow?"

"Not so long—in time," old Critchlow says, squinting up at the sun. "But it seems like a coon's-age. I wouldn't care how long she stayed—now understand me right—I wouldn't care how long she stayed; she could bog herself down right here and make my ranch her home and welcome, if it weren't that she makes me out such a measly specimen. She kind of stirs up my wife, and rouses her, and makes her plumb restless and unsatisfied with me. Oh, Mirandy Hopple don't light into me, or find fault, or nothing of that kind. I believe she even likes me, passable. But she's always a-telling about her petered-out husband Hank, and how he done *this*, and how he done *that*—always perfect, you understand. Oh, sure! So fancy, inlaid, star-spangled perfect it's bound to make me look like a spavined broke-down old stage-horse beside him. I never knowed her man Hank, myself. But to hear her tell it, the Lord up and throwed the mold in the creek after He made Hank Hopple. I don't have no use for men so all-fired *good!* They put a crimp in everybody else, even after they're dead. My wife aint never been sorry she married me till her sister come and begun bragging about her Hank. I got tired of it the other day, and told both them women that the one big drawback to all the spotless masterpiece husbands I ever knowed, was that every one was too good to live long and died off at a early age.

"'Now, me,'" I says, 'I never took no prizes myself, but I'm still a-knocking around the ranch, the chores is done regular and the curly wolf never yet come through the door!'

"Well, then Mirandy sniffled some and said yes, she reckoned I was right; anyway, it was just plain—goodness—killed off her Hank. Well, that made my wife light into me. She said *I* weren't running no such risks and didn't show respect for dead folks when I talked that way. And she said work was the only thing I ever thought of, and if I was smelted down I wouldn't assay a ounce of romance, whatever that is, to the ton.

"I says: 'maybe not. And if you'll go ahead and assay what's hived away in the cellar and the meat-house, you won't find a 'color' of romance, neither! But you'll know that nobody around this ranch runs any chance of starving to death; so you can go to bed and sleep nights.'"

After a while the old man and the handmaiden come out of the house and went off through the pasture-gate. Lester watched 'em a minute and says:

"Gillie, maybe you thought your old man was taking chances when he jawed at Tom Hands with that six-shooter not ten feet from his belly-button? Well, he's taking chances right now that make them others look sick!"

Old Critchlow give Lester a pleading look:

"Don't say nothing to *them*, whatever you do! Leave 'em go. It aint none of our business."

After a long time the old man and the handmaiden come back through the gate. The old man's arm was resting easy and comfortable around her waist so I was pretty sure he had garnered her into the Fold and snatched her back from the Brink, all safe and sound at last.

THEY come and stood in front of us. The old man looked at me and leaned over and says to the widow:

"You tell him, Bunnyduck."

Bunnyduck! I couldn't believe at first it was him said it. He was acting kind of coltish anyway and I thought maybe his brains had jumped the reservation. His elbow poked her in the ribs, gentle-like.

"Go ahead, Bunnyduck, you tell him."

Well, then I looked at the old man as strict and stern as he always looked at me when he asked if I had been a-pond'ring serious matters. But it didn't do a lick of good. And before I knowed it the handmaiden made a grab for me and give me a hug and a smack when I weren't braced for it. She called me her brand new son and asked would I mind if her and the old man up and got married.

Like a flash it come over me that I hadn't saw Bird's Nest's beaver-castor since it rolled from the buckskin bag with the medicine-catridges! I run over there and took a look on the ground but couldn't find it. So, then, I was pretty sure the old man had picked it up and taken it into the house and maybe rubbed it on a mirror and shined her eyes. So now, o' course, she couldn't help follering him everywhere, like a tame bear. As Bird's Nest said any squaw, white or red, was *bound* to do if you shined her. Well, when I knowed the beaver-castor was

mixed-up in it I see there weren't no way out and they might as well get married. So I didn't say nothing ag'in it.

Pretty soon we heard hoof-beats and Sam and George and Beavertooth come tearing into the Critchlow place with their horses lathered up. They pulled-in and Sam looked at Lester and says:

"When Bird's Nest come out of it after the doctor set his leg, and we found out about you riding over here a-looking for Tom Hands, we throwed the hulls on our horses and shoved scenery behind us as fast as them cayuses could travel—to get here in time and be sure you got a even break. Where is that murdering Hands?"

Old Critchlow spoke up.

"Tom Hands' time on earth was up, Sam. And even Hands couldn't sidestep Fate when his time come, no more than anybody else can."

The old man frowned at Critchlow.

"He means to say that the Lord God answered a blasfemous challunge today, direct from on High. An earthly insterment, Lester Touch-the-Clouds, was used to work the Almighty's will. And Lucifer come for Tom Hands' immortal soul."

If Bird's Nest was here, I knowed he would claim the bronco-sperits carted-off Tom Hands' ghost, and that no Fate, or no Devil, or nothing else had anything to do with it. And you can bet he would reel-off proofs and reasons to back it up, plenty of 'em and mighty deep ones, too. Well, I couldn't be sure *who* it was got Tom Hands' ghost; Fate, or the Devil, or the bronco-sperits. And I didn't care much, neither. Tom Hands' ghost was gone, snatched off by *somcthing*. And it couldn't come back—that is, if I never abused the buckskin horse, Pete. And I wouldn't abuse no horse that ever lived, so I knowed I was safe.

WELL, there wouldn't be much use wasting time writing down anything more. I could go on, easy enough, and tell how we found Bird's Nest, when we got back to the U Cross, propped-up in his blankets with his busted leg tied to a board, a-talking and gassing away to Aunt Emmy. I could tell how the old man's mouth fell wide open with surprise when he walked in and found Bird's Nest talking white-man almost as good as anybody. And I could go on and tell how worked-up and excited the old man got about it; and how he said this weren't nothing else but the Gift-of-Tongues, a mir'cle that had happened only once before since long before the Flood.

And if I didn't have nothing better to do right now, I could tell how Sam and Old Stan got busy a few days later and rounded-up the cowmen and sheepmen together in a big meeting at the U Cross, and how they all agreed to run every last hired killer out from under his hat, plumb out of the country before sundown that very day! And I could tell how them hired butchers, when they see that everybody was roused and frothing, didn't wait to argue but grabbed their saddles and hit their horses down the hind leg and was gone, for good and all; it was easy enough to patch-up the range war with them trouble-makers out of the way.

I COULD tell about the wedding, too, when the old man and the handmaiden got married. And how everybody come from a hunderd miles around, cow-folks and sheep-folks too, and what a high old time we had; and how downright game both the handmaiden and the old man was; how they laughed and joked with everybody, like they didn't mind it hardly at all, now they was married. And I could tell how Bird's Nest had a terrible, warning dream the night before the wedding, and how scared I was when he told it to me; how I thought for a time it was up to me to warn the old man and the handmaiden before it was too late. But the dream was pretty long and snarled-up and I decided maybe Bird's Nest had figgered it out wrong; nobody couldn't have luck as bad as that dream laid out for them two! So I didn't say nothing about it.

Then, I could tell how they backed me into a corner after the wedding and invited me to go with 'em on what they called a honeymoon. But I just says:

"No, thanks; I wouldn't know how to act on a honeymoon; I never been on one. It's all right for you two, I reckon; it's easy enough to travel a trail you've been over before. I'm much obliged and if I weren't too busy I would go. Beavertooth told me yesterday that honeymoons are the rip-snortingest times anybody can go up against. But I have saw enough rip-snorting times lately to last me for a long spell. So if you'll ex-cuse me I'll stay right here at the old U Cross and take it easy."

Which I done and was glad of it.

THE END

"North to the Promised Land," a novel of the old Texas Trail by Harold Channing Wire, will be published complete in the next, the January issue.

The Wings of Wrath

News of the war in Europe sends an American pilot on a terrific adventure in China.

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

ON the day that war engulfed the world, Carver got the chance he had been praying for. Lingard, of the Intelligence, telephoned him.

"I say, Carver! We're a bit rushed and all that sort of thing, but the Chief will spare you five minutes. Can you meet me for tiffin at the club on the Peak at noon?"

"Can do," exclaimed Carver swiftly. "You mean, there's something up?"

"If the Chief gives the word, yes."

Now, with the big-nosed Lingard, he sat at tiffin before the wide window, with Hongkong and the bay outspread below, with Kowloon opposite, and the sea and the islands thereof. Lingard talked jerkily but freely; it was safe to talk, here at the club.

The war news had changed everything. Two days ago, Hongkong had been a city of refuge, but a doomed city, awaiting the Japanese onrush. Now, all was altered. Japan was stunned by the Ger-

Vera stood talking with half a dozen Chinese: she waved a hand and then ignored him.

man-Soviet pact, and in a frantic right-about, no longer threatened to push Britain out of China. Instead, she was now making a desperate play for British friendship.

"Which," said Lingard, "doesn't fool anyone, y'know. There's too much murder been done up and down the coast. Now that the Empire's at war, you'll see troops and ships here in no time—we can go to work without danger of antagonizin' Japan and provokin' a crisis. The crisis is gone and over. . . . Oh, hello! Here he is. Remember, talk freely."

A quiet, unimpressive Britisher joined them, shook hands, sat down, refused anything to drink, and eyed Carver.

"Just one thing I'd like to know, Mr. Carver," said he, "from your own lips: Why do you want—what you want? If you please. Perhaps for reasons of altruism?"

Carver pulled himself together in order to meet these Britishers on their own level of calm, unemotional lucidity. It was difficult. Carver was a quiet man himself, his graying hair belied by his youthful features and alert gray eyes; not age had grayed this hair. His voice suddenly cut forth like a knife.

"Altruism, nothing!" he said. "I care nothing particularly about you or the Chinese, if you want it straight. You've made a mess of things, from an American standpoint. The reason is that for ten years I had a friend, Bill Harden: we starved and feasted together, barnstorming, working, instructing. Bill was the grandest guy who ever lived. We came to China together, getting jobs on the Yangtze commercial line. Bill was my co-pilot."

He paused briefly, his face taking on new lines, hard lines, his gray eyes aglint.

"One day, without warning, some Japanese planes came out of nowhere and pumped bullets into us; this was up above the Gorges, where they were on a raid. They riddled us. They were merely discouraging civilization in their usual way. I got the ship down safely but my best friend died across my feet. I've hated the Japs ever since. If you folks will put me in the way of doing anything to square the debt, I'll do it."

Somehow, the words blazed. Under their impact, the two Englishmen exchanged a glance.

"Can you fly a bomber, Mr. Carver?" asked Lingard's chief.

"I can fly anything that has wings."

"I see. You understand, we could give you nothing official to do; anything that might crop up would be, of necessity, highly perilous and quite unauthorized."

Carver smiled a twisted, cynical smile.

"What I want, is the sort of thing your

flyers would be afraid to tackle. All I ask is that it be against the people who killed my friend. Anything! Damn the danger. You ought to be able to use a crack pilot—in quite unofficial ways."

"Very well." The other man rose, shook hands, and nodded. "Mr. Lingard will give you all details. Very glad to have met you, sir. Good luck."

He departed. Carver stared rather blankly at Lingard, who grinned.

"Apparently you're on for the job, Carver! A pilot is badly needed up the coast. I've nothing to do with it, y' understand," he added hurriedly, a flicker in his chill eyes. "Not our show at all. They need someone who knows bombers, and applied to us for a man."

"Who do you mean by 'they'—the Chinese?"

Lingard shook his head. As he said quite frankly, everything was in turmoil and it was difficult to adjust the alignment. Hongkong was filled with spies of all sorts; German subjects were being rounded up, and secret agents of every description were hard at work.

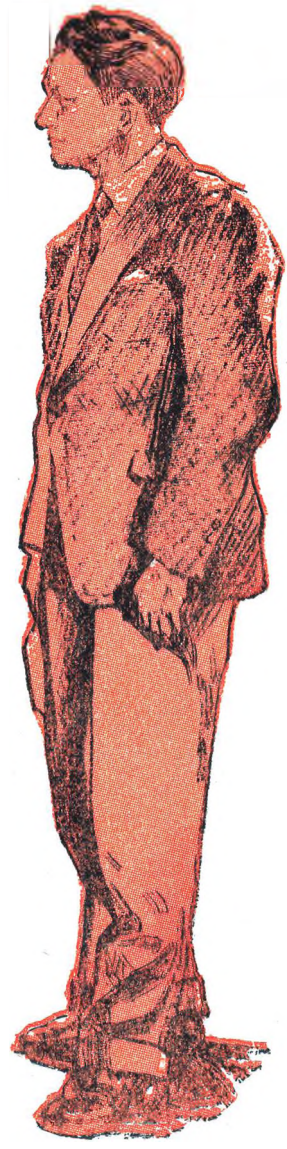
"We must do nothing to provoke a crisis just now; at the same time, we're behind the Chinese, y' know. We've no quarrel with Tokio at all. The Japanese gov'ment isn't behind this Chinese murder-adventure; that's entirely in the hands of the military caste. And their army clique is responsible only to their Emperor. At the present moment, the new gov'ment in Tokio is trying desperately to pull out of China, and face around to meet the Soviet menace. And the Soviet people are hard at work. We're sending a destroyer up the coast, tonight. This is your chance to go, if you so elect. I advise against it."

"You say it's not a British show?"

Lingard shook his head. "Emphatically not. They want a chap who can fly a bomber. When the Chinese retreated west, they left a ship behind."

"Hell! I flew a bomber at Kelly Field for a year," said Carver. He gave up trying to understand the elusive "they." Lingard was telling secrets, but not too many. "Aren't all the coast ports under Japanese blockade?"

"Quite. The destroyer's goin' to a tiny place between Swatow and Amoy—a three-hour trip, land before morning and scuttle back here. A woman's in charge of this job. We're actin' as liaison, no more. Your deal lies with her entirely. I warn you, it sounds bad; you'd not have an earthly chance, I fear. Too good a man to throw away."



Now Carver knew why a destroyer had been needed. It was no time to question her.

"All I ask," said Carver, "is to get in a good crack at those fellows who killed Bill Harden. Would this job get in a good one?"

"Terrific," said Lingard. "Provided this woman tells the truth. She'd sacrifice you like a shot, or any of us. She's an angel—an angel of treachery I fear."

She must be something wonderful, thought Carver, to evoke such poetic reactions from this chilly Englishman. Carver was under no illusion. Lingard and the forces behind him were at their cat's-paw game. They might give this woman secret aid, but hers was the ultimate risk. Also, it was obvious that Lingard was by no means certain of this woman.

"Is she acting for China?" queried Carver.

"Indirectly. She's a Soviet agent, acting for—er—the general good, as it were. She thinks we're supplying an R.A.F. man. Dash it, Carver, I don't like to turn you over to her! Not by half."

"Do it. I'm a lamb for the slaughter. And," Carver added grimly, "if your Soviet gal tries any monkeywork on me, she'd better look out. Why do you trust her?"

"We don't," said Lingard. "We accept what she says, hoping good will come of it. Then, if your mind's made up, old chap, meet me at eight tonight."

Carver passed the hours in feverish suspense.

How the war in Europe was going to affect the Orient, it was impossible to say; so far, the Japanese were so furious and terrified over the German-Soviet pact, that for the moment they were stunned in mid-swoop, as it were.

Open warfare had raged between the Soviet puppet state of Outer Mongolia, and the Japanese puppet Manchukuo, off to the northwest. Armies had been moved up in tremendous masses. The pressure on Chiang Kai Shek and the Chinese, withdrawn to the western mountains, was eased. Everything was in chaos. This woman agent of the Soviets was one of hundreds of secret agents up and down the China coasts.

Lingard talked of this after they met, that evening, and were being taken out to the destroyer in a police launch.

"It leaves me cold," rejoined Carver bluntly, as the destroyer loomed ahead, all dark. "You're a good chap, Lingard; but damn your undercover jobs! I'm in this because my best friend was murdered. That's reason enough for anything I may do."

"You might have other reasons later," Lingard said cryptically. "I'm tryin' to

The face of Bill Harden, his best friend, rose before him. He remembered how Bill Harden's blood had spurted over his feet while he wrestled with the controls.

get information on the Japanese pilots who fired on you and killed your friend; might not have been a Japanese, you know. They have no end of adventurers in their employ. By the way, I'll arrange to get you back to Hongkong, later, if you come safely out of this job."

THE destroyer was in darkness, all deck lights doused. On the 'midships deck, Carver was introduced to the captain and to a woman, Vera somebody—she was Vera to everyone, it seemed. There was muffled, anxious talk. The captain wanted to go at once, and said so.

"Go, then!" said Lingard. "I'm off. Luck, Vera! Luck, old chap! See you later."

His launch puttered away. The captain, a brusque and worried man, turned to his two passengers with curt words.

"You've three hours of rapid transport ahead. You'll have the mess cabin to yourselves. Best we can do. Come, madam."

He took Vera's arm, and Carver followed. In the gloom, feet pattered about; cursing seamen, Chinese mess-boys, crisp-voiced officers. A gleam of light broke at last; it was the officers' mess, with narrow center table and a long cushioned seat down either side. On the table were sandwiches, cigarets, liquor, everything carefully racked.

"Don't open the ports," the captain warned. "Keep the bottles racked, and stay put yourselves. If you need anything, ring. Night!"

He slammed the door and was gone. The vessel was already shuddering and shaking.

Carver laid by his hat and coat; he had nothing else. The woman threw off a heavy cloak, and at sight of her he had the surprise of his life.

"Three hours in a taxicab," she said pleasantly. "We'll manage."

Confusedly, he thought they might better have taken the trip by air; then his thoughts became incoherent. He stared like a boy, till she laughed and a little color ran up her face. She was fantastic, unreal, not at all his notion of a secret agent, a hard-boiled spy who must perforce be merciless and a thing of blood and iron.

An angel, Lingard had called her. She must be in her twenties, thought Carver; an ash blonde, with masses of wavy hair fine as spun cobweb, and skin incredibly exquisite. Features slightly too pinched for beauty, wide eyes of lapis; everything about her utterly feminine and gently fastidious in the extreme.

"You will not be sick? Good. I am never sick," she said. They were seated now, and smoking. The vessel was one tumbling, leaping shudder, and Carver began to fear the worst. Not she. Spreading a map on the table, she spoke calmly and casually.

"Now we can talk, my Englishman. The work is all planned carefully; it is for tomorrow night, and every detail has been arranged. Our destination is a tiny village of no consequence, on the coast. The bombing plane is waiting there. Out of that tiny place will arise great events, my friend. Because of the work you do, the United States of America will spring at Japan—"

Her words went vague. Carver, even in his intense astonishment, could get no farther than this, for the inevitable seized him. He was never airsick, true; but never before had he been aboard a destroyer at top speed and at sea. Sweat gathered upon him, and he turned green; then he was groaning, prostrate on the cushion, a basin beside him. And there he remained, only more so.

Vera ignored him. She ignored everything, making no further attempt to talk. She sat, a placid angel with heavenly eyes, smoking the long Russian cigarettes or sipping a drink. She seemed to have no thoughts, no emotions, as though her mind were all blank. Such was Carver's agonized memory of the night, and with it a memory of Lingard's words. An angel, but an angel of treachery, of destruction.

How and when it ended, Carver scarcely knew. The destroyer had ceased to shiver. He himself was aided down into a boat, and groaned in relief when he set foot ashore. A tiny flashlight pricked the darkness. He staggered into some sort of building, sank down in blessed quiet, and knew no more.

DAYLIGHT and dismal reality wakened him.

He lay on a pallet in a tiny, filthy room. A Chinese boy squatted with a tray, shaking him to consciousness. He drank some tea, felt better, and tried to talk, but lack of comprehension was mutual. The boy, grinning, brought a battered English tin bath. Carver bathed, dressed, and wandered outside into a sunlit courtyard.

Here stood Vera, talking with half a dozen Chinese; she waved a hand and

then ignored him. In one corner stood airplane bombs, ten of them, well packed and crated. Also a drum of gasoline, tins of oil, other things. Now Carver knew why a destroyer had been needed; more than passengers had arrived last night. What the devil had she said about the United States? It was no time to question her now, obviously, so he sought the open air.

The building proved to be a small temple with a few ruinous hovels near by, a mere hamlet perched on the seashore. The blue sea glittered gaily, broken only by long, heavy smokes at the horizon, evidently from warships. An urbane old Chinaman with wispy gray mustache appeared, making signs of obvious invitation. Carver followed, curious.

He climbed out to the left wing, crouched, and saw a stabbing searchlight finger up from the destroyer; he was almost over her.

Illustrated by Stanley Maxwell

He was led to an open field and a long shed camouflaged by straw mats. With great pride, the old gentleman tugged the mats aside to display a twin-engined bomber, a weathered ship, sure enough, of American make, with half-effaced Chinese insignia. In abrupt delight, Carver went to work then and there.

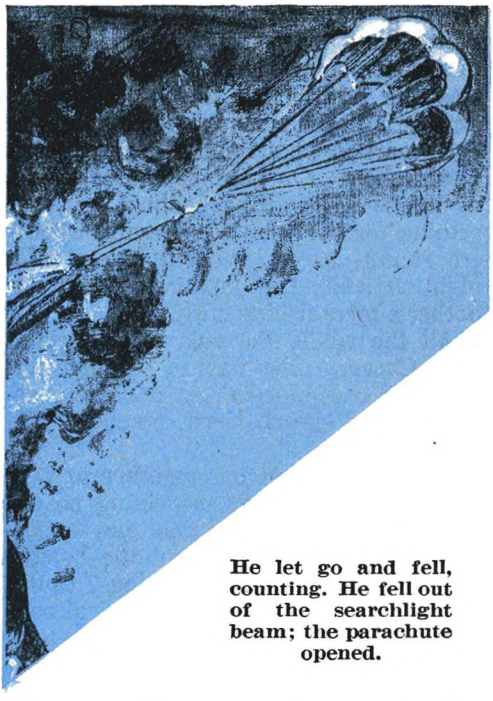
During two hours he probed into the secrets of this ship, evidently left behind in care of local patriots when the Chinese armies fled westward. He dragged off tarpaulins, bared fuselage and engines, and was rather amazed to find her in excellent condition; even the tires held air, and the batteries must have been tended and kept charged. It was all quite surprising and delightful.

A ragged boy came running and calling. Carver, the last vestiges of his sickness gone, was conducted back to the temple. He cleaned up a bit and joined Vera in the courtyard; she was alone now; tiffin was ready for them, and she smiled at his flushed eagerness.

"You've seen the airplane. Is it all right?"

"Looks good," Carver replied cheerfully, and crammed on the brakes. Careful! Something screwy here. She thought him an Englishman. Let her do the talking!

He noted maps and papers at her elbow, and a number of wireless forms



He let go and fell, counting. He fell out of the searchlight beam; the parachute opened.

brushed with Chinese writing. Hello! Must be a secret radio-station hereabouts. Turning to the food, and to the woman, he once more was conscious of her utterly placid loveliness, her perfect poise. She betrayed no inner excitement, no emotion of any sort, and seemed interested in nothing.

But, the meal finished, she turned to her maps and papers, and became animated.

She showed him this bit of coast mapped in detail, with the Japanese island base of Formosa lying opposite. Red circles were marked here and there: Jap warships and aircraft carriers, she explained. One carrier was a bare fourteen miles from this spot, down the coast.

"She sent off thirty planes this morning," said Vera calmly. "They passed over us, no doubt going to Amoy. That was what wakened you from sleep."

The ragged little boy darted in, handed her a scrawled wireless form, and ran off. She eyed it sharply, laid it with the others, and gave Carver a steady regard.

"You understand the importance of engaging America in this war, of course. She must no longer remain neutral; her fleet, her vast power of pressure, must be thrown against Japan. Only a supreme effort can accomplish this."

Luckily, Carver was too astonished to become articulate. She mistook his floundering and launched into explanations so sweetly clear, lit by so cold and precise a radiance, that his astonishment increased. It was a very simple matter, as she exposed it to him.

Russia, behind her Mongol puppet, was giving her armies a good blooding and keeping huge Japanese forces engaged. All the power of Japan was thus in check from the far north to the far southern mountains where Chiang held out; and in the interior, Japan was buckling. The outburst of war in Europe was having terrific repercussions here. Russia was free to handle Japan and to help China—and the United States must now be brought in.

Not with war, but with all her economic power at work, while the whole Japanese army was so desperately engaged in China. That army would be strangled as by closing pincers.

"The United States," said Carver, finding faint voice, "is too smart to be dragged in."

"That is our task tonight," replied Vera calmly.

He listened with pulses hammering while she read over the message last received, then consulted a chart and made calculations. Why, the woman knew navigation! She figured swiftly; she laid off lines; she penciled the chart. At length she pricked a point, smiled slightly, and turned to him with a nod.

"Here." She indicated the pricked point. "Midnight, precisely; this will be her position. How accurately it all works out! She'll be scarcely six miles from where that Japanese aircraft carrier is now moored. Only sixteen miles from here, out in the steamer lane. I'll make a little chart for your use. There must be no mistake."

CARVER eyed the map, saw that by the convolution of the coast her distances were right. A cold prickle ran up his spine.

"She? Who? What the devil are you talking about?" he demanded.

"The American troopship from Manila, taking more soldiers to Shanghai," she replied with a patient air. The truth burst upon Carver with hideous incredulity. He became pale as death, but she did not notice.

"A destroyer is with her. They stop at Amoy to pick up some American refugees; that's why she takes the inside passage. The destroyer is little, the troopship is big; you cannot mistake her. You must give her the full rack of bombs, all of them."

Carver's senses were reeling. She went on delicately, with that air of fastidious and gentle precision.

"One of our men is aboard her; one of the wireless operators who sends these messages. He risks his life; no matter! Some of us must perish for the greater good. You will drop your bombs, then continue straight on, for Formosa."

"No, no!" began Carver. She misunderstood him.

"Oh, but you must! You cannot return here. These Japs have instruments; the moment this airplane of yours goes up, they'll send up planes from the carrier. You must fly straight on and meet me. I'll be waiting with a fishing boat, a fast boat. Remember, the Japanese planes will be searching; don't try to come back. It all works out perfectly. Your plane comes down, is lost in the ocean. The Japanese will be blamed. The United States will at once turn upon Japan, full force!"

"Quite true." Carver summoned up hoarse words. "Did Lingard know about all this?"

"Oh, of course!" she replied in surprise, and smiled again. "He helped arrange it. Did he not send you to do the work?"

She lied, and he knew it. Angel of treachery! Lingard would never have sent him, of all people, had Lingard known. She was doublecrossing Lingard. No doubt Lingard thought she meant to destroy the Jap aircraft carrier.

Carver sat with temples athrob while she conned the details with him. He would have a parachute, a life-preserver, a Very pistol: all were here, provided, ready. She would flash a triangle of red lights—*flash-flash-flash*—to guide him on to her fishing boat. A large, powerful, fast boat. He would swing low down and drop into the water close by, letting the bomber go to the devil. His chances of rescue by her were really excellent.

That is, unless she doublecrossed him and let him die.

He scarcely spoke at all; he was like an automaton. A clammy chill had settled upon him, at thought of the troopship from Manila. He pocketed the wad of bank-notes she gave him; payment, blood money. He watched her make the chart, an exquisite piece of work with all compass directions and distances laid out. She went over it with him, carefully.

His one great peril, as she showed, lay from the Jap aircraft carrier, with her searchlights and instruments and swarms of hornet planes. Here, and she pointed, was the position of the American destroyer with the troopship in convoy; she even marked what lights the two vessels would show. On here, to the eastward, would be her waiting fishboat. It was coming for her; she was leaving with it ere sunset, to get position before midnight arrived; the Japanese would not bother a mere fishing craft.

All the while, the cold chill lingered with Carver. She was so damned efficient, so cold-blooded, so delicately serene! Had she no heart, no soul? He doubted.

Later, they went out together to visit the bomber; she was neglecting no detail of personal inspection and supervision. Chinese carried out the bombs, the oil and gasoline, everything. Under her eye, Carver tested the electrical controls, the release lever, the racks, the telescope sights. Everything was as it should be. When the bombs had been unpacked, Carver carefully saw them racked in place.

Oil and gasoline were drained in. Carver took the controls and briefly tested the motors; they responded instantly. Vera explained that the bomber must stay under cover till Carver was ready to leave, when the Chinese would wheel it out for him. The field offered a clear runway, the wind was gentle. Satisfied, they returned to the temple.

While the sun was lowering, she sat with him and figured the exact moment of departure. He must reach that pinprick on the chart precisely at midnight. Carver recoiled before her uncanny, placid poise; she was a machine, not a woman. He had surprised nothing personal or intimate in her; she was not at all the gorgeous sex-endowed secret agent of fiction. Helpless men, American marines, dying by the hundred, meant nothing whatever to her. She had imagination only for the exact and precise completion of what she planned. Carver offered no protest, no disagreement. She did not suspect that he was American, not English.

The unreality of it choked him, as he bade her farewell in the sunset. The sky was clear as a bell, increasing his risk—and hers. For she, in that fishing boat far out to sea, risked much. She touched his hand and went, the common blue robe of a coolie over her garments. The slim

lovely shape, crowned by masses of fine-spun hair, lessened and was gone to where the boat awaited her along the rocky pinnacles of the shore.

"Some of us must perish for the greater good." Her words lingered in his mind, like a reiterant bell-note. "Some of us—"

During the evening, while moths fluttered about his light, he pored over the chart, studying it until every least detail was secure in his mind. Queer reflections hurried upon him. He thought of the thousands and thousands of women and children, up and down these China coasts, pitilessly slaughtered by the wings of Japan, as others far away in Europe were being slaughtered now, by other wings. Such killers, wherever found, were beyond the pale of civilization; they were to be wiped out of existence.

The face of Bill Harden rose before him, the dying face of his best friend. He remembered how those Japanese planes had spurted bullets at the transport, how Bill Harden's blood had spurted over his feet while he wrestled with the controls. He thought over these things, and more, as the hours dragged on.

Then, glancing at his watch, he stood up and called aloud. Chinese appeared, dim ghostly shapes, filing out into the starlight with him to the field.

The bomber was wheeled forth and chocked, ready; the Chinese stood by. Carver stripped to his underwear. He donned the rubber vest with its pockets of compressed air, and buckled on the parachute. This was part of his old army reserve training back home. He tested the Very pistol; it was loaded. He lit a cigarette, one eye on his watch, and once more went over each detail of what he must do. In his mind, he knew exactly what lay ahead of him.

At length he climbed in and warmed up the engines. The minutes wore on—time! At his shout, the Chinese, with loud cries, pulled away the chocks. The engines roared and roared in a steadily mounting thunder. The bomber bumped down the field, gathered way—and lifted abruptly. Off! Off and up!

Now the die was cast. All the rest was only a matter of moments, of seconds.

The dials were alight, the riding lights shut off. Carver mounted and mounted, steadily zooming, climbing at full capacity. Three, four—five thousand! He

banked and turned, now heading not out to sea, but straight down the coastline. In the clear starlight, he needed only the coast to guide him.

He came into his course. He cut the engines and nosed down into a long dive. It was one chance in fifty that he would catch that aircraft carrier napping. Not minutes now, but seconds—split seconds, the struts and wires screaming around him.

The ship-lights appeared. The cluster came clear, ahead and below; there was his prey, but a searchlight was fumbling along the sky. It shifted, flung around, caught him and held on him. He revved the motors and drove down headlong, the old bomber trembling in every brace. Split seconds gone—it was now, now! Everything at once!

Another and another searchlight jumped up at him. They blinded his telescope sights—no need! Aim at the searchlight base! A rippling splash of red spurts underneath, and he pressed the release-lever. One bomb only. Then he hauled back and went rolling up and over, and the searchlights lost him.

He knew instantly that he had pulled out too soon. He glimpsed an explosion below; too soon. A miss. No miss next time! The searchlights found him again as he banked, and his hand went up to the bomb-release. All the others this time, all nine in one salvo! The wires were shrieking and moaning again. The knack of it had come back to him. His nerves were under sure control now.

He dived, screaming in the wind. Splash upon splash of jetted fire leaped up; he was all silvery in that searchlight glare. He jerked; the ship jerked. Not

too fast this time, you fool! Right. Things were jumping all around him. Wood and metal splintered, as he pulled back on the stick. Perfect, perfect!

The terrific concussion below and behind sent him rocking and reeling. Red flames spread and brought more concussions.

"That for you, Bill Harden!" he shouted hoarsely. "Got her, got her! Every murdering hawk in the nest!"

But some had already left the nest.

Worse, something was frightfully wrong. He was heading out to cover those seaward miles, leveling off at five hundred feet, desperately revving the engines—something wrong, wrong! The motors were choking, failing, catching again. Now he perceived that the instruments, everything in front of him and around him, were shattered. Bits of metal and wood drifted around him; the dials were smashed, the windshield gone —why, the old ship was riddled like a sieve! But this night she could well afford to die for China.

Coolly, Carver strained to see through the buffeting windstream. A scant six miles to the troopship—surely it was past and gone? Then he descried tiny lights below. He nosed down, his heart thumping. Yes! There would be the destroyer. And there, all ablaze with lights, the troopship!

And here, close at hand, streaming back from his right-hand engine, a burst of flame.

Up a little—*up!* With the Very pistol in hand, he climbed out to the left wing, crouched, and saw a stabbing searchlight finger up from the destroyer; he was almost over her. He let go and fell, counting. He fell out of the searchlight beam; it clung to the speeding bomber, now trailing flame. It jumped away and picked up half a dozen Japanese ships coming down the sky in rabid pursuit.

The parachute opened. To the shock, Barry laughed, waited, presently fired the Very pistol downward. The flare lit the water—not too long. Here was the old Kelly Field training again; he worked at the leg-strap, got clear, and hung by his arms. The water was close below. The flare hit it, went out. Barry waited again, to drop clear of the parachute with a twist.

Then down, down into the depths, and up again with searchlight brilliance all about him. The gamble had won.

Later, aboard the shuddering destroyer, he grinned at the officers who circled him with determined, forceful questions. He shook his head.

"Flying for China? Not at all, gentlemen. The plane had Chinese markings? You must be mistaken. American? Of course I am."

"This is no joking matter, young man," broke in an officer angrily.

"Correct," said Barry. "I was merely taking an evening swim and you picked me up. If there's an Intelligence officer aboard the troopship, I've some news for him. Urgent."

.Looks were exchanged. A worried radio man barged in.

"Message, sir. And there's a small ship of some kind afire to the eastward. Those planes seem to have been shooting at her—"

Ship, to the eastward! Barry closed his eyes. A shiver took him at memory of her lovely fragile presence, the touch of her hand at parting. And he had betrayed her. Those Jap pursuit ships, following his bomber, had found her. She had flashed the signal, and death had replied. He had betrayed her—betrayed her!

