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BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE

MAY 1940 VOL. 71, NO. 1

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Real Experiences

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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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True stories of experience in the current wars are specially desired.

In Convoy

A noted British writer gives a vivid picture of this strange war at sea.

By "BARTIMAEUS"

ABOUT eight o'clock last Saturday morning we were on the bridge of an escort vessel which was about to take charge of a southbound convoy at a northern base.

There wasn't much to look at, because there was a freezing fog and we were moving through a gray formless world with the dim forms of ships sliding past and vanishing, and men moving about like shadows in the half-light.

The gun-crews were all closed up at their guns. They had no protection from the wind, and theirs was a bitterly cold job, even with all the clothes a man could wear, and a Balaclava helmet, and the scarf his girl knitted wound three or four times round his neck. They stamped up and down and tried to get a bit of shelter in the lee of the gun-shields.

It would be warmer presently when the sun got up. Then it appeared, a red disk without much warmth yet, but vaguely comforting. There was a pleasant smell of bacon frying somewhere.

We were out in the North Sea now, and the ship was lifting to a slight swell. The convoy stretched away behind us, ships of every size and shape and cargo; British and French ships, ships with funnels in the middle and ships with funnels astern, with sloping derricks and upright derricks; loaded to the hatches or light, with propeller-blades thrashing the surface of the water. Their smoke went trailing away on the light wind in black wriggling lines.

All this time the escort ships were moving about on the flanks of the column. Occasionally one went off at high speed to investigate a submarine report, and after nosing about like a pointer for a quarter of an hour, came racing back to her station.

And so the day wore on. Occasionally we passed a tiny fishing-vessel; and contemplating her as the prayerbook says "in the midst of so many and great dangers," one no longer wondered why fish is a bit scarce ashore.

Presently the haze cleared to a bright sunny day; the day faded to dusk, the dusk to starlit night. The captain had not left the bridge or sat down since leaving harbor. Occasionally he remembered to light his pipe. The watches were relieved: the new lookouts reported they were closed up. "Very good," was the curt reply. The voice of the quartermaster taking over came up the voice-pipe, reporting the course and speed. "Very good."

It is in the darkness, when the forms of the men are outlined against the faintly luminous sky, that one becomes most conscious of the intense alertness of the bridge. In daylight events distract the eye. But at night these motionless upright forms staring out through the glasses into the darkness make you aware of only one thing: the most intensive vigilance of which men are capable.

'Tween decks it was the reverse. The watch below had turned in. The ventilating fans made a sort of purring sound; there was a faint sighing of water past the ship's side. The shaded lights shone on the rows of hammocks, and in each sleeping face was a profound tranquillity and trustfulness. They might have been a thousand miles from war and alarms.

Sometime during the night the captain snatched two or three hours' sleep; another convoy joined up in the darkness, shepherded by its escort into line astern. In the dawn they were there, ship after ship melting away into the gray haze.

(Please turn to page 189)

Do Unseen Powers Direct Our Lives?

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Sons of Kalewa

"I THOUGHT it was adventure," said Carrick rather disgustedly. "Instead, it's plain hell on a tension! And sub-zero hell, at that!"

The others laughed. "Even in Finland, the winter must break," said someone at the table. "It's beginning to break now. Then look out! They'll walk through us. The staff knows it; Mannerheim knows it. The odds in men alone are fifty to one, and they've got the air. No wonder life's at tension! That's why we're here!"

Applause rang up; glasses were lifted; an excited Polish aviator shouted a toast. The earth shuddered as they drank it—a bomb had struck somewhere close; but here in the deep shelter no Russian bomb could pierce, the Foreign Brigade drank deep.

That was not its title, except among the men who gathered here, outside the Viipuri camp—men who had come from near and far to fight for Finland: aviators, technicians, adventurers, rascals, soldiers of fortune. They met here to escape from the bitter cold, to drink, to talk. Old faces vanished each day; new ones came. Carrick was ready now to be moved out to the front. To his own amazement, since he knew nothing of soldiering, he had been made a captain. His talent for figures, for organization, was what the Finns most valued.

Like many another man, he had shed an unhappy past to get here. He never wanted to see the past again, or to hear from it, except perhaps from his sister. He was living for the present and for the future. And he had not found the present what he expected, by a long shot. Romance and adventure scarcely exist at thirty below zero.

"Captain Carrick!" A voice pierced the noise and smoke. A headquarters aide had entered, assuring everyone that the raid was over. "Report to Colonel Topelius at once, and bring Captain Lonnrot with you. Is Lieutenant Vin-

"The sons of Kalewa will help us; the

ghosts of all the heroes will fight for us!"

Even as the Bowmen of Mons were believed to have come to the aid of the British in 1914, so now warriors long dead are thought to have fought beside the heroic Finns.

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Illustrated by Grattan Condon

cent here? Good. You are to report with Captain Carrick also. Yes, look up Lonnrot first—you may need him to interpret."

A final drink, a final chorus of farewells; and the two men, buttoned up and muffled against the frost, stumbled out of the shelter. They both knew that this meant business: the end of waiting and training had come; they were going to the front. But what front? All Finland was a battle-front, and sometimes in very curious forms.

Vincent, a Brooklyn boy who had fought in Spain and was pure soldier of fortune, chuckled as they emerged into the sub-Arctic daylight—four hours of it a day.

"This answers your grumbling, Carrick! You were right, at that. Damned little high life around here; nothing but work. And the tension, everywhere the tension! Yes, that makes it hell. I suppose we'd better look up Lonnrot?"

"If we want to know what it's all about," said Carrick. "Darned few of the headquarters outfit speak English, but I hear they're putting in a lot of Finns from America to help out."

"They're swell guys," Vincent said admiringly. "No fooling. Hard common sense. Wish we had a government half as good!"

Carrick laughed grimly. The Brooklyn boy was ag'in' all governments on principle, and was no idealist; but he was here as a volunteer, and was a walking wonder when it came to establishing shop units for airplane camps and squadrons.

"Most likely they're going to give us a job together," said Carrick. "Suits me."

"Might be worse," agreed Vincent with a grin. "You used to be in a bank, huh? My old man had a pool-room in Flatbush. Well, I guess we'll get on."

Not that it mattered; around them was a pandemonium of tongues and

"It is utter madness: there are only a few shells; the guns have no emplacements!"

races, an outpouring of volunteers greater than Spain had known—perhaps the greatest rush of men to fight for an ideal the world had ever witnessed. In this one camp alone were Swedes by the thousand, and Norse and Danes, the finest of Scandinavia's youth. Here were Poles, Italians, Americans, Swiss, Greeks, even men who, like Baron Mannerheim the commander-in-chief, had once been Russian. Technical equipment was pouring in from half the countries of Europe.

THE two Americans located Captain Lonnrot, who acted as interpreter and liaison officer; and all three set off for headquarters. Lonnrot was lean and hawk-faced, like Carrick, but shorter, and with the peculiar slightly oblique eyes and round head that bespoke the Turanian origin of his people. Almost a Laplander, was Lonnrot. Carrick found the man a perpetual surprise, for from behind the veneer of education, flashes of a savage and primeval—almost a barbaric—spirit were continually breaking forth. Yet to all appearance Lonnrot was a courteous, cultured gentleman.

"Is it true," chirped Vincent, curiosity filling his scarred, impudent features, "that Hitler has sent a whole squadron of German flyers here?"

"No, no," said Lonnrot, frowning. "That is silly, absurd talk, my friend. He cannot spare any flyers. If he could, he would not send them. As soon as we have broken Stalin's back, Hitler will send him help to crush us—but at a price. He will get what he wants from Stalin, then."

"You seem damned confident about the future," observed Carrick. The Finn gave him a bleak sidelong look.

"I am. I know. I have been told."

"Yeah, he's a wizard," spoke up Vincent, to whom nothing whatever was sacrosanct. "All Finns are wizards. It's no secret. I hear in the back-country they all eat horseflesh and cast spells; that's how they've brought this weather on the Russians. How about it, Lonny?"

"It is possible," said Lonnrot curtly. Vincent must have been a fearful trial to him at times—but boy, what a machine-shop boss! Vincent had drawn up plans for salvaging a lot of the cap-

tured Russian *matériel,* and his plans were rumored to be posted at headquarters as samples of efficiency. The Finns loved efficiency.

Colonel Topelius was the headquarters official in charge of foreign volunteers. He was a broad, squat man of obviously Teutonic origin; Carrick was by this time learning to differentiate between the Swedish and Teutonic Finns, those of Russian mixture, and those of the old Hunnish blood. Not that it made much difference, these days.

Topelius, who spoke fluent German, addressed them in that tongue, which all understood.

"You are all three leaving in an hour, gentlemen, for a special camp near Lake Kianta. A plane will be at your disposal; it is essential that you get there at once. You have been chosen because you speak German. Captain Carrick, you will organize the camp there and be in charge of it, with Captain Lonnrot as your assistant; you will not, of course, have any jurisdiction over the aviation personnel. We expect you to build a model camp there; you'll have supplies just as soon as the pressure on the front slacks up a bit.

"Lieutenant Vincent,"—as he turned massively to the Brooklyn lad,—"a large amount of captured Soviet *matériel* has been assembled there: tanks, artillery and so forth. A crew of selected men will be sent you. Salvage what can be salvaged. Here are the detailed orders for all of you," he added, handing Lonnrot a fat envelope, "so there's no more to be said."

AN hour later, the three entered a Swedish plane, the grinning pilot shook hands joyously, and they were on their way north.

To Carrick it was a blessed relief from the tension of the training-camp, of this entire country. Here was his chance to make amends, somehow, for the past wastage of his life. He had found a new road, new things to do, new outlets for his flaming energy; he welcomed them all with a savage joy. He had been a misfit back home; here, it seemed, he had found his intended place. Yet when the journey was ended that afternoon, he was not prepared for what he found, or for the surprises that greeted him.

Everywhere was snow, and little else in sight. Men, willing but awaiting orders. A camp half formed, snowed in, poorly organized, no supply-lines established. A vast lot of captured tanks and artillery and machinery. Above all, forty foreign pursuit-planes, a hundred aviators and mechanics who said they were "Polish" volunteers—and no gasoline. All was stagnation. And this lay at the brink of a narrow but deep river fifty feet across, thickly frozen, that plunged down from hilly higher ground a mile to the north. There were no defenses. It was a camp supposedly well in the rear of the fighting-line. There was a good radio post here, too.

WITH officers flocking about them Carrick noticed the ski patrols coming in, was aware of the boiling turmoil that greeted them; but for a time he did not get the meaning of the frightful news these men brought. It did not soak in, even though Lonnrot explained it to him: The entire Soviet 32nd Division, a crack fighting corps, had broken clear from the trap holding it twenty miles eastward. It was headed this way in a desperate effort to smash through; fourteen thousand men, with artillery and tanks.

Still it meant little to him. His mind was full of the things he had to do here, of the chances given him to build and work. He was thinking more about this, than about the news. That he had literally dropped into an unexpected and terrific crisis did not at once become clear, even when he was called to sit in upon a council of war, together with Vincent and Lonnrot. The amazing presence of this foreign squadron had meant far more to him, until he sat in that council and learned what it was all about. The squadron commander was present; also a Swedish captain of engineers, and a dozen Finnish officers—the highest rank a colonel. Everyone spoke German.

"This camp was prepared for the reception of these planes, not for fighting," said the colonel in command. "I have here less than a thousand men, ski troops and others in training. A hundred Swedish engineers, no artillery, some two thousand laborers collected from the country roundabout, limited supplies."

"And the planes," said a voice.

But the "Polish" commander, quietly but firmly, made it painfully clear that the squadron could give no help; there was no gasoline for the planes.

A radio officer came in and handed the colonel a message; the Finn read it, folded it, remained silent.

"We have two days before the Russians could get here," he said. "It is

impossible for any help to reach us—the air is shaking now; the whole Mannerheim Line is under assault day and night. We have nothing with which to meet the Russ."

"You have something with which to destroy him," said Captain Lonnrot in a deep voice. Every eye went to him.

"You have the three sons of Kalewa," he asserted.

Carrick did not know what this meant. Eyebrows lifted; one or two Finns nodded gravely; others grunted sardonically. The colonel in command shrugged.

"I don't think they are going to give us any practical help, Captain Lonnrot," he answered mildly. "Have you any suggestions?"

"Yes," said Lonnrot. "First, what are your orders?"

The colonel reread the message.

"To try and delay the Soviet column; and if necessary, abandon the camp here, destroy the planes and fall back," he said. Angry mutters broke out. Lonnrot laughed harshly.

"Things must be desperate indeed! Well, I have an excellent suggestion. This camp has been placed under command of Captain Carrick, here; turn it over to him. You obey your orders; take out what troops you have and delay the Russ."

"Without artillery?"

"You need none. Tomorrow snow will fall, soft snow; their tanks cannot advance."

Lonnrot glanced at Carrick. "With the Swedes, two thousand laborers, and our excellent foreign assistants—what can we do?"

CARRICK'S lean, frost-hard features flashed in a smile. Gamble with destiny, by Heaven! It was his big chance. And though he did not know what the words meant, he repeated Lonnrot's recent utterance.

"I think we can do anything we desire, especially with the three sons of Kalewa to help us! Yes, I'll take the gamble."

Somewhat to his surprise, the usually merry Finns did not crack a smile at his words. Into Lonnrot's face leaped a great wild light of joy. Others looked at him askance. The colonel turned to him gravely.

"Very well. I turn over the command to you, and shall march out at once. I'll arrange to keep in touch with you by ski couriers and sleighs—the radio here is not portable."

So, while the air shuddered with the spasms of artillery fire from the embattled Mannerheim Line a few score miles away, to north and south, Carrick found himself with the devil to pay and no pitch hot. Taking over the commandant's hastily evacuated quarters, he conferred briefly with Lonnrot and Vincent, before going to mess.

"DINNER'S ahead—let's jump into it right afterward," he said. "Vincent, your job is to get some of that Russian artillery and maybe a few tanks in shape to use. —Lonnrot, what did you mean—who were the sons of Kalewa?"

"Oh, 'Kalewa' is the old name for our country, for Finland! The three sons of Kalewa are the heroes of our great epic, the Kalevala. I think you said better than you knew. They will help us, yes; the ghosts of all the heroes will fight for us!"

Carrick grunted. So that was it!

"You Finns don't need ghosts to fight for you," he said. "But if snow is coming tomorrow, we'll have to work like hell tonight. Shall we pack off the planes to another base? It might save having to destroy them."

"Everything is being bombed; this is a secret place, prepared for those planes. Leave them here, and trust to the protection of the ancient gods!"

"I'd sooner trust in gasoline," snapped Carrick.

When, later, he faced the task in hand, he was absolutely appalled. It was an impossible job he had assumed. The camp had no protection, no artillery; its very position rendered it helpless and open to attack from the higher ground upriver. The earth was a dozen feet under the snow, and frozen hard; there were a few sticks of dynamite in the stores, but not enough to open a single trench.

He consulted with the "Polish" commander, an alert, eager young officer. The ships had actually exhausted their fuel getting here—they had not been given much to start with. And until their insignia were covered, the commander refused to let any in the air. Since there was no paint of any kind, it meant waiting.

"Not much," said Carrick. "Put what gas you have left together, and there'll be enough for one plane—not to fight, but to scout and report. If we can't paint over your insignia, then remove them. Put men to work scraping it off."

With a matter of only two or three days before crisis, Carrick sought desperately for a better camp site, questioning men who knew the country intimately. The heights, a mile away, offered the only possibility; but without artillery the move would be folly. Better to abandon the position entirely; this had not been intended as a fighting unit.

Carrick refused point-blank. The laborers, countrymen who were in training as soldiers, were put to work felling trees and surrounding the camp with breastworks—a futile effort, as Carrick knew, but it kept them busy. He made plans for the camp organization and dugouts.

All this took hour upon hour. He was close to exhaustion when Vincent showed up.

"Come on and turn in, Carrick. I'm dead beat, but things are moving; best we can do. Any news?"

"Coming now; the radio officer just sent word. Stick around; then I'm with you. What chance of getting any gas from those Russian tanks and trucks?"

"Plenty of it, but vile stuff. They've tried that angle already—it wouldn't work at all in the plane engines. I've made a hole in that junkyard out there, and we've got half a dozen tanks that look first-rate. Plenty of heavy guns, but mighty little ammunition. I can get some of the trucks moving, inside a day or two."

When the radio man arrived, however, all rising hopes were dashed.

No help whatever could be spared them, he reported. The Russians were making terrific assaults, regardless of losses. Their bombers were sweeping not only the Finnish lines, but all concentration points, the cities behind the front, everything; they were coming over even in the night. All Finland was in an agony of resistance. The 32nd Division was to be held here at all costs until troops could be sent.

"Fine prospect," said Carrick, as he slipped off his boots and furs, and turned to his blankets. "See you in the morning, Vincent—if there *is* a morning!"

HE slept, and dreamed; his dream was a queer thing to look back upon. He could only remember three men who came and jabbered in a language of which he knew no word. A wrinkled old man, a young handsome man who laughed, and a grim fellow in the blackened leather apron of a smith. When he could not understand them, they grew

angry, and the old man pointed out to him a great auger standing in the snow—a two-inch auger, such as might be used for boring great timbers for the wooden pins of old-time construction. That was all of the dream.

Carrick wakened and dressed, and laughed at the memory. He remembered having seen, the previous night, just such an auger standing in one corner of his quarters—yes, there it was! And it, of course, had produced that whole hallucination! He dismissed it as such, and fell upon a bite of breakfast.

More bad news from the radio. Communication was difficult; headquarters had been bombed. New Soviet army corps had come up; the battering and assaults were incessant; the defense was holding, but none knew how long it could hold. And if this 32nd Division broke through, here back of Kianta, Finland was lost. Here was the weak spot.

Lonnrot, who brought this message, shook his head darkly.

"We've no guns, no ammunition, no defenses," he said. "We can die; that's all."

"And rather foolish," Carrick said cheerfully. "You predicted snow. Think it will come?"

"In an hour," Lonnrot said positively. "That'll stop the bombing raids, and will

slow up the 32nd Division—or at least its transport and tanks. But no word has come from our colonel; that's bad."

Word came, an hour later. A ski courier came in. The Russians, fighting like fiends, had burst through in the night; they were not ten miles away. The scattered Finns were hanging on doggedly to their line of march, and sent desperate prayers for help. Carrick summoned Lonnrot.

"Why not take the two thousand laborers and go to harry the Russians?"

"We have neither skis nor rifles for them," said Lonnrot, and that settled it.

Trees were felled and brought in, as the hours passed; the semblance of a camp began to take form. The snow was falling now, thick soggy snow.

CARRICK went to where Vincent was at work, near the snow-covered mass of trucks and mechanized units. The Swedes and some hundreds of the laborers were busily employed.

"Not even two or three guns with ammunition?" Carrick asked.

Vincent shook his head.

"Look, boss; it's a jumble, see? The most of what ammunition there is, won't fit the guns that'll work. I can give you a dozen of these seventy-fives, but with not more than four or five shells each. So it's no use."

"Send them along as soon as they're in shape, with what shells you have."

Carrick, puffing at his pipe, stared into the snow-flittering obscurity. An inkling of something had come to him; these Russians had burst through—why? Because the thin forces of the Finns, overconfident, had met them face to face. The great Finnish victories had all been won, heretofore, by strategy. What price strategy now?

Through the snow grew a strange sight—one of the seventy-fives, with a hundred men tailed on the ropes that drew it. A Swede saluted and asked where it should go. With this, the answer suddenly came to Carrick—or at least the partial answer. Within another hour he had a dozen pieces of artillery in readiness and covered over, with Swedish and other foreign officers drilling men in their use. Lonnrot came up.

"It is folly, utter madness!" he exclaimed. "There are only a few shells. The guns have no emplacements."

"True," said Carrick. "Persuade that plane commander to send up the one ship we've fueled, as soon as the snow lets up a bit, and bring in word of what's happening."

Vincent, greasy and cheerful, appeared for noon mess and eyed Carrick curiously.

"I hear you've gone mad, Chief. Swell work! Got an idea, have you?"

Carrick laughed. "Part of one, anyhow. How many tanks can you get in running order?"

"If you just want tanks, without being critical, I can have a dozen on the move by tomorrow night. No good, except where there are no drifts, because they bog down in the soft snow; darned little fuel, and only a couple have guns. Most were stripped off. Not much ammunition for those with guns, either."

"Get some men trained in running 'em, as quickly as possible, but don't waste fuel."

"What are you up to, anyhow?" Vincent demanded. "This artillery is no damned good, and the tanks won't be any good either."

"Tell you later," said Carrick. "What I'm wondering about is how these foreign planes got here and why. Is Hitler secretly helping the Finns?"

The tanks moved forward; the artillery from the camp opened fire.

"Ask that commandant," Vincent replied shrewdly. "Maybe he knows. There's a lot that's not on the surface in the German-Russian hook-up. Some sort of double-cross, probably. Maybe a triple one. Hello!"

An engine was roaring. Snow or no snow, the "Polish" plane was going up to scout. Vincent left. Lonnrot came tramping up with several other officers; they were in no pleasant mood, and demanded some explanation of Carrick's purpose in this mockery of a defense.

Carrick eyed them, repressed a smile, and spoke in a half-jocular attempt to strike at their superstition.

"I am not sure myself," he said frankly. "I hope to trick the Russians, if they come, into thinking we have a regular camp. Three men suggested it to me last night in a dream."

"Oh!" said Lonnrot. "Three men? Who were they?"

"I don't know," rejoined Carrick. He described the three he had seen. To his amazement, the officers looked at one another, turned, and made off in haste. Lonnrot saluted, his eyes like saucers, and followed. Carrick laughed silently.

He stamped off, found Vincent, and told him. The Brooklyn boy grinned.

"All right, boss! I don't savvy it, but we'll give you a camp here!"

THE snow thinned; the gray skies cleared; the plane returned, its skis taking the snow in a beautiful landing. The young pilot, laughing, reported a brush with four Soviet planes. He had shot down one and given the others the slip. The Russian column was not more than five or six miles distant, he reported; the other planes had been scouting ahead for them. The Finns had managed to cut the Russian line in two during the heavy snowfall; a few light trucks were with the column, but the artillery and tanks had fallen behind. Russian scouts were well in advance of the col-

umn. Some companies of Finns, apparently, were cutting back for the camp.

Carrick took the plane commandant aside and talked with him at length. The officer refused flatly. Carrick shrugged. "All right; have your own way, and your planes must be destroyed. Take my way, and you have a chance to save them and yourselves. Which?"

Reluctantly, the commander yielded. The planes were taken out into the deep snow and covered over; their machine-guns were removed and mounted for use on the ground. The scant hours of daylight faded out, and no Russians had appeared as yet on the heights upstream....

Carrick was asleep, that night, when the Finnish colonel came in. He wakened to hear that a radio message had just arrived through the shuddering air; there was no hope of sending help, for days to come. Soviet man-power and guns were driving incessantly at the whole Finnish line. "Hold the 32nd, stop it, delay it, or we are lost!" came the word.