He opened his eyes, and their sudden agony cleared at sight of the uniforms around. She was gone, yes; but these men lived, and hundreds of others in the same uniform.

"Yes; some of us must perish for the greater good," he muttered. Two of the officers caught the words; one drew the other aside.

"Hear him? The chap's goofy, I tell you! Clear off his head!"

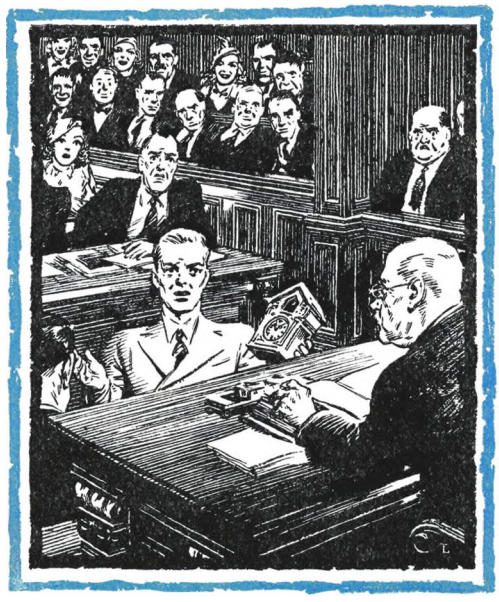
But Barry was smiling, and waiting. He had word for the Intelligence, right enough.

H. Bedford-Jones next month begins a new historical series, "The World Was Their Stage"—a group of stories similar in quality to his much-discussed "Trumpets from Oblivion." No elaborate "time machine" device is necessary in these new stories, however, for they deal with dramatic but little known events in the lives of people whose careers are a matter of record.

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL—50,000 WORDS

AS GOOD AS MURDERED

By JAMES O'HANLON



Illustrations by Percy Leason

A COMPLETELY PREPOSTEROUS BUT WHOLLY AMUSING NOVEL, GUARANTEED TO MAKE YOU FORGET WAR AND WORRY FOR MANY GLAD HOURS. . . . BY THE AUTHOR OF "MURDER AT MALIBU" AND "MURDER AT 300 TO 1."

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

"I didn't really murder Mardley," he whispered to her. Then taking a deep breath, he stepped from the limousine.

AS GOOD AS MURDERED

By JAMES O'HANLON

Who wrote "Murder at Malibu" and "Murder at Coney Island."

OCCUPYING the entire fifth floor of the beautiful Etruria Building—the most up-to-date of Los Angeles' business temples, exceeding in height all other buildings within the quake-fearing city's limits—was the luxurious, ultra-modern suite of the firm:

MARDLEY, PILSTER, CROLE & ELDRON
STOCKS BONDS INVESTMENTS

"Honest Tom" Mardley had created that firm. With great bitterness he recalled the nickname as he held taut the aging muscles supporting his bulky but impressive figure; as his watery gray eyes fired hurt, challenging glances toward one and then another of the trio of grim, scowling faces surrounding him in his office.

"And so, *gentlemen,*" he lashed contemptuously, "we have at last elevated ourselves to the lofty status of conscienceless thieves! How *proud* I am to head a firm which no longer considers honesty and ethics as requisites in the conduct of its business! You were dissatisfied with our record prior to this new policy of lying and cheating and swindling; obviously we could not do as well while operating within the restricted margins of decency and fair-play. We could not, for example, enrich ourselves to the extent of a quarter of a million dollars by selling to an uninformed sucker the worthless bonds of a defunct South American government—now, could we, Mr. Pilster?"

His burning gaze led the question to the worried features of a wizened little man of age nearing sixty, whose shifty, bespectacled eyes dodged the contact and went pleadingly to his partners.

"Now could we, Mr. Pilster?"

Pilster's tongue came forth to wet his lips. The process resulted in a moist, sickly smile, following which Mr. Pilster ventured timidly: "Now see here, Tom, aren't you becoming a bit too vindictive? After all, at the time the deal was made Santori was still running the country and no one had any idea that a revolt—"

"Of course, Mr. Pilster," interrupted Mardley in sarcasm, "we had no idea of the approaching revolt, *other than an infallible warning less than twenty-four hours before you closed the deal!*"

The leathery-faced man seated directly before Mardley squinted shrewdly, momentarily observed the accumulated ash at the end of his smoldering cigar, then stiffened suddenly and demanded in an impatient bellow: "Well, what were we supposed to do with those bonds—*eat* them?"

"Eat them, Mr. Crole? I assure you I could better digest that worthless paper than this filthy business of robbing trusting clients!"

THE stares of the two men met and clashed like invisible rapiers. Then Crole's eyes came down as he deliberately flicked his cigar-ashes to the carpet. Mardley's attention went to the uneasy countenance of Mr. Eldron—the firm's youngest member.

"And *you,* Mr. Eldron," he said quietly, his modified tone emphasizing his anger, "I suppose these gentlemen found the result of your dinner engagement

with Mrs. Roger Peckslam last evening highly satisfactory? I believe you sold her a Mexican oil-well?"

The handsome, forty-year-old broker nodded reluctantly, his hand ascending to loosen his collar.

"The fact that the Mexican Government has confiscated that particular oil-well means nothing to us, I assume, now that we no longer control it?"

Mardley's question went unanswered.

"How large a check did you accept from Mrs. Peckslam, Mr. Eldron?"

"Fifteen thousand," said the junior partner.

"And where is it?"

"Deposited to the firm's account, of course." Eldron looked toward Crole for support.

"Of course," Mardley nodded calmly. Then, snapping about to face all three of the men with whom his name was associated, he exploded: "Now understand this, all of you! For thirty-seven years this firm has enjoyed an honorable reputation, and I do not intend to stand by idly while it degenerates into a front for a clique of detestable racketeers! We're going to buy back those South American bonds! Mrs. Peckslam is going to get back her fifteen thousand. Addison Watts shall have returned to him his—"

"Don't be an ass, Mardley!" rasped Crole, bouncing from his chair and slapping his hand upon the older man's desk. "If you want to run a charity, do it with your own money, not ours!"

"*Yours!*" echoed Mardley furiously. "Not a penny of that money belongs to any of us! We've stolen it, and I'm going to see that it's returned *if I have to invite an investigation from the District Attorney's office to do it!*"

"Hold on, Tom," Pilster cautioned nervously. "You're not going to the District Attorney. You can't! This is *your* business as well as ours—you're in this as deeply as we are!"

Awarding Pilster a look of limitless scorn, Mardley turned to the desk and brought his finger to a tiny disk which buzzed a summons to the outer office. Almost before his finger had left the button, a lovely young woman entered quietly and came to attention before the four men. She was about twenty-two or -three, delicately featured, with large, intelligent, blue-green eyes and auburn hair.

"Miss Preston," said Mardley, addressing her in a low voice, "please instruct Mr. Higgens to draw fifteen thousand dollars and have it on my desk in one hour."

"Yes, Mr. Mardley. Anything else?"

"No."

The young woman turned, went out.

"And now, gentlemen," said Mardley, "we'll see who's running this firm and how it's to be run. We'll begin by buying back that oil-well!"

CHAPTER II

A YOUNG man with tousled chestnut hair, clad in pajamas, robe and slippers, and needing a shave, sat perched upon the edge of a cushioned chair, lost in concentration over a coffee-table which supported, amongst other things, the scattered remains of what had once been a typewriter.

He was the sole occupant of a tiny, comfortable cottage, a miniature Colonial in design, inexpensive, but charming in a manner achieved only in the environs of Hollywood. The walls about him were splattered with the last vermilion rays of the huge red summer sun, now sinking into the foothills beyond Cahuenga Pass. He was totally unaware that the day was dying.

Lying beside the utterly demoralized typewriter were several random, poorly typed sheets of paper which bore such auspicious titles as: "Blood on the Skyscraper," by Jason Codrey; "The Headless Chinaman," by Jason Codrey; "The Mysterious Stranger," by Jason Codrey.

Outside the house, before one of the prettily shuttered windows, with hoofs planted inconsiderately in a bed of petunias and huge brown eyes complacently viewing his young and pensive master, stood a horse—a beautiful beast—nibbling at the leaves of a geranium.

"The Mysterious Stranger"—most recent of the prolific Mr. Codrey's invasions into the field of creative fiction—was the straw which broke the back of Mr. Codrey's patience. He could tolerate the idiosyncrasies of the ancient typewriter while fooling with such insignificant efforts as "Blood on the Skyscraper" and "The Headless Chinaman." But he felt that a potential masterpiece such as "The Mysterious Stranger" certainly merited more accurate inscription. Hence the dissection of the ailing machine.

A French telephone rested on the floor beside his chair. But not once

throughout the day had he used that usually indispensable instrument—a certain indication that Mr. Codrey's newest line of pursuit was something more than a passing fancy. Under normal circumstances he would have been using that phone constantly, calling Central Casting, for normally, Jason Codrey was a motion-picture extra.

So absorbed was Jason in the increasingly hopeless task of reassembling the typewriter, that he failed to hear the opening and closing of a door behind him, and did not suspect another's presence until smooth feminine arms encircled his neck and warm lips pressed themselves against his ear. Then, suddenly, a lovely young lady with soft auburn hair was upon his lap and within his arms.

"What brings you home so early?" he inquired as their cheeks parted. Then, hopefully: "You been fired?"

"Fired?" Mrs. Codrey smiled in open amusement. "Of course not, silly. It may interest you to know that it is now six-thirty."

"Six-thirty? Ye gods! And me without the corned-beef opened or the potatoes peeled!"

"A fine housekeeper," she said with a frown. "If you can't do better than this, Mamma's gonna have to get a new boy. When a woman comes home after a hard day at the office, she expects a hot meal—not a can-opener and an unmashed spud! What'd you write today, Edgar Allan," she asked with a smile, roughly digging her fingers into his hair, "something good and gory?"

"Something terrific, Pat!" Jason exclaimed with enthusiasm. "Today I hit it! I've got the dream-story of the century! A natural! Every producer in Hollywood will be on his knees begging for it! And talk about *twists*—boy! 'The Mysterious Stranger!'" He threw a kiss heavenward. "Wait'll you read it!"

"You mean you've actually *finished* one?"

"Well—" He hesitated and looked toward her sheepishly. "It isn't *quite* finished. But—"

SHE bounced to her feet and faced him in anger.

"Jason," she began in a voice charged with irritation, "this whole business is silly, stupid and ridiculous! Night after night you hand me the same build-up—terrific, stupendous, gigantic! You waste your time writing mystery stories that are so mysterious they baffle even the author! *But you can't finish them!* You never finish them! You never will finish them!

"Why do I put up with this?" she demanded in exasperation. "All of a sudden, for no reason on earth other than the fact that we're broke and you happened to read a newspaper item about the income-tax paid by a couple of Hollywood hacks, you decide you're going to be a writer—you, who couldn't even write a weather-report in a snowstorm! And while you're carving this glamorous career of yours, your wife has to get up every morning at seven-thirty and go pound her brains out over a typewriter so we can eat and feed that animal of yours!"

"Nobody told you to get a job," he growled in annoyance.

"Nobody volunteered to pay the grocer, either! Now look, Jason," she continued repentantly, "it isn't that I mind working. I'd even like it, if it was getting us anywhere, or had some logic to it. But this way, everything's cockeyed. Here you sit, day in and day out, wasting your time trying to write when you're not a writer, losing your self-respect because you have to depend upon your wife for support when you could very easily be bringing in twice what I make. Don't you see—it hurts me; and it hurts you, too. This isn't doing us any good."

"I'll do all right," he snapped sullenly. "I can write as well as the majority of the phonies in this town, and look at the dough they make! A guy can't become a genius overnight, can he? When have I ever flopped when I started out to do something? I've made plenty, haven't I? Fourteen thousand bucks in two years aint hay, sister!"

"Yeah—you made it, all right," she agreed bitterly, "but how? Solving murders! Getting yourself shot full of holes! Putting me in boxes where bloodthirsty old hags could stick swords through me! And where is all that money, Mr. Codrey?"

"We bought this house, didn't we?"

"Thirty-five hundred."

"And a car!"

"Nine hundred."

"And . . . and we had a nice vacation in New York, didn't we?"

"Vacation! *Vacation,* he calls that! Chasing a flock of freaks all over Coney Island! Since when does risking your life to track down a murderer come

under the heading of a vacation, I ask you?"

"That job netted us eight grand, my sweet!"

"Eight grand indeed! But we *just had to* come home by way of Bay Meadows, at which race-track my cute little Jason thinks he's Nick the Greek and promptly puts half the eight grand back into circulation. *And that horse!* Thirty-five hundred dollars for a hay-burner that couldn't out-run my grandmother if she was wearing snowshoes! But dear little Jason just couldn't *live* without him! Not only do we lose four thousand dollars, but we bring home a thirty-five-hundred-dollar souvenir!"

"Disaster's a swell horse!" he defended angrily. "He's just young, that's all!"

"Sure—and while he ages back there in our garage, we use your unemployment checks to feed him! I tell you, Jason Codrey, you and that phony nag will drive me insane! If I don't go whacky between a race-horse that can't run and a writer who can't write, Ripley'll have me on his radio program!"

"Disaster *can* run!" shouted the youth indignantly. "And I *can* write! You just wait till you read 'The Mysterious Stranger!'"

"When you finish a story I'll be too old to read! Now see here, Jason, I'm beyond the point of— *Eeeek!*"

The suddenness of her shriek catapulted the boy from his chair.

"What—what, Pat?" he gasped, glancing about frantically. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"Disaster!" she moaned, with her eyes fixed on the window.

"What about Disaster?"

Her voice caught in a sob as she pointed forward. "He's—he's *eating* my beautiful geraniums!"

CHAPTER III

NOON, the following day, found Pat Preston Codrey enveloped in an impenetrable cloud of melancholy as she sat with chin cupped in hands and elbows braced on her desk, abstractedly contemplating two sandwiches purchased for her by an obliging office-boy who had just departed to seek his own lunch. She wasn't hungry. She was worried—and extremely miserable.

Jason wasn't at home—she'd tried to phone him and got no answer. Maybe he had left her—*for good!* Maybe he had taken that old horse of his and gone off, never to return! Two large tears climbed from Pat's eyelids and raced each other down her cheeks. Viciously she bit into the sandwich.

It was all her fault! Who could blame him if he had deserted her? She should never have sailed into him as she had done last night. The things she had said to him were hateful! Jason was proud and sensitive. No wonder he had refused to remain in the house! No wonder he had taken a quilt—their *best* quilt—and gone out to the garage to sleep with that old horse!

After all, what were a few geraniums compared to the love of the sweetest boy on earth? She could have apologized this morning, but had she? No! She had gone off to the office without even looking into the garage to see if he were all right. Now see what had happened! Jason was gone!

She threw the sandwich to the desk and cleared the decks for a good cry, but before she could get to it, a door to her right opened and shut with a bang, and standing suddenly before her misty orbs was the lamented object of her dejection, his face a huge happy grin, and his arms waving wildly.

"Pat!" he shouted, dancing before her. *"I've got it!"*

"Got it?" she repeated stupidly. "Got what—a divorce?"

"My story! 'The Mysterious Stranger!' I've *finished* it!"

"You—you finished it? 'The Mysterious Stranger?' You—"

"It's *done!* It's *complete! Look!"* He waved a handful of paper in front of her face, and then, noting her expression, drew back in perplexity. "What are you crying for?" he asked.

"Crying? Who's crying? I'm—I'm just happy, that's all!" She hastened to brush the tears from her cheeks. "So you really finished it, huh?"

"Yeah—this morning!" he told her breathlessly. "It's not typed—couldn't fix the machine—but it's *done! Finished!* Now all I've got to do is to sell this synopsis to some producer and we're back on Easy Street! Just think: 'The Mysterious Stranger—by *Jason Codrey'!* You'll be proud of me yet, Mrs. Codrey!"

Pat eyed him skeptically. Back to normal in one jump, she thought. A queer little shiver ran down her spine as she viewed him. Whenever Jason acted this enthusiastic, something ominous usually followed. "What is this Mysterious Stranger?" she questioned. "A ghost story?"

"Ghost story?" He frowned in indignation. "It's a murder-mystery—not a real murder and not much mystery—but *boy,* what a twist! Every producer in Hollywood'll be begging for it on bended knees! Wanna read it?" He tossed the papers onto her desk and then spied the untouched sandwich.

HER fright of the past hour sufficiently remembered to impose caution, Pat ventured meekly: "Jason, dear, you know your being here might put me in a spot. I'm not supposed to have visitors, and if it ever got out that I'm married, I might lose my job. Can't I read the story tonight?"

"Tonight? Nothing doing! If you're not interested enough to—"

"Can't you tell it to me—quickly?"

"Well—okay." He glanced toward the sandwich. "You gonna eat that?" She shook her head and he reached for it. "No breakfast," he grinned in explanation. Then, seating himself atop her desk, he began:

"The story starts when a big-shot in a swanky organization—like this outfit here—commits suicide. His suicide panics the other members of the firm on account of these boys aint been operating on the up-and-up, and the suicide is bound to cause investigation. The books aren't kosher, see, and investigation means jail for everyone connected with the firm. So, just when all the execs are about to resign themselves to their fate, in walks the Mysterious Stranger!"

"Who's he?"

"He's just an ordinary guy who gets wind of the spot the other members of this firm are in, and has a bright idea. He walks into a board meeting and calmly offers to save their necks for fifty thousand bucks."

"How?"

"Here's his plan: he will make the suicide look like a murder, get himself arrested for the murder, and thus sidetrack any investigation that would follow a suicide!"

Pat's head cocked a little to one side. "Pretty fantastic, isn't it?" she asked.

"Why?" demanded Jason.

"I mean—would they let him do that? After all, a perfect stranger—"

"These guys are in a bad way," he argued. "They're ready to grasp at any straw. What have they to lose? They're facing jail, anyhow! They have to hire him!"

"But by becoming a murderer, your hero isn't doing himself any good, is he? They take him in for murder, try him and execute him: What good is fifty thousand dollars to a corpse?"

"He gets out of it."

"How?"

"That's the twist!" Smiling triumphantly, Jason continued: "As soon as he makes a deal, the Mysterious Stranger goes to the suicide's apartment, which is in a high-class hotel, and he musses everything up to make it look as though a fight has taken place. Then he takes the gun out of the suicide's hand and tosses it away from the body. Then, as he leaves the room, he has himself spotted by an elevator boy, and establishes the time.

"As soon as he leaves the hotel, he phones all the newspapers in town and tips them off that a wealthy South American philanthropist, who's going to give away millions to the local charities, has slipped into town and will register at the same hotel at which the big-shot committed suicide.

"Late that afternoon, after the body has been discovered and the 'murder' is in all the headlines, the Mysterious Stranger returns to the hotel disguised as Don Esteban, the philanthropist, and surrounded by servants. The lobby is full of reporters and photographers, anxious to interview and photograph him. There's a lot of fuss and excitement, but all the time he is talking to the reporters and registering, the Mysterious Stranger is looking for one person—the elevator boy who saw him come out of the suicide's apartment. He finally spots the boy and goes over to him. They talk for a minute—something about helping with the luggage, and then, just as one of the photographers is snapping their picture together, he smiles and hands the boy a twenty-dollar tip. A few minutes later the Mysterious Stranger finds an excuse and leaves the hotel, dismisses the servants and forgets all about being Don Esteban."

"Wait a moment," Pat interrupted. "He couldn't get away with that! The boy would surely recognize him!"

"Why would he?" Jason demanded.

"How could he miss? It was only a few hours between—"

"No—look, Pat: everything about the Mysterious Stranger has changed since the boy first saw him. He's of different nationality; he talks with an accent; he's rich and surrounded by servants; he's important. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, no one who had seen him only once as he was, could recognize him. It's a psychological impossibility. Do you see?"

Pat nodded dubiously.

"Well," continued Jason, "the following day the Mysterious Stranger returns to the hotel, dressed and acting the way he did the first time. No more Don Esteban. He lurks about the place until the boy finally recognizes him as the murderer and has him pinched. The result is that the Mysterious Stranger goes to jail for the murder of the suicide. Following that, he's tried for the murder, but gets out of it."

"How?"

"*The twist!*" Jason announced proudly. "The principal witness against him is the elevator boy. Right?"

"So?"

"Just at the crucial moment in the trial, the Mysterious Stranger produces a picture."

"What picture?"

"The one that was taken when he was Don Esteban, talking to the elevator boy!"

"So what?"

"So what? So the Mysterious Stranger demands to know how the boy's testimony placing him at the scene of the crime at the time the crime was committed can be taken seriously, when here, as a matter of record, was the boy standing right beside him a few hours later, and unable to recognize him! How then, now, weeks later, can the boy's identification be accepted? *That's it!* The boy's testimony is worthless! The Mysterious Stranger beats the rap and walks out as free as the air! That's the story."

CONCLUDING, Jason watched anxiously for Pat's reaction. For a moment her face remained thoughtful, then she beamed, admiringly.

"Not bad, sonny—not bad at all!"

"Honestly, Pat?"

"Honestly. It's certainly original! Of course, in the story, the company's books are never investigated?"

"No; why should they be? The man didn't take his own life—apparently—and a murderer is caught and tried. No one would ever think of the books."

"I see. And it's *really complete!*" She smiled in admiration. "Jason, my brilliant husband, I didn't think you had it in you! If a studio buys the story, how much—"

Her question ended abruptly as a buzzer sounded sharply three times, startling Jason and causing him to hop from the desk.

"It's Elsie," cried Pat in alarm. "She's warning me—someone's coming!"

Jason stared at her in confusion.

"Look," she said, bouncing quickly from her chair. "It may be Mardley or Pilster or somebody! You'd better beat it!"

He started for the door.

"No—no," Pat whispered excitedly—"better hide."

He turned to another door.

"Not in there!" she hissed. "That's Crole's office!" She dashed across the floor and threw open another door. "In there!" she directed. "It's the boardroom—they never use it—"

She caught a glance of bewilderment from him as he passed, then, shutting the door behind him, she dashed back to her chair. No sooner was she reseated than Eldron, followed by Pilster and Crole, entered from the reception-room. The three men filed silently past her desk, and then, to her dismay, instead of dispersing to their individual offices, proceeded directly toward the meeting-room into which she had just thrust Jason.

In spite of Pat's allusion to the fact that his presence at the office made her position embarrassing, Jason did not fully understand her reaction to the switchboard girl's warning. Nevertheless, finding himself alone in the spacious meeting-chamber, he looked about instantly and discovered another door which, upon rapid investigation, proved to be that of a clothes-closet. He was inspecting its dark confines when a click from the handle of the entrance door warned of another's approach. On impulse, he shut himself in the closet.

The three brokers entered the chamber. Eldron skirted the huge table occupying the center of the room and advanced to throw himself into one of the many surrounding chairs. Pilster followed Eldron for a few steps and then halted, his entire frame trembling as his

bulging eyes fixed themselves upon Eldron. Last to enter, Crole reclosed the door and permitted himself to fall back against its frame. Obviously each of the partners had just received a great shock.

"It isn't true!" Crole muttered dazedly. "It *can't* be true!"

"It's true, all right!" Eldron assured him, his handsome, still-youthful features contorted in worry. "I've just come from his apartment." He paused to pat a handkerchief against his silvering temple. "What an awkward position this places us in!"

"Us?" gasped Pilster in panic. *"What* position? I say, George, you don't suppose—"

"Shut up, Pilster!" silenced Crole impatiently, leaving the door and stamping toward Eldron, to whom his next words were addressed. "Did anyone see you there? Did you speak to anyone?"

"No. I knew he was in; there was no necessity for going to the desk. I took the elevator, of course, but there were several other passengers. Then, when I'd seen what had happened, I left by the service stairs."

"The money?"

"I got it. His safe was wide open."

Pilster fell weakly into a chair. "Are you sure he was dead, George?"

"As dead as a bullet in his brain could make him!"

"Good God," mumbled the timid broker, "Tom Mardley *a suicide!* I can't believe it!"

CHAPTER IV

JASON couldn't believe it, either—it was plagiarism!

"What shall we do?" he heard Pilster ask in a tone that eloquently described the man's terror.

"Do?" Crole repeated impatiently. "What *can* we do? Mardley has committed suicide! That finishes us!"

"Exactly how bad a spot are we in?" Eldron asked.

"Hopeless," Crole said curtly. "You know that Mardley's reason for suicide will be questioned. Obviously the firm will be investigated. If—or, rather, *when*—that happens, gentlemen, we're all headed straight for prison!"

"You're sure the books won't stand investigation?"

"Of course they won't! Let a D.A. or F.B.I. investigator get his nose in them, and our goose is cooked!"

"What are we going to do?" wailed Pilster.

"How about pulling out?" Eldron suggested.

"Run away?" Crole's voice vibrated scornfully. "How long do you imagine it would be before they caught up with us? And when they do, it simply means another charge to answer, and a few more years tacked onto our sentences. We can't run."

"What then?" demanded Eldron. "Must we sit idly by until the ship sinks with us in it?"

"Guess that's it," shrugged Crole.

Jason's heart was skipping every third beat. No longer able to accept the unsupported evidence of his own ears, he sent his quivering fingers into his pocket in search of his cigarette-lighter, and by the feeble light of its flame began scanning the crumpled papers he had plucked from Pat's desk just prior to his hasty exit. This situation, this setting, these characters—*they were all his!* He shook his head vigorously to determine the extent of his consciousness. But he wasn't dreaming. Could it be a frame-up? A trick? But no; aside from Pat, whom he had just told, no one on earth knew that story but himself.

His popping eyes burned into the manuscript. Avidly he listened for further evidence. It came:

Cried Pilster: "Good God! There must be *some* way out of this!"

Jason sucked in a deep breath and scanned the following line: *"Then in walked the Mysterious Stranger!"*

A strange thing happened to Jason. *He suddenly ceased to be Jason Codrey!* His identity, ego, personality, logic—became that of the character he had created, the Mysterious Stranger. Admittedly, Jason Codrey was impulsive; but this transition was more than a mere impulse. Jason was possessed!

The script—which, at that moment, might have been the Book of Revelations—read: *"Then in walked the Mysterious Stranger!"*

So—

In walked the Mysterious Stranger!

"Gentlemen," said the dazed but dignified victim of his own imagination, addressing the three brokers, whom by his sudden intrusion, he had frozen into three gaping statues, "I am acquainted with the seriousness of your predicament, and am fully aware that, left to your own resources, you are helpless. Your backs are to the wall—but I can

save you! I'm the *only* person in the world who can save you! And the price, gentlemen, is fif—" Somehow he could not say fifty thousand. Instead, he substituted: "—is fifteen thousand dollars."

"Who are you?" demanded Pilster in panic. "Who is he?"—to Crole.

"What were you doing in that closet?" Crole's voice, when he found it, was angry. "What *is* this? Blackmail?"

Calmly Jason's eyes traveled from one to another of the stricken faces.

"No," he denied quietly, "it isn't blackmail. Who I am and how I got into the closet, doesn't matter. What you should be considering is what I can do for you, and how helpless you are without me. I give you my word, gentlemen," he continued solemnly, "if my proposition is not to your liking, if it isn't the greatest bargain you've ever had offered to you, I shall accept your verdict and leave instantly, and forget I ever knew anything about you and your organization. Does *that* sound like blackmail?"

"Get him out of here!" Pilster squealed. "Call the police! It's a hold-up! It's—"

Crole silenced him with a glance, and then, turning to Jason, inquired cynically: "And just what is this wonderful proposition of yours?"

"You gentlemen are in danger of going to prison, aren't you?"

"Assuming that we are, what?"

"You expect an investigation because of your partner's suicide, don't you?"

"Y-e-s. So—"

"Would there be any grounds or reason for investigation if your partner had *not* committed suicide?"

"No. But that can't be altered."

"Oh—but it *can!*"

"Young man, you're insane," Crole accused. "What do you propose to do; bring Mardley back to life?"

"Mardley could be dead, yet not be a suicide."

"With a bullet in his head? Ridiculous!"

"He could have been murdered."

"He committed suicide!"

"But he *could* have been murdered!"

A SUDDEN hush blanketed the office. Mardley *murdered?* Shocking as it was, the idea presented possibilities. Crole and Eldron exchanged glances. The younger man's countenance became as blank as a startled Chinaman's. Pilster alone failed to grasp the significance of the suggestion. He was on his feet and in the act of reaching for a telephone, when Crole gruffly ordered him back into his chair.

"*Murdered,* you say?" Crole paused in reflection. "Hm—get that, George?"

Eldron's eyes were round as coasters. "Could—could we get away with it?" he stammered.

"What have you to get away with?" Jason questioned. He was calmly pulling a cigarette from a pack, and continued the action to the first puff before continuing: "Mardley's—shall we call it murder?—will be strictly my affair. All you do is pay me fifteen thousand dollars. Mardley will be murdered, and there won't be any investigation."

"You mean—you'll murder Mardley?" Eldron questioned.

"Exactly," Jason nodded, his bored gaze settling upon the youngest partner. "But there's a great deal more to it than that. Since, from what I've gathered, your firm is no monument to highest ideals of honest business, it's entirely conceivable that the police might suspect one of your unfortunate clients as the murderer, in which case you'd be as badly off as you are now. Consequently we need not only a *murder,* but also a *murderer.*"

"Who?" came a chorus.

"Me." Grinning briefly, Jason continued: "In short, gentlemen, here is my proposition: for fifteen thousand dollars, cash on the line, I shall murder your suicide; I shall see to it that I am charged with the murder; then I shall get out of it as best I can. Does it appeal to you?"

"How do you intend to do all this?" Crole asked.

"Why concern yourself with something you're going to pay me to worry about?" returned the youth, advancing to an ashtray and ostentatiously flicking the ashes from his cigarette. "Now look, boys," he continued, "I don't want to bicker with you. Either you like my proposition, or you don't like it. Speak up—do I murder Mardley, or do you go to jail?"

"It's monstrous," gasped Eldron.

"You'll do it for fifteen thousand?" asked Crole, eyes narrowed in thought.

"Money in advance," Jason added.

"Are we going to permit this young upstart to take advantage of our position by wheedling—"

"Shut up, Pilster," Crole admonished. "How do we know this isn't a trick?"

he demanded of Jason. "Fifteen thousand dollars is a lot of money. Besides, aren't you a bit presumptuous in imagining that whatever our difficulties, we would accede to any plan involving the body of our—"

"Are you kidding me, or yourself?" Jason inquired sternly. "If you want to handle this matter so delicately, let's assume that I am offering to redeem your dead partner from the disgrace of his act. The fee, *and* the result, gentlemen, is still the same. Yes or no?"

Crole turned to Eldron. "Well, George?" he requested.

"A long shot," shrugged the younger man.

"And you, Pilster?"

Pilster's eyebrows twitched erratically. "I must admit," he offered nervously, "suicide is rather distasteful."

"Suppose," said Crole to Jason, "we defer payment until we see how this scheme of yours works out?"

"Money in advance, or no show!" said Jason emphatically.

Crole viewed his would-be savior searchingly. "What if you can't get out of the murder charge?"

"Then I'm stuck with it," answered the young man. "In that case—although it'll not happen—I never heard of you and you never heard of me. Fair enough?"

Crole revolved toward his two partners. There was no need to request their decisions; each face eagerly portrayed desire for immediate acceptance.

"We're gambling, gentlemen," he said quietly.

"We stand to lose everything anyhow," Eldron reminded.

Nodding, Crole requested from Eldron the money he had brought from Mardley's apartment. Eldron handed him a long manila envelope, from which he removed fourteen thousand-dollar bills and ten hundred-dollar bills. He counted them rapidly and replaced them, handing the envelope to Jason, who pocketed the valuable bundle.

"This is the wildest chance I've ever taken," said Crole without humor. "I hope we can trust you."

"You can," asserted Jason carelessly. "And now that that's settled, what's Mardley's address?"

"The Clexton Terrace," supplied Eldron, naming one of the largest, most exclusive apartment-hotels in Hollywood. "Suite 712."

The place was familiar to Jason. He repeated the number of the suite as he started for the door. His hand clutching the knob, he turned toward the three grim-faced men and smiled broadly. "Relax, gentlemen," he advised. "You've made a good investment. All you have to do now is watch the newspapers. Your Mr. Mardley is *as good as murdered!*"

CHAPTER V

IN Hollywood many a story is sold to a motion-picture producer through the simple expedient of the author acting out his tale before his prospective customer even before setting it down on paper. Hence, Jason's breathless statement—directed to his distraught little lady as he went by her anxious, inquiring countenance in his exit through the offices—can be understood if that interpretation is placed upon it.

"I've sold my story!" he shouted in answer to all the unspoken questions crowding themselves against her opening lips. "Get the rest of the day off, and meet me at home in an hour!" The last was definitely a command.

Completely bewildered, Pat watched his figure disappear through the door of the reception office, then fell back into her chair and attempted to collect her scattered wits.

Elsie, the switchboard girl, watched curiously as Jason shot through the reception office and skidded to a halt before the door of an elevator, his finger hitting a summons button as an arrow would a bull's-eye, and pressing impatiently.

"What's up, Jason?" she called. "You being chased?"

He spun about to face her just as the elevator door opened behind him.

"I'm off to commit a murder!" he answered excitedly. That announcement was made completely without thought. Then, turning, he stepped into the elevator, unconscious of the look of amazement his statement had evoked.

Conveyed rapidly to the street floor of the building, Jason dashed out of the entrance, collided with—and very nearly upset—a matronly, bundle-laden shopper. Mumbling an apology, he stooped

to recover his hat and several of her packages, rudely thrust them back into her arms, and almost upset her again in his haste to get away. Hopping from a curb against traffic signals, he weaved his way through opposing lines of honking vehicles, miraculously reached the opposite side of the street and ran to a parking lot. A few minutes later he was bouncing along Wilshire Boulevard behind the wheel of an antiquated coupé, ignoring the scowls and yells of other drivers as he zigzagged through traffic, intent upon reaching the Clexton Terrace in as short a time as possible—for should Mardley's body be discovered before he reached it, all was lost!

His wrist-watch read twelve-twenty-five. At Rossmore, he swerved right and sped toward the heart of Hollywood. At twelve-thirty-two he guided his coupé to a halt on a side-street just off Hollywood Boulevard, about fifty yards from the magnificent entrance of the Clexton Terrace.

Jason, however, had neither the time nor inclination to accord the place due admiration. His one thought was to reach Mardley's rooms before someone else did. If, as he reasoned, Eldron had come directly from Mardley's suite to the offices, less than an hour had elapsed since Eldron had been with the body. Upbraiding himself for not having ascertained at what time, in Eldron's opinion, Mardley had expired, Jason concluded that in this one detail at least he had to depend solely upon luck: the entire construction of his story—and hence this adventure—was built upon the premise that Mardley's suicide had occurred at some time during the morning. He occupied himself with these thoughts as an elevator conveyed him to the seventh floor.

After the elevator's departure, Jason found himself alone in a wide, silent, thickly carpeted corridor. A hasty investigation brought him to a door toward the fore of the building bearing the desired numerals, 712. He tried the knob, and was relieved to find the door unlocked. Entering cautiously and reclosing the door, he passed through a shadowy reception-hall, and through a pair of doors into an enormous living-room, where he paused to observe his surroundings. Spanish in design, the room was ill-lighted, heavy drapes concealing the windows, and constructed in three levels, the lowest dominated by a great fireplace, and the highest, a hardwood area from which opened other doors, presumably those of bedrooms. Opposite the doors to the reception-room was another little room, separated from the rest of the apartment by a half-drawn pair of portières. This, deduced Jason from the presence of a large flat-topped desk he saw within, was Mardley's den.

AS his mind recorded these details, his eyes sought for the corpse. Upon examination the living-room disclosed no evidence of disorder—and no Mardley. He then went to the den. The first thing to impress him there was the profusion of papers scattered over Mardley's desk. Glancing to his left, his gaze encountered an unconcealed wall-safe, the front of which was open. This circumstance did not disturb him; Eldron had mentioned it to Pilster and Crole. His attention returned to the papers on the desk. Deciding to accord them a once-over, he started around the desk, but stumbled and drew back as his startled eyes fixed themselves upon the object of his search. Despite the fact that he had come fully prepared for the sight that now greeted him, he shuddered violently.

Concealed by the desk behind which it had fallen, Mardley's body lay face downward on the blood-soaked carpet, an ugly hole in the right side of the head. Bending forward, Jason forced himself to touch the exposed flesh at Mardley's neck. It was not yet cold. That and the fact that Mardley was fully clothed in morning attire, placed the time of death safely within the margin permitted by the plan.

A black automatic rested beneath the outstretched fingers of Mardley's right hand. Removing it, Jason discovered that the serial number had been filed off, and that as far as he could determine there were no other marks of identification. This was an added point in his favor, though it seemed strange to him that Mardley should have possessed such a gun. He carefully wiped the weapon with his handkerchief, and threw it out into the middle of the living-room.

Suddenly it occurred to Jason that Mardley might have left behind a note of farewell or explanation, but a hasty inspection of the papers littering the desk produced no such message. He scanned the room quickly; the one other place a note could have been deposited without being obvious was in the safe. But the safe, he learned a moment later,

held no papers of any description. He was about to conclude that no note had been written, when another thought sent him back to Mardley's body. Reluctantly, he fell to one knee and began a systematic search of the dead man's pockets. Those to which he had easy access—if there is anything *easy* about such a task—contained nothing. To reach the inside pocket of Mardley's coat it was necessary to disturb the body. Clenching his teeth, he tried again, this time succeeding in turning the corpse. The pocket did contain something—a note or letter. He drew forth a large envelope, pushed Mardley back into position and then stood up. Inscribed in longhand upon the envelope were the words: *"To Whom It May Concern."* Convinced that at this point he as much as anyone was concerned with the death of Tom Mardley, Jason unhesitatingly ripped open the envelope, unfolded the paper contained within and read:

When this is read, I shall be dead by my own hand. I accept full responsibility for the act, and offer as my defense my sincere belief that only in this way can I restore that which is dearer to me than life itself. This, perhaps, is a vague assertion, but I am confident that it shall be understood by those for whom its message is intended.

My object might have been accomplished through less violent means, but certainly not without scandal and heartbreaking humiliation; and, at sixty-three, when all that is left to a man is his pride and record, fear of such humiliation is far greater than that of death, for which, having lived in strict accord with the dictates of his heart and conscience, he is fully prepared.

My last prayer is that the appeal herein directed to those who can make this choice a good one, will not go unheard. My profound desire—and that for which I am about to sacrifice what is left of my life—is that I may be remembered as "Honest *Tom Mardley."*

The letter was written in the same hand as that of the inscription on the envelope.

IT was not upon the mind of the Mysterious Stranger that the content of Mardley's note was recorded, for an emotional lump—entirely inconsistent with that character—welled up and stuck in the throat of the reader. For the first time since the inception of this adventure, Jason's conscience asserted itself. He suddenly began to feel ashamed of having become the tool of the three men to whom the message obviously had been addressed. Swallowing hard, the boy concentrated on the note.

"My object might have been accomplished through less violent means, but certainly not without scandal and heartbreaking humiliation—"

Then Mardley need not have died to correct the dishonest practices of his business; he could have lived and accomplished it—but how? By forcing a show-down? By compelling his partners to abandon their unlawful operations? How could he *compel* them? Only by public denunciation; by seeking the assistance of law-enforcement agencies. And would not this course undoubtedly be accompanied by disgrace? Instead, Tom Mardley had hoped to move his partners by destroying himself, thought Jason.

But, argued the boy's reason, by the very act of suicide, Mardley had defeated his purpose. He had overlooked the all-important fact that his suicide would invite disastrous investigation! Obviously he had not desired that Crole, Eldron and Pilster be brought to justice. They were unnamed in his note, and no one unfamiliar with the position in which the firm now stood would be inclined to imagine these men as the persons to whom Mardley had appealed. Therefore, by coming to their aid and preventing investigation, Jason was automatically preserving the reputation of Mardley and doing him a favor!

A feeling of self-justification relieved the boy. It was far better, to his way of thinking, to have Mardley's death fall into the category of unsolved murders than to have Mardley labeled as a cowardly suicide who had not the courage to face the consequences of his firm's nefarious practices.

Viewing himself in this new light, Jason suddenly realized that he was further burdened with the obligation of bringing the note to the attention of Crole, Pilster and Eldron, and compelling from them a satisfactory response to Mardley's wishes. He determined to do this, and to insure such a response, though his weapon—all others failing—be blackmail! Thus he was doing both Mardley and his investors a double favor. The real Jason Codrey returned to slumber as the Mysterious Stranger reassumed command of the situation.

The note, of course, could not be left at the scene of the crime without complicating the "murder." Jason therefore placed it carefully within his pocket, to be shown at first opportunity to the persons involved. He then proceeded about his business of converting Mardley's suicide.

Gun in middle of living-room; safe open; papers scattered over desk—good. What else? He upset a chair. Now what? Fingerprints. He made a rapid excursion about the two rooms, rubbing with his handkerchief everything he had touched or thought he had touched. Then, for safety, he wrapped one hand in the handkerchief and put the other in his pocket.

Drawing back into the living-room, he revolved to review his completed task and grunted in satisfaction. Before him was the den, and within it, the "murdered" Tom Mardley. He glanced at his watch: Twelve-fifty-three. Behind him was an electric cuckoo clock. He turned and glanced up at it. Twelve-fifty-three. Everything now in order, he left the apartment.

His next step?

(The Mysterious Stranger, upon leaving the dead man's apartment, goes to the elevator and rings for service. When the elevator attendant appears, he uses him to establish himself at the scene of the crime, and to establish the time—)

Jason went to the elevator and pressed the button. A minute or so later the grating parted and a smiling, ebony face looked out of the car.

"Lobby," Jason directed as he entered.

"Yassuh." The black boy nodded and reclosed the door.

"Oh—wait," Jason requested. "I've forgotten something. Would you mind holding the car a moment?"

"No suh—not attall."

The door reopened. Certain that the boy was watching him, Jason went back to Mardley's apartment. *En route,* he drew out his handkerchief, mopped his forehead, but retained it in his hand as he opened Mardley's door. He was inside only for a count of ten, following which he returned to the elevator.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"Welcome, suh," grinned the affable attendant.

The car began to descend.

"Have you the correct time?" Jason asked. His eyes were examining the dial of his wrist-watch, as though he questioned its accuracy.

"One minute past one," returned the boy after glancing at his own timepiece.

Jason's eyes came up in surprise. He was not acting. "Are you sure that's right?" he asked doubtfully. The cuckoo clock had read the same as his own, and his now read twelve-fifty-seven.

"To the minnut, suh," smiled the colored boy. "Ah checked it with the lobby clock jus' li'l' while ago."

"Uh—huh—thanks," Jason nodded. Then, as though making conversation, he turned back to the boy with: "You haven't been here long, have you?"

"Six months," was the contradictory response. The boy looked at him questioningly.

"Funny I've never seen you before. Do you work nights?"

"No suh—through at six sharp every night, 'ceptin' when Willy, the other boy, has a date."

"Oh," said Jason. "Well, that accounts for it. My visits here are usually at night."

So, he thought, his witness would be available until six.

The door opened, and he stepped out into the luxurious lobby. On his way to the entrance he paused to glance at the huge clock imbedded in the wall above the registration desk. The time it told was four minutes in advance of that reported by his wrist-watch. Well—four minutes more or less wasn't going to make a devil of a lot of difference. But a place like the Clexton Terrace should at least have the right time! Incidentally he wondered how they ever got into that kind of clocks to regulate them? Then he shrugged and laughed to himself. Fixing clocks was other people's business—his own was fixing *murders!*

CHAPTER VI

CITY ROOM; *L.A. News-Tribune:* The City Editor's fingers beat an impatient tattoo upon his desk. Though he was speaking into a telephone, his cold, menacing eyes were fixed upon the fidgeting figure of the reporter whose summons had brought him to answer the call.

"No!" he rasped exasperatedly to an invisible informer. "I never heard of Don Esteban!"

The nervous reporter interjected an apologetic explanation. "He said it was important, chief. Insisted upon speaking to you, personally. How'd I know—"

The editor's hand momentarily covered the phone's mouthpiece. "You get out of here!" he roared at the reporter. Then, into the phone: "So he's the Andrew Carnegie of South America!—the richest nut in Brazil! So he *owns* the Pampas—*so what?* What d'ya want me to do about it—a *tango?*"

The reporter retreated a few steps.

"All right," yelled the editor, still addressing his unseen tormentor—"so he's a philanthropist!—so he's going to check into the Clexton Terrace! That's a scoop, eh? Listen: Don Esteban, Don Quixote, Don Juan—*we don't want any!* . . . What?"

As he listened, his irritation began to dissipate. His bushy brows came together in thought. Then—

"W'at's 'at?" he snapped incredulously. "A few *what? Millions?* Here—*in Los Angeles?* Going to *give 'em away? Is that on the level?* Hold the phone!"

His head snapped toward the quaking reporter. "Tell Joe to grab his camera!" he ordered. "You and him beat it out to the Clexton Terrace and get a line on a guy named Don Esteban! G'wan—beat it!"

His voice fairly drooled as he resumed conversation. "You say no one else knows this Mr. Don Esteban is in the city? . . . Uh-huh. . . . And he's checking into the Clexton Terrace at five? . . . Hmmmm— Your what? Oh, the five bucks—sure you'll get it—we'll mail it to you. . . . Eh?—well, in that case you can pick it up at the cashier's window. . . . Sure—sure. And thanks."

Inside a telephone-booth in a drug-store on Hollywood Boulevard, Jason grinned his delight as he replaced the receiver. So far—so good! Now for the *Examiner.*

He deposited another nickel and dialed another number.

"Examiner," informed a brittle, feminine voice.

"City-room," Jason requested. Then: "Is this the City Editor? . . . Well, connect me with him, please. . . . But I must speak with him! . . . Indeed! You tell him that this is vital—and personal! . . . My name? I am Deacon Elsworth, director of the Save-a-Soul-with-a-Penny Foundation! Your paper carries our ad every Saturday. . . . No—there's nothing the matter with the ad! . . . No! I do *not* want the advertising department! . . . Well, if you *must* know, I thought that since we happened to be one of your paper's very best customers, you might, through your influence, suggest that the Save-a-Soul-with-a-Penny Foundation is most worthy of Don Esteban's consideration, and that—

"Yes, I said *Don Esteban!* What about him?" Jason's voice hollowed in surprise. "Why, Don Esteban is the wealthiest, most generous man in all South America! . . . But he is here—he'll be at the Clexton Terrace at five this evening! . . . Certainly that means something! He's a great philanthropist; he's here to give away *millions!* Now you people know that the Save-a-Soul-with-a-Penny Foundation is a most deserving— What? . . . At the Clexton Terrace, yes. At five—five this evening, yes. . . . Now, I want—"

The grin returned to Jason's face as the receiver clicked in his ear.

IN rapid succession he phoned other publications, and by similar deceptions continued to shape the necessary reception for Don Esteban—the alibi-supplying *Mr. Hyde.* Then, continuing in the same sequence, he strode confidently from the drug-store and proceeded with the preparations outlined in "The Mysterious Stranger."

His next move was to dress the character he intended to impersonate. He entered a first-class clothing establishment on the Boulevard.

"I want to get a complete morning outfit," he told a salesman; "striped trousers, spats, cutaway, gray derby, gray vest—and whatever else goes with it."

The salesman's face lighted joyfully. A healthy order—and one which under ordinary circumstances would be difficult to fill; but in Hollywood, where a good percentage of the population are dress-extras, calls for such clothes were not unusual.

The purchases were rapidly, though carefully made. During the hour required by the store's tailor for alterations, Jason sallied forth to make further preparations. There were the servants to be hired—Don Esteban had to have servants!—and cars to be rented. The former he ordered by phone, insisting that each be Latin, and clad in summer traveling-clothes. The agency he called promised him they would be at his address in North Hollywood by three-thirty. While still within the telephone-booth, Jason remembered an all-important detail he had thus far overlooked. *Mardley's body had to be discovered before Don Esteban's arrival!*

For the first time since becoming the central figure of this fantasy, Jason's confidence in himself wavered. He suddenly felt sick. To think that he might have made such a blunder, an omission that might have cost him his freedom—and even his life!—sent his mental organization floundering into a sea of uncertainty. What else had he overlooked?

Unable to find any further flaw in his procedure, Jason deposited a nickel and called the Clexton Terrace.

"This is Tom Mardley," he told the answering clerk, ready, upon an instant's notice of any tone-inflection denoting surprise, to hang up and retreat from the drug-store.

"Yes, Mr. Mardley." The clerk's voice was exceedingly calm and matter-of-fact, a certain indication that Mardley's body had not as yet been discovered.

"I've forgotten a packet of important papers," continued Jason in an assumed baritone. "I need them here in my office as soon as possible. Will you instruct someone to go to my rooms and get them, and have them delivered to me immediately? They're in a long, brown envelope on top of my desk—"

"We'll have them sent down immediately, Mr. Mardley. Is there anything else?"

The pseudo Mr. Mardley said no, thanked the clerk and hung up.

That was that. As he left the drug-store and started west along the Boulevard, Jason felt assured that within a brief period every newspaper in town would be screaming a lurid account of Tom Mardley's shocking murder.

He walked for a block or so beyond the Chinese Theater, then crossed the street and entered a garage which he knew specialized in renting limousines to première-bound impressionists whose feeble bank-accounts had been outgrown by their publicity. There, after careful survey, he selected three glistening, black chariots—two sedans and a town car, and after paying the required deposits, arranged to have them delivered immediately to his home in North Hollywood.

This accomplished, he started back to the clothing-store, but stopped *en route* at a luggage-shop, where he purchased several bags and a steamer trunk. At his request the salesman supplied the bags with numerous stickers proclaiming the names of several South American ports and countries. Jason left this equipment to be picked up when he returned with his car.

At the clothing-store he secured his outfit, and with it an itemized bill-of-sale covering each article. Fifteen minutes later, his coupé crammed with bundles and loaded with baggage, he was racing for home.

"JASON—*what goes on here?*"

The question came like a broadside as Jason's loaded frame sidled through a tiny gateway and staggered along the flagstones toward the porch of the Colonial cottage. Pat had fired it. Hands on hips, she was standing before the open door, her attitude as challenging as her expression was bewildered. Her erect little figure vibrated with exasperation as he advanced.

"What are you up to?" she demanded, her previous question producing nothing but a wide grin. "Here I go and get the day off, as you told me to, and come home to find the place surrounded by slinky foreigners and weird automobiles! What's coming off—a parade or a crap-game?"

"Now, take it easy, princess," he advised, his perspiring face halting before her. "Here—help me with some of these bags. We haven't got much time."

"Much time *for what?*"

"Don Esteban's debut."

Her brows knitted tightly. "Who's Don Esteban?"

"You'll find out."

He pecked her cheek, and then laughing at her expression, he circled her and went into the house.

He took but two steps into the living-room, then halted abruptly. At his entrance, seven men and four women jumped from the chairs and sofa upon which they had been sitting, and came to respectful attention.

"Well!" He scanned the little army and drew back in satisfaction. "At long last Jason Codrey holds his own interview! Hey, Pat—what do you think of my staff?"

"Your staff?" she echoed incredulously from behind. "Jason, what in heaven's name are you plotting now—a Mexican revolution?"

He ignored her, and turned to question a dark-skinned man in chauffeur's

livery. "Were all you people sent by the agency?" he asked.

"*Si, señor.* Eet ees as you order, no? All Spanish an' Mejicano."

"Uh-huh," Jason nodded. Beckoning toward an undersized, glossy-haired individual whose entire personality seemed condensed into a dripping little mustache, he asked: "What is your name, please?"

"Juan Mendoza, señor, at your service!" So rigid became the little man that Jason momentarily expected an accompanying click of heels.

Speaking to all, Jason explained: "You people are all satisfactory. Before I hire you, however, I must tell you that your services are needed only for today, and in a most unusual capacity. Actually, you are not to be servants, but actors. In a few minutes I am going to become another person. I shall no longer be an American. I shall be Don Esteban, a very rich man from Brazil. You shall act the part of my servants. Do you understand?"

Although several reluctant nods responded, it was evident that the Latins were thoroughly puzzled.

"The idea is this," Jason continued: "At five this evening, I am going to check into the Clexton Terrace posing—for my own purposes—as Don Esteban. We all drive up in those big cars you saw parked outside. When I enter the hotel, you follow just like regular servants. We'll only be there for a few minutes. If anyone asks questions about me, you say: 'Señor Esteban—very rich.' That's all there is to it. When we leave, I'll pay you each fifty dollars. Now do you understand?"

One of the young women viewed him skeptically. "Thees ees honest, señor?" she inquired dubiously.

"Absolutely," Jason assured. "Don't worry—everything's on the up and up. I have a very good reason for doing this, and it's tremendously important that you people conduct yourselves properly. However, there's nothing to fear; you are doing no harm and will get into no trouble." He paused and examined each of the dark faces staring toward him. "I hope," he said at length, "you find the offer satisfactory."

"Feefty dollars *each,* señor?" asked the little man with the mustache.

Jason nodded.

"You are a philanthropist!"

"That's exactly what I intend to become," Jason grinned. "Now look, Juan: you are my major-domo. You direct these people, watch them, give them their cues and pay them. Remember, when we leave here, I am Don Esteban."

"Verree rich!" smiled Mendoza.

"Exactly." Jason nodded his approval. "Now get busy; phone the Clexton Terrace and reserve the best suite they have for Don Esteban. I'm going in to dress."

A series of peculiar expressions cast shadows over the lovely countenance of the uncomprehending Mrs. Codrey as her narrowed eyes followed her husband's swaggering retreat into the bedroom. Whatever the mystery behind this Don Esteban business, it spelled trouble; trouble such as only the likes of Jason could concoct; and for concocting trouble, Jason, to her knowledge, had no equal.

She glanced about at the scattered Mexicans. The one called Mendoza was calmly telephoning the Clexton Terrace. Like herself, but to a lesser degree, the others were passively puzzled. There was little conversation, and that in Spanish, offering nothing in explanation to the questions buzzing like hornets within her tormented mind.

SUDDENLY she stiffened in anger. This had gone far enough! Don Esteban, *indeed!* She'd see about this business! She stamped toward the bedroom, threw open the door, entered and slammed the door behind her.

"Now see here, *Don Esteban,*" she raged, her irate glare discovering her complacent spouse perched upon the edge of the bed, calmly removing his trousers, "what exactly are you up to? What is all this stuff—cars—servants—major-domos? Have you gone crazy?"

"Like a fox, princess,"—he winked playfully,—"like a fox!"

"Like a fox with rabies!" she snorted. "Jason Codrey, you're about to do another one of those high-dives of yours, and I demand to know into *what!* You can't tell me that any sane, rational person with a single ounce of—"

"So you really think I'm nuts, eh?" he demanded indignantly. He sat up straight and looked toward her in deep agitation. "For weeks you've been sticking your spurs into me, riding me about Disaster, telling me I can't write and I should be calling Central! Now I'm crazy! Okay! So Columbus was crazy! Franklin was crazy! Edison was

crazy! That's how I'm crazy, see!" He jumped from the bed and went to a drawer-chest. "You've had your little inning, princess," he snapped, fuming as the drawer at which he tugged refused to open; "now I'm going to have mine!" He turned toward her and blurted triumphantly: "Okay! I'm crazy! I can't write! *But I've just sold my story for fifteen thousand dollars!*"

"You *what?*"

"I *sold* my story! *Fifteen thousand dollars!*"

Pat tried to speak, but she could not. Her popping eyes fixed upon Jason, she groped blindly for the bed, touched it, then sank upon its edge.

"Well, don't just sit there!" he shouted. "I'm in a hurry! The least you can do is help by unwrapping some of those packages!"

She reached listlessly for one of the many bundles upon the bed and absently began removing the string. "You—sold—your—story!" she repeated numbly. "Fifteen—thousand dollars!"

"If you don't believe it, you can find the money in my pants' pocket!" The drawer came loose, and he fell backward, covered with incidental articles of masculine attire. "Why don't you help me?" he demanded angrily. "Do I have to pull the place to pieces to find my studs?"

"Studs?" she repeated blankly.

"The little things that hold shirts together!"

"They're in the other drawer. *Fifteen thousand dollars, Jason!*"

"The other drawer! *And you sitting there watching me!* Pat, why don't you go out to the other room and let me dress?" He was struggling to control himself. "You're making me all jittery, and a guy like Don Esteban has to be calm and collected. If—"

"To whom?" she asked dazedly.

"To whom what?"

"Did you sell your story?"

"Pat, I've got to dress! Go into the living-room and wait for me. I'll tell you all about it later."

She rose and started toward the door.

"Where's the Twenty-nine make-up?" he asked.

"Bathroom," she informed; then, as she floated out of the room, she mumbled: "Fifteen—thousand—"

The servants had gone outside, and were clustered about the glistening armada. Pat's inattentive ears caught fragments of their excited, unintelligible jabbering as she coursed like a sleepwalker across the living-room and permitted her detached body to sink into the cushions of an overstuffed chair beside a radio. Absently, she reached forth and switched on the instrument. The action was the result of habit, rather than desire.

The radio hummed momentarily, following which a blurry voice ejected itself from the speaker. The voice cleared: it was that of an announcer, interrupting a program to present a news-flash. His first few words ricocheted over the glazed surface of Pat's understanding without making an impression. Then:

"—found murdered in his suite at the Clexton Terrace less than an hour ago. . . . .The aging broker was one of the most familiar and beloved figures in Los Angeles business circles; known among his associates as 'Honest Tom Mardley,' he—"

The import of that message shattered Pat's mental rigidity into a thousand tingling fragments. Tom Mardley *murdered? Tom Mardley? Her boss?* Suddenly she found herself screaming for Jason. Her third ear-piercing summons brought him scampering, half-naked, from the bedroom.

"What is it, Pat?" his startled voice trembled excitedly as his searching gaze encircled her huddled form, endeavoring to discover a cause for the outburst. "What's up? What's the matter?"

She stammered the information through clicking teeth: *"T-Tom Mardley's been murdered!"*

His arms fell limply to his sides as he stared at her in annoyance.

"I know it," he told her. "Gee—is that any reason for scarin' a guy to death?"

"You know it? How could you know it? It happened only an hour ago!"

"More than that," he corrected thoughtlessly, turning back toward the bedroom. "Mardley was murdered at twelve-fifty-seven—"

"Jason! How do you know?"

"I murdered him!"

CHAPTER VII

AT approximately four-thirty that afternoon, having already withstood a riotous invasion occasioned by the discovery of a murdered tenant, the Clexton Terrace winced fearfully as another devastating avalanche shattered

its Victorian decorum with raucous demands for information concerning the much-heralded advent of a South American Midas named Esteban.

"Where is this banana-bouncer?" demanded one impatient reporter, his fist banging forcefully upon the registration desk as the clerk drew back timidly. "Come on—out with it! You're hiding him!"

"Sure they're hiding him," supported another news-hawk. "That philanthropist stuff is a front! My guess is that the guy's here on business—big business! Arms-smuggler, maybe—"

"Undercover agent for the Fascists," fired a third. "Probably some Nazi posing as a big butter-and-egg man!"

MEANWHILE, the author, producer and star of the forthcoming chapter of "The Mysterious Stranger," was reclining comfortably in the tonneau of a luxurious town car, the last of three limousines forming a procession that was floating leisurely through Cahuenga Pass into Hollywood. His face, darkened by make-up to a deep tan, was convincingly Latin, both in complexion and listlessness of expression. His manner portrayed an unconcern bordering ennui. That he should have been so free from anxiety was a problem for a psychiatrist, since not only the success of his story, but the future of his very existence depended entirely upon the outcome of the impending impersonation.

The little Spanish gentleman seated to his right, however, was not quite so composed. Stagefright had begun to gnaw at his vitals.

"So we get to thees place—Clexton Terrace," he was saying, "and firs' I get out, yes? Then I hollar to thee others—make lot of noise—"

"But you keep directing the other servants."

"Other servants, yes. Then we go inside, me firs', an' I go to thee desk and argue and argue—"

"Lots of fuss—"

"Lots of fuss, yes. An' I keep saying about Don Esteban is very rich—"

"Until I give the signal—"

"Till you geeve thee signal, yes. Then—pouf! Nothing ees too good enough for Don Esteban! We weel not stay at thees Clexton Terrace! We go—yes?"

"Yes."

Although nearing its climax, the day was still very warm; yet despite the heat, the silent little lady perched on the edge of the seat to Jason's left, shivered incessantly. Pat was frightened.

"What's eatin' you, princess?" he demanded, perplexed at her despondency. "You look as though you had swallowed a potato-bug."

"Not swallowed; just married," she corrected, her lusterless eyes fixed to the carpet. "Jason, how could you do such a terrible thing?"

"Terrible? What's terrible?"

"Don't *you* think it's terrible?"

"I don't know what you're gettin' at, princess."

"Mardley, of course. Oh, why did you do it, Jason?"

"But I didn't *kill* Mardley!" Jason denied. "I just *murdered* him!"

"That's a swell argument!" Her misty eyes came up and flashed resentfully. "No jury in the country would convict a man who had just murdered somebody! How can you murder a man without killing him?"

Oblivious now of Mendoza, Jason tried to explain: "Mardley was never killed," he told Pat; "that is, I didn't kill him. Nor did anyone else, for that matter. It was just that he—"

"That he was murdered!"

"Yes; but he was already—"

"And *you* murdered him!"

"But I didn't kill him! Don't you see, Pat—"

"I see," she nodded, her lips drawn tightly in an effort to prevent hysterics. *"You're violently insane!"*

"But Pat darling—*this is my story!"*

"And you're stuck with it!" Her face contracted violently as her eyes became blind with tears. *"And I'm stuck with it too!"*

"Aw, now look, baby—"

"Señor!" blurted Mendoza, drawing up defiantly. "I—I want to queet!"

"What's wrong with you?" demanded the youth hotly.

"You keeled thees—thees Mardley?"

"I did not!"

"But you said it!" shouted the Mexican, gesticulating wildly. "She said it! Señor—I cannot mix up wit' thee police! I weel be export'! I 'ave wife an' keeds!"

A pang of sheer terror shot through Jason. Mendoza in revolt? That meant curtains! A flaw in his infallible story? It couldn't be! His expression hardened into one of murderous decision.

"Mendoza,"—he spoke in a low tone and from the side of his mouth,—"I don't want any trouble from you, see! What

you think I am or have done is your business—but you're not quitting! Now if you're a smart boy, you'll play ball!"

If the cold deadliness of his look did not affect Mendoza, the pressure of his finger, concealed in his pocket and pressed against the soft flesh beneath the man's ribs, brought the desired reaction. Mendoza subsided weakly.

"*Si, señor,*" he agreed hoarsely.

"You're going through with this just as we rehearsed, Mendoza," Jason reminded coldly. "If there is one hint of treachery—"

"I understan', *señor!*"

Confused, speechless—Pat's burning eyes examined the rigid features of the desperate young stranger who only a few minutes before had been her husband.

THE Esteban caravan glided to a halt in the driveway before the veranda of the Clexton Terrace. The coffee-colored servants began to alight. A shout cut through the sudden hush; then stampede—

The reception that followed was something for the historians of the movie city; no Garbo or Gable had ever created a greater sensation. A tidal wave of humanity spurted from the hotel's entrance, flooded the veranda and engulfed the limousines. Racing feet coursed from one to another of the cars; piercing eyes examined their occupants; cries of "Where is he?" "Where's Esteban?" greeted the confused, disembarking servants. The appearance of Mendoza, who, on the moment of his exit, began shouting in Spanish to the other servants, instantly attracted the crowd to the limousine containing Jason. Petrified, Pat shriveled into a corner, her terrified gaze going up to Jason.

Mendoza, with much pushing and shouting, cleared the way for his master's exit. Somewhat alarmed at the commotion, Jason swallowed with difficulty, and nervously adjusted his tie. His cold hand sought and gripped Pat's.

"I didn't *really* murder Mardley," he whispered quickly.

Shouts from the surrounding crowd demanded his appearance. Taking a deep breath, Jason called Mendoza to attention, shot a warning glance at the excited major-domo, and stepped gracefully from the limousine.

Once out of the car, Jason's old assurance returned, and he viewed the assemblage as calmly as he would have a crowd of $8.25 extras.

His one concern was Mendoza.

Mendoza, however, was functioning perfectly. His directions to the servants were snapped like a cracking whip. He ignored the ceaseless barrage of questions from the reporters and deftly, with the assistance of a chauffeur, cleared a path for Jason's advance. Though smiling constantly, Jason proceeded silently, noticing with satisfaction that cameras were snapping all about him.

As they entered the lobby, Mendoza left the side of his young master and strutted importantly toward the registration desk. Tensely, though still smiling, Jason watched him cross the lobby. If Mendoza cracked now—*finis!*

A heavy hand collared Mendoza *en route* to the desk.

"Your boss, shorty," came an inquiry, "he's a big-shot in South America, eh?"

"Don Esteban verree rich," sputtered the indignant Mexican, the words coming mechanically as he struggled free.

"How rich?"

"Verree rich! Your pardon, señor!" Indignantly Juan shook himself loose and continued on toward the desk.

The chauffeur had deserted Jason to join the other servants in the rear of the lobby.

"Don Esteban," asked a reporter, directly, "is it true that you are here to give away a fortune?"

"Eet ees true," agreed Jason solemnly. "You see—my father, he loved verree much your United States. Eet ees hees will that I do thees."

As he answered the reporters, his eyes wandered restlessly in the direction of the elevators.

"Is it true, Don Esteban," asked another, "that you are going to donate twenty-five thousand dollars to the Milk Fund?"

"Twenny-fi' t'ousand?" Jason's hand waved impatiently. "Feefty t'ousand! But I do not want to talk—"

Fifty thousand dollars! The correction exploded like a bombshell. Reporters packed closer; camera-men went to work. Spasmodic flares lighted the lobby.

"Don Esteban," bawled another who had excitedly wormed his way through the crowds, "are you really going to build a home for orphans?"

"Eet ees my dream," admitted Jason. "But for all orphans—all colors—all pipples."

"You are going to endow a university?" shouted another.

"I *build* that, too," corrected Jason. "One million dollars I spend!"

A million! The lobby went into an uproar.

During the next five minutes, as he inched his way across the lobby toward the elevators, Jason, in conversation, scattered more millions than Roosevelt, in seven years, had appropriated for the P.W.A., W.P.A., and the A.A.A. combined. Reporters cast longing glances toward telephones, but dared not leave for fear of missing additional dynamite.

Were any further proof necessary to support the conviction that the story he had completed only that morning was an infallibly prophetic masterpiece, it came when his anxious, roving gaze finally spotted the young colored elevator attendant standing stiffly between car entrances. He was there just as Jason knew he would be.

MEANWHILE, unable to sit quietly in the limousine, Patricia Codrey had squirmed out of the car and on trembling knees climbed the steps of the now-deserted veranda.

Slight attention had been accorded Pat in the excitement of Don Esteban's arrival. Discovered in the car by a reporter, she answered to his questions, "No spik English," and he was too concerned with following the principal of the drama to argue the point.

Gaining the veranda, she went toward the entrance, but here courage failed her. Retreating, she went to a great plate-glass window, glanced through it, and with sinking heart observed the activity within the lobby. Then, dragging forward a chair, she climbed upon it. A moment passed before she could single out Jason; fascinated, but with eyes full of dread, she watched him as he approached the elevators.

As cocksure as a top-flight toreador, Jason closed in upon the elevator boy. Questions were still whizzing like bullets. Reporters clustered about him relentlessly. His picture was being snapped regularly every ten seconds. The setting, he observed, was perfect!

"Boy!" shouted Don Esteban.

The colored youth blinked stupidly. Could the millionaire be calling *him?*

"Boy!"

The hand beckoning was holding a *hundred-dollar bill!* The attendant jumped forward. His popping eyes were not on Esteban, but on the money.

"Yassuh!"

"You weel help my servants wit' thee luggage, yes?"

"Yassuh!"

Two cameras were poised, ready to catch the ensuing action. Jason had noted them from the corner of his eye.

"Here"—he waved magnificently—"a leetle teep for you, boy. . . ."

Jason had turned; his attention was upon those cameras. When a moment passed, and the bill was still within his hand, he turned questioningly toward the youth. The blank face staring at him was changing color.

Then it happened—

The boy's hand ascended slowly—but not to take the money. His knotty, palsied finger aimed itself at Jason. His ashen features contorted in terror. He tried to speak. His lips moved for an instant without sound. Then, in a bellow heard throughout the lobby—

"You done it! You killed Mistah Mahdley! POLICE!"