The colonel was hopeless. With the remnants of the previous corps, about fifteen hundred men remained, hanging on the flanks of the Soviet column, but unable to do more. The artillery and tanks had been cut off, bogged in the fresh snow; but the Russians had an enormous number of machine-guns and automatic rifles, and against these the Finns were nearly helpless.

"If we could only reach them," cried the colonel, "we could use our knives alone and destroy them! But that is impossible. We have no machine-guns, no artillery."

He fell silent—then, utterly worn out, dropped to the floor asleep.

Carrick beckoned Lonnrot.

"Send out scouts to meet our riflemen; have them posted in the trees upstream, on those heights. And try to get hold of two or three Russian prisoners."

The country running upstream to those heights was denuded of trees and so heavily windswept that it had little snow. Carrick sent word to Vincent to get the tanks out and have the deeper drifts marked so none would bog down. They were to be left in plain sight, but the crews would not man them until necessary. Whatever Carrick ordered was by this time given implicit obedience.

Parties of the broken ski companies began to drift in. They brought word that the Soviet column, now a mobile outfit with light supply-trucks alone, had halted for the night.

One of the parties brought in a number of prisoners, and Carrick immediately sent for Lonnrot.

"Take charge of those prisoners," he said. "Let them see everything here, especially the artillery and the tanks. Tell them we've prepared a trap for the entire Russian column, and that we have thousands of men hidden—and see that a couple of them escape, as soon as the Russians get close. You understand?"

The sharp features of Captain Lonnrot became radiant.

"Yes, yes! It's a noble plan, a wonderful plan—"

"It's a desperate expedient," broke in Carrick quietly. "Tell me, why did that dream of mine make such an impression? Who did you take those three men to be?"

"Oh! That was obvious to everyone,"

said the Finn. "They were the Three Sons of Kalewa, of course. The old man was Wainamoinen the ancient; the second, the cunning smith, Ilmarinen; and the young one was the gallant Lemminkainen. Yes, our heroes themselves appeared to you. It is evident that you are a man of great power."

He departed, and Carrick broke into hearty laughter. He was far too conscious of the distinction and help given him by this superstition, to make any effort to disillusion the Finns; still, it amused him, and when he saw the huge auger in the corner, he chuckled.

There was no chuckling next day, however, when the storm burst. . . .

Troops came flocking in, some companies intact, others badly shattered. The Soviet machine-guns had taken heavy toll. The colonel's estimate of fifteen hundred men proved optimistic. Soviet planes appeared overhead, reconnoitering the camp, and departed; the Soviet scouts appeared on the heights upstream; and the Finns, resisting starkly, fell back as Carrick ordered. The colonel, who ranked the command, refused to take it away from Carrick.

Two of the prisoners escaped. The full half-dozen Soviet planes reappeared, swept down upon the camp, dropped a few bombs that did no great harm, and started in to machine-gun the camp in thorough style. The hidden machine-guns taken from the planes opened on them at close quarters in a terrific volley. Two of them came down in flames; two others crashed, and two went limping away to tell of the trap.

THE Russian masses began to flood down from the heights. The tanks moved forward to the attack; the artillery from the camp opened fire. The Soviet forces hurriedly moved back again, and the fire ceased. Machine-guns began to stutter along the heights, and the Finn scouts moved back; but with nightfall they swept out and encircled the Soviet camp, sniping.

And there the Russians dug in, on the high ground, no doubt mourning the artillery that would have placed the Finnish camp at their mercy. An occasional shot or two from the camp held them immobile for the moment.

Amid all the rejoicing in camp that night, Carrick did not disguise his real feelings from Vincent.

"One push, Brooklyn, and we're done! They can blow us down like a house of cards. As it is, they're consolidating themselves and probably expecting another division to move up with more artillery. If they don't get too damned curious, we may bluff 'em for two or three days."

CARRICK woke up next morning with a gasp; he was slow to get rid of the dream. Not much of a dream this time, just one of those three men, the old one, pointing to the big auger and then fading out. Merely enough to jangle Carrick's nerves, till he was dressed. Then he threw it off with a laugh.

"That auger's on my brain!"

With the muttered words, he went out to mess. All was quiet, apparently. Vincent joined him, and Captain Lonnrot also showed up, looking hopeful.

"I dreamed!" he informed Carrick solemnly. "It was about the foreign squadron. Other squadrons have come to help us, to shoot down the Russ flyers. They do this; things get bad for Stalin; he tells Hitler to help quick. Hitler gets his own price then. Oh, that is the Nazi way! Then those 'Polish' flyers, they know all about our defenses, then come back and bomb us—that's what it will be."

And all a dream! The man was convinced, absolutely convinced, of it.

"I'll be getting nuts myself," said Vincent, "the way those Swedes talk. They say there's not a chance to hold back the Bolshies very long, that the lines will crumple. I guess they're right. Can't go on forever here, and the odds are fifty to one."

"What are they in it for, then? Or you?" said Carrick, smiling.

"Same as you are, blast you!" Vincent slapped him on the back, and was gone with a burst of harsh laughter.

Doomed? Yes. Carrick had heard this on all sides since reaching Finland; even the high command had proclaimed it as no secret. The Finns were doomed, for the present; they would fight to the end and go down, and rise again. This was the country of ancient wizardry, and the people had the ghosts of the ages supporting them. Many of them, like Lonnrot, were fey men.

More parties of the ski fighters came drifting in, circling the camp above, dropping exhausted on their rifles. More bad news came from the radio; five Russian mass-attacks the previous day, on the Karelian Isthmus lines. Another division pressing westward. "Stop the

32nd—for the sake of Finland, hold it, check it! We can give no help."

Well, the 32nd was stopped, there on the heights!

So, at least, Carrick congratulated himself. So the wildly delighted Finns spread the news, and saluted him eagerly whenever they sighted him; their *sisu,* that word meaning morale and courage, peculiar to Finns, was rising high and higher.

Until, suddenly, all hopes cracked and went to black ruin. . . .

How did it happen? Carrick scarcely knew, at the time. The brief hours of daylight were nearly sped, and all promised well, when the alarm started. A squadron of planes appeared out of nowhere; a black spearhead of men came streaming down from the heights; attack! Men rushed to stations, but the bombers streamed across the sky, high, very high, and the black pellets dropped and roared. Flame spouted on every hand—snow and wreckage and men blown afar.

The guns taken from the airplanes spoke with futile hammering. The tanks, up there in the open, charged that wing of attack, and used their scant ammunition, and one by one became black empty hulks; flaming explosive bullets had pierced them.

The pieces of artillery spoke; the shells burst—and there were no more to fire. Half the camp was in deathly ruin. White shapes on skis flitted out. Rifles against machine-guns—it was useless work. Useless, yet heroically done, well done; that Russian phalanx was halted. It turned, retreated to the heights; but here was utter ruin. The planes were gone, and came no more. Their work was done. The Russians knew now how they had been tricked, and that this seemingly strong array was but a mockery.

DARKNESS was coming down, a few drifting snowflakes in the air, as Carrick and what officers remained gathered together in drear dismay. The colonel was dead. The hospital dugout was full of wounded men; the Swede surgeons were hard at work. A party of riflemen brought in a wounded Russian, an officer, taken prisoner. He talked freely. The radio had been at work. The 32nd knew now how it had been swindled, yes! This had been a trial effort, a successful one. Morning would bring the attack in force, with daylight to see and pierce the weakness of the camp.

What to do? They looked to Carrick, all of them. And he, futile, dismayed, knew that upon his word hung all their lives, and possibly the fate of Finland as well. The 32nd was coming through with daylight—and would come through.

"I'll give you my answer in an hour," he said quietly, looking at the brown Finnish faces, the straining eyes, the watching Swedes. He turned and went out; but as he went, Lonnrot came and stopped him, pointing to a dark figure, a countryman.

"THIS man has been asking for you," he said. "He says he has something to tell you. I will translate."

"Very well," said Carrick dully. He lit his pipe. The countryman spoke, and Lonnrot translated. It seemed something very silly, very absurd; something about this river that came down from the heights, a fifty-foot strip of solid frozen ice with scarcely a curve in all its long mile of descent; the current beneath the ice was rapid and torrential, even though the falls up above were frozen.

In olden days the river had taken another course from that waterfall, a course leading it far astray to the eastward, but engineers had very simply changed the channel. They had merely built a dam, a retaining wall, diverting the downpouring torrent to its present channel. If that dam were blown out, the river would return to its ancient course.

"Is that all?" Carrick asked, when the countryman fell silent.

"Yes," said Lonnrot. "Except, he says, you should know that the position of the dam can be found easily. At the lower end grows a clump of white birch, all alone."

"Oh, very well. Thank him and get rid of him."

The countryman removed his felt headgear and saluted awkwardly, and turned away. Carrick glimpsed the seamed, lined, wrinkled face; it struck him as vaguely familiar. Some fellow he had seen about the camp, no doubt. Then he forgot the man.

He sat on a smashed artillery carriage, sucked his pipe, and looked up at the ruddy reflection of the Russian campfires a mile away. All this nonsense about dreams and rivers was childish. His sanity, he thought, must be affected. He had hoped that the Russians could be held here for days; more absurdity!

They were not fools. They had the Finns at their mercy now. If only those machine-guns—

With a stifled exclamation, Carrick came bolt upright. A chance thought slipping across his mind, a memory of boyhood days when he had fished on the millpond in winter. He had not chopped holes in the ice, like the others, but had quietly, carefully bored a circle of holes till he could take out a chunk of ice, or shove it under. They had laughed at him for not frightening the fish, but he had always brought fish home. And that enormous auger, there in the corner of his quarters! Even the men in his dream, urging him to make use of it—dream be hanged! The idea had prodded him and until now he had not seen it at all! But he saw it now.

He came striding back into the dugout. His radiant eagerness struck at the huddle of staring men; his voice rang at them like a clarion.

"Lonnrot! You have some dynamite here? All right. Get it. Vincent, you make a bundle of sticks, capped and fused; then take half a dozen more and make 'em watertight somehow, in case I need them. May have to lower 'em into water. Do it now! No questions!"

Voices hammered at him from all sides. His gaze swept them; his voice stilled them. "Never mind what it's all about, my friends! You'll know if my idea works out. Now we'll make use of every man here in camp! A thousand or more soldiers, and all of these farmers, these laborers—every man of them! Three thousand men—knives, pistols, bayonets! In among those Russians with the cold steel—could you destroy them then? Cold steel and grenades?"

"We could destroy twice their number," said someone gloomily, "if we could get at them. But it is impossible to reach them. Their machine-guns command those open slopes."

"Good! I'll show you how to reach them," rang Carrick's voice. "I want one man to go with me and open the road. Who'll volunteer? It may well be death to go."

"I," said Lonnrot, and Carrick nodded to him.

IN an hour they were on their way, white wraiths in hooded snow-robes, booted and spiked. No skis, no weapons. Carrick carried the heavy auger. Lonnrot was loaded with the dynamite, well prepared. They went in silence, moving afoot up the crusted ice of the river, thin snowflakes drifting on the darkness around—the darkness that was dimly lighted by the Northern Lights behind the thick clouds. The air shuddered with distant gunfire.

Neither man spoke. Upon Carrick was a heaviness, a fear, an actual terror of what he was about. He had glimpsed it all quite clearly as a thing to do, but doing it was something else; he really was horribly afraid. The night, the reflected glow of huge fires from the Russian camp, the thin drift of snowflakes in the air, the bitter cold and the silence, weighed upon him. He had not told Lonnrot his plan. If it failed, then it would fail. If it succeeded, time enough to talk about it.

ONCE away from the camp, the ice was clear, windswept of snow. White from head to foot, the two figures were practically invisible; they made no sound. It was a short mile. Once up in the danger-zone by the heights, the ruddy glow of fires and the voices of Russian sentries showed their peril. A broad waterfall, where the stream came over the cliffs, stood frozen like a silvery white wall.

They were close, within rifle-shot. To the right, the ground fell sharply off in what must be a steep valley; thither, in ancient days, the stream had dropped away and continued its fall. There was the clump of white birch trees, all alone. Carrick touched the Finn's arm; the two men halted, their breath steaming in the bitter air, and freezing on the edges of their white hoods.

Carrick estimated swiftly. Under the coating of snow and ice, with the clump of birch as guide, he could trace quite clearly where the dam must lie. The reflection of the Russian fires, the dim glow of the Lights through the clouds, lit the night. Carrick stepped forward, and Lonnrot followed. When he judged that he must be halfway along the line of the hidden retaining wall, he halted. Must not frighten the fish now! He smiled grimly to himself as he set the big auger in the ice and leaned his weight on the handles. It would have been impossible to use axes here. The Russians were alert. A burst of machine-gun fire stuttered to the right, and fell silent, emphasizing his thought.

To stand here in the open and bore away, with the voices of enemy sentries so crisply close that even a low laugh

carried clearly, was a difficult thing. Carrick turned his back to the fires, that his white cloak might blend more perfectly with the snow and ice. The big auger bit and sank in. Was that three-foot iron shank long enough to pierce the ice? Perhaps not. No matter. Dynamite sends its force downward. Any hole would serve.

The ringing *"spang-g-g!"* of a Finnish rifle, then half a dozen more, jarred the night stillness. Two machine-guns leaped into life in response. From somewhere at the head of the falls, just above, an automatic rifle sent a hysterical burst of lead down the river-ice at imagined enemies. Carrick could hear the whistle and whine of the bullets. He bored on, until Lonnrot, who had set down his burden, touched his arm, offering to relieve him.

Carrick got the charges ready. The wrapped, watertight bombs he regretfully laid aside, as far too big for any holes he could make; after all, this ice would be too thick to bore through. His holes would take a couple of sticks, anyway. The rest could be connected by fuse and would go off even if the first explosion missed the detonators; yes, all of the dynamite could be used here very handily, but some at least must be sunk.

HALF an hour, an hour; the holes were well down. The two were sweating in their furs. Occasional shots and bursts of gunfire told of Finnish snipers and alert Russians. From the camp close at hand came an occasional chorus of voices; a vodka party, no doubt, celebrating their victory of the morrow in song.

No victory, if the Finns appeared suddenly in their camp! That would be slaughter. Kindly as Finnish men were, in this war they had become frightful. The Russians could not stand against them hand to hand, even with the favor of great odds. Let those machine-guns be silenced, and—

Carrick stiffened, at a grunt from Lonnrot, who had the auger. A circle of holes had been completed—now to break clear the central block of ice. Not a large one at all. The two put their weight on the steel tool and prized with it. A snap, a crackle; the central sliver of ice came free. Here was a hole two feet down or more, six inches across. No water; the ice was solid beyond.

That faint cracking and rending of the ice was heard. Voices leaped sharp-

ly. A rifle yammered, and a stream of bullets was sweeping the air. "Damn those automatic rifles!" thought Carrick, forcing himself to stand quiet as Lonnrot did.

Then the crisis was past.

They worked together, stuffing the dynamite into the hole. Lonnrot had caught the idea now and was trembling like an eager dog, whispering things to himself. The fuses were ready; the ice-dust was tamped down; the fuses of the extra sticks were ready—all to light at one touch of a match.

Carrick spoke softly at the Finn's ear.

"Take cover. My job. There'll be hell let loose when this goes off. If it works, our men can come up here under the ice roof—a covered road, where the water was. They'll take the Russ by surprise. All right, get away!"

LONNROT disappeared. Carrick waited, removed a mitten, fumbled for matches. Wax vestas he had brought from London—they would work, all right. He got out the box, struck one, cupped the tiny flame and lowered it to the waiting fuses. A sputter leaped instantly. The match dropped, and Carrick was off.

He made downstream and headed for a group of stumps on one bank. When he got there, he found Lonnrot ahead of him. They crouched together; the roaring crash came before Carrick could ready himself for it. The stumps shook; the earth and snow and ice shook; a sheet of flame spouted up the sky. Intense blackness followed, and things dropping, and the stabbing spurts of machine-guns at work. The Russians were taking no chances. Bullets swept the whole river and the snow-expanse around.

"It worked, it worked!" Carrick caught Lonnrot's arm. "Listen!"

They could hear the gurgling rush of water, off to the right. With a little more light they could have seen the flood spreading down those snowy slopes; Carrick fancied he could see it anyway. The burst of firing lessened.

"Get off, get off!" exclaimed Carrick. "Separate. We must get in the word. Bring every man up under the ice before dawn. Off with you!"

Lonnrot rose and sped away, too excited to speak. Carrick rose to follow; a final vicious burst of firing sounded from above, and fell silent. Carrick found himself slipping, and caught at the

stump beside him; he was not slipping, after all. His knees were buckling. He came down, sitting, his back against the stump.

There was no pain, oddly enough. He could feel the blood inside his clothes, and then he could feel nothing whatever. As he realized the truth, swift terror stabbed at him; it passed almost at once. What matter, after all? This was the future for which he had sought, and the unhappy past was well forgotten and atoned.

IN the snowy air something was moving; indistinct figures, hurrying past, moving upstream as though to attack. His own men, he thought. Strange! They should be under that frozen arch, under the ice, moving up the emptied river-bed!

He found voice at last and ventured to speak. No answer came, but one man turned aside and stepped over to him; he spoke, and Carrick understood the words.

"So you see clearly, my friend! You don't mind what's ahead?"

"Of course I do," said Carrick. "Here, give me a hand. I'm hit—badly, I'm afraid."

"Oh, that's all right." The other wagged his head. "I never supposed you would lose your life in this business. Sorry I got you into it. But we don't know everything, do we?"

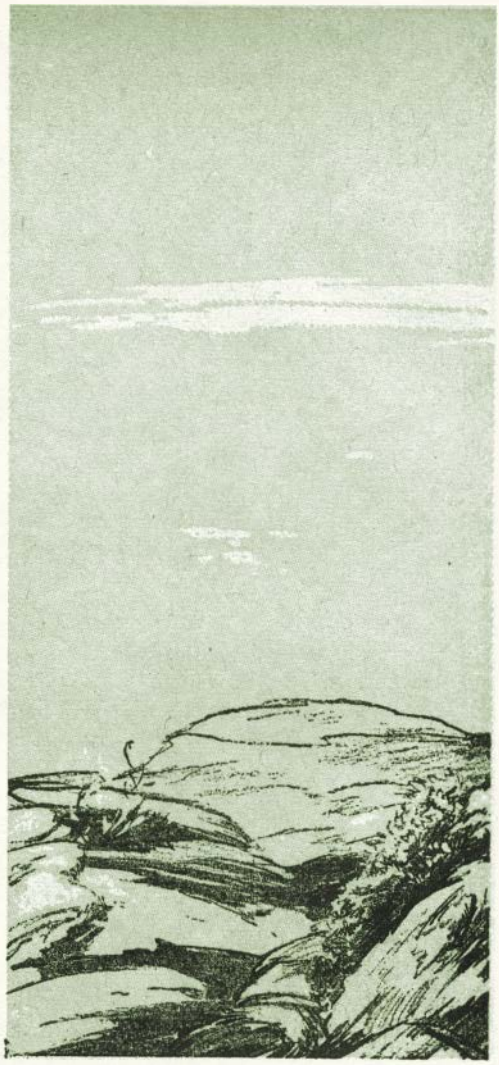
"What the devil are you talking about?" Carrick demanded heatedly. "Give me a hand up, will you?"

"Certainly. That's what I'm here for," the other said calmly, and stooped above him. "There's nothing to worry about. I should think you'd feel rather good about it; all the mistakes and tragedies and misunderstandings of the past swept away in this good work that you've done—"

Carrick glimpsed the face, close to his. It was the wrinkled, age-withered face of the countryman who had told about the river. It was the wizened old man of his dream, the one whom Lonnrot had identified with the hero Wainamoinen, the ancient of days! In other words, this was merely another hallucination.

A burst of incredulous laughter shook Carrick. . . .

He was still smiling when they found him next morning, after the destruction of the 32nd Division; but now his smile was no longer incredulous.



That famous Chinese-American G-man known as James Lee here deals with a most spectacular crime.

By HUGH WILEY

Illustrated by Austin Briggs

ACROSS the wide table in the library of his apartment, James Lee faced Chandler Hill. The pair had been classmates at college, and their conversation throughout dinner had been pleasantly reminiscent of the old days.

"Now that we've covered '23 matters, I have a technical problem for you," Lee announced. "It's right in your line—aviation."

The Fourth Messenger

"Who's talking now—the young sleuth of the F.B.I., or my old college pal?"

"Everything is off the record."

"Fair enough. Shoot the piece."

"Why did those last three passenger planes crash—the Zenith Airways ships on the San Francisco-Los Angeles run?"

"You can search me. I haven't read the Department reports. My own outfit lost eleven bombers around Canton last month."

"Your planes were shot down in combat," Lee returned. "There is no apparent reason why these three passenger planes crashed."

"There's always a reason," Chandler Hill suggested. "They're built to fly, and most of them do. Reports show anything?"

"Nothing definite," James Lee answered. "Various theories. What makes a plane crash?"

"Enemy gunfire is the first thing I think of."

"That's out."

"Check. Let's go down the line." Chandler Hill counted a few reasons on his fingers: "You get lost in a fog. Ice brings you down. You run out of gas. Your engine conks. You fly too low to jump a mountain. You collide with another plane. A gas-leak burns you up. The stick jams. Your altimeter goes haywire; your compass goes haywire. You hit a power line. Your landing-gear sticks—is that plenty?"

"Yes," James Lee said, "that's plenty—except that none of your reasons throws any light on my problem."

"Where did you get your problem?"

"The Department asked the F.B.I. to investigate these three Zenith Airways crashes."

"They expect you to clear everything up where all the technical experts have failed?"

"Evidently."

Chandler Hill yawned. "Well," he said, "that's your personal grief. I'm a flyer, not a miracle-man. . . . This is good whisky."

"Dig into it," James Lee urged. "Sherry is my dish. How are you getting along with your job?"

"Rotten," Chandler Hill replied. "Just as I expected. The airplane manufacturers are r'arin' to hit the ball on anybody's ten-million-dollar order, but the State Department dropped the boom on me. 'Build and be damned!' was the edict, 'but don't try to take the planes out of the United States!'"

"What are you going to do?"

"Search me—route them under cover through some neutral county, I suppose. Delivery is out of my jurisdiction. I came over on the Clipper fully equipped with ten million bucks and authority to sign the construction contracts. But I'm licked. I've been here three months, and I haven't turned a wheel."

"What's your next move?"

"I'd like to get back to China and start shooting where it will do some good. It's up to the G.H.Q. and the government to solve the diplomatic problems; international law is too tough for my teeth."

"CAN rifle-fire bring down a plane?" Lee asked abruptly.

"Of course—we've lost a dozen of them that way. And we've bagged twice that many." Hill put down his glass and rose.

"You don't have to shoot the pilot?"

"Hell, no! A lucky hit on a loaded bomber, and he practically disintegrates. . . . Listen, my lad; it's midnight, and I'm on my way. How about lunch with me tomorrow? Grace Howard is in from China. I'd like to have you meet her."

"I'm sorry—next week sometime," James Lee amended, smiling. "Right now, no other engagements while I have this date with the Department's problem."

"Give me a ring if I can help you with any part of it."

"Thank you; I will. Maybe you've already helped me more than you know. Good night, Chandler. Happy landings!"

FOR an hour after Chandler Hill had left, James Lee worked on development of a systematic scheme for the solution of his problem. He decided that his first investigations would cover the tangible evidence; thereafter, a study of time and space as it applied to the three disasters; and finally, an approach through the biographical data of the crash victims. He discarded all surmise and theory; the official investigations and the newspaper publicity had furnished plenty of that.

In his office on the following morning, to his assistants Riley and Wilbur, "I'll be away for two or three days," he said. "I'm going to have a look-see at the three crashed airliners. While I'm away, I want you to get me full information covering everybody on the passenger-lists of the three planes. Riley, you can dig that out. Wilbur, your job is to get a record of all flight conditions available. I want to know all about the weather at the time of the flights, what weather the planes went through, and the peculiar characteristics of each plane. They're duplicates in design and construction, but the performance factors are always variables. You might get me some dope on the technical qualifications of the six pilots who crashed. Get a transcript of all communications to the pilots, and from them, while the planes were in the air. That's all. See you Thursday!"

The three planes had crashed on the southbound trip, within an hour of their departures from San Francisco. Before he left to inspect what wreckage remained on the sites of the crashes, James Lee detoured into Chinatown for a brief conversation with Yut Sung, one of his older countrymen.

To the world at large, Yut Sung was the proprietor of a pungent store whose

"There are times when friendship pays small profits," Yut Sung suggested.

shelves were stocked with porcelain. Under cover, the old Chinaman had for long years played an important rôle in the complex politics of his native land.

At a workbench against the west wall of the place, one of Yut Sung's men, an expert artisan, was repairing a broken bowl whose base bore the mark of the Emperor Yung Ching. The bowl had been broken into three pieces, and the workman was joining the fragments with riveted staples of soft wire.

James Lee spoke to this man and to one of Yut Sung's clerks.

"Thy master," he requested.

"In his private room," the clerk directed.

Facing Yut Sung in the back room of the place, "A small cloud can conceal Heaven," James Lee began in Cantonese, after greetings had been exchanged according to the ritual of Right Conduct.

"Truth adorns thy lips," Yut Sung returned. "A grain of sand can hide a mountain."

"What secret officials of the Army represent the Central Glory in this country at this time?" James Lee asked.

"Who am I to have such knowledge?" Yut Sung nibbled at the mouthpiece of a long bamboo pipe in the metal bowl of which glowed a pinch of opium-flavored tobacco.

"I am in the house of a friend?"

"There are times when friendship pays small profits," Yut Sung suggested.

"Thank you." James Lee got to his feet. "A wise man understands a nod. It is wise to remember that friendship cannot be purchased with gold. . . . Long life, plenteous years."

He left Yut Sung's store and got into his car. At twelve o'clock, driving southward, he reached the town nearest to the site of the first plane crash.

A garage-man guided him to the spot where the plane had fallen, seven miles east of the town. "I was the third man to get there after she fell," the garage-man boasted. "Mister, she must of landed like a ton of brick! Nose down—and the front end busted to pieces no bigger than your hat. They found machinery and stuff scattered for half a mile back."

JAMES LEE spent two hours exploring the terrain at the spot where the plane had crashed and for a distance back along the track of the flight. Various minor trophies of the disaster rewarded his search—a fragment of thin metal, one side of which was covered with paper; a six-inch piece of white metal wire, and a twisted gear of corroded brass pierced by a thin shaft of steel.

"The company sent in a couple of trucks a few days after the crash and cleaned everything up," the garage-man explained. "I drove one of them. I hear they had to leave them other two wrecks where they lit—country too rough to get near them with a truck."

James Lee nodded. "We'll go back to town now," he said.

The spot where the second plane had landed was in country too rough for motor-trucks. The third plane had crashed near the top of a hill in a broken terrain difficult of approach even on foot. James Lee returned from each of these two locations with a miscellany of débris that he had found.

TO Riley and Wilbur, in his office, he said: "It took me a day longer than I expected. The third plane crashed in very rough country." To Riley, "Did you get the data on the passengers?"

"Fairly complete," Riley answered. "Here it is—seven passengers in the first crash, nine in the second, and only five in the last one. Five or six of them were evidently under cover. There was a man and a girl in the second crash who would make a hot story for the newspapers. She was married to a Chicago man, and riding around with this Portland guy under an alibi."

"Forget it," James Lee said. "We're not concerned with that angle." To Frank Wilbur: "How did you get along with the data on the flight conditions and the dope on the pilots?"

"I've got it all fairly complete," Wilbur announced. "There's quite a little evidence from people on the ground—farmers and people who saw the planes overhead. I have the course of the first plane covered, up to three minutes before she crashed. The pilot in the second plane was talking to a dispatcher when his trouble hit him. I haven't got much on the third accident. The terminal boys heard from that pilot forty minutes after he took off, and that was the last message."

"Thank you," James Lee nodded. "Let me have the documents, and I'll go to work."

"Did you get anything hot on your trip?"

"I don't know, yet," James Lee returned. "I have a lead or two, but what they're worth remains to be seen."

Alone in his office, James Lee sat quietly at his desk for half an hour, contemplating various methods of attack that might solve his problem. Presently he put Riley's report aside and turned to the information that Frank Wilbur had compiled.

He sent for Wilbur.

"It's possible that one very important fact can be developed from your data," he said. "Bring me a drafting-board and a protractor, a couple of triangles, a scale

and a straight-edge. I want to plot the tracks of the three planes. Dig up a large-scale map of the country between San Francisco and the site of the third crash."

"Geological Survey sheets?"

"They don't cover all the route," Lee answered. "The scale is too big. Something about ten miles to the inch is what I want."

"The State Mining Bureau has a good map," Wilbur said.

Working with Wilbur's data, within the next half-hour James Lee had charted the tracks of the three planes. Crash Three was approximately on the theoretical course, but the first plane had been thirty miles west, the second twenty miles east of the course when they had crashed.

Contemplating the several factors in his problem—air-speed, wind-velocities, drift-angles and the performance-variables of each plane, James Lee sought a verification of a theory of vital importance that had come to him with the discovery of the twisted gear of brass at the site of the first crash. After an hour over the drawing-board on which lay the mining bureau's map, he announced to Frank Wilbur: "We're reasonably sure of one thing. I think it's important."

"What have you got?" Wilbur asked.

"Each of the three planes crashed exactly one hour after it took off. That means deliberate human agency."

Wilbur's eyes widened with the import of the information. "Holy old double-acting dynamite!" he exclaimed. "I get you! A thousand square miles of country. No record of the time of the third crash. That's what fooled everybody! . . . But who did it?"

"That's the tough point," James Lee said. "Get Riley in here, and let's ride that angle for a while."

To Riley: "We have good reason to believe that each of the three planes was bombed from the inside—wrecked by explosives that they carried. Probably wrecked by time-bombs set to go off one hour after the plane's *scheduled leaving-time.* Let's say that we have the What, Where and When questions answered. The next thing is—Who and Why?"

"Did you get any Who and Why stuff out of my report?" Riley asked.

James Lee nodded. "You tell your story first," he directed.

"On second thought, I want to know more about Knight Patton and Gordon Chase and old Cornelius Ryckman," Riley said.

In the next half-hour James Lee charted the tracks of the three planes.

"Exactly," Lee agreed. "Let's see; Patton was on the passenger-list of the first plane as 'Robert Ward.' Gordon Chase was on the passenger-list of the second plane as 'Walter Green.' Check?"

"That's what I got from the coroner's report on the two crashes," Riley said. "Ryckman was an old China hand too," he added, anticipating James Lee's comment.

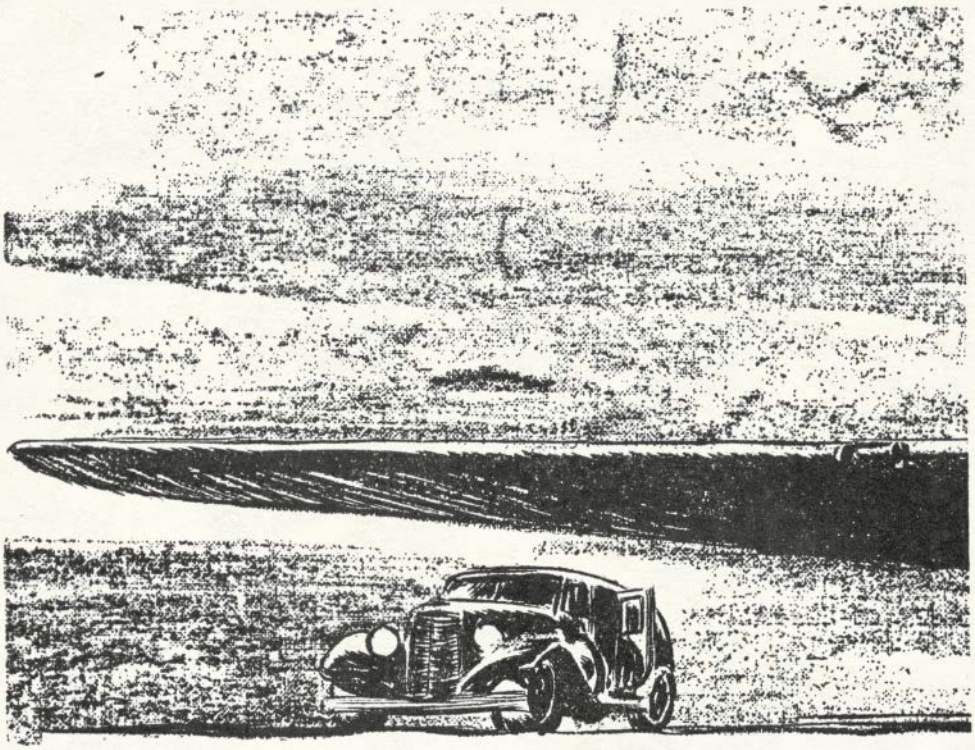
"Seven passengers on the first plane, nine on the second, and five on the third. None of them seemed to interest me except Patton and Chase and Ryckman."

"You and me, all six!" Riley agreed. "Patton got in from China on the *Hogenberg.* Chase got here eighteen days after Patton crashed; he came on the China Clipper."

"Good work. Go ahead, Riley," Lee suggested.

"Cornelius Ryckman, traveling under his own name, was headed for New York from Shanghai, via Vancouver; California was an unscheduled detour for him. His home was in Shanghai, and he was a director of the Batavia-Canton Bank. I couldn't get much that the world doesn't know about him, except that he had engagements with some heavyweight bankers in New York."

INSPECTING further data in Riley's report: "Knight Patton was Captain Knight Patton," James Lee began. "He did some distinguished fighting for England in the R.A.F. Gordon Chase put in two years training flyers for Chiang Kai-shek. Ryckman's bank arranged the credits for Chandler Hill's purchase of ten million dollars' worth of fighting-



"Follow me with the car," James Lee directed. He wheeled the light

planes for the Chinese armies. . . . It is probable that the agents of China's enemies here on the West Coast are responsible for this job." For a moment Lee's face hardened. "Damned ruthless devils!" he grated. "Deliberate murder of thirty people! . . . Killers. Well, let's see if we can do some killing to balance the books. We have the Why angle under control; there remains the single problem of discovering who bombed the three planes."

"What have you got on that one?" Riley asked.

"I've got some scrap that I picked up where the planes crashed, and that's about all. As a matter of fact, this isn't our job, from here on. It really belongs to the State Department—but we'll take a crack at it."

From the upper right-hand drawer of his desk, James Lee produced the twisted brass gear pierced by the thin steel rod, that he had found near the site of the first crash. He handed this to Riley. "This may be a part of the clock that timed the explosion on the first plane," he said. "See what you can find about clocks as they apply to our problem."

"Okay," Riley answered. "I'm on my way."

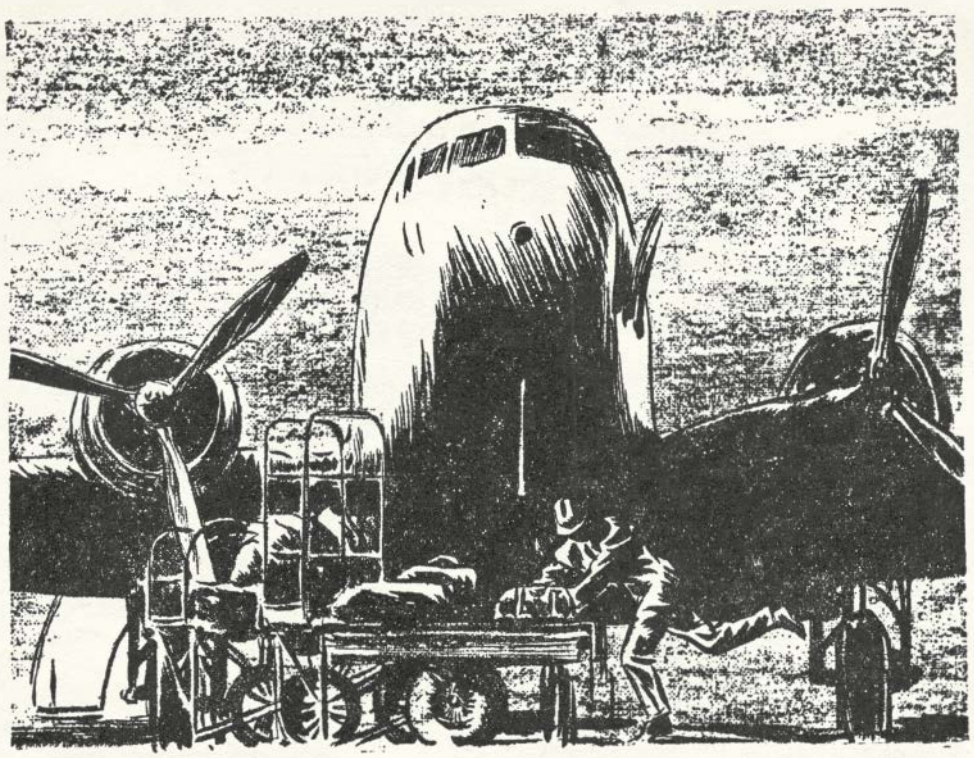
"Wait a minute," James Lee countered. He handed Riley the thin piece of metal, one side of which carried a veneer of paper. "This is probably a part of the dial of the clock—but don't let this twist you up on the brass gear identification. You have two problems, not one."

A second exploration of the drawer of his desk yielded the six-inch section of white metal wire. He handed this wire to Frank Wilbur. "Observe that it is a very soft alloy," he directed. "I have some ideas relative to that piece of wire, but see what you can do in digging up the facts about it before I confuse you with my theories."

WHEN Wilbur had left, James Lee turned his attention to mail which had accumulated during his three-day absence. The official communications had been opened. In his personal mail, bearing a San Francisco postmark, he found a message in Chinese. The message was written with a thin brush in the Hing Shu or running hand, and was obviously the work of a competent scribe.

"The aspect of a coming event in a short time," James Lee read. *"Death to be immediate penalty present pathway traveling."*

James Lee laid the death-threat on his desk and lighted a cigarette. "Let me



truck and its cargo of three packages toward the end of the field.

see," he mused. "There are several pathways being traveled at the moment. The narcotic mob would not have written this. The Hindu murder cases are closed. . . . Some Chinese enemy of China threatens me. . . . Or is he a Chinese? One phrase is written in a style that shows a limited knowledge of the Hing Shu."

He reflected that the running hand could not be read without a special study, and that long years of practice were required for proficiency in this mode. "Its abbreviations are reminiscent of the T'sao T'sz—the brush runs from one character to another here, and here, without lifting it from the paper. . . . I know that school! This threat of death has simplified my problem!"

He laid the letter in the upper right-hand drawer of his desk with the trophies of his explorations where the three planes had crashed. Reading the rest of his personal mail, he was interrupted presently by the telephone.

"Where can I see you?" Chandler Hill asked. "Right away. It's frightfully important."

"Right away," James Lee agreed. "In my office."

"I'm on my way."

Chandler Hill reached James Lee's office eight minutes after he had telephoned. "It's about Grace Howard." He handed James Lee a duplicate of the death-threat that Lee had received in his morning mail. "Is this a Black Hand letter? Grace had a Chinese bar-boy read it for her. All he said was that somebody would kill her."

James Lee glanced at the document. "Yes," he said, "it's a killer's threat. . . . What is she doing in the United States?"

"Frankly, I don't know. There's a mystery angle to her that I never knew before."

"Get her in here quick!" James Lee directed. "Where is she?" I'll send a man after her."

"You can't get her; she left on the twelve-o'clock plane for Los Angeles."

Lee glanced at his wrist-watch. "It isn't twelve yet by one minute," he said. He grabbed the telephone. "Get me Zenith Airways, quick," he directed. "The airport!"

There was a three-minute delay. Then over the phone came a voice. "Zenith Airways—Osborn speaking."

"This is James Lee of the F.B.I. Has the twelve-o'clock plane left for Los Angeles?"

"She left two minutes ago."

"Bring her back!" James Lee commanded. "Ground her!"

"There's another plane at two o'clock, Mr. Lee," Osborn said. "If we can—"

"Stop that plane!" James Lee repeated. "Get this: it may be life and death. Order the dispatcher to call her back. I'll be responsible. When she comes in, unload the passengers. Spot the ship as far from the airport as you can. Open the baggage door and the express door, and spot a baggage truck next to the ship so that I can get inside. Get everybody away from the ship. Keep them away till I get there."

"Okay," Osborn answered. "You're the doctor—I'll flag her."

James Lee got to his feet. "Come along!" he said to Chandler Hill. "We've got a tough race against time."

"I'm with you," Chandler Hill said. "I don't know the set-up, but if Grace is in danger, deal me in."

Racing south toward the airport, "I'm playing a hunch," James Lee explained. He glanced at the clock beside the speedometer. "We've got forty minutes at the outside—fifteen or twenty after we get there.... I hope the killer hasn't changed his methods!"

THE landing-field was clear as James Lee swung his car through one of the open gates. A dozen groundsmen and pilots waited for him. "Where is the grounded plane?" he asked.

"Down there." One of the pilots pointed to the plane.

"Baggage truck alongside?"

"Two of them. What's the dope?"

"No time now," James Lee answered. "Keep everyone away from the plane. Stay away from it."

Heading down the three-hundred-foot runway toward the plane, "You'd better take the car back and let me handle this," Lee said to Chandler Hill. "It may let go ahead of time."

"Forget it," Hill returned. "You'll need help.... That was Grace Howard standing there with those two pilots."

Nearing the grounded plane, "Climb into the baggage compartment and heave the stuff out on the truck," Lee directed. "We have fifteen minutes to go. Make it snappy."

In the express compartment of the plane, James Lee devoted three precious minutes to an inspection of the various packages stored there. He selected three, and lowered them carefully to the truck. He called back to Chandler Hill.

"I think I have what I wanted," he said. "Come here and lend me a hand."

When Chandler Hill came up ahead, "Follow me with the car," James Lee directed. "Ten minutes to go, and I'm not much of a runner." James Lee wheeled the light truck and its cargo of three packages toward the edge of the field. When he had pushed the truck a thousand feet from the plane, he left it and joined Chandler Hill in the car.

"Head for the airport," he directed. "We have four minutes! One express package on that truck will probably explode in the next four minutes!"

At the airport, one of the employees walked out to meet the car. "I'm John Osborn," he said to Chandler Hill. "Everybody is—"

"This is James Lee," Hill interrupted.

"Get me to a telephone," James Lee directed.

From the airport telephone, James Lee called his San Francisco office. To Frank Wilbur, "Send two men out and arrest Yut Sung," he ordered. "Hold him in my office until I get there. Send Riley over to pick up Mursaki and Kamura. If they've ducked, spread the net. If you find them, keep them apart until I get there. That's all."

"Okay," Wilbur answered. "What have you got? Did they—"

The crash of an explosion out on the landing-field punctuated Wilbur's question.

"Get busy," James Lee ordered. "No questions! This is a rush job."

He looked up at the electric clock on the wall of the airport office. "On the dot," he said half-aloud. "That one was nicely timed."

RETURNING to San Francisco with Chandler Hill, "Miss Howard is a very lovely girl," James Lee commented. "If you will forgive me for asking, how soon do you plan on marrying her?"

"Forgive you!" Chandler Hill struggled for a moment with his emotions. "You saved her life.... I'd marry her today if she'd have me."

"She'll marry you immediately after her return from Los Angeles," James Lee advised. "She'll be off duty then."

"What do you mean?"

"She is the fourth messenger," James Lee explained. "Knight Patton, Gordon Chase, Cornelius Ryckman—all killed in line of duty. They represented China in your airplane deal. Miss Howard will turn the trick.... In strict confidence, she is over here for your bombing-planes. Easy enough to buy them, but hard to

get them delivered. She has it all worked out. She's a grand girl; permit me to congratulate you."

"Do you mean that they were on her trail—that the fourth plane was to be bombed because she was on board?"

"I think that was the plan," James Lee said. "That's my theory—subject to confirmation."

"How did you work it out?" Chandler Hill asked. "Open up. I'll keep my mouth shut—word of honor."

AFTER a moment, Lee began: "It's a bit intricate: I found a brass gear-wheel and a piece of the dial of a clock where the first plane was wrecked. The main point was the strange coincidence of time—each of the three planes crashed exactly one hour after it took off. The other investigations seem to have overlooked that point. It's easy to understand how they missed it—different courses, different speeds, and different departure times. The time of the third crash was not observed by anybody. I had to figure out from charting the course that she had been one hour in the air when she crashed.

"The wreckers used different methods," James Lee continued. "The first plane went into a nose dive—probably caused by a bomb in the express compartment. The passenger-list for the second and third crashes showed that in each instance a mysterious passenger had missed the plane after his baggage was on board. The baggage compartment is back in the tail of the plane, and each of these two wrecks indicated that the tail of each plane had been wrecked before it crashed. I began with that and worked ahead. . . . There was a piece of wire near the first wreck. It's identical with the soft wire that Yut Sung uses to repair a fine piece of porcelain—when it's worth repairing. It was probably used in the bombs to connect up the batteries with the detonator. . . . Patton and Chase and Ryckman were all here from China as military envoys. I might have overlooked the import of the first two murders, but three in a row meant action by enemies of China—not, probably, by official Japanese emissaries, but by fanatics. Finally, the death-threats that were sent to Miss Howard and to me—"

"What could you tell from those things?" Chandler Hill asked. "You must get them all the time."

"I do. But these were written by someone whose knowledge of Japanese writing had modified his method of writing the Hing Shu—the running hand in Chinese. Japanese script is more angular. Then there was the paper on which the threat was written—mulberry fibers: typically a Japanese product."

"But your man Yut Sung—he isn't a Japanese?"

"No, but he's probably a traitor to China. He was educated in Japan. He plays crooked politics. He is very wealthy. He has been mixed up in several Japanese narcotic enterprises, with Mr. Mursaki and Mr. Kamura."