Silence greeted the accusal. The lobby went dead; then came alive and flew into wild disorder. The Clexton Terrace became a screaming bedlam.

Leading the others, two reporters sailed out of the lobby entrance.

"Holy cats!" yelled one. "Imagine that kid putting the finger on Esteban!"

"Esteban, Mardley's murderer!" cried the second hysterically. "Wow! *Wow!* Hey, *taxi!"*

The pretty little redhead atop the chair by the window wavered uncertainly, and then nosedived to the pavement.

CHAPTER VIII

MARDLEY KILLER NABBED!
Rich South American
Trapped as Mardley's Slayer
(L. A. Evening *News*)

"MASQUERADE" MURDERER EXPOSED BY HOTEL BOY
Eye-Witness Identifies Brazen Killer
(L. A. Evening *Herald Express*)

EXPOSE DON ESTEBAN AS LOCAL WRITER
Hoax Fails; Killer Identified as Jason Codrey
(L. A. *Examiner*)

RUDELY awakened from its customary stupor, the Hollywood police station blinked to find itself the temporary custodian of an arch-criminal, and the harbor of an excited, yelling gang of headline-trailers hot on the scent of the most brazen killer the movie city had ever produced.

Exiting from an office, at the door of which clamored the howling mob, Captain Mulligan, fat, perspiring and lobster-red, paused to remove his hat and press a handkerchief to his beaded, hairless pate; then, with a grunt of impatience, he pushed forward and forced his bulky figure through the pressing, babbling army of reporters.

"Can't a man have room to walk in his own station-house?" he demanded in exasperation, his elbows digging into the ribs of more than one oppressor.

"Did he break, Mulligan?" yelled a man to his right.

The Captain's head shook negatively.

"Why'd he kill Mardley?"

"Is he nuts?"

"Why the philanthropist stuff?"

"How about gettin' a look at him, Mulligan?"

"Bring him out!"

"Let's see him!"

Mulligan reared like a tormented bull. "Now, see here, men," he bellowed, "there'll be no statement for the press at this time! Codrey hasn't talked, an' I don't think he'll be likely to until they take him downtown! Now quiet down or get outa here! There's trouble enough without you bunch of hyenas shoutin' me ear off!"

"Can't we see him, Mulligan?"

"See him, is it? There'll be no seein' him till he's out of this station! He's in a cell and will stay there until they take him downtown and—"

Mulligan halted abruptly as a commotion at his desk captured his attention.

Leaning forward from his elevated perch, his face flushed in anger, his glare burning downward upon the indignant features of a middle-aged inebriate standing before him, a desk-sergeant, new to the Hollywood precinct, gurgled inarticulately.

"Young man," shouted the drunk, his short, pudgy body encased in a soiled ridiculously tailored polo outfit, a helmet slipping precariously over one ear, and a mallet waving menacingly, "I'll have you know I'm not accustomed to having my word questioned! When I say I'm drunk—*I'm drunk!*"

"And you want to be locked up?" grimaced the other.

"I demand to be locked up at once!"

Mulligan's hand came up to push his hat to the back of his head. A forlorn expression settled upon his features. Sighing deeply, he sauntered forward.

"So it's you again, Mr. DePlew," he greeted wearily. "'Twould be a day like this you'd pick to do your visitin'!"

"Ahoy, Mulligan," returned the intoxicated intruder, his attempt to revolve nearly upsetting him. "This enthroned pipsqueak here refuses to do his duty! I'm drunk, Mulligan!"

"So you are, Mr. DePlew," agreed the Captain, his eye winking quickly toward the desk-sergeant. "But just for this once, couldn't you go get yourself arrested by some other station? We've our hands full here already, Mr. DePlew, an' 'tis a great favor you'd be doin' us if—"

"Mulligan, what is this?" demanded the fat man. "You know your orders!"

INDEED Captain Mulligan did know his orders. They had come from the Chief of Police himself, and had been instigated by no less a personage than the District Attorney. Peter Hamilton DePlew, although eccentric, was a gentleman of considerable wealth and influence. His personal fortune was equal in fact to that claimed by the fictitious Don Esteban. His influence was that reflected by the D.A., upon whose friendship Petie DePlew had a lifelong claim.

District Attorney Drinkwater, after a series of headache-promoting experiences in extracting Petie from harmless but extremely annoying messes, had simplified his embarrassing responsibility by requesting the coöperation of the Police Department. A general order had been issued to the effect that whenever Petie was encountered drunk, he was to be apprehended, carted off to the nearest station, there to be nursed back to sobriety and then taxied home at Drinkwater's expense. This was accompanied by the additional instruction that on all such occasions Petie was to be treated gently and with respect.

All this Captain Mulligan knew only too well. Greatly embarrassed at being submitted to the indignity of DePlew's reminder before the amused audience of reporters, Mulligan conquered the seething rebellious impulses surging within him, and inquired gently: "Who brought you in, Mr. DePlew?"

"Captain Mulligan," began Petie in befuddled annoyance, "I need no assistance from your officious brotherhood to determine the extent of my imbibition! I brought myself in!"

"An' you want to be locked up?"

"Immediately!"

Mulligan motioned to a young officer standing near the rail. "Lock 'im up," he ordered in resignation.

"Aren't you going to have me fanned?" blurted Petie.

"Fan him," Mulligan ordered.

The young cop advanced. As Petie's arms went up, his body was patted searchingly. The frisk disclosed no hidden bottle.

"He's clean," stated the cop.

"Okay—lock 'im up."

Grunting contentedly, Petie marched away behind his escort, ignoring the laughter and barrage of witticisms that attended his exit. As he disappeared around a corner of the corridor, Mulligan's eyes rolled backward. Then he glanced toward the sergeant and at a reporter standing beside him.

"With two lunatics on me hands now," he murmured disgustedly, "me day's jist about complete!"

The reporter's hand whacked his back encouragingly. "Forget it, Cap," he smiled, "and let's get down to cases. So you think Codrey is screwy, eh? Why did he bump off Tom Mardley?"

NO candidate for an executioner's block—or, specifically, the gas-chamber—ever presented a more dismal, and at the same time ludicrous picture, than did young Mr. Codrey, the deflated Mysterious Stranger, as he clung to the bars of the cell to which he had been assigned after his initial going-over by the local gendarmerie. He was braced against the cell-front, sagging like a sack of dirty wash. His worried face, masked in a greasy blend of make-up and perspiration, his collar loosened, coat, vest and derby off and lying in a heap on a cot behind him, his trousers bagging about his feet, held up by a lone suspender strand, he resembled an unfortunate left-over from a May Day demonstration in Union Square.

The fact that his life was now in jeopardy did not disturb him. But there were other things. . . .

It was unfair, unjust! The most terrific story he had ever conceived, and an opportunity to illustrate its excellence, exploding right in his confident face just because a stupid elevator boy had decided to do a psychological nip-up! One person in a million would have reacted that way—*one person!*—and it had to be that colored boy! Now what? No story! No money—they had taken that away from him when they booked him. A laughingstock, that's what he was! And Pat—

His mind was buzzing thus when the cop brought in Peter Hamilton DePlew. Petie drew the cell opposite Jason's. Until now Jason had been alone in the block, but he had hardly noted the invasion.

Petie, however, had spotted Jason. As the officer departed, the millionaire stretched contentedly, yawned a satisfied "H—yo—" and seated himself on the end of his bunk.

"Greetings, stranger," he called across the narrow corridor. Receiving no response from Jason, he turned his attention to his left boot, extracting therefrom a large, concave flask. He chuckled in delight as he held it up before him. This was the big idea behind his voluntary surrender. Being drunk, he knew arrest to be inevitable. So he had planted the flask, given himself up, and thus "fooled the cops!" Removing the cap, he brought the flask to his lips and swallowed lustily from it; then, in afterthought, he looked toward Jason and asked: "Like a drink?"

"Drink of what?"

"Whisky. Good, too."

Jason came to life at the suggestion. There was nothing in the world he needed more than a drink, and he said so. Petie struggled to his feet, rescrewed the cap to the flask, lowered himself to his knees and sent the flask scuttling across the concrete to Jason's cell.

During the next few minutes the flask made several similar excursions, the last relieving it of its content and elevating Jason's condition to one almost as roseate as that of his generous cell-mate.

BY this time Petie was having trouble with his equilibrium. Descending to his knees to retrieve the flask, he found the effort to arise too much for him, and so flattened out on his stomach, set his chin in his palm and blinked toward Jason.

"Wash your name?" he inquired suddenly.

"Jason Codrey." His lips tightened bitterly, then loosened again as he added with a twisted, ironical grin: "Of the

Mysterious Stranger Codreys. Otherwise known as Señor Don Esteban!"

"'At's a lot, isn't it?" said Petie affably. "Watcha in for?"

"Murder."

The word played like a cold shower upon Petie's intelligence. He squirmed to his feet and thrust his face through the bars.

"Murder!" he echoed incredulously. "Who'd y' kill?"

"Nobody."

"Y'gotta kill somebody, to be in for murder!" Petie argued.

"Why does everybody keep sayin' that?" shouted Jason angrily. "The man was dead before I ever laid eyes on 'im!"

"'S lie!" Petie accused. "Y' can't murder a dead man!"

"Y' can if y' got to! I had to!"

"Why?"

Jason climbed from the bunk, grasped the bars and looked shrewdly toward Petie. "What're you," he demanded suspiciously, "—a spy?"

Petie denied the charge. Furthermore, he took exception to it. That was insulting! He hated spies!

His spirited denial convinced Jason. "But I can't tellya why, anyhow," he said. "Gotta keep my mouth shut. Bargain's a bargain. But it was the bes' damn' story I ever wrote!"

"You wrote a story? What kinda story?"

"Murder-mystery," Jason informed thickly. "Not a real mystery, and not a real murder—but what a twist!"

"Who wrote it?"

"Me, I told ya!"

"Who're you, t'write mystery stories? I never even heard of you!"

"Yeah? Well, I never even heard of you, either!"

"See here," said Petie importantly, "I'll have you know I am prob'ly the greates' livin' 'thority on mystery stories inna whole country—includin' Canada! I know every author—livin' or dead, mind you!—who's ever written a mystery story! *An' I never heard of you!"*

"Tha's too bad!" Jason snapped. "Jus' the same, if a darky in a woodpile hadn't done a psyc'logical nip-up, you'd heard of me, all right! I sold 'at story for fifteen thousan' bucks, smart guy!"

"Who bought it?"

"Can't talk. Bargain's a bargain. But if I weren't a victim o' circumstances, I'd be the greatest mystery-story writer in the whole country—includin' Canada!"

"Bologny!" Petie shouted. "You an author! Pouf!"

"Well, if I aint an author, why am I here?" demanded Jason angrily.

"Because you murdered somebody!"

"It was in the story!"

"If you wrote a story, I'd 'a' read it! I didn't read it! You're a lyin'—a lyin' stir-bug!"

Jason's knuckles whitened around the bars. "If I could get out o' here, I'd push your fat face in!" he shouted furiously.

ODDLY, the contention Petie had made regarding his familiarity with mystery-stories was more or less true. If he had another vice, it was his addiction to that type of work. He loved mysteries. Drunk or sober, he could discuss them with confidence. He had standing orders with bookstores for all new mystery fiction. He made a hobby of crime and criminals, not real ones, but those sprung from the imaginative brains of writers. In posing as such an author, Jason was not only insulting Petie's intelligence; he was committing sacrilege!

Of a sudden it occurred to Petie that the way to trap this fabricating upstart was to challenge his ability. He'd demand a story. Thus resolved, he slyly changed his tactics and gently encouraged Jason to make further pretensions to literary distinction.

Jason's loquacity needed little prodding. When he had gone so far that he could not retreat, Petie suddenly demanded proof. Would the embryonically great author favor him with the telling of one of his masterpieces?

Though befogged by the whisky, the effect of which had been intensified by Jason's nervous condition and the fact that he had eaten practically nothing throughout the day—he steadfastly refused to go into details regarding the "Mysterious Stranger." Instead he turned to his memory and extracted an unfinished opus entitled "Blood on the Skyscraper"—failing, however, to recall that it was unfinished.

"Story opens," he began confidently, "in a luxurious penthouse in New York. J. P. Moran—or somethin'—lives alone in this high-class dump. He's a big-shot—an internation'l banker, or somethin'—an' a firs'-class rat! He owns railroads and factories an' things like that, includin' a big munition works. An' he hates the government, account o' taxes. He's been doin' some underhanded business

with a lotta guys like Hitler, figurin' to float a big loan to buy the boys a lotta his cap-pistols. So he's a terrific phony —get it?

"Now one rainy night this J. P. Soandso is sittin' alone in his study expectin' a hot call from Europe or somewhere, when in slithers his Jap servant to give him a telegram that has just come an' has no signature. The telegram baffles J. P. It reads: 'Talles' flowers are the firs' picked'. So—"

"What's the telegram read again?" Petie interrupted, his pudgy face pressed between the bars of his cell.

"It reads: 'Talles' flowers are the firs' picked'."

"Who sent it?"

"Tha's a mystery."

"Hmmm—" Petie's brow wrinkled in thought. "Sounds like Oriental stuff. So what happens?"

"So the phone rings while J. P. is still lookin' at the telegram. It's Europe, no less; an' whatever he hears—though we don't find out right away—scares hell outta J. P. When he hangs up, he is scared and angry. He crumples up the telegram into a ball and throws it under his desk. Then—"

"Oho! A plant, huh?"

"Can'tcha wait?" Jason demanded impatiently. Then, proceeding: "So although it's after midnight, J. P. decides to get dressed an' go out. He rings for the Jap, but nothin' happens. So he opens a door an' starts to go into another room, when *boom!*—he trips over somethin'—"

"A black cat?"

"No."

"What?"

"The body of his Jap servant!"

"Wow! He's dead?"

"Yep. Throat cut from ear to ear! Blood all over the place—puddles of it! J. P. nearly faints. He rushes to the phone to call the police—"

"But the wires are cut!"

"Yeah! Then he starts to run out o' the apartment, but the lights go out. He trips over a chair an' falls. He tries to get up. But he freezes! *Something else is in 'at room!* He can hear it move! It's movin' toward him! Somethin' hits his shoulder—a hot breath is on his neck! He tries to scream, but his throat is paralyzed! Somethin's chokin' him. He struggles desp'rately. Col' steel is pressed against his win'pipe! Suddenly—"

Jason's narration ended abruptly as a policeman whose entrance neither had heard approached his cell and ordered: "Pull yourself together, Don Esteban; they're taking you downtown."

"Now? You're takin' him *now?*" Petie cried in alarm.

The cop glanced over his shoulder in mild annoyance as he inserted a key into Jason's door. "Right now, Mr. DePlew," he informed quietly.

"But you can't do that!" Petie shouted.

"And why not, Mr. DePlew?"

"He hasn't finished the story!"

CHAPTER IX

THE undulating shriek of a siren scattered evening traffic to the curbs as a squad car raced down the long, steep incline that roller-coasters Third Street through numerous intersections, into a lengthy tunnel, and finally into the heart of Los Angeles.

At the wheel of the speeding car sat a grim-faced officer. A traffic signal changed to red as the car approached, but the driver passed through it without notice.

Two men in plain-clothes occupied the extremities of the rear seat. Between them, in a dejected slouch, sat their prisoner, the starchless sensation of the hour, "Killer" Codrey. His head was beginning to ache violently.

Still screaming its warning, the car reached the base of the hill, shot through another signal and raced forward. A stranded pedestrian blinked in terror. The officer jammed on the brakes, a curse accompanying their release as the jay-walker scrambled to the safety of the sidewalk.

Poised atop a narrow, ill-lighted street paralleling the hill through which ran the tunnel—a street that intersected Third just at the tunnel-entrance—a huge produce-truck waited in silence. Stirring at the sound of the approaching siren, the driver of the truck loosened the emergency-brake, permitting the cumbersome vehicle to coast downhill to a point commanding a two-block view of Third Street. His foot then pressed upon the brake-pedal. He tensed for action.

Clearly visible was the advancing red light of the squad car. Following it to

the spot at which the pedestrian briefly had impeded its progress, the truck-driver again released the brake, threw the motor into gear and started downward.

It was not until the squad car was within thirty feet of the tunnel-entrance that its driver caught his first glimpse of the descending truck. Too late to halt the car, the cop jammed the accelerator to the floor-board in a desperate attempt to beat the truck through the intersection. A peculiar observation impressed itself upon Jason's jelling consciousness: the truck had no headlights. Then, suddenly, the lights were streaming in on him. It was the last thing he remembered. An ear-splitting crash attended the collision. Spun about by the terrific force of the impact and pushed sideways by the superior weight of the truck, the lighter car crunched against a corner of the entrance, teetered momentarily and then fell over on its side. Continuing onward into the tunnel, the truck finally halted about fifty feet from the wreckage.

The driver of the truck—a young Japanese of about twenty-eight or thirty—leaped down from his seat, and screaming for help, ran madly toward the demolished squad car.

Materializing as though from nowhere, an awed, shivering crowd collected at the tunnel entrance to view with horror the terrible result of the accident. This shuddering phalanx parted, a few minutes later, split by the simultaneous arrivel of an ambulance and another police car.

Two seriously injured men were removed from the wreckage; the uniformed driver and one of the plain-clothes-men. The other plain-clothes-man, although badly cut and dangling an arm that was obviously broken, stood quietly by the doors of the ambulance, until the unconscious body of his prisoner was placed within. Then, with the assistance of an interne, he too entered the ambulance, which left immediately.

The Japanese youth was arrested.

"SORRY, lady," said the big policeman who in answer to an impatient knock had stepped from the hospital room containing Jason Codrey; "my orders are to let nobody in, and that means you too."

"But I've got to see him!" protested the tearful little lady to whom the information had been addressed. "He's my husband!"

The policeman's face softened sympathetically. "I'm sorry, lady," he repeated. "I know how you feel—but you can see the way it is with me, can'tcha? If anything happens to that baby inside, I'm a goner!"

"But he may be *dying!*"

"He aint dyin', lady. All he got was a bad bump on the dome and a few cuts an' things—but he aint dyin'!"

"Can't I please see him?" she begged piteously. "Just for a moment, can't I see him?"

"Why d'ya hafta make it so tough on me for?" His glance sped up and down the corridor. "Now look," he said in a low voice, "I aint supposed to do this, see? If it gets out, it'll break me. But I'm gonna let you in—just for a minnut, y'understan'. You get one peek, and then you scram. Okay?"

A tearful look of gratitude accompanied her nod.

"Just for a minute, now," he repeated, opening the door and permitting her to pass before him. Retaining his position in the doorway, he faced outward and kept a cautious eye scanning the corridor.

A BLAZING sword seemed to sear through Pat's heart as she saw her husband. Inertly flattened against the bed, his body lightly covered to his armpits, his head and arms wrapped in bandages, his drawn, boyish features deathly pale, Jason looked unreal—like a waxen dummy. Smothering a cry of anguish, Pat rushed to his side. Resisting an impulse to throw her arms about his rigid neck, she bent over and lightly placed her lips against his cheek. He stirred uneasily. Afraid that she had awakened him, she drew back quickly; a hot tear fell on his cheek; she brushed it away.

Then he moved again; his brow puckered as though in pain. He began to mumble:

"Pat—Pat darling—" he moaned; he was obviously delirious. "Pat, why don't you come to me? Where are you? Oh, Pat—I love you so. . . . You're so lovely—so beautiful—"

A sob choked her. Again that impulse to throw her arms about him. Whatever he was—whatever he had done—she loved him! She'd stick to him!

She looked toward the policeman. He was beckoning for her to leave. Planting a final delicate kiss on her husband's cheek, she tiptoed away, murmuring her thanks to the officer as she left the room.

For a long moment the cop watched her as she retreated up the corridor. Then, heaving a deep sigh, he shut the door, and with face grimacing angrily, turned to his horizontal companion.

"You deceivin' skunk!" he rasped, walking toward the bed. "How you can lay there an' fool a sweet little lady like that, is more than I can figure out! Aint you got no heart?"

A quizzical eye opened in response to the reproach. The other eye followed suit.

"She gone?" Jason asked.

"She's gone, all right—gone home to cry her eyes out over her no-good husband!"

"I get what you mean, Murph," admitted Jason contritely. "But if she'd walked in here an' caught me awake—boy, would I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"What's comin' to me for gettin' myself into this mess! Race-horses that can't run—writers who can't write! Phew!"

Grinning ruefully, Jason reached beneath his pillow and brought forth a deck of cards. "Here—deal," he said, offering them to the cop; "I'll give you a chance to win your three-eighty back."

CHAPTER X

DISTRICT ATTORNEY BABSON DRINKWATER meditatively drummed his fingers upon his desk; he was carefully digesting the information imparted to him by the young woman who squirmed nervously on the edge of a chair set against the wall opposite him.

"Is—is that all, Your Honor?" asked the young woman hesitantly.

Annoyance contracted his deeply-lined countenance. Why did she insist upon calling him *"Your Honor"!*

"I guess that's all, Miss Bailey—you can't think of anything else, can you?"

Elsie Bailey shook her head quickly. "I've told you all I know about him," she hastened to assure him. "Jason never came to the office, hardly. Naturally, when he said he was going to kill Mr. Mardley, it didn't mean much to me then because—"

"Miss Bailey," Drinkwater interrupted, his stern gaze settling upon her, "I must impress upon you that regardless of your personal convictions—and mine too, for that matter—we must adhere to Mr. Codrey's actual utterances and not transform his phraseology to what we imagine he implied. *He did not say he was going to kill Mr. Mardley;* he said, according to your statement, he was '—off to commit a murder'!"

"Well, he meant he was going to kill Mr. Mardley, didn't he?"

"A jury will decide what he meant. Remember that, Miss Bailey, if and when you are called to the witness-stand. That will be all, thank you."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

"And don't call me 'Your Honor'!"

Her sails filled by that final blast, she skimmed out of the office.

HE sighed deeply. It had been a strenuous morning, what with the whole police department yapping at his heels for an indictment against the Jap who had rammed the squad car, and the long series of inquisitions relative to the Mardley murder—and had just concluded with the exit of Elsie Bailey, the switchboard girl from Mardley's offices. He was just about to go to lunch, when a dictaphone buzzed insistently.

His finger flicked up a tiny lever. "Yes?" he said tiredly.

"They've just brought Jason Codrey in, Mr. Drinkwater," informed an efficient feminine voice. "Shall I send them into your office?"

Animation returned to Drinkwater's harried features.

"Send them in immediately," he ordered.

A moment or so later, flanked by two towering detectives, Jason sauntered into the office and came to ease before the District Attorney's desk. His head was still crowned with bandages, but nothing else suggested damage from the accident of two days ago.

Drinkwater scanned him rapidly. "Glad you weren't badly hurt, Codrey," he commented politely.

"Thanks," acknowledged Jason. "The whole State of California's happy about it, I guess."

"Why do you say that?"

"Public Enemy No. One is valuable property, isn't he?" Jason's smile was crooked.

"Oh, now, see here," Drinkwater protested, "there's no justification for that sort of attitude. After all, the State is your friend, you know."

"It is?" The smile lingered on Jason's lips.

"Of course, my boy, of course. The difficulty is that the average criminal

fails to comprehend that fact. Now, I believe that you are far above average, m'boy, and consequently expect you to act intelligently."

"In what respect?" Jason parried.

"Well,"—Drinkwater again cleared his throat, and began opening a drawer, —"I have here a little paper that I think you should sign. It's customary in instances of—"

"What sort of a paper?"

"A—well, suppose we call it a brief condensation of your case, based upon collected evidence and composed to save the County the expense of a trial. You see—"

"Do you suppose we could also call it a confession?" questioned Jason bluntly.

"Frankly, it is a confession," Drinkwater admitted, laying the paper before Jason. "You see, Codrey, you really haven't a leg to stand on, so there's no sense in pursuing—"

His voice died off as Jason plucked the paper from the desk.

"But my dear Mr. District Attorney," he protested after a momentary pause, "this document does not adhere strictly to the facts. From what I gather, it states that I killed Tom Mardley!"

"Well, didn't you?"

"I had nothing whatsoever to do with his death!"

"Oh, come now, Codrey, that's ridiculous! You know you shot Mardley! Why don't you be sensible and admit it!"

"But I didn't," Jason denied evenly.

"You mean to say you're going to have the gall to present an absolute denial of the charge?"

"That's just what I'm doing."

"Codrey," said Drinkwater seriously, "I've spent the entire morning interviewing witnesses who are going to appear against you. I beg you to believe me when I tell you that yours is the most open-and-shut case I've ever encountered!"

"I still didn't kill Mardley," shrugged Jason.

"Where did you get that money you had on you when they took you in?" Drinkwater demanded.

"I'm not at liberty to tell you."

"You had almost fifteen thousand dollars. Fifteen thousand dollars was exactly the amount that Mardley had in his safe at the time he was killed."

"How do you know?"

"His partner, Eldron, is prepared to swear that Mardley took that money home with him on the night before he was murdered."

"Is that all you have on me?"

"Is that all? Listen: you visited the offices of Pilster, Crole, Eldron and Mardley at noon on the day of the murder. You were with your wife—"

"Who else knows she's my wife?" Jason interrupted.

"We know it," said Drinkwater; "who else knows doesn't matter. You left the offices at approximately twelve-twenty. You told Elsie Bailey you were off to commit a murder! Then you went to Mardley's apartment and killed him!"

"That's not true."

"Why, good grief, Codrey—you know damned well we have a witness who'll swear he saw you leaving Mardley's apartment just after the murder! The elevator boy positively identifies you!"

"Psychological nip-up!" Jason grumbled beneath his breath.

"He's practically an eyewitness!"

"So he identified me!" Jason exploded. "But regardless of anything said by Elsie what's-her-name, or Eldron, or the elevator boy, *I did not kill or rob Tom Mardley! And I'm not going to make any confession, either!* Now you can take that or leave it!"

Drinkwater's shoulders heaved in resignation. Slapping his hands upon the desk, he rose and inquired abruptly:

"Have you a lawyer?"

"I don't want a lawyer."

"If you can't afford one, you know, the Court may appoint—"

"I do not want a lawyer!"

"In that case," said Drinkwater coldly, "I don't believe there is anything I can do for you. I'd like to remind you, Codrey, that it's your life you're gambling with. *And I think you're a sap!"* Then, looking toward the detectives: "Take him back, boys."

CHAPTER XI

STRANGELY enough, Patricia Preston Codrey was still a stenographer in the offices of Pilster, Crole and Eldron.

Furthermore, the treatment accorded Miss Preston was most sympathetic. She had been questioned by the police, of course, but had been handled gently; and her employers' consideration was so marked as to exclude all reference to the unfortunate involvement of her husband in the murder.

But the grim specter of doom haunted her constantly, followed her everywhere —to her home, to the office; even into Jason's cell, where, after several unsuccessful efforts to see him, she was finally conducted by a disinterested jailer, who departed hurriedly to avoid witnessing one of those sloppy reunions with which his job had made him so familiar.

Patricia and Jason fairly fell into each other's arms, and clung desperately.

Her first words were those of concern for his well-being. The bandage—had he been badly hurt? A bump, he told her—just a bump and a little cut. Were they treating him well? Was the bunk comfortable? Were the meals all right? To all these questions his replies were gauged to reassure her.

"Oh, Jason darling, I miss you so!" she breathed, drawing away to press her handkerchief to her swimming eyes. "I know I'm being a terrible sissy about all this, but I can't help it—"

"How are you getting along, princess?" he asked. "Have you any money?"

"I'm still working."

"They say anything to you at the office?"

"Everyone's been wonderful."

"How's Disaster?"

"I'm boarding him at a stable on Riverside," she informed. "I couldn't take care of him and work, too. But he's fine."

"Hope they're takin' good care of him," Jason mumbled. "He needs special attention—he's not an ordinary horse, y'know!"

She forced a smile. "I told them that," she said. "I told them that we had been feeding him geraniums!"

He grinned wistfully as he looked at her. Sweet little Pat—what an ordeal this must be for her!

"Jason," she said seriously, sinking to the bunk, "how did you ever get into this mess, anyhow?"

He settled beside her and grasped her hand.

"Princess," he said softly, "haven't you figured it out yet? Don't you know what happened to me?"

"I know you didn't murder Mr. Mardley—"

"*Nobody* murdered Mr. Mardley, baby." And he went on to tell her the details of his fantastic scheme and its unfortunate outcome.

"How could you be such an idiot?" she demanded, when he had finished. "You've gambled away your life!"

His gaze came up to challenge hers. "Well, what would you have done if you'd written the story and it came to life right in front of you?" he snapped.

Anger had dissipated the mist from her eyes. She leaped from the bunk.

"Who else but my precious husband could dream up such a nightmare? I'm going to see the District Attorney and tell him the whole story!"

"Pat—you aren't!"

"I'm not, huh? Boy, you just watch my dust!"

"But you can't! I made a bargain! I can't break my word!"

"*Fooey!* If you think for a moment that—"

"Pat, listen to me!" he cried, jumping to his feet and grasping her arms. "You can't tell *anyone* about this, do you understand?" He swung her about and seated her upon the bunk. "Even if you go to the D.A. with that story, he won't believe you! He'll think you're just trying to save me!"

"I'll see Eldron—Crole—"

"You'll see nobody!—least of all, Eldron, Crole or Pilster! Eldron's already been to the D.A.; he told him that the money I had was stolen from Mardley's safe!"

"Eldron?" she gasped.

"Yes, Eldron! If you go to those guys now, you'll probably be laughed out of the office!"

"But—we've got to do *something!* You're a dead-eyed cinch to be convicted!" she groaned. "Here—wait—take a look at this—" She reached over and picked up a paper she had let fall to the bed when they first embraced. "If you think you're still on the honor-roll, wait'll you get a load of these headlines!" She opened the paper and held it up before him. "It aint the key to the city, Mister!"

CODREY PROTESTS INNOCENCE;
"LYING" SAYS D. A.!
Conviction Certain, Drinkwater
Predicts; Trial Mere Formality

Jason's fingers dug into his hair. "Drinkwater's just looking for publicity," he declared. "He's scared of this case, or he wouldn't be talkin' like that!"

"He's scared, all right! Scared like a wolf is scared of a rabbit!"

Jason swung about to face her. "Regardless of what you read or think," he cried, "you're not to say anything to anybody! That's an *order,* Pat!"

Her eyes blazed defiance. Then, she raised her shoulders in resignation and lowered her eyelids.

"Just as you wish, Jason," she murmured solemnly. "But I pray to heaven you know what you're doing! And now —what about a lawyer?"

"I don't want a lawyer."

"*No lawyer?*" she echoed incredulously. "Jason—you're mad!"

Faintly she heard the rattle of the jailer's keys as he returned to the cell.

"Good-by, darling," he whispered fervently as she hung listlessly within his arms. "Keep that little chin up and see me whenever they'll let you. This'll all come out all right—you'll see!"

Alone again, Jason picked up the paper Pat had brought and began to read.

Every line he read about himself spelled *doom* with a capital *D*. Thinking to find something more pleasant, he turned to the second page of the newspaper, but became intrigued by an "Exclusive!" biography of the man he was believed to have murdered.

"*The Life of Honest Tom Mardley*" ran the caption. It was a Horatio Alger build-up, attacked from the "rags-to-riches" angle and presenting Tom Mardley as an under-privileged kid who had defeated adversity and risen to a peak of accomplishment in the world of business. Embellishing this account were several photographs of Mardley at various stages of development.

Jason chuckled lightly over the first of those pictures. It showed "Bunky" Mardley, age two, wearing a cardboard crown which proclaimed him king of a baby-parade. Another photo afforded Jason some amusement. It was a rigidly-posed affair of young Tom Mardley, age twenty, clad in an ancient baseball uniform: Tommy Mardley, pitcher at City College, the only southpaw who could pitch a double-shoot.

His eyes then settled upon a picture of Tom Mardley as he was just prior to his death. "At the peak of his career," ran the accompanying account, "deprived of his life by a cold-blooded thief and murderer!"

The newspaper crumpled in Jason's fists. Then suddenly he straightened its pages again and with shaking hands held it before his bulging eyes.

A shout escaped him. The paper returned to the floor. Then Jason jumped forward, gripped the bars of the cell and commenced to scream.

"Let me out of here!" he yelled. "Let me out, I say! I've got to get out of here! Let me out! Let me out!"

The startled jailer charged down the corridor.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Codrey?" he demanded. "Have you gone nuts or somethin'?"

"Nuts, am I? Sure I'm nuts!" Jason screamed. "Let me out of here—Tom Mardley was *murdered!*"

"Sure he was," agreed the irritated jailer. "What do you think you're in here for?"

CHAPTER XII

THE cheery treble of a tiny sun-worshiper's salute to a glorious morning traveled gracefully through the perfumed air of a flowered patio, its melodious ripple seeping through a screened window and following a sunbeam to the wakeful ear of Petie Hamilton DePlew.

The room bore closer resemblance to a library than a bedchamber, for surrounding on three sides the studio bed upon which the blanketed Petie was huddled, were shelves upon shelves of gayly-jacketed novels—and each, from its shocking title, a mystery-story.

The door of the chamber was opened cautiously; not cautiously enough, however, to prevent a reflex from the bedeviled Petie.

"What in blazes do you want?" he yelled as he snapped into sitting position. The question was directed toward the meek, tray-bearing manservant who had just entered.

"Your breakfast, sir," timidly offered the gentleman's gentleman.

"I don't want any breakfast! Draw my bath—I'm going downtown."

"Yes sir. And what shall we be wearing today, sir?"

"A golfing outfit."

"Excellent, sir!" spoke the servant with enthusiasm. "A good game is undoubtedly just what you need—"

"I'm not going to *play* golf!" Petie shouted, bouncing irately upon the bed. "Do I have to *play* the game just because I want to wear the outfit?"

"I was just making conversation, sir."

"Yeah—well, just make my bath. And step on it! I've got something very important to do downtown!"

Some sixty minutes later Petie barged into the office of District Attorney Babson Drinkwater, and ignoring the gruff ejaculation that greeted his entrance, he bounced across the carpet and anchored himself before the desk.

Drinkwater's creviced, leathery features showed no elation at Petie's unheralded appearance.

"Babs," said Petie forcefully, waiving preliminaries, "you've got to do something for me!"

"Petie," said Drinkwater sternly, "I'm a busy man. Now, why don't you—"

"Look, Babs," Petie interrupted, "I know you're busy and all that—but this is vital! You can't refuse me! I've got to see Jason Codrey!"

"Codrey?" Drinkwater's eyes opened in surprise. "You've got to see *him?* Petie—that's impossible! Codrey's a murderer! He's—"

"Aren't you the D.A.? Can't you fix anything in this town? Well, fix it so I can see Codrey!"

"I'm sorry," said Drinkwater, rising from his chair. "If it were anyone else, I'd see what I could do. But not Codrey!"

"Oh," Petie shouted angrily, pursuing Drinkwater across the room, "so that's the way it is, eh? My pal, my lifelong friend, giving me the cold shoulder, eh? Who was it that donated fifty grand to get you elected to this office, hey? *Petie! Who* got those letters back from that dame who was going to sue you when your wife was in Chicago? *Petie!*

"Now, when Petie asks one little favor of you, you say 'Impossible!' eh? Okay! If that's the way you're going to act, I'm through, see! *Through!*"

Highly excited, Petie revolved away and stamped toward the door.

"Petie," said Drinkwater pleadingly, "please don't go off that way! You've got to realize that I occupy a very important position. It has a lot of responsibilities. Jason Codrey is a public charge. I'm responsible for him. Now just because your curiosity happens to be aroused—"

"It's more than curiosity!" Petie corrected.

"Then why is it so important that you see him?"

"Why?" Petie echoed. "I'll tell you why! Because I can't eat! Because I can't sleep! That's why! What do you want me to do—go through the rest of my natural life wondering what happened to J. P. Moran?"

"Who is J. P. Moran?"

"A big banker! An arms-smuggler! He gets mysterious messages! His life is in danger! His house-boy's throat has already been cut from ear to ear!"

"What has Codrey to do with all this?" asked Drinkwater with growing excitement. "Is he planning to murder that banker *too?*"

"I don't know what he's going to do with the banker!" Petie shouted. "But that's why I've got to get to him!"

"Yes—yes, of course—" agreed the befuddled D.A., his face gravely pensive and his hand waving absently. "You must get to him, Petie. . . . Here—wait—I'll write a note—" He went to his desk, fumbled for a sheet of paper and scribbled hastily. "There," he said, folding the paper and handing it to Petie, "that'll get you in—"

Without pausing to thank him, Petie hustled through the door.

DRINKWATER hastily buzzed his dictaphone. "Send Benny in," he shouted to the girl who answered.

A moment later a lumbering gentleman of huge proportions, a derby over one ear, cigar in mouth and thumbs inserted in his vest, swaggered into the office.

"Flannery," barked Drinkwater to this detective, "Peter DePlew just left here, headed for the Hall of Justice. He's wearing a golfing outfit—big cap, red and yellow sweater with socks to match, and plus-fours. Follow him. Tail him wherever he goes. Don't let him out of your sight, d'ya hear? And check with me when you get a chance. That's all—beat it."

"Okay, boss," waved the detective, "I won't lose him."

"See that you don't!" warned Drinkwater, reaching for a telephone as the other started out of the room.

"Captain Ricket," he said tersely, after receiving his number and requesting the officer to whom he was now speaking, "this is Drinkwater. Listen: I just sent Peter DePlew over there with a note requesting you to permit him to see Jason Codrey. Now look—you'll have to work fast—have a dictaphone planted in one of the cells and stick Codrey into it before DePlew arrives. I'll explain when I get there. I'm coming over immediately. Thanks."

The call completed, Drinkwater left the desk and went for his hat.

"Whew!" he breathed to himself, *en route* from the office— "that Codrey must be a one-man crime-wave!"

PERSONIFYING that grim stoicism that precedes despair, Jason accepted quietly the announcement that his cell was to be changed, and docilely permitted himself to be conducted through the dismal corridors to his new quarters. Robbed now of the illusion that the crime for which he was held had never been committed, his sole source of comfort had died within him. That Tom Mardley had actually been murdered had never once entered his head until that discovery in the newspaper.

He was washing his hands when Petie gained admission to the cell.

"Jason, my lad," beamed the eccentric millionaire when the two were alone, "I can't tell you how delighted I am to see you again!"

"Again?" The implication puzzled Jason. He turned off the water. "Throw me that towel," he requested, indicating a small pile of belongings he had placed on the bunk. Petie tossed it to him. "Again, you say?"

"Of course. Don't you recognize me? Petie, you remember! The Hollywood Station—"

"Oh." Jason nodded and seated himself on the bunk, his legs drawing up and his arms coming about to encircle them. "Sit down," he invited, "make yourself at home. Sorry I can't offer you a drink; butler's day off, y'know."

Smiling happily, Petie parked himself beside Jason. "Well," he sighed, "like old times, isn't it?"

"Yeah,"—Jason nodded without humor,—"like ol' times—the Dark Ages, the French Revolution, the Spanish Inquisition." He paused and viewed Petie quizzically. "Say," he asked at length, "how'd you get in here?"

"The D. A. wrote me a note. He's a pal of mine—"

"Nice pals you got," the boy commented. "What did you want to see me for?"

Petie was waiting for that. "Blood on the Skyscraper!" he ejaculated, his voice skiing upward.

"What about Blood on the Skyscraper?"

"You didn't finish it!"

"How do you know?"

"They took you away—remember?"

A vague idea of what Petie was talking about finally dawned upon Jason. "So," he grinned, his memory assembling the fragments of that hectic evening, "you're interested now, huh?"

"Interested?" Petie edged closer to him. "There you had the guy—that banker—slopping about in the blood of his houseboy, falling in the dark, a hot breath on his neck, a cold blade at his throat—and they come and take you away! Tell me—what happened to J. P. Moran?"

For the first time since his capture, Jason laughed.

"Now what do you think happened to him?" he asked with a chuckle.

"The way I have it figured out," said Petie breathlessly, "it all hooks up with the telegram! J.P., being a big banker, was naturally one of the tallest flowers, wasn't he?" Squirming forward, Petie clutched Jason's shirt. "Now look," he went on excitedly, "you're the murderer, see? You kill the Jap. Then you fix the lights and tear out the telephone wires. Now you're laying for Moran! You grapple with him in the dark! You've got a knife—you find his throat—then *zip!*"

"I murder him? Wrong!"

Petie drew back in surprise. *"You don't murder him?"*

"No. Not right away. You see, while I'm holding him, I whisper something in his ear—"

"What?"

"'The boat sails Friday!'"

"What boat?"

What boat? Jason didn't know what boat. That last disclosure was a new inspiration. As he had been talking, his eyes had been examining Petie. Those clothes—

"Petie," he said absently, "that note from the D. A.—"

"What boat?" Petie repeated eagerly.

"All you had to do to get in here was to flash that note?"

"Sure. He's the District Attorney, isn't he? *What boat sails Friday?"*

"A big boat!" cried Jason with excitement. He leaped from the bunk and stood before Petie, his arms extending to illustrate the size. "A tramp steamer! Destination unknown! Grim-faced officers stare through the fog, while below-decks, locked in the filthy brig, a man is imprisoned! He's dirty, dying of hunger and thirst! He screams for water—"

"And then?" Petie gasped anxiously.

"Then—"

Wham! Swinging upward from the floor, Jason's fist met Petie's jaw with a resounding whack. A look of amazement crossed Petie's features. His eyes blinked twice, then rolled backward. Petie was out like a light.

"Sorry," murmured Jason as the unconscious form of his visitor pitched forward into his arms; "we'll have to finish the story some other time, Petie. . . . Right now I've got to get out o' here!"

DRINKWATER tore the earphones from his head and looked up at Captain Ricket. "They've stopped talking," he snapped.

"What do you make of it?" Ricket demanded.

Drinkwater frowned deeply. "I don't know." His hand stroked his chin. "It's confusing—what about that Jap servant? Any report?"

"No. Who's J. P. Moran?"

"Never heard of him. But we'd better look into this! One thing's certain: it's a damned good thing we've got this Codrey under lock and key!"

On that point, however, Mr. Drinkwater's confidence was in for a serious jolt, for five minutes after he had made the observation, Jason Codrey was no longer a prisoner.

Substituting for Jason was a pudgy little man, dressed in Jason's clothes, his head encased in Jason's bandages, his back propped against the wall of Jason's cell, and one of Jason's unlit cigarettes dangling from his inactive lips.

Gayly attired in a blazing golf outfit, Jason Codrey beat a hasty retreat from the Hall of Justice.

CHAPTER XIII

THE brilliance of the late-morning sun all but blinded Jason as blinking, he emerged from the Hall of Justice. He was free. Free! Although the section surrounding the Civic Center—of which the Hall of Justice is a part—is easily one of the shabbiest in Los Angeles, the magic of contrast rendered it beautiful to Jason's eyes, which for days had seen nothing but cold, rigid bars and damp, unfriendly walls.

His heart pounded exultingly. His feet, however, seemingly endowed with a will of their own, wanted to move faster, to run away from the horrible memories of the past few days. It was with utmost difficulty that he succeeded in maintaining a gait slow enough to avoid attracting attention. . . .

His retreat carried him to Main Street. Here, he reasoned, where humanity coursed in a heterogeneous procession past the endless fronts of beer-parlors, flop-houses, honky-tonks, clip-joints and hock-shops, his prominence would diminish appreciably, for all about him were strange-looking and weirdly costumed people.

Petie, he knew, would be discovered shortly. A general alarm was certain to follow. It would be a matter of minutes before Jason Codrey would become the most frantically sought man in California. He had money—Petie's pockets always carried a plentiful supply of that commodity. If he could manage to get out of the State—

He dismissed the thought. What would become of Pat? Of himself?

Suddenly Jason knew what he was going to do. Let them rearrest him! Let them take him back to jail! This time, things were going to be different! He'd talk! He'd tell the whole—

But who'd believe him? They'd think he was crazy. His jaws snapped together determinedly. All right—so they wouldn't believe him. *But they'd believe Pilster, Crole, or Eldron!*

His pace increased. He turned up a side street and headed for Broadway. He knew now where he was going—to get one of the three men responsible for his predicament! Maybe they didn't know Mardley had actually been murdered. They'd know when he got there! And they'd know that the bargain was off! They'd talk, too!

At his best, Jason Codrey was a remarkably observant young man. But Jason was not at his best. Consequently, he had no idea that each step he had taken since the moment of his escape had been duplicated by an overstuffed, short-winded minion of the law and the District Attorney's office, a gentleman named Flannery.

Flannery had his orders. When that red and yellow sweater left the Hall of Justice, Flannery left with it. No; Jason did not know that Flannery was trailing him—but then, Flannery did not know he was tailing Jason Codrey.

Entering the office-building he sought, Jason boarded an elevator and was conveyed to the floor occupied by the offices of Mardley, Pilster, Crole & Eldron. As he stepped from the elevator, he pulled

his cap far down over his face and rapidly skimmed by Elsie, the switchboard girl, breathing his relief as his passage went unnoticed. He halted, finally, at the swinging gate of a rail, behind which, at a desk, sat a bespectacled woman guarding a door leading to the inner sanctums. She glanced up at him questioningly.

"Mr. Eldron in?" he asked.

"Have you an appointment?"

"No."

"Mr. Eldron is not in."

"Mr. Crole?"

"Mr. Crole is not in."

"Mr. Pilster?"

"Mr. Pilster is not in."

A look of irritation blossomed on Jason's features. Casting a fiery glance in the woman's direction, he stepped forward suddenly, pushed open the gate, ignored her protest and went through the door, closing it behind him. On the verge of following, the woman was distracted by the appearance of another caller, requesting information that compelled her presence.

THE first person Jason encountered in the intermediate office, was his wide-eyed, startled wife Patricia.

"Jason!" Her hand went to her mouth to muffle a yell of surprise.

"Pat, darling!" A surge of emotion threatened to overcome him. He stepped forward and caught her in his arms. For the moment, the hideous world in which he had been living drifted from beneath him. Then, strangely, all united to accentuate his resentment, for it was Pat, more than his life, that he dreaded to lose. He moved away from her, abruptly. "Who's here?" he questioned sharply. "Pilster —Eldron?"

"They haven't come in yet," she told him. "Crole is in his office. Jason,"—her eyes were flashing their joy,—"how did you ever manage to convince them you didn't—"

"Tell you about it later. Which is Crole's office?"

She indicated a door.

"Look, princess," he told her hurriedly, as he crossed the office, "I don't know how this is going to come out. If I don't see you here later, meet me tonight at eight-thirty at the fountain in Westlake Park."

"But Jason," she protested, "why—"

Her question expired unfinished as he disappeared into Crole's office.

Outside in the reception office, Flannery had just exited from an elevator.

"Did a guy come in here wit' red 'n' yeller sox 'nd a sweater?" he barked to Elsie.

"A salesman?"

Flannery's cigar toured the length of his wide mouth. "Did I say a salesman?" he demanded in annoyance. "Okay—so he's a salesman! Didja see 'em?"

"No."

"Den what diff'rence does it make?" growled the detective. He left the switchboard and went to the bespectacled woman guarding the inner offices. "Did you see 'im?" he asked gruffly.

"See who?"

"A guy wit' red 'n' yeller sox 'n' sweater—and he aint no salesman!"

"He's a very fresh young man!" came the trilling answer.

"You seen him, huh?" Flannery's face beamed happily.

"He's inside."

"Any back doors to dis joint?"

"This is the only exit."

Flannery grunted in satisfaction. Then, like the gentleman he undoubtedly was, he tipped his derby and turned away, his hand coming down to arrange his tie as he sauntered back toward the switchboard. . . .

Seated behind a desk, Crole was busily taking inventory of a drawer when Jason entered. He heard the door open and close, but did not look up.

"Miss Preston," he said, "will you bring me the numbers of those bonds we—"

"It's not Miss Preston," Jason said.

Crole's head jerked upward. At the sight of the grim-faced youth standing before him, his body tensed rigidly. His leathery features faded to an anemic yellow.

"*You?*" he gasped, his voice incredulous. "How did you get out?"

"I escaped."

"Escaped! What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Crole," began Jason, his tone leveling menacingly, "as you must know, my plan hasn't panned out according to schedule. I've got a murder rap hanging over me and somebody's got to do something about it!"

"Wasn't it your intention to have yourself suspected of the murder?" Crole questioned calmly.

"Suspected, yes; but not unanimously elected!"

"You mean you can't get out of it?"

"That should be obvious even to you, Mr. Crole."

Crole picked up a lead-pencil and fingered it idly. Then: "Codrey,"—his features registered something akin to sympathy,—"I'm sorry for you. I wish I could help you, but—well, you know my position. However, you're not convicted yet. There's still hope, you know."

"Listen!" cried Jason, his temper rising at the broker's hypocritical demonstration. "Webster, Fallon, Rogers and Darrow combined couldn't get me out of this jam! There's just one thing to do, and I'm going to do it! I'm going to spill the whole story to the D. A.—and you guys are going to verify it!"

"Oh, now see here, Codrey," said Crole, sitting back and viewing him sternly, "you can't drag us into this! After all, it was *your* idea to convert Mardley's suicide into a murder—*we didn't ask you to do it!* If I remember correctly, this question came up before we accepted your proposition. You assured us that if things went against you, you would not involve me or my partners! Wasn't that the arrangement?"

"I made that bargain," Jason admitted, "and I intended to stick to it. But I didn't bargain for murder!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Mardley did not commit suicide! He *was* murdered!"

Crole stiffened as though struck. "You're crazy!" he accused. "You don't know what you're saying!"

His eyes blazing, Jason bent forward. "I don't, eh?" he rasped. "I'm just crazy enough to know that someone bumped off Mardley before I ever thought of going to his apartment, and I'm not going to be the goat for it!"

"I don't believe it," Crole told him flatly. "Furthermore, I think you're welshing! If you imagine that any member of this firm is going to jeopardize a two-million-dollar organization to rescue you from a scheme you practically rammed down our throats, you're certainly a deluded young man!"

"You mean you won't help? You'll let them execute me for a crime you know I didn't commit?"

Crole's gaze fell to the desk. "You're free now," he reminded, ignoring the question. "Why don't you disappear? —run away? If you need money, we might—"

Jason's anger was rapidly becoming explosive. "I'm not running away!" he shouted. "I'm sick and tired of covering a bunch of filthy crooks—"

"That's enough, Codrey!" Crole's voice cracked like a whip. "You'd better get out of here! Get out of here before I call the police!" His hand extended toward a telephone.

That was too much for Jason. Uttering an infuriated gurgle, he threw himself over the desk to grasp Crole's throat. Then suddenly Jason felt the muzzle of a gun digging into his ribs. Crole had risen to his feet. He forced the boy away.

"Stand back!"

The warning stung Jason's eardrums. His eyes flashed from Crole's face to the gun. He hesitated, moved as if to obey the command. Then, with surprising suddenness, his left hand whipped out to chop Crole's wrist, his right fist following the action with a lightning blow to the broker's jaw. An instant later Crole was floundering upon the floor, and the gun was in Jason's hand.

Rounding the desk, Jason stood over him. "Okay, wise-guy," he said through his clenched teeth, "call the cops! Call anybody you like! But get this: I'll find some way to make you guys talk! And when I do, *I'm coming back!*"

MEANWHILE, during the recess permitted by Jason's invasion of Crole's office, Flannery had time to kill in the reception office. Believing the straw-haired switchboard girl to be what he considered "a swell dish," he had paraded his bulk to and fro before Elsie without inciting the vaguest response. Tiring of this, he had conceived a method of forcing an impression, and had approached her importantly with the demand:

"Get me the District Attorney's office!"

Elsie had viewed him frigidly, returning: "Haven't you got a nickel?"

"Listen, sister,"—he then flashed his badge—"this is official bizness, see! Call the D. A.!"

"There's a pay-telephone in the corner, flat-foot!"

Thus defeated, Flannery had bitten deeply into his cigar, had awarded her an indignant, contemptuous glance, and had then stamped across the office and entered the indicated telephone booth.

"Hello, Chief." His fingers drummed his annoyance against the glass of the booth. "Flannery. . . . Jus' called to tell ya I'm still tailin' the guy wit' the

gay sweater. . . . Sure—at the offices of some brokers named Mardley 'nd Pil— What? *What?* He's *who?* . . . It mus' be a mistake, Chief! Y'see—*he is?* Holy Mackerel! Yeah! Yeah, sure, Chief!" . . .

At precisely that moment Jason, still clutching the gun, ran from the office, neglecting, in his haste, to re-close the door. As he exited, Pat rushed toward him. He caught her shoulders. "The park!" he snapped, then pushed her to one side and ran for the other door.

The sight of the gun sent a chill of terror along her spine. Greatly alarmed, she glanced back through the open door, and saw Crole, fuming with rage, struggling to regain his feet. Her frightened gaze returned to Jason, who had just thrown open the door of the reception room.

Flannery, red-faced and breathing excitedly, was just then emerging from the telephone booth.

An enraged bellow from Crole permeated the offices.

"Stop him! Stop that murderer!"

Elsie froze at the switchboard. The bespectacled woman lost her glasses; they shattered upon her desk. Flannery halted in mid-office.

Paralyzed, Pat's widened stare remained glued to her husband.

On the back of Jason's neck, the tiny hairs stood out like pins. A trickle of icy perspiration raced down his back. His fingers, still holding Crole's gun, tightened about the handle. Acting on impulse, he leaped through the door, brandishing the gun as he came into the reception office.

"Don't anybody move!" he ordered menacingly.

Flannery's hand had gone for his gun. Jason caught the action.

"You!" he yelled. "Put your hands up!"

Reluctantly, and with evident disappointment, the detective slowly raised his massive arms.

"Get back!" Jason motioned.

Flannery moved toward the switchboard.

"Okay—" Jason started to back toward the elevator. He had now covered Crole, Flannery, Pat and the two women. "Just stay like that and no one 'll get hurt!"

Reaching the elevator, he groped behind him, found and pressed a button.

A minute later a car halted at the floor. As the door opened, Jason stepped to one side and ordered the operator and two passengers to come out into the office. Startled, they obeyed rapidly. His gun still holding the people at bay, he slowly retreated into the elevator. As his left hand engaged the door's handle, his ears caught the faint scream of an approaching siren.

He slammed shut the door, then whirled about to grasp a lever. At that instant a bullet bit through the door and imbedded itself, shoulder-high, in the rear panel of the car. Flannery had fired it.

Pressing himself tightly in a corner, Jason pushed down the lever. The car jerked upward. Hurriedly, he pulled the lever toward him and the car slowly began to descend.

The siren was coming closer. He could hear it even within the elevator.

CHAPTER XIV

HIS heart thumping like that of a frightened deer, Jason managed after a series of frantic experiments to halt the elevator within jumping distance of the street floor. Bounding forth into the lobby, he wove his way through its scant collection of occupants, gained the street and swung left.

A police car was approaching from the direction in which he proceeded. As soon as he saw it, he dodged into a cigar store.

The car screamed to a stop before the entrance of the Etruria Building. Two officers leaped out and entered; a third, then a fourth officer followed, to begin immediate exploration of the street.

Momentarily ignored by the clerk, who was occupied in serving another customer, Jason edged toward the cigar-store's window, his frightened gaze picking up the action at the building's entrance. Another car, a coupé, had halted behind that of the police. With something of a start, Jason drew back as he recognized its passenger. Drinkwater, the District Attorney, stepped to the sidewalk, glanced about rapidly and then went into the building. The recognition brought Jason no comfort.

In the cigar-store the clerk had disposed of the other customer. "May I help you, sir?" he requested.

"Help me?" Jason pulled his gaze from the window. He had to look about to determine what sort of merchandise the store offered. "Oh, sure," he said

after a slight hesitation, "I—er—a pack of those, please!"

The clerk placed the cigarettes upon the counter. "Anything else?"

"No."

Reaching into his pocket, Jason extracted a large roll of bills, the smallest of which, a ten-spot, he handed to the clerk. This money, he suddenly remembered, was not his; it was Petie's. He had stolen it! No—he argued to his conscience—not stolen; borrowed. But it was a lot of money. He counted it as he awaited his change. Over two hundred dollars! It gave him an idea.

Accepting his change, he picked up the cigarettes and made for the door, where he cautiously inspected the street before exiting. Then, deciding to venture forth, he started along the sidewalk, walking briskly and staying as close as possible to the store-fronts until he reached that of a clothing establishment. He entered and a smiling salesman came toward him.

"I want to buy a suit," Jason told him.

As he followed the man to the rear of the store, it occured to him that as soon as the newspapers broke the story of his escape from jail, this salesman—who had already given mute evidence of professional disapproval of the golfing get-up—would immediately report both him and his purchase to the police. Thus, while relieving himself of Petie's clanging armor, he was about to acquire clothes of which the police would soon have an annoyingly accurate description. The thought depressed him.

"Have you any preference of color?—style?" asked the salesman, advancing to a long rack of suits.

Then came an inspiration. "I want *three* suits," Jason told him.

Those he selected were dark-blue, brown and gray, respectively. He purchased also a shirt, a tie, a hat and a pair of shoes to match each. Thus equipped, he donned the brown outfit, gave the clerk a fictitious address to which to forward the golfing-togs, and then, laden with bundles, he departed from the store.

A few minutes later, still carrying the packages, he entered a large hotel, located a public wash-room and went into it. There, inside a stall, he changed quickly from the brown to the blue outfit. Re-wrapping the clothes, he went from the wash-room back to the hotel lobby, found a check-room and deposited his bundles under a manufactured name. This done, and breathing somewhat easier, he left the hotel.

Despite the fact that Jason had constantly been expecting it, the raucous voice of a newsboy broadcasting the news of his sensational escape, all but froze the blood in his veins. He heard it just as he was crossing to a corner of Pershing Square.

"Mardley's killer breaks jail!" the newsboy was shouting. "Jason Codrey at large in L.A.!"

People were buying the papers as fast as the boy could supply them. Jason tried to shut his ears to the yelling, but couldn't. He didn't want to read that story, but curiosity—a characteristic curiosity—compelled him toward the newsboy. The people frightened him; his recognition by any one of them was simply a matter of comparing his countenance to that featured by a photo on the front page of the newspaper. He chanced it, nevertheless, and procured a paper, but dared not open it until he had seated himself upon an unoccupied bench within the park-like square.

He scanned the headlines, looked briefly at his picture, then started to read the accompanying story:

"Hitherto considered impregnable, the L. A. City Jail today sprung a serious leak when Jason Codrey—"

He couldn't read any more of it; the whole business sickened him. His tired mind sought relief by directing his gaze to other news items: "Europe Trembles in New Crisis"—Europe and poor Jason! "Mate Sues Writer for Divorce"—Page Miss Preston! "Jap Driver Charged with Manslaughter . . . Kazu Yamaoka, driver of the truck that crashed into a police car at the Third Street tunnel entrance last—"

YAMAOKA! Manslaughter! The accident! Despite the healing wound on the top of his head, Jason had almost forgotten the incident. He read on: "Yamaoka, at the preliminary hearing, was represented by Attorney Gerard K. Fienbeck, who contended that the accident in which the two officers were killed, was totally unavoidable. . ."

Yamaoka—a Jap truck-farmer—represented by one of the ablest criminal lawyers in America?—it didn't make sense to Jason. Then, in a flash, it made very good sense!

Until now, Jason's freedom had no purpose. His escape had been to no

avail; it would hurt his case rather than help it, for in running away he had simply placed another bullet in the enemy's gun. Crole's reaction to his visit had proved conclusively that any expectancy of help from the three dishonest brokers could be nothing but a mirage. They weren't going to risk their business—and their calloused hides—to save him. Crole had said so! Crole had also said he did not believe that Mardley had actually been murdered. Whether he did not not, his conduct had convinced Jason that it would make little difference.

Now Yamaoka! It was odd that he had not thought of him before! There he had been telling Petie about Japanese houseboys and all, and had never thought of Yamaoka!

Discarding the newspaper, he rose from the bench and started across the square.

"I'D like to see Mr. Fienbeck."

The prim young woman to whom this statement had been addressed, calmly continued an inspection of the papers in which her attention had been engrossed at the time of the speaker's entrance. "Have you an appointment with Mr. Fienbeck?" she asked without looking up.

"No; but I've got to see him immediately."

"Mr. Fienbeck is very busy—"

"Tell him it's Jason Codrey."

The papers fell from her hands. Without another word, she slipped from her seat and sailed into an adjoining office. Jason grinned ironically as he watched her. Pretty soon, he thought, mothers would be scaring their children by mentioning him, instead of the bogeyman!

The girl came out of the office and posted herself by the door. "Mr. Fienbeck will see you," she managed. The corners of her mouth twitched in what was meant to be a smile. "This way—"

As Jason passed her, she flattened herself against the wall; then, as he entered, she rapidly shut the door between them.

Facing Jason from behind an enormous desk, a large man with black unruly hair removed a pair of thick-lensed glasses, squinted forward while he wiped the glasses with his handkerchief, and replaced them before speaking.

"So you're Codrey the Terrible," he fired, his grave expression incongruous with the greeting. "What brings you here?"

Jason walked slowly toward the desk. "You know my history?" he questioned casually.

"You killed Tom Mardley," said the lawyer, eying him myopically.

"I didn't kill Mardley," Jason denied quietly; "and I'd like you to prove it."

Fienbeck's magnified orbs widened, then narrowed shrewdly. "You want me to take your case?" he asked, settling back in his chair.

"Yes, I do."

"Who sent you?"

"The same guy who sent Kazu Yamaoka."

"Carnation?"

"Yeah—Carnation."

"I'm an expensive mouthpiece, Codrey!"

"How expensive?"

"Ten grand—"

"Pretty steep, isn't it?" asked Jason.

"Cheap, I'd say," the lawyer corrected. "Ten grand, and I guarantee nothing! Any attorney who can keep you out of a gas-chamber deserves a Congressional Medal!"

"You want the money in advance?"

"On the barrel-head, son."

"It's a deal," said Jason. "I'll be back with the ten thousand at four-thirty this afternoon."

Once again amidst the blessedly commonplace activity of a Los Angeles street, Jason had difficulty in remembering that of all the people who drifted about their businesses, he alone was marked for quick removal. Murder was hard to discern in the sunlight. Over and over he kept repeating to himself a name; a name he had heard only a few minutes before; a name to which his memory could attach no personality; a name upon which his ominous future hung like a spider clinging to a thread over a water-drain.

That name was *"Carnation!"*

CHAPTER XV

PAT'S occupation within the offices of the brokerage during Jason's period of imprisonment had been her salvation. Not tonight, however. Tonight she was to see Jason—in Westlake Park, by the

fountain, at eight-thirty! True, Jason was a fugitive, and conditions had in no way been improved by his escape—but she was to see him!

When five-thirty struck, Pat was the first to leave the offices. Fifteen minutes later, strangely, she was seated in a beauty-parlor. Her reasoning was typically feminine: she was going to see Jason; she had to look her best—for Jason.

At seven she entered a cafeteria, procured a salad and brought it to a table which afforded easy view of a wall-clock. She wasn't hungry; but she had to do something to pass the time until eight-thirty. Seating herself, she promptly forgot the salad, and lighted a cigarette. Then she saw Flannery.

The detective had unloaded his heavily-laden tray on a table less than twenty feet removed from that Pat occupied. Her visit to the beauty-parlor had annoyed him; but this subsequent stop wrung forgiveness from his noble heart. There he'd been, practically starving, an' she'd led him right into a cafeteria!

It was the derby that drew Pat's attention to him. An average-sized man eating with his hat on might have gone unobserved, but not a derbied mastodon like Flannery. Pat saw him, but did not suspect that she was the star to whom he had temporarily hitched his wagon.

Another man had claimed a table near Pat's. His manners, as well as his appearance, were far superior, and thus far more subdued than the detective's. He was a dark-haired individual of about thirty-five, slight of build, suave, and with a mustache no wider than that of a penciled line. Although neither Pat nor Flannery were aware of his presence, he viewed them both with considerable interest.

At seven-twenty-five, Pat left the cafeteria and walked to the parking lot near her employers' office, to get her car. A minute or so later, while guiding the coupé from the lot, she was forced to halt at the sidewalk to permit the passage of a group of pedestrians. During that pause, her eyes wandered idly to the left, then widened as they discovered, standing beside the door of a taxicab, the big man with the derby whom she had seen eating in the cafeteria. With a start, she suddenly remembered that she had seen him one other time that day—in the office!

The sidewalk clear, she threw the car into gear and turned right, into traffic. A glance into the rear-view mirror confirmed that which she had just begun to suspect: *she was being followed!*

Gone was her elation at the prospect of seeing Jason. She could not go to him now, with that man on her heels. Obviously, she was expected to lead the trailer to her husband. Her only hope was to lose the cab in traffic. With this in mind, she pressed her foot upon the accelerator.

Then began one of the weirdest rides Pat had even taken. Racing the car as rapidly as conditions would permit, she turned right or left at every street or alley she encountered; the coupé twisted and turned, moving first in one direction, then in another. A wide circle carried her by New Chinatown, Olvera Street—the Mexican bazaar—the new Southern Pacific Railroad Station, then back through the city. Not having seen the cab since passing Olvera Street, she finally concluded that it was now safe to head for Westlake Park.

AT eight-thirty-five she guided the car into a parking-space on a street paralleling the park fence, then climbed forth and hurried toward an entrance.

Another car—the taxicab—glided to a halt beside the parked coupé. From it bounded Flannery, his eyes fixed upon the running girl. Instructing his driver to wait, he started in pursuit.

From the opposite side of the street, another peered forth from a taxi window to observe the action of the detective. Instead of joining in the chase, the man directed his driver to take the cab to the entrance, where he emerged, tossed a bill to the driver, and beat Flannery into the park by several feet.

Walking rapidly, the man overtook Pat, passed her and continued onward until he was as far in front of her as Flannery was behind. At this point he paused, glanced quickly about, then slowly reversed his direction.

Pat was then within a few feet of the fountain. Some distance ahead of her stood a young man in dark street clothes. Jason! At that instant, for some inexplicable reason, the girl glanced back over her shoulder. The big man with the derby was right behind her! The shock of that discovery nearly rooted her to the ground.

Jason had seen her! He was coming forward! She continued onward as though she hadn't seen him.

"Please God," she mumbled in prayer, "don't let him speak!"

But she was sure he would—in a second. Something had to be done—instantly!

A man was coming toward her. It was dark; she couldn't see his face clearly; but somehow she knew he was watching her. Thinking faster than she had ever done in her life, she bounded forward, threw her arms about the stranger, halted him with a kiss and cried:

"Jason! Jason darling! Thank heaven, you're safe! Jason, my love, how I've missed you! How—"

OVERWHELMED by the unexpected attack, the man stood speechless. Equally dumfounded was the real Jason. That was *his* wife! She was calling the man *Jason!*

Flannery, however, was neither overwhelmed nor amazed; this was just what he had expected. Without any loss of motion he stamped forward, rudely removed the man from the girl's embrace and snapped a handcuff to his wrist.

"Sorry to bust up the reunion, sister," he apologized gruffly as he flashed his badge; "but me an' li'l' Jason has a date at Headquarters."

"Say, what is this?" demanded the stranger, finally finding voice. "My name aint Jason! You've got the wrong guy!"

"Oh, please don't take him!" Pat pleaded. "He didn't do it! He's innocent! Jason never murdered anybody! Please, Officer, *please!*"

"Sorry, sister," Flannery repeated. "Come along, li'l' fella, before Poppa bats yer ears outa shape!"

Pat continued to plead until Flannery and his captive were beyond earshot. Then, heaving a deep sigh of relief, she turned toward Jason. Aware now of the motive behind Pat's bewildering demonstration, his face glowed with admiration.

"You were wonderful, baby," he whispered as she entered his arms. "Boy! You certainly fooled that cop!"

"Kiss me before I start bawling!" she ordered.

He kissed her.

"That guy's been eating onions," she sobbed, pressing her face against Jason's breast. "He's the first man I've kissed except you since we were married!"

He smiled down tenderly. Then, suddenly, his brow puckered in interest. Releasing Pat, he bent over and picked from the walk a white flower—a carnation!

"Did you smell anything besides onions when you were close to him?" he asked of the girl. "This, for instance?" He brought the flower beneath her nose.

"He was wearing it," she told him. "I didn't smell it; I saw it. Why? Does it mean anything?"

"If it means what I think it does, you just saved my life in two directions!"

"Who was he?"

"His name, or nickname, I think, is Carnation."

"So?"

"So Mr. Carnation—or whoever he is—seems just as anxious as the State of California to rid the world of your loving husband's presence!"

"He wants to *kill* you?"

"It's an idea," Jason admitted.

"But *why?*"

"I haven't the slightest notion."

"Then what makes you think—"

"It's just an idea, princess," he said absently. "Look—let's find some place where we can sit down and talk. We haven't much time—"

He led her to the opposite side of the fountain and to a dark, pleasant corner obscured by low-hanging trees and looking out toward the lake. It was a setting for romance; a night for lovers.