"I see." Hill nodded. "Evil companions—but how are you going to make sure?"

"We'll probably find Yut Sung and Mursaki and Kamura in my office."

"Then what?"

James Lee was silent for a moment, his eyes narrowed. "I doubt if they live to face the bar of justice," he predicted. "When they fail in these affairs, the Japanese prefer to destroy themselves rather than suffer official penalties. As for Yut Sung—there is a Chinese method of torture known as the Thousand Deaths. Various countrymen of mine in San Francisco who serve the Central Glory are skilled in the technique of that torture. We shall see."

IN San Francisco an hour after the confessions of Yut Sung and his two Japanese associates had confirmed his theory of the three plane-crashes, James Lee telephoned to Chandler Hill. "You can tell Miss Howard that she can forget the death-threat," he said. "Our theories have been confirmed by confessions from Yut Sung and his two accomplices. Miss Howard is safe enough this time, but I advise her against further activities of a similar kind."

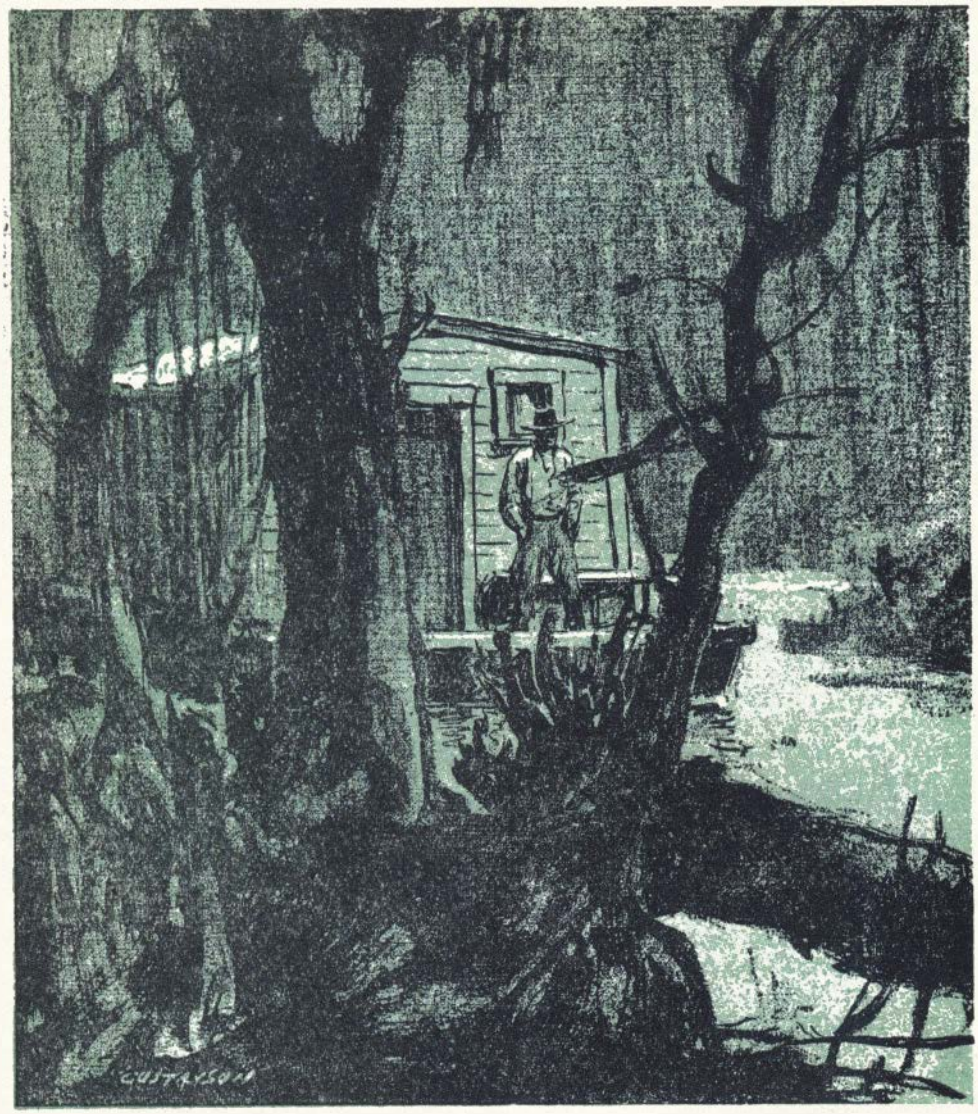
"I have just talked to her on long distance," Chandler Hill replied. "She's coming back tonight. We're to be married next Monday—and you've got to see me through with the show. She won't marry me unless you're there."

"Thank you," James Lee answered. "You can count on me. I'll be there."

"You're there a million, right now!" Chandler Hill complimented. "Boy, I owe you one bride and the best luck I ever had!"

"See you Monday," said James Lee. "Happy landings!"

Another James Lee story by Hugh Wiley will appear in an early issue.



A STRANGER approached the old river-man as he sat on the stern-deck of his shanty-boat with a handline over the side, which he lifted absently from time to time. The mouth of Whisky Bayou was a good place to catch blue and yellow catfish. He evidently wasn't thinking about fish as he gazed dreamily into the distances across, up and down old Mississip'.

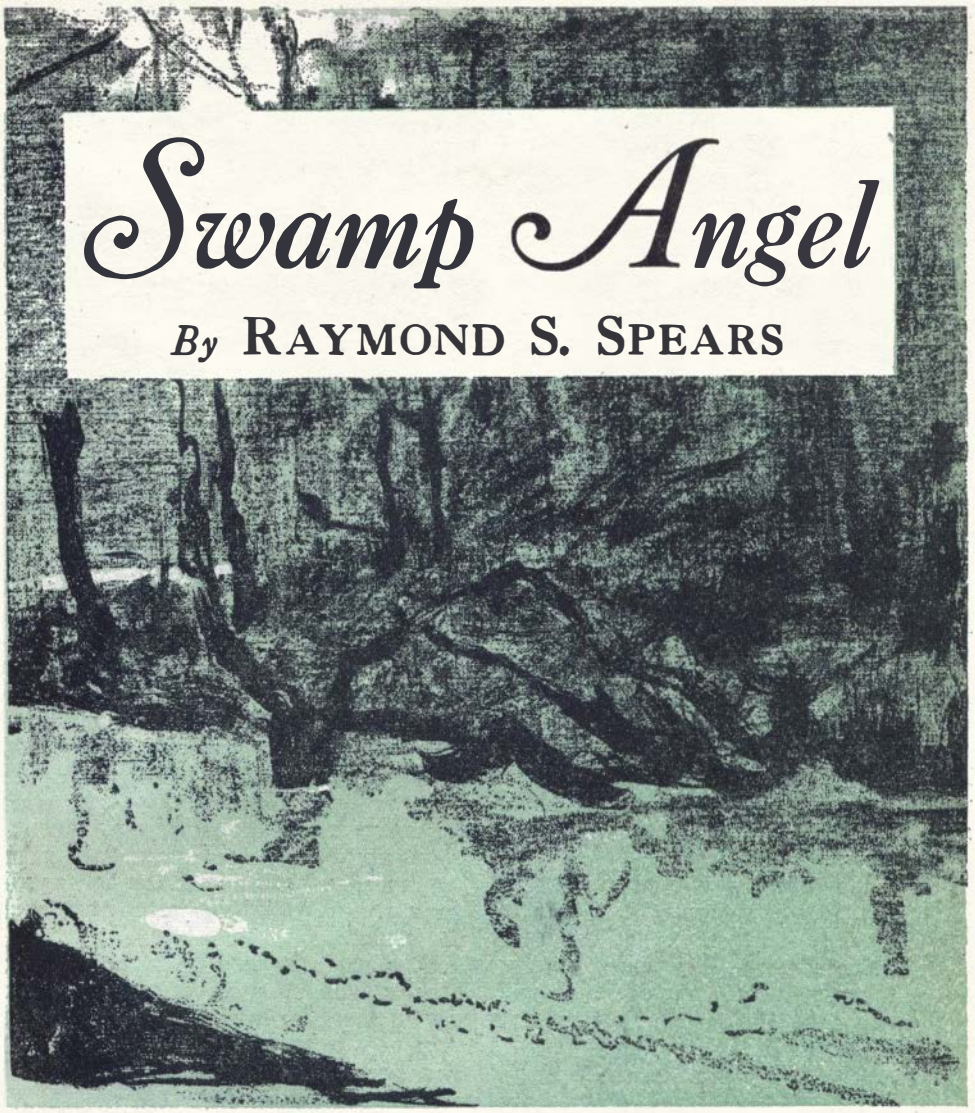
The stranger's trunk-cabin swung in within hail and he found the old man not averse to answering questions.

"This heah's the Dark Corner, suh—yas suh, in a way of speaking, it's Gov'-ment land, but I wouldn't advise a strangeh to go in, theh. Old Mississip's a tol'able sizable riveh, plenty good fishin', right smart huntin' along reaches an' bends. 'Taint as if the Dark Corner was all the good livin' they is down along. Course, yo' bein' a Yank, would want to know how come—"

The old man's clear eyes twinkled through lashes and overhanging brows, as he chuckled. Then he caught a bowline of the model-hull and made it fast.

"Course, hit's a perty long yarn, but if'n yo' got as much time as I have," he smiled, "I'll tell yo' 'bout one strangeh that come in here. He warn't suspectin'—he was some time findin' where he was at."

The old man pulled his thick mustache apart in the middle as if to clear the way for his words, and smoothed his palm down his long cascading beard, like whitened rollers down his chest.



Swamp Angel

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

"I'll tell yo' 'bout Wing Dobussy, an' them happenstances—along back—not so fur back, at that."

Of course, nobody could write his language of words, sounds, gestures, the fill-ins of what has to be understood—pointing with fingers and thumbs—but it could all be told, time, place, and folks, just how it was;

WHEN Wing Dobussy jumped to his feet, his eyes blinking, as he glanced around, his too-comfortable armchair falling over on the bow deck of his cabin-boat, he saw close to him tall columns of mossy, sickly-looking trees, short-branched, twisted and gnarled. He was gliding down a chute or bayou hardly fifty yards wide in a dark swamp bottom all under muddy water to the lower limbs of a culled forest.

"Where's that dog-gone old Mississip'?" he demanded hotly. "How come?"

When he had sat down, tipped back against the cabin and sighed in plumb comfort, the river was miles wide, old Mississip' in flood, a levee shore on the west, high bluffs on the east, both miles away. In mid-stream he was far from anywhere. Even the submerged timber brakes were off yonder in dim distance.

Now he had lost that enormous flood, running ten miles wide, and he was poking off down a trifling creek that a blue heron could almost step across, gliding into nowhere, the best he could figure it.

"Dad-blasted old Muddy-gut!" he grumbled. "I mought've known! You

cain't trust him half a minute—not old Mississip', you cain't!"

He looked ahead through a straight chute between two walls of outspreadi canopied branches, the yellow torrent drivi down a visible grade in narrowing perspective. Behind him was a bend, and vistas in similar wilds, pale green of tiny growing leaves, deep purple shadows, long reflections mingling trees with blue sky.

A wilderness submerged! He could see raccoons basking on big limbs, nourished by their own fat. Squirrels as big as rabbits were jumping from tree to tree. Around each bend a flock of mallards would jump up at the coming of the cabin-boat, a shack on a scow-hull, flying out of the way. Freshwater terrapin rested on lots of the floating timber. Here and there a huge frog in glistening green would sit up, grunting.

Wing Dobussy watched ahead anxiously. Lots of these swamp rivers head into a raft, a jam of driftwood, floating islands, débris clear across them; and it sure is bad business, sucking down under the loose stuff. Nervously he caught up his big sweeps ready to pull for life; but when he stretched his neck watching ahead, he didn't see anything to stop him.

THE late evening was nice, clear, a pretty, balmy spring day. Some of the trees were in blossom, turning green with lush new leaves. Birds were singing; woodpeckers yelping back and forth; and the darting of the migrants kept the branches lifting in the evening calm.

They were heading north, those birds, hurrying to 'tend to their spring and summer business. Little birds, and pathetic little flocks of big birds, were everywhere, but scattering. The river was getting down. Wing Dobussy couldn't even tell whether he had floated out on the east or the west side of the big river. He felt hoodwinked, impatient, stupid, caught thataway.

"A man hadn't ought to be careless like that!" he admitted to himself. "I better keep dropping on down."

Bothered, not knowing what to expect, watching ahead and all around, he kept going; and then in a scattering where the current almost stopped, he heard a motor coming, pounding along with an open cut-out. He reached for his rifle, just to be on the safe side; he had to laugh, then, when he saw who it was actually driving that engined craft skimmering in the boundless overflow.

A girl with a brown skirt and a yellow blouse, standing tall, rangy and graceful, in a big green canoe with an outboard frame hung on the stern, was steering directly toward him and pounding right along.

"Hi-i, you!" she hailed, catching up a long paddle. "Look aout!"

Dobussy was so surprised that he didn't notice she was pinched in a making current where drift had lodged against the trees; and his boat cut her off because the side-jam deflected and spread the flow in the suck at the head of the bayou where it drew into the thick timber again.

WHEN he saw what he had done, he seized a pike-pole and poked it into a large gum tree, checking his shanty-boat just enough so she slid through without crushing her canoe against the tree at the current take-off. For two or three minutes he was whirling around, trying to get straightened out in the narrows, catching glimpses of the blazing blue eyes and boat-craft energy of the young woman, saving herself in the circling eddy he had crowded her into. Then they were down in another wide-water which looked as innocent and calm as ever.

"I reckon yo're a soft-paw!" the young woman hailed him as soon as he was able to listen. "Or aint yo' jest naturally got no sense?"

Of course, the way his ropes hung, the hoop-nets and frog-spears, turtle-dips and claws, fishpoles—all those tools and conveniences he had rigged up, making probably the best outfit for all-around wild-crafting that ever came out of the Wabash, told her different. She knew what she was saying, taunting him.

"I don't blame you for thinking so!" he called back. "But I'm a stranger down thisaway. My first trip below the jump-off at the Ohio, and I never did intend to get out into the overflow. Which way is old Mississip' from here, anyhow? East or west?"

"Ho law!" she laughed. "You are sure twisted! Did yo'-all get lost in the night?"

"No, it wasn't night," he grinned sheepishly. "I was jus' trippin' down, in one of those long breaks in the runnin' drift, an' a-sittin' on the bow deck, sun shining and plumb comfy. The next I knew, I was all shut in by timber brake and floating down a crooked bayou fifty yards wide. I'd done lost the middle of old Mississip'!"

"Shu-u!" she laughed. "That happens! This yeah's the Dark Corner—sure black-lonesome in places! Wild geese get lost in there, they say. Yo' slid off'n the head rise into the Spoonbill Cat, I expaict. Jes' foller the main currents down. Yo' come out down the West er East Albion; an' if'n yo' catch the Shortcut, yo' can git through the timbers oveh by the Barstow place. They got a two-story house livin' upstairs, now. Yo' whoop at the end of the Shortcut, an' they'll hear yo'. They'll tell whichaway to git through. I don't advise yo' to hang around these yeah brakes. 'Taint good medicine fo' strangehs. Us Swamp Angels git along all right, mostly. Keep yo' eyes open wider'n yo' have, strangeh!"

Her voice grew distant. If she said more, he didn't get it. So it was bad for strangers? Wild life was plenty—fur, winter meat, and now fish, terrapin, frogs were abundant; he could make a good living in there. Nevertheless he caught the swirl and curve into the Shortcut and ran through between the tall willows, stumpy trees, the winding channel only twice as wide as his boat.

The cross-current was slow, but sure deep and with body to it. He came to a narrow inlet, and as it was approaching sunset he headed up this byway out of the main channel, driven by his outboard. Even in lowest water this would probably be good mooring. He found a great whirling pool an acre or more large in the midst of tall forest. He dropped a lead—it was a hundred feet deep and a soft sandy bottom. The whirlpool had dug a blue-hole in the loose silt and quicksand, making a pretty harbor.

Here was a hiding-place in the brake for his cabin-boat, his skiff, shell-scow and launch. He knew that few if any people would ever come through here. This scattering of forest, lake and bayous was dense and wild. Here was a good place for a wildcrafter to tie in.

"She said it's bad medicine in the Dark Corner for strangers," he reflected. "Well, I won't be a stranger long. I can make a big living here, spring fishing, shipping frogs, turtles, probably shells in summer, hunting in autumn. Looks like plenty fur for short-season trapping winters!"

CHAPTER II

The Varnished Pirogue

NEXT morning Dobussy was up before dawn, eating a hearty breakfast. In the morning light he made sure the houseboat was swinging all clear, where no submerged stubs or branches could poke holes into it, leaving plenty of slack mooring-line in case the water should go down farther than he anticipated. Taking a spare five-gallon can of gasoline as well as his regular outboard-motor supply, with rations, boat-hood, a blanket and everything for two or three days if he wanted to stay away that long, exploring around, he headed out in his heavy clinker-built skiff. Prowling in the overflow, one needed a boat to stand rough prodding by snags and drift.

HE circled around, going west to another fork of the Albion; then working up the current, cutting across to the middle fork down which he had drifted, he studied the timber. Tupelo, gum and cypress—there were lots of those swamp-ground trees. Higher ground with white oak, hickory and pecan showed too. Wide opens indicated marshes, and here the only trees were scattered swell-butt cypress, often with the outflaring conical butts almost completely submerged.

The flood current swept in a miles-wide sheet gliding down through the brakes, the trees of which were draped with wild-grape vines, whispering at every trunk as it lapped by. In the open strips, the channels of the bayous and branches of watercourses carried faster currents with more body to them. They tore into the flood in places, and made ugly sucks and boilings—a small-boat could get into a lot of trouble mighty quick in those agitated places, and there was an old-river lake, shaped like a crescent eight miles long.

Dobussy's four-horsepower outboard took him up-current, across the sweep of the overflow, and when he dropped down in places, he let a branch current take him circling every which way, inspecting and prospecting until nightfall.

Then putting up the skiff-hood, he lighted his lantern and cooked supper on a gasoline two-burner stove. He was tired, hungry and wondering. The Dark Corner was lonesome! The queer voices of the water and the birds around didn't make for the feel of company. Never had he been where he could wander around like this over hundreds of square miles, apparently.

In the morning he was slow getting up. Clouds had come over, and misty rain was falling now and then. The wind wasn't strong, but it had a moaning to it. He went over to the steep slopes of

"I reckon yo're a soft-paw!" the young woman hailed. "Or aint yo' jest naturally got no sense?"

the densely wooded valley ridges and skirted along them for a few miles. Places like that often had big trapping luck for a man.

PRESENTLY he headed back, beginning to think of going around to his shantyboat. The river flood was standing stationary now, and it would soon begin to fall if it hadn't started already. But finding his way back to his boat was a problem. He lost his way in the flood, missing or not recognizing the Albion forks when he worked back and forth across one or the other of them. Going through the woods, he struck a long, narrow-backed ridge ten or fifteen feet above the overflow. He landed, pulled the hood over the skiff to keep out the rain, if it began to pour, and walked up the back to the head end, where the current split down both sides through the dense brake. Over to his right was a good current and an open channel through the trees.

Looking back the way he had come, he could see the ridge was long, like a snake, and he was standing at a wide place, like a snake head. Perhaps it was natural; perhaps it had been heaped up by mound-builders or Indians.

Anyhow, it was hundreds of yards long, and when he went down to the head he found that a practically new log dugout or cunner had drifted down through the woods and was just teetering, ready to slide off into the current again. A man could go in this craft where a skiff couldn't. It was luck! On the bottom of the boat was a white-oak paddle with a two-foot by four-inch blade, straight-sided and spoon-gouged on one side, rounded on the other. He tipped the water out of the canoe and started down the slow current on the branch-side of the ride.

"Howdy, yo'!" a shrill voice suddenly hailed him.

A big, light pirogue with a log bottom and varnished cypress board sides, gunwales and a six-horsepower outboard shot into view, poled by a gaunt swamp man who was grinning across his dark red face, which looked like a little cabbage. Squatted in the bow was a wiry, blue-crystal-eyed man with a cascade of white whiskers down his chest to his waist. He wore a black frock coat, a black wide-brimmed hat, and he was gripping a fancy Model '86 repeating rifle, pointed at the hip, ready for business. The outboard's tail was tipped clear out of the water. The pirogue had lurked behind a thicket waiting for him.

"Howdy!" Dobussy answered. His own .22-caliber meat-rifle was out of reach on the drift canoe bottom. He was no match for that hulking big scoundrel in the stern with a 30-30 repeater and that old swamp devil and his 38-55 full magazine. The two were grinning mirthlessly in a peculiar kind of satisfaction Dobussy couldn't figure.

"What's yo' business, strangeh?" The old man's mustache lifted in the gusting of his voice, which was like a buzzard's, shrill and inadequate in comparison to his white-haired frock-coated dignity.

"Wild-crafting," Dobussy answered. "Trapping, fishing, frogs—"

"Jes' loafing! Tha's all—jes' a vagabond!" The man grew shrill and indignant. "A no-'count, lazy, shif'less riveh-rat! Big, strong, healthy—livin' round, doin' nothin'! We don' 'low no tramps er sech trash down yeah, no suh! I 'rest yo', charge of no visible means of support, 'spicious character, loiterin'—all them things! Pick 'im up, Duck!"

The burly, small-headed man shoved his pole, and the pirogue darted alongside of Wing's drift dugout. Dumbfounded, caught by surprise, not knowing what to think, Dobussy just stood in a daze while the old man pulled the light dugout alongside, and the big fellow snapped handcuffs on first one wrist, then the other, pinching them up tight.

"Step oveh!" Duck ordered, cuffing him aboard their boat. "Sit down!"

Dobussy sat on a narrow board thwart, and then the man in the stern shoved over into the open channel, started the outboard and letting in the propeller-gears, steered up the current, cut over into a ditch, crossed a cypress swamp, skirted jungles and a cane ridge, and in the depths came to a highland several feet above the water-level. The scoundrels had circled back to the creek, trying to fool him.

AT the water's edge there was a big shed, roofed with rusty sheet metal, sided with patched galvanized iron and surrounded by a high pole stockade with a barbed-wire entanglement. As they ran into the structure at the back, a sour odor wafted from it, and there was the sound of steam hissing, misty wreaths eddying up in foggy streamers, and the *clink-clank* of pumps gurgling came to them. From within came a wailing, moaning song to an old roustabout river-tune as shadowy, half-naked figures moved about in the structure amid glaring flame-flashes from furnaces in the dim glowing of lamp globes.

They landed at a float; the prisoner was prodded in the back, driving him to a landing-stage leading up into the building past a double-door at which sat a man in an old armchair with a repeating shotgun across his lap.

An enormous moonshine stillhouse! Dobussy saw in the gloom a close-up of shuffling workers, stripped to the waist, wearing ragged overalls or corduroys, barefooted, black-, brown- and white-skinned, the sweat shimmering in the red light from boiler furnaces and pale electric globes dangling from wires.