Jason removed his coat, folded it and placed it upon Pat's lap, following which he extended himself full length upon the ground and rested his head on the coat.

"Murder or no murder," he murmured, "this is wonderful!" He smiled up at Pat, then winced as his head encountered a hard object within a pocket of the coat.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

He raised himself on one elbow, drew the coat from her lap and from its pocket pulled forth a gun. "There," he said, starting to refold the coat, "that's better."

"What did you take out—a gun?" she questioned.

He handed it to her and replaced his head upon her lap.

"Where'd you get this, Jason?" she demanded.

"Took it from Crole this afternoon," he informed lazily.

Pat's gaze was examining the pearl-handled automatic. "But this is *Mr. Mardley's* gun!" she protested. "I've seen it dozens of times!"

"Crole pulled it on me this afternoon," he told her; "it's the one I stuck up the office with."

Pat's expression hardened. "Crole isn't going to be of much help to you in getting out of this mess, is he?" she questioned suddenly.

Jason pulled himself into sitting position. "No, he isn't," he admitted grimly. "Nor are Pilster and Eldron, from the way things look. They apparently think I made a bargain and I'm stuck with it. Besides, Crole doesn't believe Mardley was really murdered."

"Really murdered? He committed suicide—"

"No, he didn't, princess. He was murdered." Jason rose to his feet and extended his hand. "We've got to get going," he told her; "that cop won't be long in finding out he's captured the wrong Jason."

He grasped her hand and assisted her to rise.

"Oh, Jason—this is awful," she gasped as she stood beside him. "If Mardley was really murdered, you have no alibi whatsoever!"

"Not that I had very much of one before," he added ironically. "You're right, princess: the murder they're trying to hang around my neck is eighteen-carat, gilt-edged!"

"But Jason," she sputtered, "who murdered him?"

He looked at her blankly. Then the blank expression dissipated as his face lighted with sudden inspiration. "Pat!" he cried. "That's our out! We've got to find out who murdered Mardley!"

"How?"

"How? I don't know how! Look, baby," he said hastily, "I'll see you later —somehow. I've got to beat it!"

"Where are you going?"

"To Mardley's apartment!"

He plucked the gun from her hand, pecked her cheek and started away.

"Hey—wait!" she called. "I'm going with you!"

CHAPTER XVI

IT was very dark—though not very late —and the Clexton Terrace nodded upon the brink of slumber, its lingering consciousness evidenced by the light escaping a few shaded windows, and by the subdued drone of one or two muffled radios.

Finding a stairway, they began to ascend, their knees quaking rebelliously, their ears straining for sounds of other presences, their eyes darting about nervously, and occasionally engaging in silent conversation. Step after step, landing after landing, they pursued their upward course, keeping careful account of each floor as they passed it. At length Jason halted.

"Seven?" he inquired in a whisper.

Pat nodded in affirmation.

He stole along a short hallway, hesitated where it angled into a corridor, then waved for her to follow, and started along the thick carpet toward the fore of the building. Passing door after door, they finally halted at one numbered 712.

"This is it," he whispered; then a scowl of annoyance crossed his features. The door was padlocked, and bore a sheriff's seal.

"What's the sign read?" the girl asked softly from behind. "Measles?"

"Place is sealed," he told her. "Padlocked."

"Then we can't get in," she said, almost hopefully.

"Seems hopeless," he sighed.

Her head shook sorrowfully. "Jason," she said, "I hate to tell you this, but you're sure slipping."

"What do you mean?"

"Look—"

She led him to a place at the wall, and pointed downward. Following her finger, his gaze encountered a small door about twenty inches square at the base of the wall.

"Waste-paper baskets," the girl explained.

His face brightened instantly. Falling to his knees, he unfastened a catch and opened the tiny door. Then, flattening on his stomach, he snaked into the stuffy, ill-smelling cavity until his outstretched palm met the wooden surface of another door. This one, he imagined, would have to be forced open. But on pressing his hand against it, he was surprised to find it opening with the slight pressure. Wriggling forward, he emerged into an inky-dark room, which, from the smooth, solid surface of its floor, he deduced to be Mardley's kitchen.

He rose to his feet, then turned to assist Pat, who had followed him through the opening.

"Smell something funny?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"You mean in that hole?"

"No; in here. Sniff."

She sniffed. "Yeah," she murmured, "like tobacco smoke."

"Uh-huh."

Grasping her hand, he tiptoed across the kitchen to a door barely discernible in the starlight leaking in through a small window. The door, suspended upon two-way hinges, moved easily when he pushed it open. Inserting his head through the breach, he peered out cautiously into a dark, spacious chamber. That it was Mardley's living-room he ascertained from the adjacent den; that adjoining area, because of its many windows, was slightly less dark than the other. Listening carefully and hearing nothing, he widened the breach and began to move forward. He had taken but two steps when Pat jerked his arm convulsively.

"Jason!" she whispered. "Look!"

AT first he saw nothing. Then, as his startled gaze scampered through the darkness, it caught and became fixed to a pinpoint of light emanating from the farthest darkest corner. All breathing suspended, both he and Pat stood immobile. The light glowed intensely, then receded, then began to move. Transfixed by fright, their stares accompanied its sidewise progress.

Without any warning other than a sharp, sudden click, a shower of brilliance flooded the room. The glow disappeared, but in its place materialized a pudgy, smiling, blinking countenance: a face not at all unfamiliar to Jason, since only that morning, in the cause of liberty, he had lifted it.

"Petie!" The name sprang from his lips like a pebble from a slingshot.

And Petie it was, teetering uncertainly near the entrance of the foyer-wall, his stocky frame encased in a tight-fitting riding-habit, his right hand holding a smoking cigar, and his left hand waving a large champagne bottle.

"Greetings an' salutashuns, my fine-feathered frien'!" called the jubilant, intoxicated millionaire. "You certain'y took your time gettin' here!"

"How'd *you* know I was coming?" Jason demanded.

Petie's fingers waved before his lips in a coy motion of secrecy. "Murderers," he announced superiorly, "always return to the scene o' the crime!"

Jason winced in disgust. "Princess," he told Pat, his voice flatly unenthusiastic, "this gentleman is Mr. DePlew—my public!" Then, to Petie: "My wife, bloodhound!"

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Bloodhound," Pat gurgled nervously.

"How'd you get in here, Petie?" Jason questioned.

"Jus' like you did," Petie smirked. "Been here f'r ages—smoked two whole c'gars. But tut-tut—we're wastin' time. S'pose you jus' bring the li'l' lady over here 'nd sit down." He turned, and with a gracious flourish, indicated a sofa, before which stood an invitingly decorated coffee-table. "Observe," he directed, "—san'wiches, wine, pickles—all f'r you!"

Neither Pat nor Jason had noticed the table before. They stared at it in surprise, then looked toward each other in bewilderment.

Of the two, Jason was the most puzzled. He started toward the table, then stopped and revolved toward his self-appointed host. "Petie," he demanded sternly, "what *exactly* are you up to?"

"What do you care what he's up to, Jason?" Pat asked impatiently. "I'm starved; let's eat and figure it out afterward."

"Words o' wisdom, my girl!" Petie complimented. He came forward to grasp Jason's arm, then led the reluctant youth to the sofa. "Regret to say only one bottle o' the sparklin' nectar remains," he apologized, "but you took s' damn' long gettin' here—"

He filled three glasses with champagne, presented two to Pat and Jason, then accidentally upset the third, its content spilling to the floor. "Doesn't matter," he mumbled. "Prefer the bottle, anyhow."

Pat nibbled hungrily at a sandwich. Although just as famished as she, Jason took but a single bite of one before discarding it. What was Petie doing here, he asked himself. Had he been planted? Unable to stand the suspense any longer, he turned to face Petie squarely.

"Now look, Petie," he said exasperatedly, "what's behind all this? I know I socked you and took your clothes, and I've spent most of your money. I couldn't help it; I had to. Now if that's why you're here—if that's—"

"Clothes? Money?" Petie snapped his fingers. "What do I care 'bout clothes 'nd money? Tut-tut, m'boy—stop worryin' 'nd eat—"

"I don't want to eat!" Jason cried angrily. "I want to know what you're doing here!"

Petie's gaze shifted nervously.

"Blood on the Skyscraper!" he said sharply.

"What?"

"I've got to hear the rest o' that story!"

Jason stared at him in amazement. "Y-y-you mean you—you crashed this place and set up this lay-out just—just for *that?*"

Petie nodded vigorously. "Had to see you 'fore they took you back to jail, didn' I?" he demanded. "They'd never let me see you after this morning! Maybe you'd 'a' been executed 'fore I ever saw you again!"

"Why is that story so important to you?" asked Jason limply.

Petie viewed him sternly. "I'm a c'llector!" he announced with unsteady dignity. "Some people c'llect books; some people c'llect stamps; some people c'llect antiques—*an' I c'llect mystery-stories!* How'd *you* feel if you were a c'llector? How'd you feel if you'd foun' a rare specimen, an' ev'ry time you almos' had it—*bing!*—somethin' happened! Well, tha's me, see!"

The force of his protest caused Jason to draw back in astonishment. For the first time he began to realize that however silly it might seem, Petie's sincerity was beyond question. But what was he to do about it?

"I'm sorry, Petie," he said, attempting to rise; "I'd like to help you, but I can't. I've got important things to do—"

PETIE'S hand came up to pull him back to the cushions. "Now see here," he directed, his eyes narrowed and his voice threatening: "you're gonna tell me the rest of that story, *or else!*"

"Or else *what?*"

"Or else I start yellin' for the police!"

"But Petie," Jason protested, *"I can't!"*

"Y' gotta!"

"But I've never finished the story! I've told you everything I'd written on it!"

"Y-you're lyin'!" Petie accused.

"No—no, he isn't lying, Mr. Blood—er, Mr. Petie," interjected Pat. "He never finished 'Blood on the Skyscraper'! He never finished but one story in his whole life—and look where that's got him!"

Petie's face convulsed in anger and disappointment. "You can't do this to me!" he shouted. "You've got no right to start stories you can't finish! I'll show you! I'll—" Arms waving wildly, he started toward the kitchen door.

"You'd better stop him!" Pat whispered. "If he starts through that hole we're drowned kittens!"

Jason leaped to his feet and stamped in pursuit. "Aw, now wait, Petie," he pleaded, throwing his arm about the other's heavy shoulders, "I know how you feel about the story, and I'm terribly sorry—"

"Let me go!" Petie ordered in a pout.

"But you've got to listen! That 'Blood on the Skyscraper' yarn wasn't so hot, anyhow! If you want a story to add to that collection of yours—a *real* story! —something more terrific than you've ever heard or read in your life—*help me find out who killed Tom Mardley!*"

"I know who killed Mardley," Petie snapped. *"You* did!"

"But I didn't, Petie!" Jason protested. "That's just it! Oh—I know that everything points to me as Mardley's murderer—I deliberately created that impression; but someone else killed him!"

Petie's eyebrows raised skeptically. "Didn't you tell me at the Hollywood Station that you murdered someone?"

"A figure of speech," Jason told him. "It was this way: I thought Mardley had committed suicide, so in order to save his firm from investigation on account of his suicide, I came here and made the suicide look like a murder. I had an alibi worked out, but it fell through, so I landed in jail. Then I found out that Mardley had actually been murdered. Do you see?"

"Say—" Petie brightened, "—this is beginnin' to soun' like somethin'! You murdered him—but he was murdered *before* you murdered him! Right?"

"Right! So, tonight," Jason went on, "we came here hoping to find some clue that would lead us to the real murderer. If we can—well, Petie, there's your story!"

"D'ya think," asked the little man in growing excitement, *"we* might be able to fin' out who really killed 'im?"

"We've got to!" Pat ejected from the sofa. "If we don't, the story may go unfinished, *but not the author!"*

"The author?" Petie repeated. "Oh —I get it!—it's jus' as though we were writin' this story as we go along, eh?"

"It's already been written," Jason told him. "I wrote it before it happened! Only, in *my* story, a man committed suicide, while here it turns out that Mardley was murdered!"

THEN, briefly, Jason sketched the circumstances and coincidences that had resulted in his becoming the de-

fenseless victim of his own story. The very title, "The Mysterious Stranger," intrigued his avid listener. Forgotten was "Blood on the Skyscraper." Forgotten was all resentment, all disappointment. Observing him closely, Jason knew that Petie's cooperation was now assured. Unfortunately, however, the boy did not anticipate that Petie's befuddled sense of justice was becoming incensed at the treatment Fate had accorded the author. Consequently, he was surprised when, at the story's conclusion, Petie leaped from the sofa, and without a word, staggered determinedly toward a telephone table at the opposite side of the room.

Pat was first to translate the action. "Jason!" she cried in alarm. "Stop him!"

Jason did stop him, but not in time to prevent him from lifting the receiver.

"WHAT are you trying to do?" demanded Jason angrily, jamming the receiver back on its hooks. "Don't you know that any call from this apartment will bring the cops in on us like a bunch of hornets?"

"Forgot," Petie mumbled. "Sorry!"

"Who were you going to call, anyhow?" Pat demanded.

"Babsie—" Petie whimpered. "Wan'ed to tell 'im Jason's innocent."

"Who's Babsie?"

"Distric' Attorney—"

"Ouch!" groaned Jason. "Petie, you go over there an' sit in that chair. . . . That's swell. Now, you try to think who could have killed Mardley. When you get an idea—let me know. Okay?"

Petie's head nodded uncertainly, following which he lost himself in fuzzy concentration.

"Now," said Jason softly to Pat, "let's get busy. First thing we do is try to reconstruct the crime. Come on—"

He led her into the den and beside Mardley's desk. "Mardley," he said, pointing to the floor behind the desk, "was lying right there when I discovered him. Therefore he must have been standing about here"—he moved to another spot—"when he was shot. Now—since the bullet entered his right temple, he must have been looking this way—through the window, maybe. He couldn't have seen who killed him, for he would never have turned his face from a man with a gun. The shot, then, must have been fired from the living-room. Go stand out there for a moment, Pat."

She left the den and took a position in the center of the living-room.

"What do I do now?" she asked.

"Pretend you have a gun," Jason called. "Now, level it at me, and shoot."

She raised her finger and said: *"Boom!"*

Jason fell to the floor behind Mardley's desk. "That's it," he said as he rose again. "The murderer stood somewhere between here and that clock." He pointed to a cuckoo-clock on the wall to Pat's rear, and as he did, emitted a soft whistle upon noting the time. "Can that be right?" he asked incredulously. "Eleven-forty?"

"Probably not working," Pat surmised. "But it's electric. What time have you got, Petie?"

Petie's languid gaze settled upon the dial of his wrist-watch. "Twenty minutes of twelve," he informed. Then, for no apparent reason, murmured: "The Tick-Tock Murder Case—"

"It's right, I guess," Pat shrugged. "Well, what do we do now, Hawkshaw?"

Jason seemed lost in thought. "Pat," he said, "I'm positive Mardley was murdered and all that—but why do you suppose he wrote a suicide-note?"

"Did he?" she asked in surprise.

"Yeah—it's in that drawer at home where we keep all our receipts and stuff."

"You never told me about a note."

"I'd forgotten it. But he wrote one in which he outlined the cause of his suicide. Same business about the firm being crookedly operated, and so on."

"Then that settles everything, doesn't it?" asked Pat hopefully. "If he wrote a note, all you've got to do is show it to the police and tell them your story!"

"Doesn't settle anything," Jason told her. "If he really committed suicide, I'm still stuck with my bargain. If he was murdered—and I'm sure of it!—then the note's no good, anyhow."

"What deathly logic!" she snapped in disgust.

"Say—you don't suppose Mardley was going to commit suicide when someone came in and bumped him off, do you?"

"Be kind of a dirty trick, don't you think?"

"It *must* have happened that way," said the boy meditatively. "I'm sure he didn't commit suicide, but it's obvious that he intended to. Relax, princess, I'm going to give this place a once-over."

For the next few minutes Jason occupied himself at the desk, then in the

living-room, then in the apartment's two bedrooms. His search unearthed nothing of value—no lead, no clues, not even a photograph.

Pat, meanwhile, had fallen into a chair opposing that occupied by Petie. What folly, this! What grasping at straws! There was nothing here; there was no escape for Jason—except *escape.*

At length Jason, passing through the living-room to the den, stumbled over the dozing Petie's outstretched legs.

The disturbance brought Petie back to consciousness. His eyes, as they opened, fixed themselves upon the cuckoo-clock on the opposite wall.

In the den, Jason had reopened a drawer of the desk and was fingering his way through some of Mardley's papers. "Pat," he called, "have you got a cigarette?"

She had just lighted one, and rose to give it to him. At that moment, the clock struck twelve.

Petie blinked as the bird emerged to cuckoo the hour. Its bobbing back and forth fascinated him. Then his brow puckered worriedly.

"It's a lie!" he ejaculated.

Both Jason and Pat started at the sudden voice from the other room.

"It's a lie, I say!" Petie repeated with emphasis. His eyes were still glued to the bobbing bird. *"It's ridiculous! It can't be done!"*

"What can't be done, Petie?" asked Jason.

"That cuckoo can't cuckoo!" Petie exclaimed.

"But it *was* cuckooing," said Jason, bewildered.

"It was, but it can't!" Petie protested. "It's ridiculous! How can a cuckoo cuckoo when it hasn't got a head?"

"No head?" Jason echoed. His eyes sped to the clock. Pat, coming up behind him, viewed Petie dubiously.

HIS brows knitted, Jason hurriedly picked up a chair and placed it beneath the clock. Mounting its seat, he reached upward, pried open the doors of the upper compartment, and forced out the bird. As Petie had contended, *the bird had no head!* Unhooking the clock from the wall, Jason examined the bird's retreat. The head was inside, caught in some mechanism, and in the rear of the cavity, imbedded deeply in the thick backboard, was a *bullet!*

Quivering with excitement, Jason turned to Pat and Petie. *"The head's*

been shot off!" he cried excitedly. "Petie—what time is it by your watch?"

Petie was too befuddled to speak. Pat glanced at his watch, then said: "Twelve-four." Jason exhibited the clock: It also showed twelve-four!

At that moment a banging on the apartment door brought the three of them to attention. It was repeated, louder—*someone was pounding on the padlock!* The racket grew in intensity; gruff voices could be heard conversing in the outer corridor.

"The cops!" Petie gasped.

THINKING rapidly, Jason replaced the clock, leaped from the chair, pushed Pat aside and picked up the sandwich-laden coffee-table. "Open a window!" he cried to the girl.

She dashed across the room, freed a catch and lifted a sash. Following, Jason tossed the sandwiches through the window, then returned to gather up and dispose of the champagne bottles. This accomplished, he turned to Pat.

"Go into the kitchen and crawl into that cubbyhole!" he ordered. "Stay there until you know the corridor is clear, then beat it!"

The noise was getting louder.

"I want to stay with you!" she protested.

"What good'll it do for you to be pinched?" he cried. "Beat it, honey, while there's still time!"

She kissed him quickly, then ran into the kitchen. Turning to Petie, Jason extracted his gun from his pocket and handed it to him. "Take this," he ordered, "and stand by the hall doors!" Petie's trembling hand accepted the gun; then he scrambled into position.

Going to the opposite end of the room, Jason turned and elevated his hands. "Hold that gun up, Petie!" he directed anxiously. "The idea is that you've captured me, see? When the cops break in, you say: 'Okay boys, I've got him covered!'"

Then, out of the confusion of slamming doors, gruff commands, pounding feet and inrushing bodies, rose the timid voice of the inebriated millionaire:

"Okay, boys—I've got him covered!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE breathless anticipation with which all of Los Angeles had awaited the trial of Jason Codrey was emphatically demonstrated on the morning of the trial's inception. Bustling with activity, the streets about the Hall of Justice resembled the approach to a circus.

Long before the courtroom doors were opened to the public, the corridors on the eighth floor of the building were packed with prospective spectators. It was with utmost difficulty that people whose businesses were within that or any of the other rooms moved to their objectives. Newspaper- and camera-men dashed about wildly in their frustrated efforts to interview and photograph important personages.

At ten o'clock the doors were opened. "All take seats! All take seats!" the attendants called, and seats were taken in a room-wide battle.

Then the players in the impending drama began to file in. First to enter was the Clerk of Court. His ancient face an expressionless mask, he proceeded to a desk set below and in front of the judge's bench, and upon its top dumped an armload of files and papers. A stenographer followed to claim a desk and typewriter. District Attorney Drinkwater, accompanied by an assistant with whom he was laughingly conversing, entered through a rear door and advanced to a long table set forward and to the right of the bench. Then, attended by a bailiff, Jason Codrey came into the room, and at an indication from the bailiff, went to a table across from Drinkwater's.

At Jason's appearance, a loud murmur of interest rippled over the courtroom. A woman shouted something and was promptly silenced by an attendant.

DEPOSITING the papers he carried upon the table, the boy turned to view his audience. A look of anxiety crossed his features, evaporating when he discovered, staring out from the front row of spectators, the pale and lovely features of his wife Patricia. Beside her, very nervous and ill-at-ease, squirmed the pudgy figure of Peter Hamilton DePlew. Jason went toward them, then reached forth to press Pat's hand.

"You look scared, princess," he said in undertone, smiling as though the idea of anyone being frightened about the outcome of the approaching ordeal was ridiculous. "Don't tell me we Codreys are at last beginning to cringe in the face of the enemy!"

"I'm not scared," she managed through clicking teeth. "It's just that it's—well, cold in here."

"Cold!" Petie echoed, drawing a handkerchief to mop his beaded brow. "I'm roasting! —Jason," he said resentfully, "this heartless wench hasn't even permitted me the comfort of a single eye-opener this morning!"

Jason laughed. "Your eyes'll open fast enough as soon as this trial gets under way," he promised.

Some newspaper men, passing through the gate in the rail on their way to the news-box, on the opposite side of the room from that of the jury, called pleasantries as they passed him.

"Hello, David," said one with whom Jason had once had conversation, "all set to pin Goliath's big ears back?" Then, as the reporter went on, he murmured to a companion: "I wish him luck, poor kid!"

The crowd stirred nervously: the Judge had come from his chamber and was approaching the bench.

"All rise," requested an attendant. "The Court of the County of Los Angeles is now in session, the Honorable Judge Jackson Frobin presiding."

All rose, then resumed positions as the Judge seated himself. The court clerk presented him with a collection of papers.

Then:

"The case of the People against Jason Codrey. Jason Codrey to the bar."

Jason, who had seated himself at his table, came to his feet and walked forward. His eyes lifted questioningly. Not very familiar with court-proceedings, he said nothing.

Judge Frobin leaned forward and scrutinized the boy through a pair of ribboned, pince-nez glasses. "Is the defense ready?" he prompted.

"Oh—" Jason digested. "Yes, Your Honor."

"Ready—for the People," Drinkwater announced confidently.

The Judge nodded, then set his worried gaze upon Jason. "My boy," he asked gently, "are you still determined to conduct your own defense in this case? If you've changed your mind, the Court will be only too happy to grant a postponement to enable you to secure the assistance I believe you will require."

Jason glanced toward Drinkwater, whose face had become suddenly annoyed. Then, looking back to the

Judge, he stated: "I appreciate your consideration, Your Honor, but I assure you that I feel qualified to defend myself."

The Judge's gaze lowered in irritation. He bit his lip, but added nothing.

The clerk began calling the names of the men from whom the jury was to be selected. There were no absentees. Then began the empaneling of the jury. In the course of the next few minutes, after three candidates had been questioned and approved by Drinkwater, the Judge again called Jason to the bar.

"Have you no intention of challenging these men?" he asked in bewilderment.

"No, Your Honor," Jason admitted. "Anyone Mr. Drinkwater okays is okay by me. To challenge them, would be a waste of time. Any man who can hear and understand English is perfectly acceptable as far as I'm concerned."

A general mumble of comment greeted his announcement. The Judge silenced the crowd, then told the clerk to proceed.

More names were called; more jurors admitted to the box. At ten minutes past twelve the selection was completed, at which time the Judge called recess.

AT one-thirty, Court reconvened and promptly resumed session. It was then that the trial actually got under way.

Formally approaching the bench, Drinkwater began: "May it please the Court—" Then, at a nod from Judge Frobin, he repeated, and continued: "May it please the Court—gentlemen of the jury—" He turned and bowed to the twelve men he had selected.

"I am not going to resort to a theatrical attempt to arouse your emotions in this matter of the People against Jason Codrey by pretending that this case is the most vicious or harrowing example of human brutality I have ever experienced. It is not. There have been worse—much worse—and many of them. There is, I believe, no greater crime than murder, and though some murders are more horrible than others, some murderers are less responsible than others. Before you in this Court stands a youth against whom an indictment has been brought for the murder, coldly planned and executed, of one of the most beloved and respected citizens of Los Angeles—Mr. Thomas Mardley. This youth, the defendant in this case, appears to be a highly intelligent young man; so intelligent, indeed, that he has taken it upon himself to answer without assistance the charge herein brought against him.

"It is therefore to be considered, gentlemen, that in view of the intellect of its perpetrator, *this crime is far more heinous than its outward appearance first suggests. It was committed by a man whose rationality cannot be questioned! It was committed in the light of cold, merciless reason!*

"Mr. Thomas Mardley, the unprovocative victim of the defendant's revolting act, was an old man, and a good man. For nearly forty years Mr. Mardley was engaged in business in the city of Los Angeles. His method of conducting his business, and his personal code of ethics, had earned for him the nickname 'Honest Tom.' Get that, gentlemen: *'Honest Tom'!* It is almost symbolic of Evil rising to destroy Good, that Honest Tom should have met his death at the unscrupulous hand of an avaricious youth whose purpose in committing the crime was to rob his victim of a sum totaling nearly fifteen thousand dollars!

"Now, fifteen thousand dollars is a lot of money. There are many things a man might be tempted to do to get fifteen thousand dollars. But if a man is honest, and good, as Tom Mardley was honest and good, neither fifteen thousand nor fifteen million dollars would attract him if robbery was the medium through which the money was to be acquired. Robbery, then, must be quite hideous. And if robbery is so hideous, what, then, can be said of a murder committed that robbery may be effected?

"Some men kill in anger; some through fear; some for love. In such instances, the murderers have lapsed, through influencing circumstances, into a state of comparative insanity. Their crimes, while they cannot be excused, may, at least, be understood. But when a man coldly and deliberately plans and executes the murder of another for no reason other than his own selfish enrichment, he is not a man, but a beast—and should be removed from the society upon which he preys!

"It is as such, gentlemen, that I, speaking for the People, view Jason Codrey!"

PAUSING to note what effect his personal indictment of Jason had had upon the Judge and jury, the District Attorney continued:

"Before I start calling witnesses to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that

Jason Codrey did kill and rob Thomas Mardley on the morning of July 23, I should like to warn the jury against the youthful, and deceivingly innocent exterior of the defendant. There is no doubt, furthermore, that his decision to defend himself is an exceedingly clever device by which he hopes to prey upon the sympathy of this court. I warn you, *be wary of it!*"

CONCLUDING, Drinkwater turned and went to his table. Every eye in the courtroom followed his movement; every eye, that is, but the two owned by the youth upon whose head Drinkwater had invited the crushing hand of doom. Jason was scribbling on a piece of paper. Lifting the paper, he turned in his chair and hissed for Pat's attention, and when her worried countenance revolved toward him, lifted the paper to the level of her gaze. Two hearts were drawn upon it, one labeled J., the other P., and through them an arrow. Her face softened almost to tears; then, catching herself, she grimaced disapproval. Jason turned back to the table.

Drinkwater was calling his first witness: Dr. Nesbit Shaw, the coroner. After being duly sworn, and in answer to the District Attorney's questioning, Dr. Shaw contributed the following:

He had performed many autopsies. He had performed an autopsy upon the body of Thomas Mardley, and had determined the cause of Mardley's death: a wound, inflicted by a bullet, which had entered Mardley's right temple, lodging in the cerebrum. Death, he stated, had been instantaneous. Then he placed the time of death: Mardley had died sometime between the hours of ten A.M. and one P.M. on the day of July 23.

That was all. Jason had no questions.

Inspector Fred Lord was the next to the witness stand. He was an attaché of the Homicide Division of the police department. He testified that upon notification by the hotel authorities that Thomas Mardley had been discovered murdered in his apartment at the Clexton Terrace, he, Lord, had conducted an investigation, had found the body as described by the coroner, and the gun with which Mardley had been murdered. Drinkwater then had him identify the gun, following which he exhibited the weapon to the jury. Since the police department had been unable to supply him with the gun's owner, Drinkwater shrewdly sidestepped that issue by concentrating upon the fact that the serial-number had been filed off; a circumstance which he attributed to Jason's cleverness, and to which he attached much importance, as it went to prove that the crime was premeditated. Continuing with Lord, Drinkwater brought out the condition of Mardley's safe, which, Lord said, had been opened and emptied of its contents.

Later, stated Lord, when Jason, after his capture, was searched at the Hollywood Station, upon his person had been found a sum totaling fourteen thousand, seven hundred and thirty-two dollars.

Drinkwater dismissed the witness. Jason had no questions.

Regarding the Don Esteban impersonation, Drinkwater had this to say:

"At the time of the defendant's capture, gentlemen, he was endeavoring to impersonate an unknown, and, as far as we can determine, totally fictitious character: one Don Esteban, supposedly a fabulously wealthy philanthropist from South America. No one but the defendant himself knows what was behind that masquerade, and he has steadfastly refused to explain it. We do know, however, that it was a fraud, and, if we can extract nothing else from it, it does, at least, illustrate the bold and cunning nature of the brain that directed Mardley's murder! But more of this later."

He then called George Eldron to the stand.

The junior member of the firm, Mardley, Pilster, Crole & Eldron, rose with dignity from the front row of the outer division of the courtroom, where he had been seated between his two extant partners, and without a glance toward Jason, entered through the gate and went to the witness-stand.

COURT CLERK: "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do," said Eldron.

Then Drinkwater asked his name. Eldron established his identity and confirmed his relationship with the brokerage headed—until his death—by Mardley.

"Do you know the defendant?" Drinkwater asked.

"Personally, no," said Eldron. "I know of him, of course."

"Did you know that a stenographer in your office, employed under the name of Patricia Preston, was the defendant's wife?"

"No—that is, not until after the arrest of the defendant."

"You trusted Miss Preston?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Eldron," said Drinkwater, after clearing his voice, "can you state positively that Mr. Thomas Mardley, on the evening of July 22, departed from the office carrying with him fifteen thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"How do you know this?"

"I was present when Mr. Mardley had Mr. Higgens, our cashier, instructed to draw that amount, and later saw Mr. Higgens give the money to Mr. Mardley."

"Through whom did Mr. Mardley instruct Mr. Higgens to draw the money?"

"Through Miss Preston."

"You mean, the message was relayed through Miss Preston to Mr. Higgens?"

"Exactly."

"That's all, Mr. Eldron."

JASON jumped from his seat to halt the witness.

"Mr. Eldron," he cried as he advanced, "did I hear you say you didn't know me?"

Eldron looked toward him soberly. "I said I did not know you personally," he told him.

"What do you mean by 'personally'? Do you mean you have never spoken to me?—or had any dealings with me?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Eldron, *you're a cock-eyed liar, and I charge you with perjury!*"

The courtroom flew into uproar. The spectators laughed, cheered and booed, creating such din that for the space of a full minute neither the banging of the Judge's gavel nor the heated protests of Drinkwater could be heard. Silence was restored after a threat from Judge Frobin to clear the courtroom. Then Jason drew a reprimand. The Judge imposed upon his memory the fact that this was a court of law and that any further accusals directed at witnesses without substantiation would result in a citation for contempt of court.

"I apologize to the Court, Your Honor," said Jason. "But I beg the Court to retain the charge until the conclusion of this trial."

Fired now to a zealous pitch hitherto unsuggested, Drinkwater called his next witness:

"Patricia Preston Codrey to the stand!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AS Pat, nervous and trembling, passed through the gate to take the stand, Judge Frobin's brow puckered worriedly. Leaning forward, he beckoned for Jason to come before him, and then, his voice loaded with concern, he asked: "Mr. Codrey, you know it is your privilege to restrain your wife from testifying against you?"

"I know, Your Honor; but I've no objection," stated the boy. "I shall be most happy if the District Attorney finds her valuable." A smile suggested itself at the corners of his mouth as he turned back to his table.

"Miss Preston," said Drinkwater after preliminaries, "—or do you prefer to be called Mrs. Codrey?"

"Mrs. Codrey," Pat selected huskily.

"Mrs. Codrey, then. You are employed as a stenographer by the firm of Mardley, Pilster, Crole and Eldron, are you not?"

"I was. . . . I quit two weeks ago."

"But you were employed there at the time Mr. Mardley met his death?"

"Yes."

"On the day before his death, did Mr. Mardley instruct you to have Mr. Higgens draw fifteen thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"*You knew,* then, Mrs. Codrey, that Mr. Mardley departed from his office that day with fifteen thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"Upon leaving the offices that night, where did you go, Mrs. Codrey?"

"Home."

"Was your husband there?"

"Yes."

"Did you, by any chance, happen to mention to him that your employer, Mr. Mardley, had left the office with fifteen thousand dollars on him?"

"No. I didn't say much of anything to Jason that night. We had an argument—"

"An argument? About what, Mrs. Codrey?"

Pat turned to the Judge. "Do I have to answer that, Your Honor?" she asked.

BEFORE Judge Frobin could reply, Jason called: "Go ahead, princess; tell him anything he wants to know."

Judge Frobin glanced toward him in irritation, was about to speak, then changed his mind and said nothing.

Shrugging, Pat turned back to Drinkwater and supplied: "We argued about

his horse. Jason has a horse—a racehorse named Disaster—and he'd eaten my geraniums!"

"Then what, Mrs. Codrey?"

"Then I got mad and told Jason that I was tired of supporting the house while he wasted his time at his typewriter. I was sore because Jason was spending his unemployment checks to take care of the horse—"

"You were the only one working, then, Mrs. Codrey?"

"Yes—"

"Your husband was collecting unemployment insurance checks?"

"Yes. But—"

"And you're quite certain that you said nothing to him about Mr. Mardley's possession of the fifteen thousand?"

"Yes."

"But he knew, of course, that Mr. Mardley was quite wealthy?"

"Yes, of course—"

"That's all, Mrs. Codrey."

JASON arose to question the witness. He walked to the stand, pressed her hand and whispered: "I love you." Then, drawing away, he asked:

"Mrs. Codrey, you say you knew that Mr. Mardley had drawn fifteen thousand dollars from the firm's account?—it *was* the firm's account, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Do you know for what purpose Mr. Mardley drew that money?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell it to the Court?"

"Well—you see, Mr. Mardley had just had an argument with Mr. Pilster and the others—"

"Mr. Crole and Mr. Eldron?"

"Yes. He was all burned up about the way they were handling the business, and he drew the money so he could return it to a client they had gypped—"

"Objection!" roared Drinkwater with an angry flourish. "Why Mardley drew the money has no bearing whatsoever upon the case before the Court!"

"Your Honor," said Jason in annoyance, "Mr. Drinkwater is just a bit hasty in drawing his conclusions! How can he possibly know at this time whether or not the question has any bearing?"

"Well—has it?" asked the Judge curiously.

"Of course it has! If he drew the money to pay a swindled client, those crooks—"

"That's enough, Mr. Codrey!" the Judge exploded. "Objection sustained! Strike all reference to the question from the record!"

Jason dismissed Pat from the stand, and retreated to his table.

DRINKWATER'S next witness was Elsie Bailey.

"Miss Bailey," he began, "did you see the defendant on the day of July 23, in the offices of Mardley, Pilster, Crole and Eldron?"

"Yes sir."

"At what time did you see him?"

"I saw him twice—when he came into the office, and when he went out of the office. He came in just after noon and left about twenty after twelve."

"You're sure he left about twenty after twelve?"

"Yes, because at twelve-thirty my boy friend called and wanted to—"

"Never mind your boy-friend, Miss Bailey. Now, when the defendant left the office, did he say anything to you?"

"Yes. I asked him where he was going in such a hurry, and—"

"And what was his answer, Miss Bailey?"

"He said he was *off to commit a murder!*"

"That's all, Miss Bailey."

The courtroom stirred excitedly as Jason permitted Miss Bailey to leave the stand without questioning her.

"Juan Mendoza to the stand," called the clerk.

Mendoza testified that Jason had hired him, with several others, to assist in perpetrating the Don Esteban hoax. There had been no explanation, and Jason promised to pay them well. Then, while riding with Jason in the rear of a hired limousine—

"'Ees wife haccuse 'eem of keelin' Señor Mardley. 'I deed not keel 'eem,' 'e said. 'I jus' murder heem!'"

"The defendant then, *admitted* he had murdered Mr. Mardley?"

"Yes, señor—"

"Then what happened?"

"Then—I queet! But 'ee weel not let me!"

"He would not let you quit?"

"Yes—'ee would not let me queet! 'Ee sticked a guns to my bellee an' say: 'You play balls—or else!'"

"He threatened you with a gun?"

"Yes, 'ee deed!"

"And you wanted to quit because you had heard him say he murdered Mr. Mardley?"

"Yes, señor."

"That's all, Mr. Mendoza."

Jason came forward and leaned toward Mendoza.

"Juan," he questioned gently, "you heard me say I didn't kill Mr. Mardley—I just *murdered* him? Right?"

"*Si*—"

"Did you *see* the gun you say I stuck in your—your belly?"

"I *feel* it!"

"But did you *see* it?"

"No, señor—"

"That's all, Juan."

Turning to the jury, Jason grinned broadly and held taut his thumb and forefinger.

"Gun!" he informed them with a chuckle, then crossed back to his table.

Despite the fact that Juan's dialogue had been rather quaint, the importance of his information regarding Jason's admission of the murder had an intensely sobering effect upon the audience. That Drinkwater was scoring repeatedly, each time with more force, was becoming increasingly obvious.

A tense silence gripped the room as the District Attorney lingered over his papers before calling the next witness. After a few words with his assistant, Drinkwater looked up and called a name to the clerk, who relayed:

"Jackson Floragill to the stand!"

Jackson had been dozing. As the command was repeated, he snapped upward and nearly fell from the end seat he was occupying just behind the rail. He was frightened, and when Jackson was frightened, his thick lower lip bounced like the bill of a pelican. As he approached the stand, his ebony face glistened as though waxed.

"Who's he?" Pat questioned anxiously of Petie.

"I think," Petie informed, "he's Jason's little psychological nip-up!"

CLERK: "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"Ah does indeed!"

"Your name?" Drinkwater fired at the youth.

"Jackson Spillwater Floragill, suh."

"Your occupation?"

"Indoor aviator," Jackson grinned, beginning to enjoy his conspicuousness.

"Are you an elevator operator?"—sternly.

"Yassuh." Jackson sobered.

"Where?"

"At de Clexton Terrace, suh."

"Mr. Mardley had an apartment at the Clexton Terrace. Did you know him?"

"Yassuh—very well Ah knowed him."

"You carried him up often?"

"An' down, suh—"

"You knew his apartment?"

"Yassuh."

"On the 23rd of July—the day Mr. Mardley was murdered—did you see the defendant leaving Mr. Mardley's apartment?"

"Yassuh—Ah took him down, suh."

"What time was that, Jackson?"

"'Xackly one minnut afteh one, in the aftehnoon."

"You're sure that's what time it was?"

"Yassuh. Ah knows 'cause he axt me. He axt me whut time it wuz, an' Ah tol' him an' he axt wuz Ah sure an' Ah said sure Ah wuz sure 'cause Ah jus' set mah watch by de lobby clock!"

"You're certain that was the defendant?"

"Yassuh!"

"Did you see him again that day?"

"Yassuh—at five—when he wuz makin' b'lieve he wuz dat phony South 'Merican 'lanth'opis'—"

"And what did you do then?"

"Ah yelled fo' de po-leece!"

"You called the police because you recognized the defendant as the man you took down from Mr. Mardley's apartment at one minute after one?"

"Yassuh."

"That's all. Your witness, Mr. Codrey."

Jason had no questions.

"The People rest," Drinkwater announced abruptly.

THE Judge looked toward Jason expectantly. As the youth merely ignored that announcement—his puzzled gaze followed Jackson Floragill as the colored boy returned to his seat—those present who were familiar with court procedure, sent their questioning gaze in his direction. Still he said nothing.

"Mr. Codrey," said the worried Judge, "it's customary for the defense to move at this time for a dismissal of the case on grounds of insufficiency of evidence."

Jason stood up and came before him.

"But I think the prosecution has a swell case," he told Judge Frobin seriously. "You're not thinking of dismissing it, are you, Your Honor?"

"What the Court thinks will be made known when the motion is made!" retorted the Judge.

"But I don't want the case dismissed—"

Judge Frobin's eyebrows jumped to the center of his forehead, after which they came down to unite in vexed astonishment. He banged his gavel to restore the order Jason's statement had dissipated. Even Drinkwater appeared shocked.

"Court adjourned until tomorrow morning!" said the Judge.

CHAPTER XIX

AT nine-forty-five, the following morning, under the watchful eye of a detective, Jason was permitted to see his wife, and with her, Petie Hamilton DePlew, in the attorneys' room, which adjoined the court room.

The meeting was rather strained.

To Pat, the ordeal of the past few weeks had been, and remained, a continuous nightmare. To Jason it had seemed much the same, except that the challenge was directed not only toward the defense of his life, but to his honor, ability, and responsibility as well.

He thought of all this as he held Pat within his arms; then his expression hardened from one of tenderness to one of grim determination. He released her, and turned to Petie.

"Did you bring those statements?" he asked.

Petie nodded. "Jason," he asked, "do you think you're really capable of handling this case? I've been around Drinkwater a long time, and take it from me, he's a tough *hombre*. The Judge offered yesterday to postpone—"

The suggestion chafed the boy. "If I can't get myself out of this," he snapped, "nobody can! Give me those envelopes." Then, returning his gaze to Pat, he forced a smile and gently patted her cheek.

"Don't you worry, princess," he told her. "Hop out to that courtroom and watch your husband start throwing monkey-wrenches!"

"What about the other stuff?" Petie asked as Jason took the envelopes.

"Keep it with you," Jason directed. "But have it ready when I need it."

As on the previous day, the courtroom was packed to the doors. When Judge Frobin mounted the bench, his expression was firmly set, yet his eyes, roving behind the scholarly mask provided by his glasses, softened when they lit upon Jason.

The twelve men seated within the jury-box gave evidence of similar disturbance. Even Drinkwater seemed a bit ill at ease.

A tense silence gripped the room as Jason rose to address the court.

"Your Honor," he began, "yesterday, when this trial opened, you seemed concerned by the fact that I had chosen to defend myself. The District Attorney seemed annoyed by it, suggesting, in his opening address, that my decision to do so was probably a subtle appeal for the jury's sympathy. I beg you, and the jury, and Mr. Drinkwater, to believe me when I say that this is not so.

"I need no sympathy. A man who is innocent does not have to resort to such appeals. I know that there isn't a person present who desires to see me convicted of a crime I did not commit. I did not murder Mr. Thomas Mardley. Were I so inclined, I could prove—to the satisfaction of all of you, at least—*that Thomas Mardley was never murdered!*"

The shock of that contention stunned the entire court. Returning to his table, Jason picked up an envelope and brought it to the Judge. As he absorbed the information inscribed upon the enclosed paper, Judge Frobin's mouth snapped open in surprise. Calling for the clerk, he instructed that the note be read aloud.

CLEARING his throat, the clerk began to read:

"'To whom it may concern:

"'When this is read, I shall be dead by my own hand. I accept full responsibility for the act, and offer as my defense, my sincere belief that only in this way can I restore that which is dearer to me than life itself. This, perhaps, is a vague assertion, but I am confident that it shall be understood by those for whom its message is intended.

"'My object might have been accomplished through less violent means, but certainly not without scandal and heartbreaking humiliation; and, at sixty-three, when all that is left to a man is his pride and record, fear of such humiliation is far greater than that of death, for which, having lived in strict

accord with the dictates of his heart and conscience, he is fully prepared.

"'My last prayer is that the appeal herein directed to those who can make this choice a good one, will not go unheard. My profound desire—and that for which I am about to sacrifice what is left of my life—is that I may be remembered as—

"Honest Tom Mardley.'"

FOR a moment the court sat spellbound. Then, leaping to his feet, Drinkwater bellowed: "What is this? Where did that note come from? The defendant has been withholding vital evidence from—"

"Your Honor," Jason interrupted calmly, "what the District Attorney is trying to say is true! I have been withholding this evidence. To be perfectly frank, *I didn't know what to do with it!* But I assure you, the note is genuine. Tom Mardley wrote it—and it's dated July 23rd! I invite any comparison to assure its validity!"

"Your Honor—" yelled the irate Drinkwater. "This situation is ridiculous! The People were not informed of the existence of such a note! I—we—"

"On the face of that note," Jason again interrupted, "I can now demand that the charge against me be immediately dismissed! It proclaims Mardley to be a suicide—and if he committed suicide, *I couldn't have murdered him!*"

No one seemed to know what to do. Heads turned, people argued, the Judge's gavel beat for order—but still no one arose to challenge that assertion.

"However," Jason continued, "such action would do no good. Regardless of what that note states, and regardless of the fact that by saying what I am about to say I sacrifice an opportunity to walk from this room a free man—I know for a positive fact, that *Tom Mardley was murdered*—though I myself *did not kill him!*

"My purpose in bringing this note to the attention of the Court," he went on, "is one that can be explained only when this trial has reached a certain point of development. I do hope, however, that by refusing to avail myself of the excellent opportunity of ducking the issue against me, I have convinced the Court, the jury, and the District Attorney, that I have no intention of impeding, obstructing or evading justice. It is in the cause of justice that I now insist that this trial continue!

"I should like now, to request of the Court and the District Attorney, that I may be permitted to proceed, unhampered, in my own way, and that there may be as few interruptions, either by questions or objections, as possible."

As he finished, Jason glanced quickly from Judge Frobin to Drinkwater; then, turning resolutely, he went to the witness-stand, seated himself in the chair and demanded to be sworn. This done, he paused momentarily, then announced:

"As strange as it may seem, gentlemen, I am going to begin my defense with a confession.

"I did murder Tom Mardley."

CHAPTER XX

THE shock of that admission nearly catapulted the Judge from his bench. Spectators roared, and composing himself with great effort, Judge Frobin beat the gavel viciously for order. It was only after he repeatedly threatened to clear the Court, that order was finally restored.

Having expected this demonstration, Jason sat quietly until it subsided; then, in measured tone, his attention alternating between Judge and jury, he told a story.

It was the story of himself, and how he had written "The Mysterious Stranger." In detail, he told his audience the story of "The Mysterious Stranger." Completing that, he went on to explain how he had rushed to the office to tell it to Pat, and how, just as he concluded its telling, the three brokers invaded the office. Then, step by step, he outlined the circumstances through which he had become involved in the murder of Tom Mardley, where he had gotten the fifteen thousand, most of which remained upon his person until after his capture. He told how, victimized by his imagination, he had tried to convert Mardley's suicide into a murder, had arranged the scene and taken Mardley's suicide note; how he had established himself at the scene of the apparent crime, and how he had called Jackson Floragill's attention to the time. Following this, he explained the Don Esteban hoax, concluding with his eventual capture.

Then, leaving the witness-stand, he went to his table and plucked from it a copy of a five-weeks'-old newspaper. From it, he read the comment beneath a picture showing Tom Mardley, at City

College, *"—the only southpaw who could pitch a double-shoot!"*

He exhibited the picture to the Judge, the jury, and finally to Drinkwater.

"As everyone knows, gentlemen," he announced, "a *southpaw* is a *left*-handed pitcher. The bullet which killed Tom Mardley was lodged in the *right side* of his head! And when I discovered him, the gun which fired the bullet, was in his *right hand!* Tom Mardley was *left-handed!* Had he killed himself, the hole would have been in his *left* temple and the gun in his *left* hand! Therefore, in spite of his note, Mardley *was* murdered!

"I shall now proceed to show you how it would have been impossible for me to have killed Mardley. But first, I'd like Rodick Crole to take the stand."

Faultlessly attired, his stocky frame moving with a grace belying his fifty-odd years, Crole rose from his seat between his two partners and went to the stand. If he was at all nervous, he gave no evidence of it. He seated himself, was sworn in, then placidly gazed at Jason.

"I've asked you to the stand, Mr. Crole," said Jason slowly, "to have you substantiate what I have already told the Court. You know me, of course?"

"Only from what I've read about you, and seen in this room," Crole denied evenly.

"You mean to say you *didn't* hire me to convert Mardley's suicide into a murder?"

"I did not! That's the most imaginative story I've ever heard! I'm sure no sane man would believe it!"

"That's all, Mr. Crole."

Jason then called Pilster to the stand. Pilster, a somewhat older man, lacked the self-possession of his partner. He did, in effect, however, repeat Crole's denial of ever having had anything to do with Jason. His answers, though, were given nervously. Jason dismissed him.

It was not necessary to call Eldron, since Eldron had already made his denials before the Court when appearing as Drinkwater's witness.

PILSTER stepped down. Jason turned to the Judge and demanded that each of the men be charged with perjury, the charge to go into effect when proved by subsequent developments.

The next witness to be called was a man named John Fogerty.

"Mr. Fogerty," began Jason, "you work for the Sesame Clock Company, do you not?"

"I do," Fogerty answered. "I'm a repair-man."

"How many repair-men does your company employ?"

"One to a district."

"And your district, Mr. Fogerty?"

"The Coast—'Frisco to San Diego."

"You know all about Sesame clocks?"

"Of course."

"They are all set flatly in the wall, are they not?"

"They are."

"If one gets out of order, runs fast or slow, could its time be regulated by any person not instructed in its mechanism?"

"You can't get at 'em," Fogerty informed him. "When one of our clocks goes out of order, the company has to fix it."

Jason nodded.

"And have you, Mr. Fogerty, as the only repair-man in this district, had any call from the Clexton Terrace to adjust a clock—a Sesame clock—imbedded in the wall of the Clexton Terrace's lobby?"

"I put that clock in last year, and it's never been touched since. Why? Are they havin' trouble with it?"

"No," smiled Jason, "but I am. That's all, Mr. Fogerty."

As Fogerty descended, Jason turned to the court clerk and requested a reading of Jackson Floragill's testimony.

WHEN this was done, and after the clerk concluded, Jason addressed the Court with: "The time that I entered the elevator after leaving Mardley's apartment on the day that he was murdered, is now definitely established. It was—according to the court record, *one minute past one.* —Your Honor," he asked suddenly, looking up toward the Judge, "have you a watch?"

Judge Frobin reached beneath his robes and pulled one forth.

"And you, Mr. District Attorney?"

Drinkwater also produced a watch.

"What time is it, Your Honor?"

"Eleven-fifteen—"

"And by yours, Mr. District Attorney?"

"Eleven-fifteen—"

"Your Honor—I know this is an unusual request, but I beg you to grant it. Please instruct the clerk to call the Clexton Terrace and request from whomever answers the time by the clock—the *Sesame* clock—in the wall over the desk."

After a moment's hesitation, during which the Judge glanced toward Drink-

water as though expecting an objection, the clerk was so directed, and lifted the receiver from a telephone atop his desk, he procured the number of the Clexton Terrace, and then, after receiving his party, made Jason's request.

The court lapsed into silence, all eyes upon the clerk. Then: *"The time,"* repeated the clerk, *"is eleven-twenty-one!"*

Swinging back to the Judge, Jason fired: "And what is it now, by your watch, Your Honor?"

BEFORE the Judge could reply, a chorus of united voices, of spectators, jurors, attendants, burst forth with: *"Eleven-seventeen!"*

"The clock at the Clexton Terrace, then, is four minutes fast!" cried Jason. "It was four minutes fast on the day of Mardley's murder. Jackson Floragill was sure he had the right time because he had just set his watch by the clock in the hotel lobby! Therefore—I did not enter that elevator at one minute past one! I entered it at twelve fifty-seven!

"Now—" He went quickly to the first row of spectators, and procured from Petie DePlew two packages. Placing one on his table, he tore the paper from the other and exhibited the article it contained to the Court. "This," he said, "is a cuckoo-clock!" He held it up that all might see. "It's an electric cuckoo-clock. And it's a *very strange* one—because the cuckoo, which comes out every hour to chirp the time, *hasn't any head!"*

Opening the tiny doors in the top compartment of the clock, Jason drew forth the bird and showed it to the Judge and jury.

"Now *why* hasn't this cuckoo got a head?" he asked. "It hasn't got a head, *because its head was shot off by a bullet!* The bullet-hole is still in the rear panel! But there is *no hole* in the *doors* of the cuckoo's nest! Therefore, gentlemen, the bullet must have entered the clock while the doors were open! Which means that the bullet must have entered the clock *on the hour!*

"Now," he continued, "this clock, until a few days ago, was telling *accurate time*—which, if necessary, I can prove by a witness—on the wall of *Tom Mardley's* living-room, in his apartment! *It was his clock!"*

Pausing to give his audience time to absorb all he had just presented, Jason went back to the table, unwrapped the other package, drew forth a pearl-handled gun, and, from an envelope, a statement and a bullet, and returned to his position before the bench.

"This," he said, "is a gun. It, like the clock, *belonged to Mardley.* I have a copy of his permit, which proves that it was his. And this—" exhibiting a tiny pellet, "is a bullet that was fired from this gun. This can be proved by the sworn statement of a ballistics expert. *This bullet was in that clock!*

"Now, because of his note, we know that Mardley was going to commit suicide. At the time of his death, Mardley still clung to that intention, for his note, when I found it, was on his person. As a matter of fact, gentlemen, *Mardley was in the act of committing suicide when he was murdered!* He was standing with his left side facing the windows of his den. He did not hear the murderer enter the apartment. He had his gun in his left hand, holding it to his left temple. The murderer saw only the right side of Mardley's body. Taking careful aim, he shot Mardley in the right side of the head. Mardley's gun went off simultaneously, the bullet crossing the living-room and entering the cuckoo clock!

"The coroner has stated that Tom Mardley met his death between the hours of ten in the morning and one in the afternoon. The clock proves that Mardley's death occurred *on the hour.* It is obvious, then, that he must have been murdered at exactly *ten, eleven, twelve* or *one!* No testimony has been presented to the Court to show that I was at the scene of the crime *within fifty-seven minutes of the time Mardley was murdered!* And, as has been shown, there can be no mistake about the time I left the apartment."

AN involuntary cheer went up from the spectators. The Judge restored order, and Jason called a witness.

"Gerard Fienbeck to the stand."

The noted criminal lawyer came forward, took the oath and was seated.

"Mr. Fienbeck," Jason began, "the newspapers say you are to represent in court, when his trial for manslaughter comes up, a Japanese gentleman by the name of Kazu Yamaoka. Is that true?"

"It is."

"You were retained to defend Mr. Yamaoka, by a gentleman named Tony Carmello—sometimes called 'Carnation'—were you not?"

"I was."

"It is Mr. Carmello who is paying you your fee, is it not?"

"It is."

"Thank you—that's all, Mr. Fienbeck." Jason turned to the clerk. "Now may we have Kazu Yamaoka?" he asked.

"Kazu Yamaoka to the stand."

An undersized, poorly dressed Japanese made his way down the aisle, passed through the gate and came to the witness-stand. His eyes, squinting behind thick-lensed glasses, were fixed upon Jason as he took the oath. Then:

"You are Kazu Yamaoka?"

"Yes."

"You are a truck-farmer?"

"Yes."

"You drive a truck?"

"Yes."

"You drove the truck that ran into the squad car at the mouth of the Third Street tunnel on the night of July 23rd?"

"Yes."

"You are now awaiting trial on a manslaughter charge resulting from the death of the two police officers in that collision?"

"Yes."

"Was that accident *really* an accident?"

"Ah—w'at you mean, please?"

"I mean that you *deliberately* drove that truck into the squad car! *It was no accident!*"

"No—no! Not seeing squad car coming!"

"You not only *saw* the car—you were *waiting for it!*"

"Not waiting—just coming downhill to hit accident'ly!"

"Did you have on your headlights?"

"Lights on!"

"Lights off!" Jason corrected. "Why were your lights off, Kazu? Wasn't it because you didn't want the driver of the squad car to see you?"

"No—no—maybe forget lights."

"But you didn't forget to switch them on just before the cars crashed!"

"I thinking then, maybe. . . ."

"You murdered those two policemen, Kazu!"

"Not meaning I kill the policemen!" shouted the distraught Japanese.

"I know you didn't mean to kill the policemen. You meant to kill *me!*"

"Not me! Carnation!"

"Carnation hired you, is that it?"

"Carnation hiring me—"

"That's all," Jason smiled. "Good luck at your own trial. *You're going to need it!*"

"Tony Carmello, take the stand!"

Carmello admitted posting bail for Kazu Yamaoka, and subsequently hiring Fienbeck to defend him.

"Why?" questioned Jason.

"He's a friend of mine," said the suave flower-fancier.

"You didn't hire Kazu to wreck that car?"

"Of course not."

"Then it's just out of the goodness of your heart that you're helping him?"

"That's it. Anything for a friend—"

"You weren't doing a favor for *another* friend by arranging that car-wreck? You weren't trying to help this second friend of yours out of a tough spot by trailing me to Westlake Park, to get *me* or *the gun I was carrying,* were you?"

No answer.

"Your Honor," cried Jason, swinging toward the Judge, "this man is a murderer! He hired Kazu Yamaoka to wreck that car, and is directly responsible for the deaths of police officers John Albright and Walter Simonds! I *demand his immediate arrest!*"

"But it wasn't my idea!" shouted Carnation in panic.

"*Whose* idea was it?"

Carnation—Carmello—would say no more. His eyes, however, blazed straight ahead.

Jason dismissed him, and as he reclaimed his seat, an attendant moved toward him.

JACKSON FLORAGILL was then recalled to the stand.

"Jackson, you said you saw me come out of Mr. Mardley's apartment at the approximate time of his murder?"

"Yassuh."

"You're *sure* it was I?"

"Yassuh."

"How was I dressed, Jackson?"

"Like when you wuz the Spanish 'lanth'opis'."

"Derby? Striped pants? Cutaway coat? Spats—and all?"

"Yassuh."

Leaving Jackson for the moment, Jason went to his table, picked up an envelope and then went to the bench. "Your Honor," he said, "I have here a receipt for some clothes I bought at the 'Good Fellow' store on Hollywood Boulevard on July 23rd. I have also a sworn statement from the clerk who sold me those clothes. They were not purchased—as the statement says—until after one-thirty *in the afternoon!* And

each item, you'll note, is listed on the receipt.

"Proving—" he stamped toward Floragill—"that I could not possibly have been wearing those clothes at the time this boy saw me!

"Now, Jackson," he continued gently, "you've been lying—"

"But Ah could 'a' swore—"

"You *did* swear, Jackson."

The colored youth moaned his discomfort.

"Derby . . . cutaway . . . striped trousers . . . spats—" Jason reviewed, stroking his chin. "Jackson—you couldn't have confused me with somebody else?"

"Ah don' know now, suh!"

"Isn't there anyone present dressed like the *other* man you saw coming from Mr. Mardley's apartment?"

"O-other man?" Jackson's eyes were widening.

"That man, for instance?"

AND Jason's finger pointed out over the rail.

Jackson leaped from his chair. His trembling lips made several attempts to move before he could speak. Then:

"T-t-tha's him!" The accusal came in a high-pitched squeak. "Tha's him! Ah seen 'im!"

Rodick Crole to the stand!

Amidst the uproar created by the negro's accusal, Crole, now white and shaking, came forward and took the stand for the second time.

"Mr. Crole," said Jason, a note of triumph toning his voice, "I've known for some time that you murdered your partner Tom Mardley. I also know why you killed Mr. Mardley; I've shown the Court *how* you killed Mr. Mardley. When they put the heat on him, Carnation, like Jackson Floragill, will also put the finger on you. If you need any further persuasion to convince you that you'll be saving both yourself and the Court a lot of trouble by confessing, I'll be most happy to supply it. I can show how, on the morning of Mr. Mardley's death, at eleven-forty-five, you entered the bank and had transferred from the firm's account, to your own, the sum of four hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars! Later, after I had taken all the worry from your shoulders by volunteering to become the stand-in for your murder, you had the money put back into the firm's account.

"You killed Tom Mardley because you were afraid that he was going to

have the firm investigated; and having killed him, your intention was to run away with the firm's money. You tried twice to have me eliminated, because you were afraid I'd talk, and because I took Mardley's gun from you after I broke jail.

"You were afraid of that gun! You were afraid, because you had taken that gun from Mardley's hand, replacing it with your own, when you murdered him!

"Jackson Floragill saw you leaving Mardley's apartment. He also saw me leaving the apartment, sometime afterward. He formed a composite picture in his mind, remembering *your* clothes and my *face*. You see, Mr. Crole, when I tried to dress as Don Esteban, I could think of no one remotely resembling a millionaire after whom to pattern his attire. Then I thought of you, and I imitated your outfit to the smallest detail!

"You can see, now, that I know as well as you do what happened to Tom Mardley. You *did* murder him, didn't you?"

Crole's eyes had been fastened to the floor. Sighing deeply, he brought them up to meet Jason's. His mouth twisted in an ironic smile.

"Yes," he said, breathing heavily.

THAT was the last intelligible statement heard in the courtroom for the space of ten minutes. The spectators rose in a body and pressed against the rail. Newspaper men fought desperately to gain the corridors. Cameras flashed from everywhere. A shrieking crowd gathered about Jason. The District Attorney's hand was the first to shake the boy's. The Judge banged for order, then gave up. He motioned the clerk toward him, gave orders to be imparted to the jury, then left the bench and joined the throng about Jason. It was the wildest demonstration the Hall of Justice had ever witnessed.

"Think we'll ever get to him?" cried Pat to Petie, tears of joy streaming down her face as she battled the mob.

"What?" yelled Petie.

She repeated the question.

"I don't know what you're saying," shouted the pudgy man, "but if you want me, you can find me in the nearest bar!"

ONE half-hour later Jason and Patricia stood together on the street before the impressive building.

"Doggone it," he was telling her delightedly, "I knew that elevator-boy had done a psychological nip-up!"

(From Loretta Peabody's Column, Los Angeles *News-Tribune:)*

Well, folksies, he's done it again! . . . My favorite Producer, the Wizard of Hollywood, Sam Fuller, has just scooped the industry by purchasing the screen-rights to the most sensational drama this city has ever experienced. "The Mysterious Stranger," as written and lived by its author, Jason Codrey, will go into production—

A YOUNG man with tousled chestnut hair sipped languidly from a tall glass as he watched from his box in the clubhouse section of the Santa Anita stands, the antics of eleven thoroughbreds as they approached the barrier.

Beside him squirmed a lovely red-haired young lady, one hand gripping a rail while the other assisted her teeth in tearing apart a program.

"Boy!" The young man waved for an attendant.

"Yes sir?"

"Boy—bet this thousand for me, please. Stick it on the nose of No. 11—Disaster."

The young lady nearly swallowed the program.

"Jason!" she cried as the boy departed. "A thousand dollars! Who do you think you are—Vanderbilt?"

"I've got to back my own horse, don't I!" he demanded.

The boy returned with the tickets just as the horses broke from the barrier.

"At the quarter," droned a voice from the loud-speakers, "it's Slaphappy in front by a head. . . . Green Orb second. . . . Ladyfingers by two lengths . . . . Bad Kid fourth . . . Disaster—"

"How can a horse like Disaster win?" Pat yelled. "He's been training on geraniums!"

"He'll win," said Jason.

"At the half-mile post! Green Orb in front by two lengths. . . . Slaphappy second by a nose. . . . Bad Kid third by a length and a half. . . . Ladyfingers fourth. . . . And Disaster—"

Patricia had lapsed into prayer, while Jason followed the horses through his field-glasses.

"Around the far turn! Bad Kid leads by a neck. . . . Ladyfingers second between horses. . . . Green Orb third by a nose. . . . Slaphappy fourth and bearing out! Disaster trails!"

The glasses came down as Jason fumbled for a cigarette.

"Into the stretch! It's Bad Kid and Ladyfingers neck and neck. . . . Green Orb third. . . . And here comes Disaster!"

"Did he say *Disaster?"* Pat gulped, opening her eyes.

Jason threw away the cigarette.

"Disaster's moving up! He's challenging the leaders! He's moving between Bad Kid and Ladyfingers. . . . It's going to be close: Bad Kid—Disaster—and Ladyfingers!"

Then it happened! Bad Kid's jockey yelled something across to the boy on Ladyfingers. Crops cut through the air. Disaster fell back—

"Coming across the line of finish! It's Bad Kid—no!—Ladyfingers first! Bad Kid second, Disaster third—"

Pat's eyes flamed toward her husband. "He'll win, all right! Yeah, man! One thousand bucks *pffft!"*

Jason said nothing. He fell into his chair and sipped his drink.

But then, as the cheering died:

"Ladies and gentlemen—there's been a disqualification. . . . Ladyfingers has been moved back—"

"How d'ya like that?" Jason groaned. "And Disaster third!"

"Bad Kid has also been set back! The winner is No. 11—Disaster!"

"What!" Jason's glass went over his shoulder; he struggled to his feet and let out a whoop: "He wins! He *wins!* Disaster wins! I told you!"

"Oh, Jason!" screamed Pat. "It's wonderful! It's—" Her face melted in sudden horror. "Jason! *What are you doing?"*

"He won! He *won!"*

"He won, all right—*but you've just torn up the tickets!"*

THE END

"North to the Promised Land" a novel of the Texas Trail, is scheduled to appear, complete, in our January issue.

Caterpillar No. 2

The following stories of adventure are contributed by our readers in accordance with the prize offer detailed on page 3. First the story of what is perhaps the strangest aircraft disaster ever to happen in America is told by the pilot of the ill-fated ship.

As told to Tracy Richardson

By CAPTAIN JACK BOETTNER

THERE was no Caterpillar Club when I fulfilled the requirements for membership; but when it was formed, I became Caterpillar Number Two. It's a strange organization, this Caterpillar Club. No one is invited to join. No one has the least desire to become a member; the initiation is too tough. There is only one requirement for membership—that a person has saved his or her life by the use of a parachute.

Caterpillars spin cocoons from which the silk is made that is woven into the parachute used throughout the flying world. The idea originated in the fertile mind of a manufacturer of parachutes; and he presents the symbol of the club to each qualifying member. The member's name and number are engraved on the back of the pin.

I am Caterpillar Number Two. Henry Wacker beat me down by a matter of two seconds, and so he is Number One. We were the first men in America to save our lives in an aircraft disaster by the use of parachutes. Ours was disaster, complete, horrifying as it was unexpected. An accident that seared the memory, but one that with all modern improvements could not be repeated. It was the catastrophe that gave birth to the idea of the Caterpillar Club.

During the war I had served as pilot and instructor on lighter-than-air craft, training army and navy officers in the use of free balloons, observation balloons and the maneuverable balloon known as the blimp. I'd trained hundreds of observers and pilots. I'd flown hundreds of hours and taken part in a great many races in free balloons. I was an en-

thusiastic advocate of lighter-than-air flying.

A lighter-than-air blimp-type ship had been assembled at an amusement park in Chicago, the Great White City. The press and public had been mildly sarcastic about the idea of constructing such a ship in the city of Chicago. But on July 21, 1919, the air-ship was completed and turned over to me, as pilot, to test.

With me on that first test flight was an expert airplane mechanic, Henry Wacker, and a lighter-than-air mechanic, Carl Weaver, an enthusiastic youngster thrilled with the ambition to become a lighter-than-air pilot.

TO us that ship, the *Wingfoot Express*, was a thing of beauty and promise. Its sleek sides glistened under the sun of a perfect summer's afternoon. Two seventy-five horsepower motors suspended beneath the bag were in perfect condition, and the open gondola that swung slightly forward of the two motors was the last word for observation and comfort. The gas-bag that supported all this was one hundred and fifty-eight feet long and was inflated by one hundred and ninety thousand cubic feet of hydrogen gas. She was the last word in non-rigid construction, and I was proud to be her commander.

After a careful inspection the engines were started and warmed up under the careful supervision of the two mechanics. They pronounced them perfect. I tried the controls but there was nothing more we could do to improve this queen of the air.

I gave the word, "Up ship," and the ground crew loosed their holds and heaved on the bottom of the gondola. The motors roared full out, and like a thing alive the *Wingfoot Express* surged into her element, the air, her two big wooden propellers pulling us forward and upwards. It was the perfect ship and perfect flying weather.