"Hyar yah be!" the big burly fellow cackled. "Don't try no funny business. We don't 'low no damned foolishness round heah, no indeedy!"

CHAPTER III

The Stillhouse

OLD Pap Hatchie and Duck Wamber (as they later turned out to be) turned Wing Dobussy over to a guard in the stockade yard at the front of the stillhouse, between a dormitory shed on the south side and the guard quarters on the north. A barbed-wire gate looked into the dense timber, through which ran a tramway with rails, going over a low rise in the swamp bottoms. Duck unlocked the handcuffs.

"Yo' don't need all them clothes!" Duck jeered; and with that the guard jerked off Wing's expensive hunting-shirt; Duck took his fine hunting-boots; the guard took his prized felt hat, which was much too large for Duck. They left the captive with laced knee-breeches and union suit. From the pockets the scoundrels took a pocket-knife and a piece of trotline.

"Aint yo' got no money-belt—no wallet?" Duck demanded sharply. "Whereat's yore pocket money?"

"Joe Poney's beat you to it!" Dobussy answered darkly.

"Ho law! So yo' been whisky-boat gamblin'!" Wamber threw his little head back, laughing aloud. Then he stepped away, and uncoiled from around his waist an ominous six-foot blacksnake whip.

The next instant the long lash snapped and whished around, coming down with a crack like a snapping bone, falling on the thinly clad back of the amazed wild-crafter, the sting of it like flaming poison in the long welt raised on his skin.

Staggered, Dobussy glanced around—dimly he had seen the naked backs of those toilers in the steaming, fuming shed, and all were crisscrossed with the raised welts or sunk scars of just such merciless lashings. In that instant he understood the predicament he was in.

"Git oveh theh an' move mash!" the grinning overseer ordered. "Yo' day of loafin', triflin' round is done, yas indeedy! Git oveh theh an' git to work!"

As the lash landed again, Dobussy leaped clear. The lash-wielder had two big holster-guns at his waist; standing back was a man with a shotgun, the barrel sawed off to sixteen inches, ready. There was nothing to do but obey orders!

Running, Dobussy went to where one of the big boilers was open, the drained mash ready to be scooped out into a wheelbarrow and run out to the dump. He had heard of the shotgun labor of the dark brakes and big jungles, used when labor was hard to get or wages were too high to leave the contractors or whoevers any profit, if they had to pay them. In time of stress at the levees, toting bags was part of the labor needs. Dobussy had supposed no-'count negroes and very low-class poor whites, tramps and river-rats were manhandled that way—if the talk had any foundation. Never had he counted himself as a vagabond tramp!

Wincing under the lash, he said not a word. His helplessness was obvious. Not even looking at the scoundrel who had robbed and whipped him, he took his place emptying the big souring-vats, heaving mash with a big scoop-shovel, sweat pouring down his cheeks and body, dumping the waste orts—toiling with a dozen or so others who were scurrying on their ways. Dusk had come.

"Come get it!" a shout came; and while two men watched the works, the others scurried to a long table and began to eat, wolfing the grub—bread, stew, canned corn, coffee—well-cooked, surprisingly good, and plenty of it.

Wing Dobussy was silent as he toiled in that big stillhouse, doing as he was told, alert and learning his job. He didn't even look ugly at the scoundrel who was "breaking him in." No use of protesting! Keeping lively and putting his strength to it, he avoided the snap of the lash. And there were times when he had nothing to do and stood by with those other workers, hearing them talk through ventriloquist throats, though he could not see their lips move.

The old man with gray beard and black clothes was Grandpap Dolmen Hatchie, the owner; and the overseer with him was Duck Wamber. Old Hatchie never had been able to keep hired labor hustling in his brake establishment. He could hire men to sit around with buckshot guns, though, shooting anyone who tried to jump the stockade "contract." They had bloodhounds if a man broke away from the tramway out to the river landing. White man or negro, nothing made work like a braided blacksnake with raw pigskin snappers.

So Grandpap kept his stills bubbling and whistling by arresting friendless poor whites and vagabond negroes. He had been obliged to learn his business, yes indeedy! In the early days he hadn't been able to make up his mind about Federal revenues and pro-rating markets and production. Figuring the gallonage taxes, Hatchie found his products actually cost less than the Government excises amounted to, and it just made him mad.

He'd be a moonshiner. Then he located good personal, private and confidential markets. First along, he used to do his own transporting; but that was pretty risky, and so he picked up some reliable runners who knew blockading and sent them out with loads bought and paid for. He was bright, that old man! He knew raw materials, distilling, aging, all those things. He knew the science and business, but he was always bothered about labor till finally he solved the problem. Course, he was lucky. If he'd been fool enough to pay taxes, the Government'd had snoops in the stillhouse, and they'd caught on to how labor was handled there. This would have led to trouble. The way it was, he got along all right.

When he had built up a big trade, getting into high production, he had to have labor, especially woodcutters, carriers and stokers. At first he brought in his raw stock in bags, jars and baskets, and sent the product out in gallon jugs, demijohns, even bottles.

White corn was his mainstay, but he experimented with yellow corn, making profits though it never made the best liquor. He special-ordered wild-grape cognac, tried rice, tanked in Louisiana molasses for adulterant, and ran off wild-honey metheglin. He used mules to haul to the Mississippi bank, till he built the iron-rail tramway, his landing on a deep, narrow, inconspicuous bayou.

In a few days Dobussy knew that big shack like a camp—rather like a wolf-den, a wildcat hunting ridge. Grandpap had learned that feeding his help plenty and good doubled the work they did. He'd been lucky, picking up a log-job cook who was careless enough to be drunk on Mendova levee when Grandpap and Duck Wamber were leaving for the Dark Corner one black morning.

Old Hatchie was careful to work only strangers who couldn't find their way through the swamp, especially if barefooted. The transporters never came to the still, unloading on the bayou, where reasonably faithful men rolled the raw stock in and products out. If sports trippers or hunters came, they were bluffed off, bullied around, their camps shot through if they didn't take hints. This gave the Swamp Angels a rough reputation, and nobody stopped in the chute of Skip-by Island, let alone trespassed into the little high-banked bayou harbor.

Running two shifts, the off-shift slept in a bunkhouse where a long pipe had rings with chain staging and an ankle-iron to clamp on. All night Dobussy would reawaken, hearing the *clink-clank* of the links. He never would forget the guard sitting at one end of the narrow shack building with an automatic shotgun across his knees, his eyes glowing red in the faint light of a reflector bulb, like a watching wolf, a cigarette making a brightening eye, when he drew a puff.

DUCK WAMBER watched Wing Dobussy like a hawk, unable to understand him. The newcomer didn't violate any regulations. No matter what he was told, he did it. That marked him for just about the most sensible laborer anyone remembered in that crew. Another thing, he didn't complain or watch around mean, careful and ready, like some treacherous and bad actors, to make trouble. He broke in the easiest of anybody Duck had ever worked over, learning how to do the skilled things, quick and handy.

"Reckon yo' know now yo'd done betteh to have a job instead of wanderin' round, shiftless, lazy, hoboin'?" Duck remarked one day when Dobussy backed away from the furnace he was feeding, resting a minute.

"Looks like I was just resting up for this job to come along," Dobussy answered; and Duck Wamber burst into a guffaw of laughter.

"Air yo' a Yankee?" the overseer inquired when he calmed down.

"Not away Down East," Dobussy answered. "North bank of the Ohio."

TAKING things easy thataway, Dobussy made a very favorable impression. When the long-whiskered old proprietor came again and asked Duck how the new hand was doing, the overseer had to tell him how quick and good-natured he was. Wing was strong, healthy too, and he was one of those lucky men that mosquitoes and other bugs didn't cotton to any, so he didn't have malaria and have to eat quinine. Another thing, he didn't drink any liquor. That was one bad feature about stillhouse help. No matter how closely they were watched, the labor would drink the stuff, even the raw, stinging distillings coming warm out of the spout. Wamber told Dobussy he was practically the only one who had any personal pride. Most of the workers were just practically drinking themselves to death. Everything had been tried to stop it, but it didn't seem to do any good. They simply wouldn't take any care of themselves. About the only thing that could be done was to get what work they could out of such trash, and when they drank themselves to death on what was practically raw poison, bury them and bring in another batch of help, hoping for better luck next time.

"It must be very discouraging." Dobussy shook his head.

"Yas suh, that's so!" Duck sighed. "Take that damned yeller Smart Aleck oveh theh, sneakin' in back of those barrels! That scoundrel aint wuth the grub he eats. Drunk all the time, no ambition, jes' a nuisance! Shu-u! I'll wake 'im up!"

Going over, unwinding his lash as he went, Wamber sneaked after the shirker, and suddenly the yelping howl of the scamp echoed, the whip-snapper cracking like a nitro-powder shot on his yellow hide. Duck sure whupped him plenty. Three or four days later when the day-shift was called to breakfast, that negro didn't get up with the others. Come to find out, he'd cut his leg with a piece of broken carboy glass and bled to death. The hurt didn't amount to anything, only drinking so much thinned his blood so it didn't have any body to it, so of course he died. Duck used that case as a fair-warning example, but it didn't do much good—the drunks, if anything, lapping up worse than ever.

Wing Dobussy learned the run of things in the moonshine plant in two or

three weeks, taking hold good. Twice he went out with a burial party digging graves for men who hadn't any stamina, dying on the industry's hands. One man made a break into the swamp, but Duck said in his condition, barefooted, hungry and lost, he wouldn't get far. Even if he got out, no one would believe his story. Or even if he was believed, how could he find his way back to show anybody in those brakes?

The stockade was held close, the shotgun guard shooting if anyone crossed the deadline; and mean as it was, the brakes were worse, with quicksands, soft-bottom lakes, blue-holes, cane ridges, tupelo-cypress marshes, snaggy, full of miasmas, night air, cottonmouth snakes—and no place to go and no way of getting there, anyhow.

Not many tried to break away, and the dogs trailed down and caught nine out of ten, and a whopping big whipping was all the good it did a runaway. Fear of whippings even more than fear of dying out in the misery of the lonely Dark Corner kept most of the wretches contented.

Understanding the situation, Dobussy didn't make a bit of bother for anyone. If spoken to, he answered; labor could talk among themselves as long as the jobs weren't neglected; and of course there were treacherous ears. Dobussy never asked a single suspicious question, so far as the stool-pigeons heard. If a workman talked, telling of getting ambitious to make a break, and somebody tipped Wamber, it meant a whaling for the rascal with ideas, and a new pair of pants, special extra eats, or an ease in the driving labor for the informer.

After a month or so, without a sign of desperate, hot-headed foolishness, it got so all Foreman Chouser had to do was tell Dobussy what he wanted and then go back to the guard quarters and read, or snooze—anything he happened to want to do. Dobussy always understood right off, picking things up. And he knew his place when he got into it. He stayed there too, respectful, obedient, working without being slack or ornery. Getting right down to it, he actually did more work than anybody else in the place. Take some of the labor, it hardly didn't pay to feed it for the work it done! And take some good, strong and able worker, and he couldn't be trusted because every chance he got, he stopped up pipes and broke machinery and practically ate up all the profits, the no-'count, treacherous scamp!

"If'n old Dolmen Hatchie could have two shifts like yo'," Duck said right to Dobussy's face, "I betcha he'd get to own practically all this whole country out around, yas suh! Yo' got the right idee, workin' reliable, honorable."

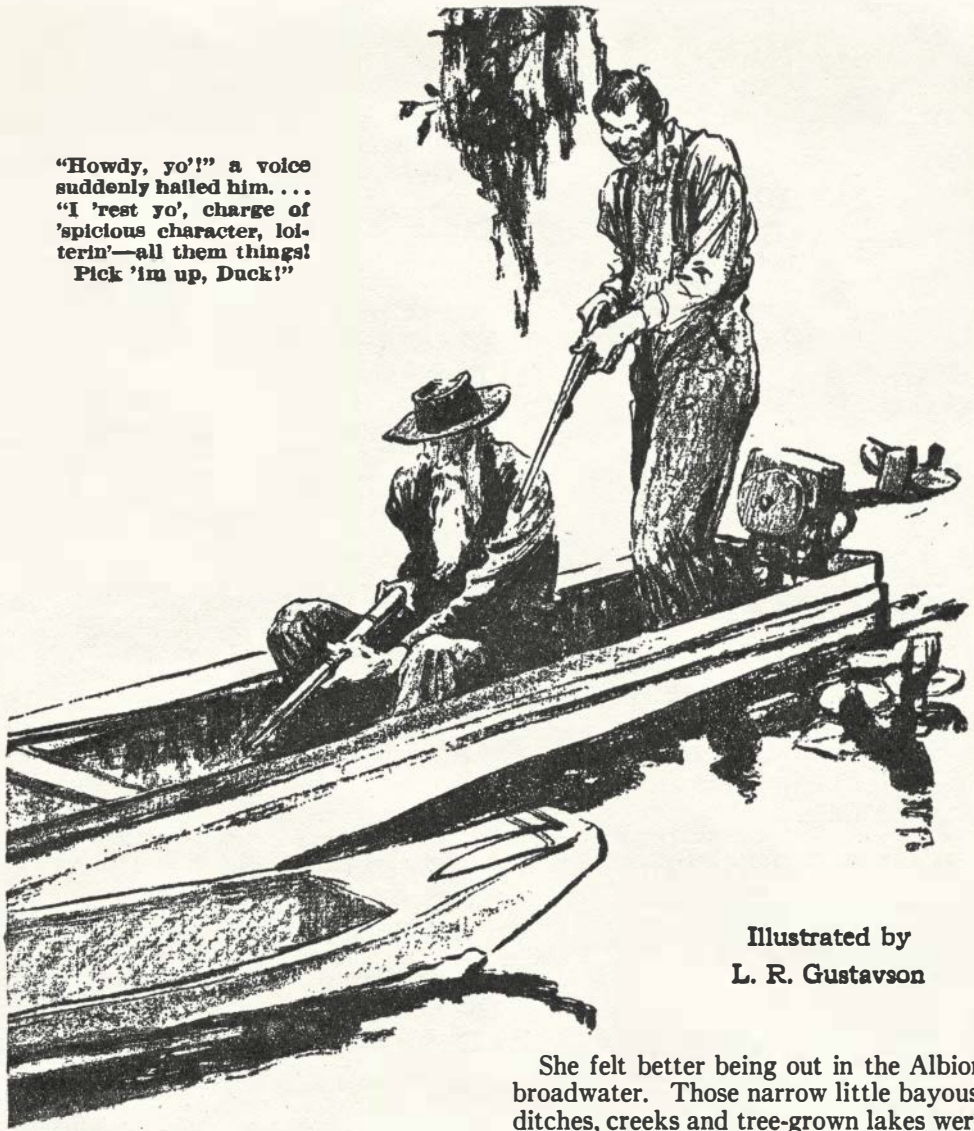
CHAPTER IV

The Hidden Cabin-boat

WHEN Isbelle Strake had told the stranger who had lost old Mississip' that this was the Dark Corner, he hadn't said a word, given a sign, that it meant anything more than just another swamp brake. Well, of course, a river-

rat would know how to take care of himself. Just naturally a man tripping the lower river had to keep his eyes open. A man always has lots to learn in new country. . . .

Flitting through the channel in the standing timber, darting among the swell-butt cypress and dodging the sunken snags across country, slipping across the shallows, she went more than a mile before she turned down the current of storm-flow through the woods and struck into the Shortcut, watching with searching eyes in all directions, in the way all must do in wilderness jungles.



"Howdy, yo'!" a voice suddenly hailed him. . . . "I 'rest yo', charge of 'spicious character, loiterin'—all them things! Pick 'im up, Duck!"

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

Once she was all clear in the deep Shortcut, she tuned up her outboard to full cruising speed and knelt in the canoe so she wouldn't be such a windbreak, steering with slightest of twitches of her hand. She hadn't allowed any too much time to arrive home before her mother would worry, and it was just early moonlight when she saw one of the Barstow boys turning into the trace toward his homestead, having come up the West Albion, leaving the quivering eddy showing the rolls his boat stirred up in the current.

They waved across the gliding waters, visible in the glowing moonlight, but it was too far and dim for her to tell whether it was Huck or Clem. She could make out in his dugout the upbulge of a pale razorback he had killed for pork. Both were good boys, honorable, minding their own business and friendly. Wouldn't be any trouble if everybody was thataway!

She felt better being out in the Albion broadwater. Those narrow little bayous, ditches, creeks and tree-grown lakes were gloomy and treacherous. Anything might happen in the thickety fastnesses. All kinds hide out in them. As night gained, her motor and the current carried her swiftly. The last vestige of day gave way to the full brightness of the moon in the clear sky.

With night came the rising voices of the brakes, water whispering and slashing among the tree-trunks, sawyers jumping up out of the depths like leaping fish big as boats, and the rising chorus of frogs, night-birds, the humming of tall timber in the dragging of the running water. The run-off was sure fiddling!

THEN ahead she saw the flashing of a light down a reach, cutting through the trees and spearing over the surface of the flood. Her mother or father had put a lantern on the cabin-boat roof, so if she was anywhere in sight she would

know where she was. Sure did look home-comfy, but she had to kind of laugh, thinking of her folks always worrying.

As she came nearer, the stern door of the cabin-boat opened, and the light of a table lamp flashed out through the night air, which was beginning to thicken over the water. Mrs. Strake came out on the deck and stood right in the light, listening, wiping her hands on her apron. Of course, blinded thataway, she couldn't see even in the moonlight to amount to any thing.

"Woo-who-o!" Isbelle called out, and rounding into the eddy, stopped the motor and coming square to the stern bumper, stepped onto the deck with her bag of walnut shucks, the dye-stock which she had gone after.

"Well, you're home at last!" Mrs. Strake sighed, and turned back to the kitchen galley.

"Oh, Maw!" Isbelle exclaimed. "Of course I'm back! I always come back."

"So far!" the mother assented.

Mrs. Strake wasn't as tall as Isbelle, who favored her father. She began to put things on the table, which she had kept warm on the stove. Isbelle was going to remonstrate. Instead she sat down and ate, telling where she had been, how easy it was getting over to the walnut ridge in the high water, cutting right off across the one-way current, compared with trying to find the way when one had to follow the meandering channels, across the dead-waters and remembering all the trifling trace marks.

"FUNNY thing," Isbelle laughed. "A shanty-boater was coming down the East Fork, and he asked me which way the Mississippi was! Actually, he didn't know if he was east or west of it. He was riding down the head-rise, so he said, and he dozed off in the sun on his bow deck. When he woke up, he couldn't tell which side of the big river he'd slid off of. My land! Well, I told him all he had to do was jes' float right on down and he'd be back in old Mississip' along by Scatterin' Court.

"No tellin' who some of these strangers are, if'n they're reliable or who they're tied up with," Mrs. Strake began. "When I was a girl of yore age, now—"

"You ran off down the Ohio with Pap!" Isbelle laughed. "That's jes' what yo' done at my age! An' they rewarded yo' for lost, an' the police an' sheriff were all huntin' fo' yo'—an' nobody was satisfied till they found yo'd married an' tripped into old Mississip' on yo' way to N'Orleans, loaded down to the gun'ales with fur, junk an' feather pillows! An' to hear *yo'*, talkin' to *me!*"

The girl put her arms around the older woman, who gave her husband a severe glance, despite the smile twitching at her lips for having told. Anyhow, Mrs. Strake was worried about her daughter, times had changed so; and so much more could happen, the way young people ran around so free and wild and so terribly independent and so much alone. Of course, it was no use arguing. Isbelle took after her father, afraid of nothing, going everywhere, worrying him the same way as he'd worried *his* folks. Served him right!

MORE than a week later, when the overflow was down three feet and only the Missouri head-rise was staying up, Isbelle went up to the Shortcut, and after looking around making sure she wasn't watched, she slipped into the blue-hole channel.

The Dobussy boat was back there, sure enough. He hadn't lowered the lines, giving slack, and they were pretty tight, because of the lowering of the water-level. She hailed, though no smoke was curling in the stove-pipe, and then she looked into the windows.

Nobody was there. Everything inside was as neat as a pin.

Of course, the stranger might have gone down to Scattering Court after supplies, having made up his mind to stay there. His skiff was gone, and so was the outboard motor which had been hanging on the scow bumper when she met him up the East Fork. Perhaps he was out around, looking things over, taking advantage of highwater overflow while it lasted. His launch and bannister boat for shelling were still there.

She sat on the bench on the stern deck, looking around. The woods were quiet; the mud settling as the current slowed made the water clearer. A branch had blown onto the stern deck—a little one, about the size of her thumb. She didn't touch it. He could do his own picking up!

At the same time she went to the bow lines, which were all he used in the shelter where the wind wouldn't swing the hull, and slacked them again, tying them lower. Hesitating a minute, instead of using two half hitches and a bight on the line for ties, she took a turn around the tree-trunk and made three bights around the line. Then he would know when he re-

turned that somebody had been looking out for his outfit. But for her, the scow would be bowed on the drift and the stern deck down in the water.

She peered into the galley and living-room windows. Everything was picked up, remarkably orderly for a man's housekeeping. Floating clear of the hull, she paddled back over the blue-hole and headed away through the woods again.

She stopped to look back, holding onto a wild-grape vine so she wouldn't drift. Nobody home—quiet, and somehow lonesome; everything looked all right to her. At the same time she gazed at the water, the way it was slowing and eddying, turning to glance in all directions through the timber brake; and when she paddled away it was silently, like a swimming bird watching over her shoulders.

That Wing Dobussy had been away three or four days at least was none of her business, of course. . . .

The river didn't go lower any to speak of during the next ten days. Rain in Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky and locally across Arkansas and in the Cumberland and Tennessee valleys checked the run-off with more inpouring water. Heavy winds and storms kept Isbelle close to home.

Moreover she was running seven hoop-nets with her father, which kept her busy. They carried their catch and shipped it with the Barstow boys from their eddy landing, which made it convenient for the fish-tug of the Mendova commission merchant which came up twice a week.

NO one mentioned seeing Wing Dobussy, not the Barstows, nor the fish-tug hands, nor Prat Adkins away down at the Forks told about a stranger coming into the Dark Corner. Of course, she never mentioned him. She did ask three or four if they'd seen any strangers around, but none had.

Accordingly, the first chance she had she went to the hidden harbor again, more careful than ever not to be seen. In fact, she took advantage of a fog that tangled all through the bottoms, following the watercourses but not thickening much into the woods.

There was the cabin-boat, just as she had left it. The shelling bannister scow and a nice launch were floating out on their bow-lines. The dead branch was still on the stern. The knots she had tied held the rope. A big spiderweb was over the stern-deck door, and another was swung like a triangular curtain from the sternpost to the cabin roof and down to the deck, the fog-mist white upon the pattern.

Wing Dobussy had been gone better than twenty days now. Many things could have happened. Perhaps he was lost in the tangles of the Dark Corner. A joke was told around that surveyors with their instruments couldn't find their way through the jungles and meandering waterways there.