For an hour I guided the new air queen over the city. Down below we could see thousands of white faces turned upward to follow our progress, and I wondered if they were cheering. I throttled the motors, and we floated along with the gentle breeze. I climbed the ship, dived and circled and put her through all her paces, and to every touch of the wheel and throttle she responded like a thing alive, as though she understood my every thought. I was satisfied. It was the most perfect ship I'd ever flown.

Reluctantly I headed back to the field, for I knew there was a long list of waiting passengers who wanted to make the first flight. "She's perfect!" I told the ground-crew and officials as we dropped lightly to earth.

"ALL ready for the first passengers!" I shouted—and never dreamed of the fate in store for those two who had pulled wires to be first.

Two men came forward and were helped into the gondola. They were M. G. Norton, news-photographer for the *Herald and Examiner*, and Earl Davenport, a writer. They were nervous, as was natural, for it was their first flight. Norton clung firmly to his camera. They joked with the crowd and with the crew as to what they would do in case of accident. I ordered them to put on the parachute harness.

"I'd be too scared to use that thing, anyway," said Davenport, but I insisted, and they buckled the straps around his body.

This was before the days of the modern pack parachute that straps over the back or forms a seat and opens at the will of the wearer when he pulls the rip-cord—which releases a pilot chute that in turn drags forth the main umbrella. The chutes we were using were folded in packs and slung on the outside of the gondola, and were connected to the harness worn by the passengers by stout cords. I explained the parachutes to the two passengers and told them how, in the remote case of an accident, they were to jump clear of the gondola, and the weight of their bodies would pull the parachutes from the packs and carry them gently to earth.

Parachutes were not new, but up to this time they had only been used in this country for exhibition purposes, jumps from airplanes and balloons. I knew they worked, but I had never used one, and in my heart I knew I'd never take to the 'chute except as a last forlorn chance. But then, I never thought for one minute the occasion would ever come for me to use one of these frills, as I called them. Nothing could happen to such a perfect lady as the "Wingfoot Express."

But orders were orders and my instructions were that everyone in the gondola must be equipped with a parachute. As an example, I got into my chute harness, feeling just a little foolish and something like a traitor at taking such a useless precaution.

All set, I took over the controls and settled behind the tiny windshield. Wacker and Weaver sat in nonchalant pride where they could keep a watchful eye on their precious motors. Our two passengers settled down in comfortable seats, waiting for the moment of take-off, the thrill of a lifetime.

For the second time that day I gave the word "Up ship," and we rose rapidly until we were flying at an altitude of two thousand feet; there I leveled off and we flew level at an average speed of forty miles per hour, with both ship and motors behaving perfectly. I circled while Davenport made copious notes which he intended later to enlarge into a story of his first flight. Norton was in his glory, snapping pictures of everything below, and I could hear him shouting to Davenport about the scoop he was getting for his paper. Gone was every vestige of nervousness.

Norton leaned over toward my back and shouted above the roar of the wind and motors. "Hey, Boettner! How about flying over the Loop District, so I can get some real pictures? I'll give the other papers something to shoot at."

I was willing to oblige. In fact, I rather liked the idea of showing the doubting Thomases who had said we could not build an airship in Chicago. So I headed toward the loop, the central business district of Chicago. Soon Norton was shouting with glee as he snapped picture after picture and made certain of his scoop.

I throttled down until the *Wingfoot Express* was almost floating as a free balloon, so as to give photographer Norton more time to get his pictures. And then it happened.

THE official investigation after the disaster said static electricity was responsible. I think that must have been the cause, but I don't know. There was a slight bump, as though something had collided with the soft gas-bag. I heard a cry of horror from Weaver, and looked around. Flames were leaping around the bottom of the gas-bag above us.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Fire on my ship! Impossible! My stupor actually lasted only a second or two. I well knew the explosive power of hydrogen. I pushed the throttles closed, but the motors continued to turn over slowly, working perfectly until the last.

"Jump!" I yelled to the transfixed crew and passengers. "Jump—*jump!*"

Strangely enough, I forgot my own parachute for the moment. Seconds counted. The flames were growing, spreading upward around the sides of the gas-bag. Any second might see the explosion of those thousands of cubic feet of confined hydrogen that would hurl us all to kingdom come. I saw Norton struggling between his desire to jump and the almost overwhelming call to "get the picture." Twice I saw him raise his camera—I don't know whether he snapped a picture or not; then Wacker grabbed him; and half pushed, half jumping, he went over the side and out of my sight.

Davenport jumped next and was out of my line of vision. Flames seared my arm. Wacker went over the side of the gondola, and I followed him; then Weaver came over after me in a wild leap. How I blessed at that moment the order that required each person to be equipped with a life-saving parachute.

I felt the tug of my harness jerking at the chute-pack, felt it give and pull free —and I looked up and *straight into the eyes of Davenport,* the man who said he'd be too scared to jump. The shroud-lines of his chute had caught on the side of the gondola. Too late to be of any service to him, I watched until his struggles were blacked from my sight by smoke and flames.

I plummeted for a short distance, all too short for safety; then my chute caught the wind and flared open, and I floated peacefully down while above me raged an inferno of a burning airship. Below me I could see three other chutes dropping gently toward safety.

There came a muffled roar above me, and I knew the *Wingfoot Express* had exploded, although I could not actually see it on account of my billowing parachute above me. Almost instantly, it seemed, pieces of burning fabric came raining down; and then like a meteorite the motors, the flaming gondola and the burning envelope, trailing like the tail of a kite, flashed past me. I saw a black hole come like magic in my chute, and knew it had caught a spark. "How long?" I thought. But the spark died, and I breathed again in hope.

BELOW me I saw another flash of flame, and one of the parachutes simply disappeared. One second it was there, and the next it was gone and a dark speck was hurtling down, end over end, toward the city below. I wondered wildly

which one it was, but it was not until much later that I learned that the burned parachute had been carrying mechanic Weaver, the boy who had been so happy in his work on such a grand ship.

Distinctly I saw the flaming wreck of the airship plunge down into the business district, and then I was too busy to do anything but try and take care of myself. Directly beneath me there rose the tall spire of a skyscraper, and I thought that was my landing-place. In time I realized it offered no footing on its sloping sides, and pulled my shroud-lines and so passed it by, to land a second later on a flat roof, narrowly missing a large glass skylight.

Almost doubting my luck, I scrambled to my feet; and instantly, it seemed to me, my parachute, which evidently had been soaked in gasoline and oil from the burning ship, burst into flames.

Dazed but thankful at my escape from a fiery death, I made my way to the street. Only then did I realize the full horror of that fatal flight. The wreckage of the airship, two heavy motors, the gondola, the gas-tanks and what remained of the envelope, had crashed down through the roof of a big bank, exploding and throwing oil and gas over everything. Ten people lost their lives in that inferno inside the bank; and many others were seriously injured.

I had escaped with only a burned arm, the luckiest of the lot. Mechanic Weaver, with safety almost in his grasp, had been swung against the side of the Western Union Building and injured. From there he had fallen to his death in the street below.

Wacker was dashed against the cornice of a tall building and knocked unconscious, but fortunately he fell onto a fire escape, from which he was rescued, battered but with no bones broken. He recovered and is alive today.

Thirteen dead from a trip that started out so hopefully! Today such an accident would be next to impossible, for all lighter-than-air ships here in America are inflated with the non-inflammable helium gas. In fact, helium will smother out a fire.

After the accident Wacker quit the flying game, but since the day I qualified as a member of the caterpillar club I have flown lighter-than-air ships more than ten thousand hours without a single mishap. I have every confidence in the modern airship, and needless to say in parachutes made possible by caterpillars.

THE END

Pioneer of Africa

He found a diamond mine in a savage desert, but the Germans had other ideas.

By PETER

YEARS before, as a boy, I had visited the Zulu chief Dinizulu, who had been almost a neighbor of ours. He had called me a little woman, then. Now he was in rebellion; and I, as one of the Natal Carbineers, was marching against his stronghold.

Forming up in the pouring rain behind a guide, we rode into the darkness. Mud squelched underfoot. Rain trickled down my back. The cloth of my newly issued riding-breeches chafed my legs. We rode till dawn. Before us then was an open plain, in the middle the great cluster of concentric rings of huts.

"Walk, march," the order came. As we rode out from the forest, I caught my breath in astonishment. Horsemen were moving simultaneously from the trees in every direction. The kraal was ringed with horsemen, moving steadily forward.

"O-u-u!" cried an old woman, giving the alarm, as she came to draw water from the stream which we were already crossing. She turned so suddenly to run that the calabash slipped from her head and crashed to the ground.

Warriors swarmed like bees from behind the reed stockade. They stood stock-still when they saw us, a mob of men without a leader for the moment. We had caught them napping.

Colonel Mackenzie dismounted.

"No. 1 Troop, B Squadron, will follow the Colonel," came the order.

It was my own troop. Chance had ruled that I was to see the actual ending of the rule of the House of Chaka.

With bayonets fixed, we pushed our way roughly through the angry disorganized horde of Zulu warriors to the royal

RAINIER

hut. Colonel Mackenzie kicked in the door of the hut without ceremony and ordered Dinizulu out.

With much grunting on his part and some pulling and pushing on the part of his counselors, Dinizulu was got through the low doorway and helped to stand erect. Pity struggled with loathing in my mind as I watched him, a ring of rifles pointed at his great heaving belly.

Suddenly he straightened. With something of the royal dignity for which his forbears had been famous, he spoke.

"Is it thus that you greet a king? Know ye that he who breaks down the door of the house of a king must die? Since Chaka first sat upon the royal stool, no man had defied his house as thou hast this day—and lived."

The hum of astonishment which had broken from the warriors around us at the breaking down of the door died suddenly at Dinizulu's words. Had they found a leader after all? I felt them edging closer, heard their short excited breathing, smelled the acrid smell of many naked bodies; my flesh crept to the thought of the spear-points clustered within a yard of my back. Another minute of this, and we would be speared from behind. The troops outside would avenge us most thoroughly, but they could not possibly intervene in time to save our troop if we were attacked.

Colonel Mackenzie saved the situation.

"O foolish king!" he cried. "Fool and craven, who let Bombata die while you sat among your wives! Had you led these warriors then, when the time was ripe, the minds of your people would have set you beside your father Cetywayo, a warrior king. Why should they die for you now, a proven coward, without hope of victory?"

There was a muttering among the crowd as his words went home. He had struck the right note.

"*Dinizulu,*" bellowed Mackenzie suddenly, and placed his hand upon the great black shoulder, "*in the name of the King I arrest you for high treason!*"

Dinizulu wilted and what majesty he had assumed dropped from him.

We closed around him and marched him through a lane of his own warriors. A wagon was found. He was literally loaded on it, with a few of his favorite wives, and carted to the railway, *en route* to Pietermaritzburg, to stand trial. There he was found guilty and sentenced to exile for life, in distant Cape Colony

IT was in the Horseshoe Hotel bar in Pietermaritzburg that I met Walter Airey. I was back home for a brief visit, with money in my pocket. It had taken me a year to get that money. Some of it came from a shepherd's wages—how I had hated the five thousand silly bleaters in my charge as I grazed them for three months in the Alleman's Nek range of the Transvaal! More of it came from shooting baboons at a shilling a head in the Drakensberg Mountains, bounty paid by a farmer to save his corn. But by far the most of it came from a fencing contract in the Orange Free State—Piet Joubert's place, son of the old Boer commander-in-chief, who had died during the siege of Ladysmith.

"Came out at sixteen," Airey told me. "Ran away from school. Got pipped at Magersfontein and sent back home."

"What brought you out again?"

"Old man died and left me enough to get along with. But what are you doing in this dead hole?"

"I've been in the Free State, contracting," I replied with great importance. "I'm leaving for Rhodesia, maybe even farther, in a few days."

"I'm looking for a partner," Airey continued. "Got a scheme on. It's sound but sounds wild. I'll tell you about it if you keep it under your hat."

"Righto."

"What brought me from home was the new diamond strike in Demaraland, German South West Africa. Heard about it?"

I nodded. The papers were full of it. Diamonds had been found lying loose in the sands of the Namib Desert back of Luderitzbucht. There had been the usual

rush to stake claims. Some of them appeared to have turned out quite rich, but the workable area was limited by lack of water.

"Well, I happened to come out from home with a geologist who had spent some time in Luderitzbucht. He told me that it was almost certain that the diamond formations extended right into the interior, in a northeasterly direction. My scheme is to outfit for an expedition to land in Conception Bay, two hundred miles north of Luderitz', and strike inland with camels to locate the extent of the field."

"Sounds attractive—but tough."

"Why not come in with me?"

"Man, that would cost thousands. I've only got my fare to Rhodesia and a bit over."

"I don't need your money. I need someone who is used to the veld. I'll put up the money and give you a ten-percent interest in anything we find, plus your expenses."

We struck a bargain along those lines. A month later we sailed from Capetown on *The Pride of Jesse*. The old tug was nothing to be proud of now. She leaked like a soap-box, wallowed like a sow and steered like a drunken Hottentot. Her cargo of cockroaches would have sunk her, had they been lead. Her engines wheezed asthmatically and broke down at irregular intervals. Her captain came aboard tacking like a lugger in a head wind. *The Pride of Jesse* was ours, however, bought and paid for.

At Luderitzbucht we could probably have sold the contents of the water-casks piled in our hold for enough to pay our expenses up to date. Water was selling for one shilling per gallon in that hell of black glassy rock, white flying sand and blazing sunshine. Everyone drank beer, perhaps because it was cheaper.

By the grace of God and the luck of landlubbers we dropped anchor a few days later in Conception Bay, with the thermometer in the cabin registering 120° Fahrenheit, and the threat of a storm rolling in the combers from the unprotected southwest quarter.

WE established our base among the sand dunes behind the beach. The base would be left in charge of two of our colored crew. Two more would accompany us inland. Still another two would direct the camel-train which would maintain connection between Conception Bay and ourselves. The balance were to sail to Capetown in *The Pride of Jesse*, to return monthly with more water, camel-fodder and supplies.

In a shelter of baled hay, roofed over with tarpaulin, we lived for three months in the inner Namib Desert. The caldron of the sun was a menace of death as Airey and I lay panting with the thermometer at 140° Fahrenheit.

There was death in the whirling sandstorms when we huddled behind our saddles, our saddle-blankets around our heads to filter our breathing, and visibility down to zero. At such times our hands were always on the pocket compasses which alone could direct us back to safety in case the storm should persist beyond the limits of our water-bottles.

There was death, too, in the chill silence of the desert night, when we woke from sleep with a start and clutched at one another, to know there was at least one other inhabitant of this deserted planet.

Strangely enough, there was life in this dead place—though what it subsisted on was not readily apparent, as there was no open water within a hundred miles.

Wild ostriches there were, springbok and an occasional lordly gemsbok. Jackals sneaked around our camp and yipped at the moon. There was also a queer miniature brown rabbit with a black tail, who was so tame he would hardly move out of our way. He would sit up and look at us, wriggling his nose, at three or four yards' range.

The *narra* melon was the secret of the existence of these creatures. About the size of a cantaloupe, its pulp almost pure water inside a hard shell, it grows beneath the surface in the lee of sand-drifts.

A white-hot inferno—140° Fahrenheit in the shade, to be exact. I moved my feet uneasily as the heat struck up through the soles of my boots. My hands were sore where the iron prospector's pan had blistered them and the sand-grains worked into the blisters.

Hot, sore and parched, I straightened up and began to blow the sand-grains from the handful I had collected in the bottom of my pan. Soon there was nothing but a small residue of the heavier minerals—minerals by the dozen, but never the glassy sparkle in the pan which would mean a diamond. In disgust I flung down my pan.

For a month we had been testing, ever since we had reached that camp, away back, which we reckoned was about

eighty miles inland. The camp where the camel had torn the trousers off one of the boys, then shaken them aloft as a terrier shakes a rat.

Sand, heat and thirst by day. Cold and thirst by night. Always thirst, because we had to save an emergency ration of water for fear of accidents to those six camels which trekked through with our supplies each week from the base we had established among the sand dunes of Conception Bay.

Did the diamond belt really extend this far into the Namib Desert? I was beginning to doubt it, although Walter didn't seem discouraged; he had outfitted for three months' testing, he said, and test we would for that length of time.

If there had been only some way to distinguish readily the diamond-bearing formations—if they existed here—from the barren desert sands! But there wasn't. The diamond-belt carried an occasional diamond loose in the surface sand. The barren formations didn't. That was all. To find the difference, we had to keep on testing, testing till we found a diamond. Then more testing, to establish the width of the diamond belt. Then the monumenting of claim corners with piles of rocks. And we hadn't found our first diamond yet, although we had tested the sand at fifty-yard intervals for the last twenty miles.

IT was about ten o'clock. Time to knock off. At three we would start again, if no sand-storm began. Most afternoons we had to lie in our shelter among the hay-bales while the almost daily blistering sand-blizzard roared overhead. Mostly we spent those times talking, lifting our voices above the shriek of the wind, or reading, if there was anything unread from the mail the *Jesse* had brought on her last monthly voyage. Those stories of Walter's were good, though. What a fine life he had led —yachts, theater parties, chorus-girls, race-meetings! I would try it myself some day when I struck it rich. He liked my stories of the veld too, although they were commonplace enough.

That was Walter over there, although one wouldn't guess that expanding and contracting brown blob was a man crouched over a pan. Mirage was bad today. Our pile of hay-bales was playing queer tricks a quarter of a mile away. One moment it looked like a great flat rock standing out of water, another like a high pillar. A curse on this desert!

Walter looked up from his pan as I approached. I saw the cracks in his lips open and bleed when he grinned. Cheerful swine! Sand had caked with sweat in the stubble of his face. No washing for us till we were back on the coast.

"What luck?" I croaked.

He handed me the pan without a word. I took it eagerly and stirred the varicolored fragments with a finger that trembled. Then I threw it down with such violence that it clanged on the rocks and clattered as it rolled away.

He reached down into his trouser pocket, still grinning, took out a tiny paper roll and handed it to me. There was a sparkle as I opened it—a diamond.

"By the Lord—is it?" I stammered.

"It is, by God. It's *it!*" he shouted. "Not worth much in itself. About half a carat. Spent more than its value on a dinner at the Savoy. But it's the proof. We're in the diamond-belt. Win or lose, they can't laugh at us now when we get out. My theory was right; even if there are not enough diamonds here to make it payable, we've proved that they *exist.*"

Back among the hay-bales Walter rummaged in a dilapidated suitcase and pulled out a bottle.

"Brought this from Capetown to celebrate—in case."

Champagne with the thermometer at 140°—and no ice! It exploded when we cut the wire. Most of what we didn't get in our faces deluged the landscape. But there did remain a little, with which we wetted our find.

TWO months later we were back on the beach of Conception Bay, watching the great combers dashing themselves to flying snow on the shore, with a southwest gale behind them.

"What a dirty trick it would be if the old tub didn't turn up!" I remarked.

"She most likely won't, if she's out in this. Her rivets are loose. She's likely to have gone to the bottom unless she managed to put into Luderitzbucht. It would be tough luck. She's kept us going nicely up till now, one trip a month as regular as a liner. Kept us going till we made our find, located the best diamond-field in the Namib and monumented our claims; to make our pile, all we've got to do now is to register those claims in Luderitz'. And," concluded Walter, "I know just where to sell them when we get back to South Africa."

Next day the captain and crew of the *Jesse* came stumbling along the beach

toward us, half dead with thirst. They had managed to keep the *Jesse* afloat till the sea began to moderate, then beached her twenty miles down the coast before she sank under their feet. We were two hundred miles from Luderitz' along the beach. The only way to get there now was to walk. . . .

Ten grueling days later we marched up the sandy street of Luderitz' to Kapp's Hotel. We had loaded all our remaining water-barrels on the camels, killed and eaten each camel as its load was exhausted. The last camel lay a day's march back along the beach, but we had got through.

We paid off our men and spent the last of our cash on a new outfit of clothes. Penniless but rich! Even my ten per cent of the probable price of our find meant more money than I had hoped to earn in years.

Jubilant and victorious after so much pain, we made a night of it, signing chits for drinks. Everyone would be rushing to lend us money as soon as we published the news of our find, which we could do next morning after we had fulfilled the formality of registering our claims.

"WHAT can we do for you, gentlemen?" asked the heavy-jowled German official in faultless English.

"We have claims to register. Here is the map which your regulations require, with latitude and longitude marked. Here are the descriptions of the claims. I think you will find them in order." Walter knew the procedure thoroughly.

"H'm!" The official looked us over, then the map which Walter had handed to him. He walked to the big map hanging on the wall and compared latitude and longitude.

He was back in a moment, the personification of suavity.

"It is much to be regretted. . . . The claims cannot be registered."

"What?"

"I regret."

"Why not? The law has been complied with. Everything is in order."

"All but one thing: You have been prospecting in a closed area where prospecting is forbidden under heavy penalty."

"Who said it was closed? It was open when we left Luderitz three months ago. I checked it on your map." Walter had turned white, and I saw his hands shake.

The official handed us the copy of a recent decree. It was dated barely a month previous. We gazed at one another in consternation, then at him. It was the air of triumph on his face that suddenly brought home to us the fact that this had not happened by chance. News of our find had leaked out, and this was a scheme to deprive us of it.

"The dirty—" I began, but Walter caught my arm.

"Shut up," he cried. "There's nothing more we can do here. We've got to get to a lawyer."

"But there is something yet to do," said the official pompously. "Much to do. There is the penalty."

"What penalty?"

"You have broken the law."

"We'll see about that."

"We will see—now."

As though the last word had been a signal, two big policemen stood beside us. Before we could recover from our surprise, we were handcuffed and marched down the street to jail.

After an hour in a clean but dismal cell, we were marched before a judge.

The judge sentenced us to deportation in the first outgoing ship, without allowing us a word in our defence.

Within the hour after the sentence we were at the dock and being hustled aboard a little guano schooner. She carried a full load of guano; her deck was inches deep with it.

The crew were colored boys from the Cape. Eight feet square, their forecastle measured—their only quarters. They asked us to share it, a sporting gesture which we refused. We preferred the deck, guano and all. There was fresh air on deck.

A week we lived in that offal. Dry guano was bad enough. But when the weather roughened after four days, the powder turned to reeking, sodden paste. *The Pride of Jesse* was a lady's boudoir compared to that.

A PAIR of untouchables, we stood on the dock at Capetown. People skirted us to windward. Dogs sniffed at us. We had not even cabfare uptown, and no cab would have taken us aboard had we had the fare.

Walter had friends in Capetown. A telephone-call brought a smart-looking carriage, whose coachman covered the cushions with horse-blankets before he let us in. On our arrival they fairly boiled us in hot baths, while they burned our clothes in the back yard and sent downtown to buy us new outfits.

A Sailor's Reckoning

Three outstanding rescues in a long career as a ship-captain.

(Continued from page 4)

By CAPTAIN WILBUR ROSS

IT might be interesting to a student of races to learn that of the three men whose lives I was instrumental in saving during my years at sea, one was a European, one a Japanese, and one a Hindoo. . . . The European was captain of a freighter.

One night while steaming across the Indian Ocean we received a wireless from the mate of a freighter. He said that his captain was sick, and gave the symptoms along with his temperature. The temperature was one hundred and five. My doctor diagnosed the ailment as acute appendicitis. He said that an immediate operation was necessary.

We sent this message back to the mate, and asked if the captain was willing to transfer to our ship for an operation. The freighter had no doctor. After some time we received a reply in the affirmative, and arrangements were made to contact the freighter.

We altered course, and all night plowed through the rough seas to meet the other ship. The southwest monsoon was blowing. The sea was turbulent. Shortly after daylight we made a perfect contact. It had been agreed that the freighter would lower her lifeboat with the sick captain in it. This was done without incident. But getting the sick man on board presented more of a problem.

This was accomplished by rigging a boom over the side and running a small line through it to attach to the stretcher. We figured that we could hoist the stretcher without danger of the lifeboat being crushed against the side of the ship.

The captain refused to go in a stretcher. He wanted a bosun's chair. We sent that to him, and he allowed himself to be tied securely in. Getting a well man on board in the sea that was running would have been a difficult task. We watched our chance, and as the little boat raised on one of the huge waves, the men detailed to heave on the small line did so. My heart was in my mouth, but we landed the captain safely on deck.

They started to carry him below at once, but he refused to go. He said that he wanted to wait until all his men returned safely to his ship. He sent word asking if I would stand by until his boat was hoisted. Of course we did so. He knew that the greatest danger would come to his men when they tried to hoist their boat on board.

It took two hours to get that boat hoisted, and the captain lay on our deck and watched them. He was suffering intensely, but he stuck it out. When the boat was safely home, he collapsed. We thought him dead, but he came out of it.

It's all right to argue that he was no help to his men by lying on the deck, and that his action was foolish. It *was* foolish. But only those of us who watched him can know how big it made him look. His conduct was an inspiration to every sailor on our ship. Everyone felt proud that they belonged to a service which could breed a man like him. He had what it takes, and I am glad that he is alive today.

OFF the coast of Japan we sighted a small motorship. She was flying distress signals, and we pulled alongside. From the appearance of the crew on deck with their suitcases, we understood that something had happened which caused them to want to leave her. Through our interpreter we learned that her engines were broken down. She had been drifting eighteen days, and had made eight hundred and seventy-five miles.

She was a coaster and had carried no great supply of food, so that the men had been starving for sixteen days. Fortunately she had a cargo of ice, which gave them all the drinking water they needed. Most likely they would have starved to death in a few more days.

There was a heavy swell on, and I didn't like to lower a boat to pick them up. They had lost their boats. We finally pulled up close to them and passed them a heavy line, which they

made fast to their bitts. By going ahead dead slow, we managed to keep the little craft close to us without being too close to escape being smashed against our side.

Then we threw them a heaving line. One by one the little brown men jumped into the ocean and were hauled on board our ship. The last to go was the captain. I asked him to set his ship on fire to prevent her drifting about and becoming a menace to navigation. He started the fire. But just before he jumped, he extinguished it.

As soon as we hauled him on board, he came to the bridge. He said that he put the fire out because he wanted us to tow him back to port. I told him that I couldn't be bothered with his ship. I didn't like to take chances with my own vessel. I knew we would have bad weather, and didn't want to risk getting my ship in a jam fooling around with a ship that would scarcely pay for any damage I might do.

Then he asked me to give him enough canvas to make a sail. He said that he believed he could sail her back. At least he would try. I knew that he couldn't do it. It only meant suicide for him.

Bear in mind, that he hadn't been eating for sixteen days. Yet he was perfectly willing to go back aboard his ship and try to save her. All he wanted was a fighting chance. I am glad that we didn't have the canvas to give him. I am glad we were able to save another man who had so much of what it takes.

SWIMMING SAM is the last of the trio. That wasn't his name, of course; but it was the one the sailors gave him when they gave up trying to pronounce his own unpronounceable Hindoo name. It was descriptive, too.

One morning I heard the sound of running feet outside my door. We had had a hectic voyage all the way out from San Francisco. Everything had happened to the ship that voyage that can happen, except a stranding. Three days before we had had a fire which was so severe that had we not been in a spot where assistance was abundant, I would have abandoned ship rather than risk my passengers on a doubtful outcome.

Because of the troubles we had had, I had ceased to go to bed, but slept on a settee near the door. When I heard the running feet outside, I hurried out in time to catch the runner before he reached the bridge. He told me that there was a man overboard.

We called the lifeboat crew and turned the ship around to retrace our course. When we reached the spot where we imagined he might be, the boat was lowered. The sea was rough, and there was no sight of the man, but the lifeboat pulled around in circles for an hour. Then they signaled that they had him.

When the boat came alongside, the rescued man seemed blacker than any of my crew. I was greatly puzzled. None of the men on the bridge seemed to know the extra man in the boat.

When we got him on board, he turned out to be a little Hindoo boy of perhaps twelve years. We couldn't understand a word of what he said. Our interpreters were stumped. Only when we arrived at Colombo, did we get the story.

The boy had been a sailor on a British tramp. It was his first trip at sea. After leaving Colombo, he became terribly seasick and hid away. His boss found him; and the boss, who was a Hindoo, beat the little fellow so severely that he ran aft and jumped into the ocean. No one saw him leap; in fact, the British ship didn't know what had happened to the little fellow.

He hadn't intended to commit suicide. The lights on the beach looked much closer than they were, and he'd imagined that he could swim ashore. But he didn't have a chance. At that spot there is an offshore current which carried him back as fast as he swam forward.

From nine o'clock at night until seven in the morning the little fellow struggled toward the beach. The sea was rough. The waters are shark-infested. Ships passed him in the darkness, unable to see him or hear his frantic calls.

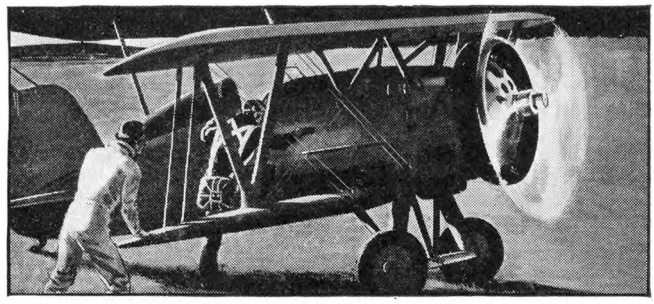
Those ten hours must have seemed a lifetime. He said that he expected a shark to get him any minute. His hands were in bad shape. Between his fingers the flesh had been worn away from the salt water as he swam until they were bleeding.

When he saw us, he started to swim toward us. He was a long way off and managed to get close enough to shout just as the stern flashed past. By great good luck the barber happened to be aft and heard him. The boy said he thought he would have let himself sink if we hadn't picked him up.

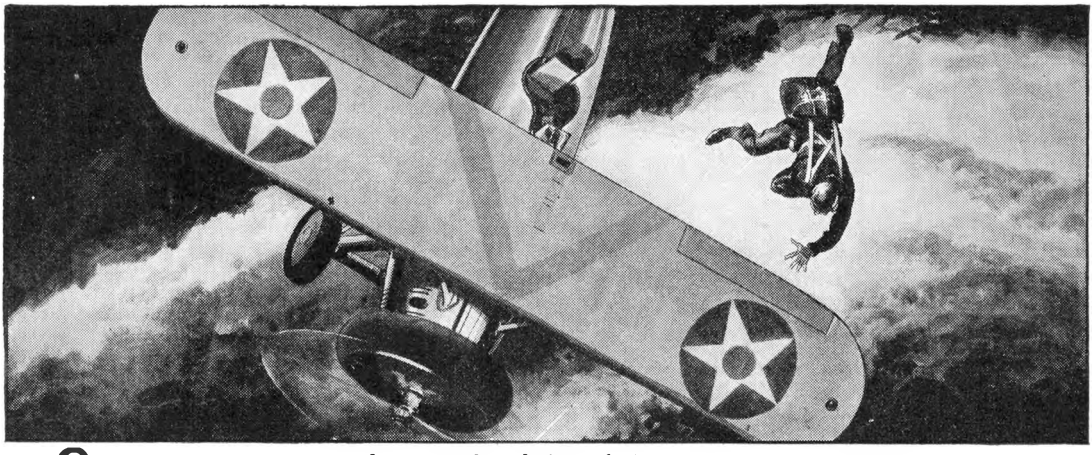
I think everyone will agree that any small boy who can fight all night against such awful odds must also have more than his share of that something known as "what it takes."

"I HAD TO BAIL OUT IN A PEA SOUP FOG!"

C. W. HARBERT
Aviation Cadet
Bristol, W. Va.

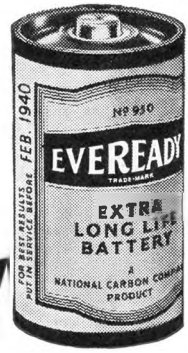


1 **"I took off** from Pensacola on a night training flight in my single-seater fighting plane," writes Cadet Harbert. "Later, as I started homeward, a heavy fog rolled in. The landing field was blotted out!



2 **"It was too dangerous**—for myself and those below—to attempt a landing. I had to bail out in that pea soup fog! Heading for open country, I circled at 5,000 feet until the gasoline gauge showed empty, then jammed the stick forward and catapulted into space!

3 **"I landed waist-deep** in the wide mouth of a river. Marooned by deep water on all sides, I grabbed my flashlight, and—despite the soaking—it worked! Guided by its beam, two fishermen eventually found and rescued me—thanks to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries—which you can depend on in emergencies! *(Signed)* Guy Harbert"



FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... *Look for the* DATE-LINE

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC., 30 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.
Unit of Union Carbide UCC *and Carbon Corporation*

Above, "VAN" waiting in the duck blinds for the "zero hour." Explorer, sportsman, author of the authoritative new "A Book on Duck Shooting," Heilner knows the waterfowl flyways from California to Maine, Alaska to Mexico.

You can tell a lot about a cigarette by whether it burns fast or slowly. Camel cigarettes are noted for their long burning. In fact, they burned longer, slower *than any other brand,* in recent scientific tests (*see right*). Van Campen Heilner, the famous American authority on wild game, points out an interesting angle to this. "Camels give *more smoking* because they burn so slowly," he says. "And I think the way they burn is a very good way to judge the *quality* of cigarettes too. I notice this about Camels—I can smoke them steadily and they still taste smooth and cool, and my mouth feels fresh—not dry—with no throat irritation. Camels are mild, flavory. They give more genuine pleasure per puff—and more puffs per pack." Turn to Camels. Get extra smoking per pack—topped off with the delicate taste of choice quality tobaccos.

Whatever price you pay per pack, it's important to remember this fact: By burning 25% *slower* than the average of the 15 other of the largest-selling brands tested—slower than *any* of them—CAMELS give a smoking *plus* equal to

5 EXTRA SMOKES PER PACK

Cigarettes were compared recently . . . sixteen of the largest-selling brands . . . under the searching tests of impartial laboratory scientists. Findings were announced as follows:

1 CAMELS were found to contain MORE TOBACCO BY WEIGHT than the average for the 15 other of the largest-selling brands.

2 CAMELS BURNED *SLOWER* THAN ANY OTHER BRAND TESTED—25% SLOWER THAN THE AVERAGE TIME OF THE 15 OTHER OF THE LARGEST-SELLING BRANDS! By burning 25% slower, on the average, Camels give smokers the equivalent of 5 EXTRA SMOKES PER PACK!

3 In the same tests, CAMELS HELD THEIR ASH FAR *LONGER* than the average time for all the other brands.

Don't deny yourself the pleasure of smoking Camels, the quality cigarette *every* smoker can afford.

PENNY FOR PENNY YOUR BEST CIGARETTE BUY!

CAMELS—*Long-Burning Costlier Tobaccos*