Bad actors might have got away with the tripper's skiff, but he'd manage with a raft or something, no matter where he was—if he had come clear. Perhaps a sawyer had jumped up under his boat and smashed in the bottom. He could have hit a stub or sinker and sunk his boat. A cottonmouth might have hit him in a vein with its fangs, or something like that.

DUST, twigs fallen from the trees on the decks, the swiftly gathering appearance of desertion, neglect, the signs of no occupation, were unmistakable. She found both the bow and stern doors locked. The windows were all fastened inside and the curtains were down, so she couldn't look in. She reckoned he'd have a sure good outfit.

The cabin-boat held her fascinated. Always she'd minded her own business. She knew the Barstow boys, but they were sparking other girls. Now and again a stranger floated by down the line, but she had never been attracted by any of them. Some looked mean, skulking bad actors. Wing Dobussy was different. An old river-man; yet the flood had fooled him, comical, carried him back down into the Dark Corner when he went to sleep in the balmy spring sunshine.

"I don't reckon anything could have happened to him!" She shook her head. "I don't bet he's daid, nothing like that!"

She peered and snooped around, searching under the eaves. Then she found a small black screw-hook under the wash-bench on the stern, with a flat key that fitted the stern deck door-lock. First looking and listening, presently she slipped inside, searching around the neat kitchen-galley. In the screen-cooler was withered meat, an open can of soured condensed cream—they looked as though the tripper intended return to the boat that same day he went out into the brake.

She shuddered, thinking of all the things that could happen to a stranger in a skiff in the Dark Corner overflow.

In the living-room of the cabin was a narrow iron bedstead, not much more than a cot, but a sight more comfortable,

with a heavy Indian blanket covering the sheets, and a good mattress and other bedding.

There were no women's belongings around, no pictures of women on the walls or any sign any women ever came aboard. There were three chairs and a locker along the side which would serve as a bench. The small table was square but didn't have a card-game kitty. The stove was a combination coal-and-wood heater. In the corner stood three long guns, all spares.

What caught her eyes, though, were shelves of books in a case that was iron-strapped to uprights so if the boat rocked, it wouldn't tip over; and strips of wood kept the books from sliding out on the floor if the boat struck rolling water. The Strakes had a book, and Isbelle had read it so much she knew it practically by heart. It was called "Tricks of Trapping," and she had set traps by it and caught mink, muskrats, raccoons and other furs real good.

But here were books she had never heard of, more books than she had ever seen anywhere except in a law-office one time in Scattering Court.

Here were books of poetries, she found, "Fur-bearing Mammals," "Green Timber Trails," "Pearls and Pearling," "Fur-bearing Mammals of Louisiana," and there was a big stack of paper books printed by the Government.

One book had maps of the Mississippi from Lake Itasca to the Passes. She turned back to the sheet that showed the Dark Corner Bottoms and with her finger traced the Forks of the Albion, resting it on the cut-off, back from which she was sitting at that very moment.

One book was about a mountain preacher who came down the Ohio and Mississippi in a shanty-boat and mixed up with river pirates, a pretty woman and one of those writing-fellows with a typewriter who appeared down about every so often. She read it, and for hours she whispered the words till she was hungry.

IN the kitchen she looked into the pantry cupboard, finding canned goods, staple grub and cooking ware. She lit the oil-stove and opened a can of soup, heating it up. This fellow was sure forehanded, for he had a big carton of crackers, every pound wrapped in greased paper so they stayed dry and crisp. She ate heartily, smiling to herself.

Once she left the meal, happening to think of the pump well and looked into it, making sure a leak had not sprung in the scow-bottom. The hold was painted inside with plenty of white lead, and the bottom was dry as a bone. All the planks and stringers were planed on all sides. The boat would last for years.

HAVING eaten, topping off with wild honey and coffee, she read on till before she knew it, dusk fell swiftly and night came. She heard in the black gloom the whispering sounds of the Dark Corner, voices of creatures, the call of birds flying north, the gurgling of an eddy in the current, splashes of diving creatures, all the uneasy, restless disturbances of the brakes and flowing waters. Then out yonder a tree began to rock on its loosening roots, the top threshing back and forth in the forest canopy, crashing branches with branches, and then at last with a terrific crash fell to the water, waves coming presently through the standing timber and rocking the boat.

It just seemed to Isbelle as if the brake was alive with the creatures she knew, and there were others she didn't recognize; the whisperers kept stirring the air, and she wondered if they were real or spirits. She shut the door and lighted the wide-base lamp. Thick curtains covered the windows so no light betrayed the boat. Dobussy was sure careful. He knew river-living.

Living in the lonesome bends and wild brakes, Isbelle Strake had not met very many people. Working hard, busy all the time, knitting nets and sewing in stormy weather, she hadn't thought much about outsiders. Now in the boat of the man who knew these books, who lived alone in the back-brakes, she felt his presence, wistful and wondering.

"Probably no good'll come of it!" she reflected; and then with sudden resentfulness, she added: "An' I don't cyar if'n no good comes of hit! What dif'rence does hit make? If he's daid, he won't neveh come back. If'n he's alive, hyar I be."

For all her circling around within an hour's drive or two from the Strake boat moorings, Isbelle knew little, or only rumors of the way-back swamps. A woman had no business in the hidden places of the Dark Corner. People who behaved themselves generally lived right along on the open streams, like the Forks of the Albion, if they had somebody always on board to watch things. Of course, people alone hid their outfits, the way Dobussy did, off the main traces. Scouters, men

Dobussy would never forget the guard sitting with an automatic shotgun across his knees.

the law had rewarded, went away back and scarcely showed themselves.

Of course, there were confidential industries; in most of the jungle swamps moonshine distilleries were hidden. Tradition, rumor, said that a big one was in the Dark Corner, jungle-hidden from everyone. People didn't talk much about those things—no telling who were connected with them. Isbelle never paid much attention to such dangerous talk.

Now she studied the map of the Dark Corner, which showed the main forks, some of the lakes, but not just right—not the way she knew the details. It didn't show Crooked Island, nor Lost Birds' Marsh, nor the twisty bayous; but it showed Barstow's homestead landing on old Mississip', and it looked pretty reliable, if one knew where it was off-sided.

She sat so long tracing the waters, that she dozed off; and then after looking around, dubiously, undressed herself in the dark and put on a nightshirt of cotton flannel she found in a locker-drawer.

In the morning she cooked breakfast and then went home to tell her folks she was all right, so they needn't worry. She'd found a good place to sleep—a drift shanty-boat the overflow had brought down through the standing timber. She was going to stay out there now, looking for frogs to take for market, because nobody else ever worked through there.

Her mother warned her against going back into the marsh, for it was sure risky even for a man to be alone in some of those places. But Isbelle carried a twenty-two-caliber revolver she found on Dobussy's boat and practiced with it, though for frog-shooting she preferred her own single-shot six-inch-barrel twenty-two-rim fire. She began to search hither and yon, and went prowling into the back waters she never before had visited.

SHE was hard put to it to explain to herself why she was heading back, slipping in the ditches and bayous, peering and peeking into those hidden nooks and blind harbors. Poling, paddling, keeping close in the edges of brakes and looking across the open waters, not stirring up the bottom, she was over on the East Fork, when she heard an outboard. She hid behind a green-bush and saw the varnished pirogue of old Pap Hatchie coming up, the old man with his whiskers over his knees in the bow, hugging his 38-55, and Duck Wamber huddled in the stern, holding the motor-tiller. They were looking all around—careful, watchful.

The branch was narrow, running emerald green. The overflow was getting down, and this water didn't come out of old Mississip'. It came out of the back hills, or settling marshes. Suddenly the popping of the outboard slowed down, stopping right in near hearing of her hide-out. Isbelle thought perhaps it was out of gas or the battery had run down; the scoundrels might float back down—she'd better watch out!

Then through the moaning of the wind she began to hear hissing, and cog-wheels turning, the *clink-clank* of wheels rolling on iron tracks! Her breath caught. Out yonder were the hidden works, the big moonshine stillhouse old Hatchie was whispered to have in the Dark Corner.

The sun swung fast down to setting. She waited till it was plumb dark, after Duck Wamber had changed the outboard battery and shoved up the narrow creek; and presently she saw a red glow back in the brake. When she slipped into a long, straight bay, she saw the red reflections of still-furnaces, the lights of the big shed shining through the steam, and scurrying around were shadowy figures of humans, pale white skin and black hides sweating and glistening as half-naked men fed the fires and tended the barrows, running orts off into the swamp on a plank trestle.

A high stockade of poles came to the runway down to the water. An iron grate-gate closed the near end of the stillhouse.

The back of every laborer was criss-crossed with whiplash scars, white on the black skins, red on the white. She recognized one man, square-shouldered, slim-waisted, thick-chested. This was that river-man who had been sucked into the Dark Corner overflow and didn't know it—Wing Dobussy!

She thrilled to her discovery. She could have cried out in pity, seeing the long, dark wounds where he had been lash-cut, though now the wounds were healing. Her own peril, she knew, was deadly. If those guards caught her! She saw at the other end of the shed a man sitting on a stool with a repeating shotgun across his lap, ready to kill.

hat could she do? No one in the whole world, apparently, could help Wing Dobussy in this grievous predicament! She backed quietly out of the harbor when she had spied on the place, then went down the branch and swiftly down the current into the Shortcut, home to his cabin-boat, where she sat studying and figuring, making up her mind what she ought to do—no matter if she died for it!

THUS she came and went in the dark, watching, listening, learning the water and the swamps around that desperate, scoundrelly industry, with its shotgun labor and stockade, so that when the time came she was prepared for anything. And then when she saw old Hatchie and Duck Wamber going down early one morning with two hogs between them in the varnished pirogue, she knew they'd never stop till they reached Scattering Court; and with them out of the way, she wasn't apt to meet anyone in the brake.

At the same time she took no chances, and wormed through one of the little ditches off the main creek, lurking like a panther in the shadows, coming in the mid-afternoon to the scandal-distillery, where she hid opposite, watching—figuring, making sure, holding her rifle, the 25-35 carbine she'd borrowed from the spare long-guns on Wing's boat!

"Come night, an' I'll get up clost!" she said to herself.

Presently, away out in the southwest she heard a humming that grew into a roaring. She could just see in that direction a tiny black cloud, like a man's hat; and when she looked back at the 'stillery, there was the man with a gun sitting on the runway, watching men roll barrels into a long, narrow pole-flatboat.

A white man poled the scow out into the harbor among the lily-pads, where he rolled one of the barrels overboard, moved the boat a ways and then sunk another barrel, dragging the wide floating leaves over the splash opening, covering the sinker. She saw him pause to look at the storm coming, and heard the guard shout above the approaching uproar:

"Way-hay, yo' Wing! Git a move on. Storm's a-comin'! Git them bar'ls sunk theh!"

Dobussy waved and shouted an answer, and shoved the scow a few yards farther, working fast and dumping another barrel. Gusty rain began to fall with tiny balls of ice hissing down, cutting through the tree leaves, bounding off the branches and tossing fountains up all over the surface of the water. For a minute Isbelle fairly held her breath, watching through the screen of downpour. She saw Wing Dobussy glance over his shoulder at the guard—who sprang to his feet, rifle ready.

With sudden determination, Isbelle aimed the 25-35 rifle, holding it high on the guard's body as he stood gripping his rifle, stock and barrel, ready for business. It was a long shot, but Isbelle was a hunter who had used a rifle, like a boy, from childhood.

She pulled the trigger.

The downpour like a cloudburst, with swirls and twists of wind-blasts, veiled the scene—but dimly she saw the laborer plunge over the bow of the scow and vanish underwater.

Crouching under the lee of a leaning tree-trunk, she waited; but she could see nothing thirty feet distant. She ran over to the creek-bank, but even there she could see only a little way, and the hail smacked her, stinging like bees.

Running back to the ditch where she had left her boat, she scurried to get into the main creek to try and pick the fugitive up, but in the sheeting downpour, in the darting hail, and in the thickening gloom, like night under the black pall of flaring clouds, she missed him.

"Perhaps he drownded!" she choked. "I'd oughta been where I could pick him right up!"

CHAPTER V

A Bad-acting Scouter

OLD Dolmen Hatchie and Duck Wamber found bad news waiting for them on their return to the stillhouse four days after the storm, when the three-day downpour cleared up. On the evening of the day they left, Chet Keyburn was guarding Wing Dobussy while he sank barrels in the harbor among the lily-pads. Chet wasn't any man to fool with any of the labor; and the last anyone noticed him was just as the storm came in, bringing a big roaring wind.

The draft through the stillhouse was strong, and there was a skedaddle to swing the screens to protect the furnaces. Then it was a rush to change the drafts. Nobody paid any attention except to his own job, and when at last one of the help went back to the runway, he found Keyburn floating in the harbor at the jump-off of the runway by the float.

"He was plumbed through and through by a bullet!" the captain of the guards said. "It was a 25-35 or some such caliber. Anyhow, you c'n see where the slug skipped along the floor after it went through him."

"You buried him, course?" Hatchie asked.

"Oh, yes, for he was daid. We took 'im out to the mound and dug a grave. We went through his pockets, but he didn't have nothin' to amount to anything—jus' a watch, knife, prob'bly five or six dollars. Tha's all. I put all of it into a cloth sugar-bag. . . . Dobussy'd run in the excitement."

DUCK Wamber took his 30-30 rifle through the Skips to look around, sizing up the killing situation. Hatchie went among the workers, asking questions, lashing out with his quirt when he thought information was being held out on him. The two joined at the back entrance, where they stood looking at the flat-boat. A long wire rope had been fastened to it just so no scoundrel could run away in it—but this damned Dobussy had taken advantage of the storm to swim for it.

"I cain't figure that 25-35 bullet!" Wamber declared. "That scoundrel couldn't of had a Luger pistol on him, could he?"

"You mean you maybe didn't search him right?" Hatchie snarled angrily. "Was theh any chancet of that?"

"No suh, Mist' Hatchie! I stood 'im up, stripped bare naked—an' I shook his pants out—I'm wearin' his own shirt myse'f, now!" Duck was sure for certain.

They went out to the end of the rope length, and Duck prodded around, hoping Dobussy had been tangled in the lily-pad stems, or perhaps he couldn't swim. They

went out in the varnished pirogue and searched behind the brush and trees on the far side of the narrow Albion fork. It was Hatchie himself who found an empty rifle shell, a bottle-neck 25-35.

THE two men studied the brass tube, shaking their heads, sighing. They glanced around uneasily, their eyes blinking, their tongues running along their lips.

"Some damned, treacherous, despicable scamp done this, Duck!" Hatchie shook his head. "When that storm was roarin', he drapped Chet Keyburn, daid. I tell yo', Duck, theh's a triflin', desperate class lies out around in these back-brakes. Yo' cain't trust 'em! Yo' cain't reason with 'em! Yo' cain't neveh tell when they'll lie back in the bresh along the creek an' bust a man down—not no warnin' er anything. They'd just soon shoot a man as look at him! My God, Duck! Theh's Chet Keyburn shot down in cold blood, murdered, an' we cain't do one damned thing 'bout hit! If'n we started lawin', where'd we be? They'd ask how come Chet got killed, an' where at. I tell yo', Duck, I been thinkin'. When hit gets right down to hit, like this, we gotta take the law in ouh own hands. Why, they mought git impudent an' shoot one of *us!*"

"That Dobussy's treacherous!" Duck agreed. "I tell yo', he neveh said one word. He neveh tried to fight back. He neveh even looked ugly, scarcely. Why, afteh I taught 'im his place, I neveh had to whup him. All I eveh done was jes' snick him, oncet in a while, jes' so's he wouldn't get no impudent idees. If'n I'd had any s'picion he was harborin' murder an' escape, by Gawd I'd 'a' whupped 'im till I cut 'im right square in two!"

"Yeah, yo'd done hell!" Old Hatchie shrugged. "He's run loose, an' he's liable to have idees, now. I looked particular in Harker's reward-notices in the Sheriff office. Neveh nobody rewarded him, no pictures of him, nothin' like that. Mebby he's halfway innocent, fur's the law goes. The fact is, we don't know one damned thing about him, Duck. 'Course locally he cain't start nothin' we cain't handle. But we don't know if he's got c'nections. No tellin' who's back of that rascal, if'n he's got his dander up—"

"We neveh found no place he camped—no hide-out." Wamber shook his head. "He hadn't any outfit—"

"He could've hid a shanty-boat, cabin-cruiser, or maybe camped on that mound; we neveh did look, Duck." Hatchie shook his head. "The water was way up. If he left his shanty-boat in back, he's stranded—cain't get to hit, prob'ly. Yo' know, if'n hit wa'n't for that bushwhacker, I'd figure he died, drownded. But whoever killed Chet—mebby his partner, or some friend?"

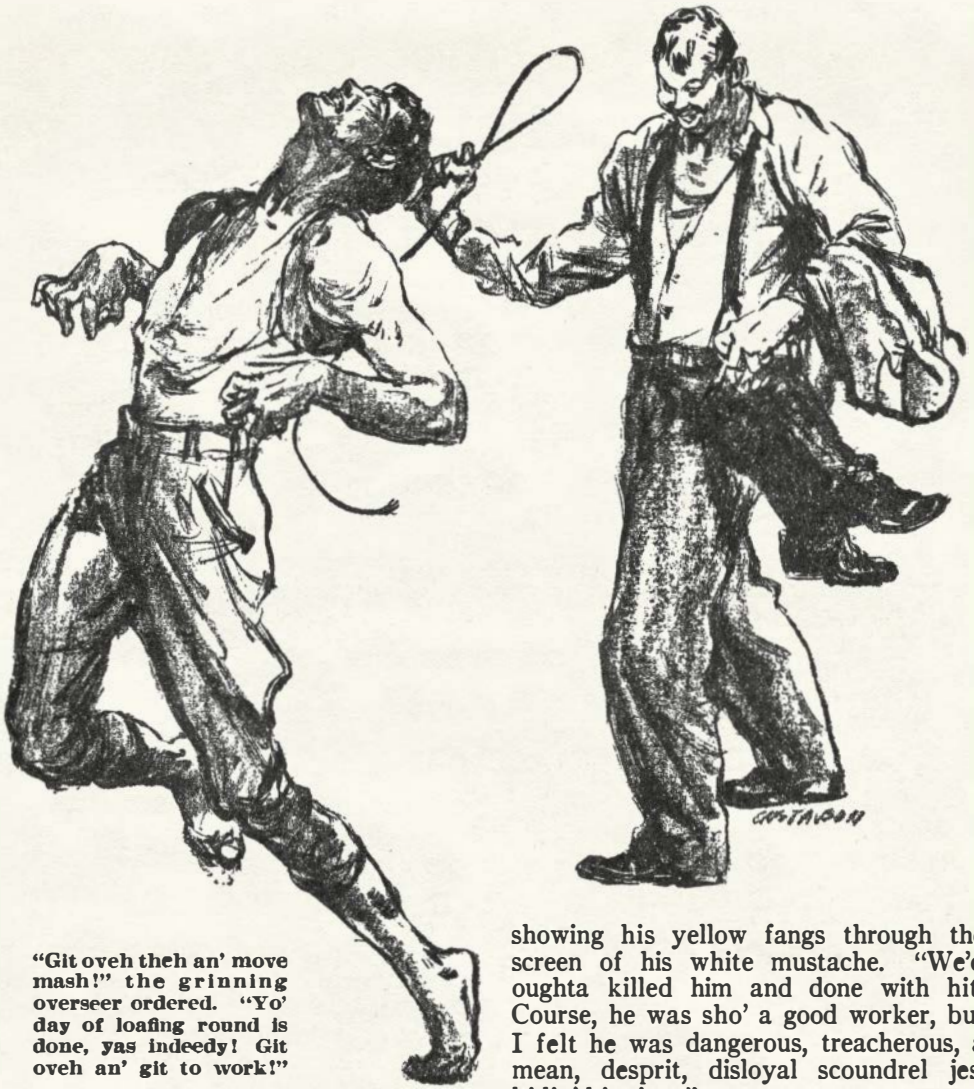
"He's a strangeh." Wamber shook his head. "No Swamp Angel eveh asked a word about him. If'n he got away, I don't reckon he'd find his way back up these branches. He cain't lead no posse into the Skips and Stockade, Mist Hatchie—I don't reckon he can!"

"Well, keep yo' eyes open, Duck!" Hatchie said. "Keep blockadin' along, an' don't take no chances. I'll run down't the Court, an' with luck mebby I'll pick 'im up on a legal vagrancy charge. Lookin' the way he does, bare to the waist an' nothin' but a pair of pants on, ev'ybody'll think he's crazy. Course, hit'd been better if'n we'd neveh let him shave, but workin' faithful, we had to show we 'preciated hit. Course, if'n he tries to start any nonsense at the court seat, I'll settle that. Chances are he's so tickled to death, makin' his get-away, that he'll jes' cut an' run right plumb cl'ar out the country!"

"S'posin' he aint drownded." Wamber shook his head. "I hate to think he aint daid, mebby bit by a cottonmouth, er all stung up by mosquitoes. I tell yo' those damned laborers don't 'preciate the way the smoke an' steam drives skeeters out'n the stillhouse! Why, Mist' Hatchie, jes' that much comfort's 'nough to pay those scamps."

"They neveh count what they git, humans don't." Old Hatchie nodded sagely. "Hit's always what they aint got, that poor whites fuss mos' about. Damn 'em, they're lucky they's alive! I tell yo', Duck, when I think of these damned Swamp Angels neveh workin'—jes' loafin' around, fishin', trappin', shootin', pickin' up nuts, shippin' frogs, an' livin' so damned shif'less, I'm jes' disgusted. It oughta be the law for them to work stiddy, if'n not in industries, then on plantations, er log-camps, er reputable. Well, we're doin' the bes' we can!"

HATCHIE rolled over to the Shipping Bayou on the tram and went down the Mississippi in a launch, making sure of forestalling the dangerous fugitive one way or another. He telephoned to Mendova to make sure nothing broke on him through the Federal Building. Wherever



"Git oveh theh an' move mash!" the grinning overseer ordered. "Yo' day of loafing round is done, yas indeedy! Git oveh an' git to work!"

he sought information he found that no word had appeared, not even in rumors, connecting him with difficulties.

Dobussy had vanished. Somebody had given him a helping hand. That slim-bullet goose-rifle had done a quick job on the guard, the sound of the shot smothered in the uproar of the blasting storm. Hatchie didn't like the quiet. No telling what was hatching; no telling what those tight-mouthed scoundrels were liable to do!

Grandpap Hatchie was worried. Reassurances did not allay his feeling of doubt. Duck Wamber came down the East Fork, looking for sign or track, but didn't find a thing to indicate that Wing had really escaped. A man had to be mighty good to escape with neither skiff, canoe nor launch. The three-day rain had covered up the fugitive's tracks.

"I always did mistrust that scamp!" Hatchie shook his head, grimacing and showing his yellow fangs through the screen of his white mustache. "We'd oughta killed him and done with hit. Course, he was sho' a good worker, but I felt he was dangerous, treacherous, a mean, desprit, disloyal scoundrel jes' bidin' his time."

"Maybe he'll go t' the Federals?" Wamber suggested nervously.

"Them fellers cain't lick both sides of a spoon, to save 'em! They jes' run round in circles in the big brakes. They won't pay no 'tention to poor white trash. Yo' gotta be quality to reach a commissioner. Dobussy cain't neveh git to Marshal Curtain, not any of *them!*"

The feeling of the Dark Corner, the streams of the brakes, the whole of the Scatterings changed for old Grandpap Hatchie, and his years'-long confidence gave place to doubt and anxiety. His nervousness as he watched over his shoulders, mumbling to himself, searching the shadows on all sides communicated itself to Duck Wamber, who in all his born days never had worried or feared anything. They ought to have known, but they hadn't, that Wing Dobussy would make his get-away at the first chance.

"I aint safe heah no more!" old Hatchie said, under his breath, looking into the thick, gloomy standing timber along the tramway as the car rolled across the lake trestle and over the divide through the jungle depths where only those were welcome who came to stay. Grandpap tried not to let Duck know he was actually scairt up, worried and hard hit.

For the first time, Hatchie and Wamber hesitated to go down the East Fork of the Albion, past the brush, grapevine tangles, the tall green cane stands on ridges, willows on the bars and tall timber. Wing Dobussy could bushwhack them anywhere, any time he wanted to let go. Hugging his 38-55, Hatchie glowered, doubtfully.

They tried to be bold and careless with each other, those two men, old Grandpap and his faithful overseer, but their pride crumbled and shame embittered them. They couldn't be cowards, yet despite self-denials, they knew they were.

"We betteh lay off an' make hit ouh business to git back that Wing Dobussy in the crew!" old Hatchie declared, "We'll put a ball an' chain on 'im next time. He's a good fast worker, worth two ornery hookworm, malarial scoundrels. I admiah a man who aint lazy. We don't want to leave him get away."

"Yas suh," Duck assented fervently. "We need 'im—that, er drap an' sink 'im deep."

NATURALLY, neither old Pap nor Duck Wamber spoke of Wing Dobussy outside. They listened for word about him, but never let go a question that would incriminate themselves with guilty knowledge. Visiting around, listening and watching, old Hatchie and Wamber felt that luck surely favored them, not hearing a word. But they weren't satisfied. Every time they saw a buzzard pitching down, they headed out; and no matter how much they had to wallow in the swamps, they made sure of what the vultures were feeding on. But it was never Dobussy.

They met Clem Barstow, Isbelle Strake and her father coming up in a launch, below the Forks, right in the Narrows where the river cuts through the Green Cane Ridge. Generally old Hatchie and Duck passed the Swamp Angels by with only a nod, if that much, but they stopped now to talk.

"Ducks coming down yet?" Wamber asked.

"Not much," Clem answered.

"How's fishing?"

"Set lines are good," Clem answered, "but the fish are in deep water. Not running up any."

"The melt heavy?" old Hatchie asked.

"Yas suh." Strake nodded. "Razorbacks are sure fat; neveh better for sausage, bacon, smoke' hams. Haid-cheese sho' good, too."

Too early to tell about fur; goosedown was heavy on the Canadians; and ducks had lots of breast feathers. Sure did look like a rough winter coming. Feather-hunting for pillows was getting good.

"Then trippers'll be flocking down in shanty-boats!" old Hatchie declared. "Many strangehs tying in down the bends an' reach?"

"Few," Barstow said. "Aint noticed many."

"Swamps'll be full of traps, hunters, I bet!" Wamber snorted.

"Any strangehs on the Albion—in the Dark Corner?" old Hatchie demanded, flatly.

"Not's I know of!" Clem shook his head.

"Ner I!" Strake said, when the two looked at him.

They looked at Isbelle Strake, but she was reaching for her basket and didn't see their inquiring gaze. Wamber shoved the two boats apart and let in the pirogue's outboard gears. Clem pulled his gear lever, and the water boiled under the stern of the launch. The boats parted, and the two searchers went on down toward town. They were indignant. Nobody ever got any satisfaction trying to get anything out of those trash Swamp Angels.

GOING out into the Mississippi, they dropped down to Dex Long's Dark Corner fish-boat. Dex told old Hatchie that a stranger had come down to the landing and tied in long enough to buy supplies uptown.

"He's a quiet, cleveh man, sure sharp, good blue eyes, and he's square-built, dark-complected from the sun, but light-ish hair."

"Tell his name?"

"No suh, he didn't, Mist' Hatchie," Long shook his head. "Yo' could tell he's one of those fellers minds his own business. He come back presently with right smart of supplies. Flour, cornmeal, cans of ribbon-cane molasses, one thing an' anotheh—a burlap bag of traps. I bet he had two hundred pounds in

Tom's dray. An' he wa'n't gone more'n two hours."

"Is he up the Albion, you reckon?" old Hatchie asked.

"Well, now, he didn't say. He mought be up the outside along the reach, er on the chutes, back ag'in' the Dark Corner. I jes' don't know. I neveh saw him befo', not fishing. He had a pretty clinker-built skiff, an eighteen-footer, with an outboard."

"He didn't say nothing, then?" Hatchie pressed.

"No suh; nice feller, but minded his own business," Long said.

"Let's go!" Hatchie said impatiently, and Wamber shoved the varnished pirogue clear and started the outboard.

"That feller's Wing Dobussy," Hatchie stated, when out of earshot. "The next thing is to find where he's hid out at."

HATCHIE and Wamber went back up the river into the Albion, then turned over into a bayou that ran to the foot of the ridge on which the court town was built. This landed them just behind the Hatchie mansion. Hatchie's yellow man heard their motor and came hopping. If there had been any talk around town, Squire would have heard it. He was just glad to have them come back again.

"Dobussy aint told a soul," old Hatchie said to Duck. "Those tight-mouthed scoundrels are dangerous. Cain't tell what they are liable to do. 'Liable to bresh-whack a feller anywheres!"

"He knows better!" Wamber said. "He's had all he wants of us, afteh the way I laid the whup on 'im! He aint nobody's fool!"

"He knows betteh'n to let anybody know't he's got hit in fo' us, Duck!" Hatchie answered. "If'n he let on we'd made him work honest thataway, an' he done meanness on us, that'd 'stablish his motive fo' bush-whackin' we-uns. Don't git the wrong idee 'bout Wing Dobussy. He neveh told a single stool-pigeon what he was thinking, back in the Stockade. That feller aint safe to live, Duck. That man Dex Long told was here must be Dobussy. Theh aint no otheh stranger up theh! Clem showed that. We gotta find out if'n he saw anybody here—the Sheriff, the Judge, the Prosecutin' Attorney. Don't miss no bets on that scamp; he's plumb bad."

"He wouldn't dare do nothin' to yo', Grandpap!" Wamber said uneasily.

"He mought figure he owed yo' a lead slug fo' those whuppin's," Hatchie said.

Duck gulped, his cabbage-head jerking assent. "I jes' 'bout made up my mind to that," he admitted. "A mean, treacherous scoundrel like that aint dependable, no suh! I got the idee I'd betteh jes' git right afteh him, yes suh! I'll find that rat soon's he begins to trap! I'll locate his lines and watch his cubbies, tanglestick water sets, wherever he puts down steel. He'll neveh know what hit 'im!"

Now that they had things figured out, both felt better. Inquiries around the courthouse square yielded bits of information which satisfied their minds that Wing Dobussy was the stranger who had tied in at the fish-dock. Apparently he wasn't connected close up with the Barstows or the other Swamp Angels. The description fitted him.

Judge Brooner, Sheriff Harker, Prosecuter Calhoun Boucan all gave no least hint of having heard anything regarding Dolmen Hatchie's confidential business in the Dark Corner. Had Dobussy complained, these faithful, honorable authorities sure would have said something to Hatchie about it.

"Every soul in Scattering Court'd fair warn me, loyal, if they heard a word!" Hatchie boasted to Wamber. "They'd come a-runnin', blabbin' their haids off. Why, they wouldn't dast not to, the way things is."

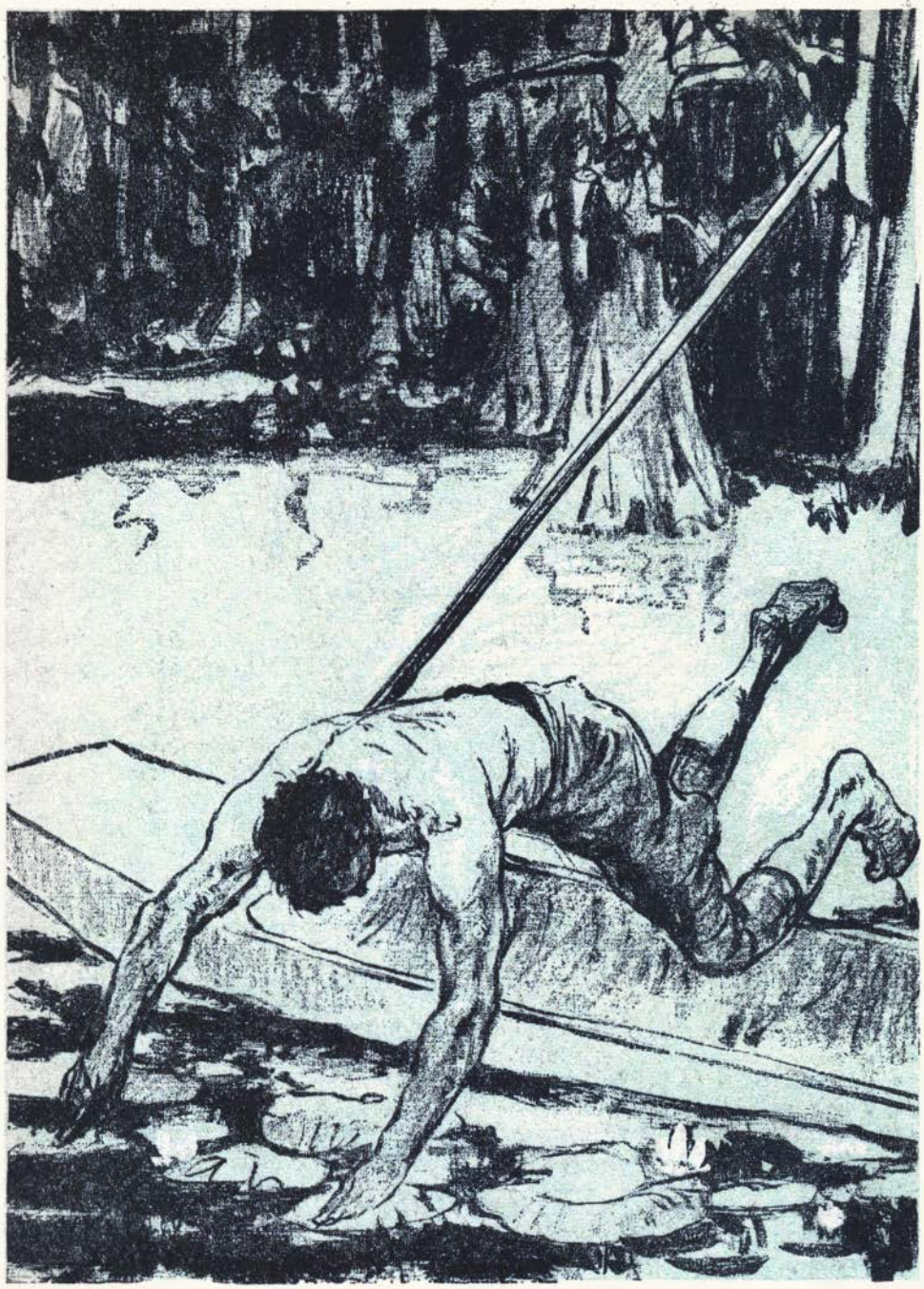
"But I don't like the looks of it!" Wamber scowled. "Looks like Dobussy mought seek personal revenge. Why, jes' keepin' his mouth shet—that shows how treacherous he is. He's *bad*, that feller!"

Wamber looked around. That sure stood to reason! He had had to kill men who would rather be shot than whipped. Dobussy had served faithful just waiting his chancet! Now a man wasn't safe, not with a close-mouthed, vengeful scoundrel like Wing Dobussy lurking out around.

CHAPTER VI

The Escape

WING DOBUSSY took full advantage of the terrific downpour, a cloudburst, diving into the branch and swimming downstream. As soon as he was clear of the harbor, he made fast time, for the water flowed at the rate of four or five miles an hour. The storm was the biggest help he could have asked for, once he was in the clear. The hail stopped beating down, but the rain fell in sheets. He crept ashore up a tree-trunk that had caved off a bank; and



Isbelle, watching, saw the laborer

landing in the brake, he headed down the stream, running. Dogs couldn't track a man in that heavy fall of rain.

The distance was miles to where he had landed at the long mound, back in the timber away from the stream a few score yards. The only ground above the high tide was in those mounds over against the jungle. Hardly a ridge was out of water that spring. Now the streams were back in their channels, the banks out.

Following the mound around, he found the skiff where he had left it when he went up to the head of the mound, finding the dugout lodged there. The waterproof hood had kept water out of the skiff. He dragged it to the creek, where he waited till dark.

Just at dusk a boat went by, swiftly, in the storm.

plunge over the bow of the scow.

The rain dimmed his vision; the gloom was thick too; but he knew that Swamp Angel, the girl who had told him he was in the Dark Corner, Isbelle Strake. He opened his mouth to hail, but he saw the carbine rifle beside her, which reminded him of the strange fate of the guard, pitching down the way he had, his shotgun sliding into the stillhouse harbor.

Above the uproar of the wind and slatting hail, slashing rain, he had heard two familiar notes, one the report of a shot; the other was the smacking past of a fast bullet—of lead hitting through hail and rain as it thickened.

The shot had gone true, no matter what it hit. In his flurry of escaping in his sudden, desperate plunge, he had noticed many things; but all he thought about was getting away. Now he picked

up those impressions of glimpses, considering them. He knew a carbine when he saw it. The girl went by in a hurry, watching behind her.

"She's getting away too!" He shook his head. Then night fell.

IN the skiff he headed downstream, glad his outboard started so pretty on the magneto and battery both. The river was all changed now, the water down and the banks showing, the channel curving. He could hardly see at all. He couldn't tell where he was. He shut off the motor and drifted along down, hardly feeling the rain, which was chilling at first, but warmed up after a while.

Somewhere on his way he knew was that crosscut channel, back in which he had hidden his cabin-boat. He kept watching over his right for a break in the timber. Then he remembered the maps of the Dark Corner, showing a shortcut. If it was a dry bayou in summer, it wouldn't show on the map. Anyhow he worried and shook his head. Probably the cabin-boat had a hole punched through the bottom, or it was standing on end, half full of water!

"There!" he exclaimed, swinging out of the main current into the pass through the brake. He'd found his way! A slight current carried him on his way, and presently he found channels toward the north. At one of these, where a dead stub stuck up, he struck back into the swamp. The course wound around right much, but presently he came to a blue-hole about half an acre in extent, almost perfectly round—no telling how deep!

There was his shanty-boat floating pale on the surface; and the rain was singing on the roof. He shoved up to the stern and tied his skiff painter. He found his key right where he had left it. He unlocked the door and went inside.

"Home!" he whispered, hardly able to control his feelings, the way it felt, free again and by himself!

The matchbox was where he felt it. He struck a light—there was his lamp. With the flame burning, he looked around. Books were on the table. The furniture was moved around, he thought—he couldn't be sure. Dishes were on the kitchen table—he looked into the cooler. It was all clean, nothing at all in it. He turned back the bedclothes—under the pillow was his blue nightshirt, all folded up neatly.

He looked in the corner—there was his 25-35; and when he picked it up, the carbine was clean, but there was water and fuzz between the barrel and magazine, and yet no rust. The weapon had been wiped off. Inside the barrel had the faint stain of nitro powder. It had been fired. He pumped out four shells.

"I never left that loaded!" he shook his head. "Somebody's been here—"

He kept looking, trying to figure something definite. Then he found a locker drawer, right next to where he kept his spare clothes. He stared at the things. Stockings—long and small-footed; silky-looking pink specialties—like newspaper advertisement pictures; queer suspender elastics, with a belt buckle and a pair of forked-straps, with stocking clips—they hung from the waist, it looked like; a skirt, two waists—one thing and another.

Wing Dobussy didn't know what to think. Come to look around, he could tell somebody had been staying on board. The oil, kitchen wood and heater stoves had all been used. Dishes were put away different. Some home preserves in glass jars he never put up in God's world were there. Then there was a big jar of wild honey in the comb.

"I've been having company!"

A newspaper in the pile of magazines he had for reading when he didn't care about books caught his eyes. He unfolded it.

"The Scattering *News!*" he read aloud, "Why, I never saw this—October 4th? Why—" He looked around, astonished. "Lawse! Lawse!" he whispered. "I've been better than six months in that hell-hole!"

Bitter indignation welled through his consciousness, long restrained by good judgment. Such things couldn't be done to him—but they had been!

"An' I'm not running away from those scoundrels!" Dobussy told himself. "I'm not scairt of them now, for I'm free! Those poor devils laboring there—they haven't a hope in the world but me!"

HE cooked something to eat, and he heated a lot of water to bathe in. He shaved and scrubbed, and clipped his hair. All the time he listened to the rain pouring down, and thought of a slim woman who had found his boat, slacked the ropes, used it—kept it sweet and clean, lived aboard, perhaps for days and weeks —coming there to read his books.

She was gone now, but perhaps she would return. Somehow, he could guess who it was. A girl with blue eyes dancing under her lashes, and a teasing smile,

one who knew the brakes and cruised through the Dark Corner overflow, telling strangers who were lost where they were. And in low water she knew the hidden places in the waterways.

"Course, I don't *know* it!" he jeered at himself. "It could be some bum-boat hussy that's been here. But she puts things back. . . . I'll clean that rifle. I don't want a rusty rifle now, nor one whose pump action sticks—not for business I don't! They cain't do that to me, not Duck Wamber, not old Grandpap Hatchie himself! They can't keep those boys in that stillhouse any more, either —with those scoundrel shotgun guards!"

ONE day a week later, before dawn, he returned to the stillhouse. He knew what he was going to do. No question was in his mind about the work he had cut out for him, the way things had come around. A new grave was at the graveyard mound. That would be Chet Keyburn, buried there. All hands were up at breakfast, excepting one man watching the stills while the others ate. The gates were open. A man sat by the gate, dozing in the warm rays of the morning sun, a fat, hulking, slouching brute—his knuckles were calloused from knocking men down.

Dobussy waited patiently. He knew just what to expect. Now he was thinking about those men eating, with their legs still chained to the clanking rings on that long iron pipe.

The guards came sauntering out with their shotguns, wearing their short-gun holsters, picking their teeth, the long guns resting in the hooks of their elbows. All of them, just standing around, getting ready to settle down for the day. The night-watch stretched now—he was going to bed. The others were ready for the day's business. . . .

In five seconds—Wing didn't shoot very fast—there weren't any guards. They were pitching around on the ground, trying to creep and crawl—but they couldn't, not very far. They were all hit, counting the second loading of the 25-35, two or three times each.

The help, the men who were naked to the waist, black, brown and white, stood paralyzed staring as they saw Wing Dobussy coming with his rifle, bareheaded and smiling. . . . Never in God's world had they seen a man smiling with such satisfaction. He took the big key-ring and unsnapped all the shackles from the men's ankles before he said a word. Then he said:

"Well, boys, you're free now! Help yourselves! Take anything you want. You better cut loose and break away; there'll be boats over at the whisky-landing to go onto the river!"

The brake was very quiet. The sharp, crackling shots had awakened prodigious echoes in the stillness of the early dawn. All they heard for a minute now was the barking of a squirrel off yonder.

The men stood blinking, staring, shaking their heads. The shock was terrific. They couldn't get the idea. And then one gave a low yelp, then another managed to get the words through his ears. They swarmed at the scoundrels who had guarded them, forcing them to carry on. They went through their pockets, found their money-belts, looted the kitchen, loaded up the tramcars and tried to get Wing Dobussy to go with them, but he shook his head.

"No, boys," he said. "I don't want any of the loot, either. Divide it even among yourselves. Don't hang around here. Get going—scatter out on the river. This isn't any safe place for you!"

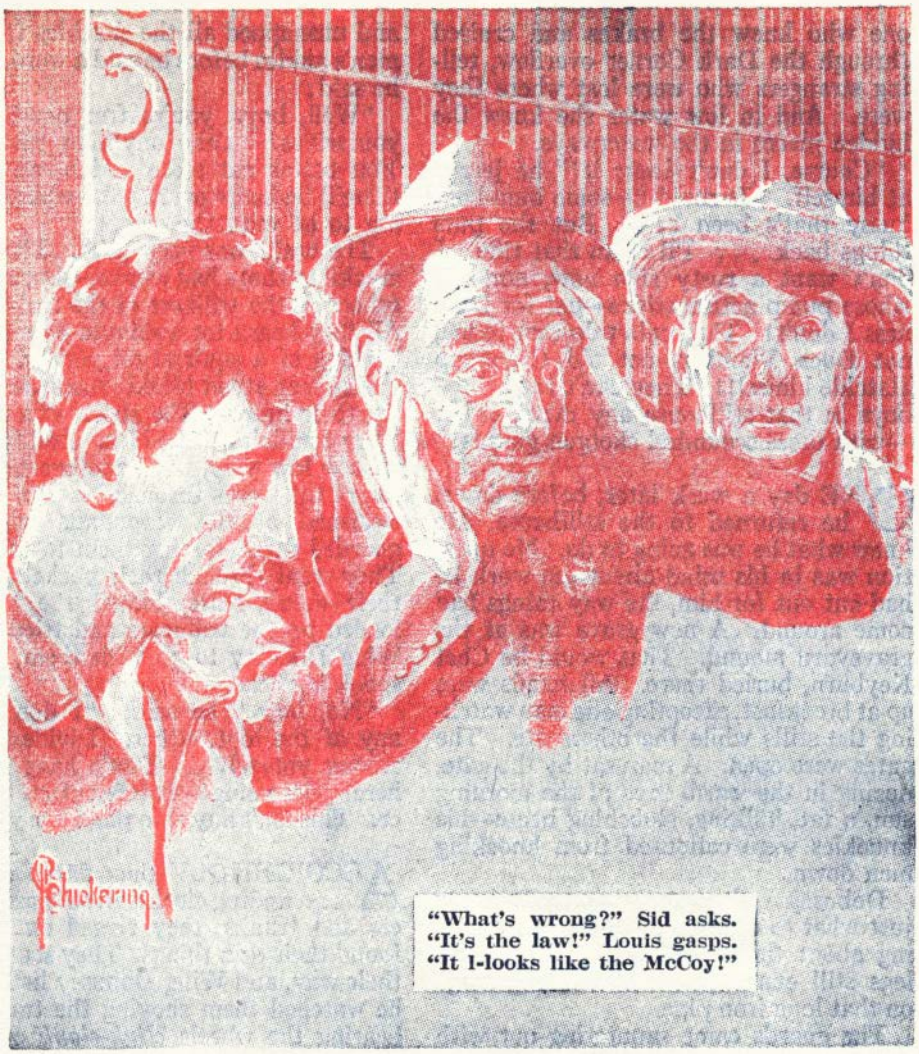
ACCORDINGLY they flaxed around, and finding clothes in suitcases, closets and trunks, they rigged out. Some found their own things. They scurried on their way, and Wing Dobussy listened as he watched them shoving the tram-cars, hearing the wheels *clink-clank* over the rail-ends as they went out over the hill and coasted down on yon side.

Presently they were gone. Dobussy went into the establishment and set off the safety valves and dampered down the fireboxes. The old distillery was dying. He made sure of the establishment, so there wouldn't be any explosion. He ate his own grub out in his skiff. He knew he had quite a while to wait around.

Old Hatchie and Duck would be prowling around, looking for him. They never would expect what he had actually done. Probably they would think he had fled the Dark Corner entirely.

"All I'll have to do is just hang around here till they came back, and then we'll see!" Dobussy reflected grimly, settling himself where he could see clearly and hear plainly whenever those two old scoundrels made up their minds to come to the stillhouse.

The American tradition of rugged individualism persists passionately among the people of the Mississippi—as the next installment of Mr. Spears' novel well demonstrates.



"What's wrong?" Sid asks.
"It's the law!" Louis gasps.
"It l-looks like the McCoy!"

BANG IT

A joyous tale of the circus in its old-time wild and woolly days.

SID is settin' on a box outside the cook-house, frownin' at the pages of a little black notebook he always carries. It's a funny thing, but seein' him lookin' at that book and scowlin' over it, I'd of knowed exactly where we was, even if I'd just woke up from a case of amnesia. It's in this book that Sid writes down all the dough the guys on the lot owe him. Sid is a kind of a Santa Claus to most of 'em. If he's got a couple of bucks in his pocket, he'll always divvy up with anyone who can spin him a good hard-luck story. And he don't press for payment—that is, only once a year. That's why I say I'd of knowed where we was, on account of Sid always starts collectin' when he gets within a jump or two of Hodson Falls.

Hodson Falls is where Emmie Seaton lives. Sid would have tore the shirt right off his back for Emmie, and said thank you when she took it. She's high-class, all right. Works in a doctor's office in Hod-

OUT OF TOWN

By HUGH PENTECOST

son Falls, and she and Sid has been crazy about each other ever since they was kids. The trouble is she won't listen to no weddin' bells until Sid settles down somewhere, and Sid won't never settle down. It just aint in him. But each year, when the show gets to Hodson Falls, Sid gives Emmie a grand whirl and asks her again. That's why he has to collect his dough. I figure when Emmie finally gets wise to the fact that nothin' aint never goin' to tie Sid down, she'll give in. I guess he figures the same way, which is why he's always so anxious to get to Hodson Falls. He thinks maybe this'll be the time.

This mornin' I was plannin' on coppin' a little sleep after I'd et. The way we run this show, we tear down after the night performance and pack it in the trucks—thirty-six of 'em includin' the animal wagons. This is maybe done about one A.M. Then we grab off some shut-eye till daylight. Then we start her goin' over the road. Our jumps aint more'n fifty or sixty

miles, and we usually hit the next town by seven or eight o'clock. The reason we don't move till daylight is on account of the fact the Irishman don't want no truck-drivers fallin' asleep over their wheel and clippin' no telegraph poles.

As soon as we land on the lot, we push the show right in the air, and then there's maybe a couple of hours to rest before the afternoon performance.

My job is just to kind of wander around and see that everythin's okay. I don't bother with the big top nor the animal tent. The boss canvasman and the roughies know their job inside out. But I check on layin' out the sideshow tents and the Midway. Now I figure I'll have some beans and coffee and then roll up in somebody's trailer and pound off a yard or two of sleep. It's when I get to the cook-house that I see Sid.

"What's impetigo?" he asks me.

"It's a town in upstate New York," I says, "near a lake. We played there a couple of years ago."

"That's Oswego," he says. "Impetigo's a disease."

"It sounds tough," I says, "but it's probably no worse than a bad cold."

"I'm worried," Sid insists. "Emmie's down with this impetigo. Maybe she needs an operation or something. I'm worried sick, Eddie. I got to get out of here tonight, and in a hurry. If there's any trouble, I'll wring somebody's neck. I got to get to her. I got to see if she's getting proper care and has everything she needs."

"I'm sorry about Emmie," I tell him. "There wasn't no trouble movin' in. Maybe everythin'll be okay."

"It better be," Sid says.

YOU see, Sid Galloway is fixer for Riley Brothers Monster Show. I guess if you aint never been around a circus, you won't know what a fixer is. When a fixer is talkin' to the mayor of a town or to some selectman or some customer that's got a bellyache, he calls himself a legal adjuster. He's supposed to settle all claims against the show. But his main job is to see that they don't run into no trouble. He greases the politicians that has got to be greased, and sometimes the cops too. Some of the games in a show like Riley's aint exactly on the up and up. I mean, the customer aint got a chance. If someone gets sore or suspicious, he'll start yellin' for the law. But the law has been took care of by the fixer, and the sap gets talked out of makin' trouble. Maybe if it's been too raw, he gets his money back—but it's got to be raw like lion meat, for *that* to happen.

Sometimes you got to shell out good money to the law, but I've seen places you could buy 'em with alarm-clocks and Indian blankets out of the beano tent. And most places they're square enough.

"There won't be no trouble if you tell the boys to take it easy," I tell Sid.

"Pass the word around for me, will you, Eddie? And there's some monkeys that owe me dough I still got to collect—Joe Alpert, and Big Louis. Tell 'em I'm looking for 'em if you see 'em."

"Sure," I says. I knew what he was worryin' about. There'd be a lot of farmers claimin' the advance gang had plastered paper on their barns without permission. Some dame'd get some grease on her clothes off the bleachers and holler murder. Or maybe there'd be an accident. Like once in Vermont, a dame falls off the top of the grandstand. Lord knows why she don't break her neck—but the worst that happens is a rip in her stocking. Sid fixed that up for ten bucks—release and all. So she won't wake up the next day with no internal injuries. But that's the kind of thing he has to hang around for. When somethin' really bad happens, like a blowdown where a lot of customers get hurt, you might be stuck in a place for a day or two, with the law keepin' you from movin' a wheel. That's what Sid didn't want, on account of him wantin' to get to Emmie as quick as he can.

JUST then I see Joe Alpert comin' toward the cook-house. He don't see Sid till he's almost there, and then it's too late to duck. But Joe plays his cards good.

"I was lookin' for you, Sid," he says.

"That makes it mutual," Sid says.

"I know I owe you sixteen smackers," Joe says, "and I know you'll be makin' tracks for Hodson Falls as soon as we pull out of here."

"So lay it on the line," says Sid.

"This is how I figure it," Joe says: "I got just seven bucks. I'll give you five bucks now. I got to save two, on account of I got to have some change at the joint, and I got some laundry comin' in which will cost maybe seventy-five cents."

"How could you send out any laundry?" Sid asks. "We only just got here."

"It's bein' mailed on from the last town," Joe says. It's a wonder God didn't strike him dead, because if he'd left any laundry anywheres, he'd have been walk-

in' around half naked. "Now I figure if we go good here this afternoon, I ought to take in at least nine or ten bucks. Then I got to eat, of course, which will cut it down some. So I figure—"

"How much can you have on the line when we pull out tonight?" Sid cuts in.

"Five now," says Joe, "and say five tonight."

"Okay," says Sid, "but don't forget. I've got to lay my hands on every cent I got coming because Emmie's sick. She may need an operation."

"That's too bad," Joe says. "What's wrong with her?"

"Impetigo," Sid says.

"Holy gosh!" Joe says.

"You know what it is?" Sid asks him, anxious.

"Well, I aint exactly sure," Joe says. "I think it's some sort of a—well, a poisoned sore throat, like."

Sid draws his lips tight together. "I wish I could get out of here right now," he says. "I wish there was somebody with brains enough to handle this job."

Just then I see Big Louis comin' on the run. I know he aint comin' to pay up no debt, at that rate of speed.

"Hey, Sid!" he hollers. "The boss wants you."

"What's wrong?" Sid asks, sliding his notebook into his pocket.

"It's the law!" Louis gasps; Louis is about six feet two tall and six feet one wide, and he's winded. "I—I don't know w-what's up! B-but old m-man Riley looks like s-someone let the air out of him."

"Sheriff?" Sid asks.

"An' about ten deputies!" Louis says. "It l-looks like the McCoy!"

"Come on, Eddie," Sid says to me, frownin'. "We better see what's up."

WE come across the Irishman at the north end of the Midway, and he looks like a picture of Custer's last stand. Louis aint exaggerated none. There's a Sheriff, with a big badge pinned onto his coat and about eight deputies—and a dame. This dame is all in black and carryin' an umbrella, though there aint a cloud in the sky. She's got a hatchet mug on her that'd make the witch in "Snow White" look like one of these now glamour girls.

The Irishman, who calls himself Colonel Riley, is lathered up like a trottin' horse after a brisk work-out. He's moppin' at his red face with a big silk handkerchief, and his sombrero is pushed back on his head. He always wears a dark suit and a wing collar, and a kind of a flashy tie with a hunk of ice in it that a kindergarten kid would know he bought at a dime store.

"Ah, Galloway!" he says, as we come up alongside.

The Sheriff and his boys and the old dame give us a look that's as cold as a stepmother's breath.

"What's wrong, Colonel?" says Sid, cheerful-like.

"There—ah—seems to be a little—ah—misunderstanding," says the Irishman. "Gentlemen—Miss Gooch—my legal adjuster, Mr. Galloway."

"SO you're the fixer for the show," says the Sheriff.

"Fixer?" Sid sounds vague. "I don't think I understand, gentlemen."

"Now, aint that just too bad," says the Sheriff. "Well, my name is Warren, and I'm Sheriff of this county, and I got papers here attachin' this show, and every piece of property belongin' to it."

"There *must* be a mistake," says Sid.

"Mistake, my foot, young man!" says Miss Gooch. "I know my rights, and I don't aim to be hornswoggled out of 'em this time by no slick tricks."

"My—ah—dear Miss Gooch," says the Irishman, "I assure you that you are in error."

"I made all my errors last year," says Miss Gooch.

"Could I know the details?" Sid asks, pleasant as you please.

"It's a waste of time, but I guess you got the right," says the Sheriff. "Two years ago, when this show come to town, one of the trucks run into Miss Gooch's auto and smashed it up. Miss Gooch, here, suffered shock and nervous—er—disrangement. She got a judgment against the show, but when we tried to serve it last year there was some technical difficulties. This time Miss Gooch has seven thousand bucks comin' to her, or she takes over the show."

"If I was the Colonel," I says, "I'd pay her seven thousand bucks to take it."

"Shut up, Eddie," Sid says. He turns to Warren. "I'm sure, as Colonel Riley says, that there has been some misunderstanding. Would you mind letting me see the papers in the case?"

"I guess you got a right to look at 'em," Warren says.

I turn away so they won't see the grin on my face, which I can't hold back on account of I know what's comin'. Sid

Illustrated by Charles Chickering

looks at the papers, and his eyebrows go up.

"But there is a mistake, gentlemen," he says. "This is a judgment against Riley Brothers Monster Show. It's true we have acquired some of the Riley brothers' equipment, but this is in reality the Great Western Carnival Company."

Sid reaches into the left-hand inside pocket of his coat, which we call File A, and starts pullin' out a document. This gag is old as the hills, but it always works. The show is incorporated under three different names. If they's a judgment against Riley Brothers, we got papers in File A to show that this aint Riley Brothers at all, but the Great Western Carnival Company. And if they got a judgment against the Great Western, we got papers in File B, which is the righthand inside coat pocket, statin' that this is the New England Amusement Corporation. And if they got papers against New England, we got evidence in File C, which is the right-hand hip pocket, to prove that this is Riley Brothers. The sucker can't win.

But there's somethin' wrong this time. The Sheriff don't bat an eye. "Young man," he says, "you wasn't with the show last year, was you?"

"I'm Sheriff of this county, and I got papers here attachin' this show and every piece of property belongin' to it."

"No," says Sid. "I was with Colonel Tim McCoy last year and we didn't play Chanford, which, by the way, I think is a very beautiful little town."

"Because if you'd 've been here," says the Sheriff, "you'd know this gag was pulled on us then, Mister Wise Guy. So I got a duplicate set of papers made out against the Great Western Carnival Company." He starts diggin' 'em out.

SID laughs. "I must be slipping, gentlemen," he says. "Did I say Great Western? But I have only just joined forces with this outfit, and I was thinking about my last job. I meant to say that this is the New England Amusement Corporation." And he reaches into File B.

"It's no use, bud," says the Sheriff. "I got papers ag'in' them too. Your boss ought've tipped you off that this hanky-panky had been tried on us last year."

"And it's seven thousand dollars or the show," says Miss Gooch. "I'm not backin' up an inch—and don't think I will."

Sid gives the Irishman a dirty look. This was a fine thing, lettin' him walk right into a trap like that.

"Well, Sheriff, what do you propose to do?" Sid says.

"We're takin' over the show right now, and that's that," says Warren.

"Perhaps we can arrive at a more satisfactory solution for everyone," Sid says.

"Bud, there's only one satisfactory solution we're fallin' for. Seven thousand dollars to Miss Gooch, and not one cent less. And if it aint in her hands quick, there won't be no show this afternoon."

YOU got to hand it to Sid. He don't ruffle at all. "Of course, Sheriff, I don't know what Miss Gooch would do with the show if she had it. Perhaps she'd use it to entertain her friends."

"I'd get even with that—that murderer!" says Miss Gooch, pointin' her umbrella at the Irishman. "That's good enough for me!"

"Well, boys," the Sheriff says, turnin' to his men, "we might as well take over."

"Just a minute," says Sid. "You gentlemen don't suppose that Colonel Riley carries seven thousand dollars in cash around in his pocket! Naturally, if you have a legal claim against him, the Colonel will want to satisfy it."

"Ah—naturally," says the Irishman.

"But it will take several hours to have the money wired here from his bank," says Sid. "Now let's be sensible about this, gentlemen. A day's layoff is a very costly proposition. We have heavy payrolls to meet—heavy expenses."

"That aint my headache," says Miss Gooch.

"But let me show you how we can both be satisfied," says Sid. "Let the show go on today. Of course you can attach the receipts, Sheriff. We should take in two or three thousand dollars in admissions alone. By the time the night show is over, the Colonel will have received the balance from his bankers. After all, we can't *go* anywhere, Sheriff. We can't move out on you."

The Sheriff shakes his head. "Now, look here, bud," he says. "You know and I know that there aint no bank-account nowhere. There aint goin' to be no money comin' from anyone."

"I resent that, Sheriff," says Sid. "Colonel Riley's integrity is a byword from coast to coast. But if you are right, it's all the more reason why you should let the show go on. Surely Miss Gooch would like to have two or three thousand dollars in cash as well as the show itself."

"You bet I would," says Miss Gooch. "It'd be like takin' it right out of that crook's pocket. But you'd cheat us. I know that, young man!"

"How is that possible, Miss Gooch?" asks Sid. "The Sheriff could station a man at our ticket-wagon. When the customers stop coming in, he'd take over the receipts. There wouldn't be any way we could cheat you. And I resent your implication, madam."

The Irishman makes a stranglin' noise in his throat, tryin' to attract Sid's attention. But Sid don't give him a tumble.

The Sheriff and the Gooch dame whisper together for a minute. Then Warren says: "Okay, Galloway. We're willin'. But one of my men stays right in the ticket-wagon, and every cent of the take comes to us. And if you don't make up the balance between that and seven thousand dollars by tonight, you don't stir out of here."

"Fine, Sheriff," says Sid. "I'm sure everyone will be satisfied."

"An' if it aint all paid up," says Miss Gooch, shakin' her umbrella under the Irishman's nose, "I'll take it out of your hide, Mister Man."

THE attackin' party walks off, leavin' Sid and me with the Irishman. The Colonel can't hardly speak.

"You—you *Judas!*" he finally whispers. "You know what it means if they take over the gate!"

We knew what it meant, all right. This cockeyed show was just hangin' on by its teeth. We had about two hundred people on the pay-roll, trucks to keep rollin', animals to feed. Throw out a good day like this, and we'd be sunk for the rest of the season. All our profits was bein' et up by them damn' animals. For example, anyone knows that them young lions has got to have liver at least three or four times a week, and they'd ought to have it every day. That runs into dough.

"You, Galloway," says the Colonel, "have—ah—betrayed me! It is your job to smooth over these—ah—rough spots. By Gad, I'll have you blacklisted with every show in the country. You've double-crossed me, Galloway."

"Easy, Colonel," says Sid. I can see he is plenty sore. "I ought to let you take it for not wising me up to the situation here, so I could be ready for it."

"But—I—ah—thought the situation had been settled last year," says the Irishman. "Her claim is phony. Her car skidded into our truck from behind and got dented up some, but our driver was as innocent as—as a newborn lamb."

"Okay," says Sid; "it can't be helped now. There are two reasons why I'm go-

ing to get you out of here tonight. I've got to get to Hodson Falls myself. And I don't want to see that pickle-faced dame promote a nickel for nervous shock. She hasn't got a nerve in her body—if that's what it is."

"But you've told them they could—ah—station a man at the ticket-wagon! That means—"

"Don't bother your thick Irish head about what it means," says Sid. "Let me take care of that end. But you got work to do. I don't want any other trouble with the law. You go to every one of those monkeys on the Midway, and say if we've got any complaints that'll hold us up when the show's finished tonight, I'll leave them to figure their own way out."

"I will—ah—pass along the word," says the Irishman, and he walks off lookin' very dignified.

"I ought to let him take it," Sid says again, "but I got to get to Emmie."

"You really figure you can get the show rollin' tonight?" I ask him. "You know there aint goin' to be no seven thousand bucks for no one."

"Getting the show rolling is my job, isn't it, Eddie?"

"Yeah, but—"

"She'll roll," says Sid, kind of grim. "Then I and you are making tracks for Hodson Falls." We start walkin' toward the Midway. "Impetigo!" Sid says under his breath. "I wish I could find someone who knew just what it is."

I been workin' with Sid long enough so as I know better than to ask him what's on his mind when he don't talk. When he gets ready to spill it, he will, not before.

Everybody on the lot seems to've heard the news although it aint over five minutes old. Naturally they's all steamed up. Them as works on a salary figures the show will never get out of Chanford, and they're out of a job. The mugs on the Midway like Joe Albert, with his Mickey Mouse game, and Big Louis, who has a shootin'-gallery—they work on a commission. So much of the day's take to the Irishman, so much to themselves. If the show don't move, they can't no Sheriff attach their stuff, but where will they go with it?

SID makes straight for the big top and Mike Lewis. Mike has charge of the sale of the concert tickets. This concert is a sort of a Wild West rodeo, and Riley Brothers has added a spectacle of Lee surrenderin' to Grant at Richmond. I always get a laugh on account of the Confederate Army is made up of a bunch of faggy clowns, but it seems to go over with the customers okay. Now, you got to pay an extra quarter to stay for this concert. They's a ticket booth outside the big top where you can buy a concert seat on the way in. But most of the tickets is sold by guys circulatin' among the crowd. The ringmaster'll announce it about halfway through the main show, and then the boys start hawkin'. They's easy dough in it. Out of a crowd of four or five thousand, we can count on hookin' from eight to twelve hundred of the suckers for an extra two bits.

Sid walks up to Mike.

"We're going to run things a little different today, Mike," he says.

"Are we goin' to run at all is the thing," says Mike.

"Yes, we're going to run, Mike, but don't sell any concert tickets from the booth outside. Tear down the booth—take it away."

"That's great," Mike says.

"And tell the equestrian director not to make any announcement from the ring about concert tickets."

Mike just groans.

"But start your boys circulating early, Mike. Start them the minute the crowd starts coming in. I want you to sell your quota before the main show is half over. Then I'll send Babe Seboe here to pick up the dough."

Mike's eyes narrow, and then he grins. "Came the dawn," he says. "You wasn't born yesterday, Sid."

"Not quite," Sid grins back.

ALONG about eleven A.M., Sid and I go out to the ticket-wagon, which is parked outside the marquee at the entrance to the big top. There's already quite a few customers waitin' for the gate to open. In these hick towns people come from miles around to get into the circus the minute it opens, even though it's a couple of hours till the show starts. Some of 'em comes in cars, some drivin' a horse and wagon; a lot of 'em brings their own grub on account of they aint got much to spend.

The ticket-wagon is an old bus with the seats took out of it and a window cut in the back end opposite to the driver. They's an old safe in it, an' a couple of chairs, and Pete Williams has a bull terrier there that sits around and don't like nobody, not even Pete.

When we get to the wagon, the Sheriff and three or four of his men is sniffin'

"If you have any more trouble," I tell the apple-knocker, "let me know."

around. Sid takes Pete Williams and Joe Marsalla, his assistant, off to one side and talks to 'em. Then they all three of 'em walk back to the wagon. Sid has a friendly smile on his face as he goes up to the Sheriff.

"I see no reason why we shouldn't open up now, do you, Warren?"

"It's okay with me," says the Sheriff. "Only get this: One of my men is gonna be stationed inside that bus, and they aint none of your men goin' to leave it without bein' checked to see he aint carryin' out no cash."

"That's perfectly reasonable, Sheriff," Sid says. "Only you can see for yourself there isn't room for three men inside the bus. We have to have two men there to handle the situation. I suggest your deputy sit just outside the side door. He'll be able to check on everyone from there."

"*Inside the bus,*" says the Sheriff.

Sid shrugs. "Well, he'll have to sit right in the doorway, then. You can see for yourself there isn't any room inside. Besides, Pete's dog doesn't cotton to strangers."

So the deputy sits square in the middle of the side door, which is the only place anyone can get out by, with a pipe in his mouth, and makin' no bones about the fact he's got a gun in his pocket. The ticket window is upped, and the crowd begins to move in.

Sid says to me: "That's that, Eddie. Now beat it over to the Midway and keep circulating. If there's any trouble anywhere, step on it. The customer is always right—today!" He laughs. "If anyone crabs, tell the boys to pay off. We don't want any arguments. When it's time to close up tonight, I don't want any arguments with anyone except Miss Gooch. Got it?"

"I got it," I says, "only I don't see what you're figurin'. You aint goin' to save none of the dough out of that ticket-wagon—not with a deputy sittin' right there with a bead on the boys. And you aint goin' to raise no seven thousand bucks, even if you do save a few hundred on the concert tickets."

"You go to your church and I'll go to mine," Sid says. "Do what I tell you, and about four o'clock this afternoon come back out to the ticket-wagon."

So I start patrollin' the Midway. It's the kind of day you dream of in the circus business. There aint a cloud in the sky, and it aint much after noon that I realize we're goin' to have just about every person in the county there before the day is done. Well, whatever happens, the boys with concessions is goin' to have a good day, even if Riley Brothers folds after that. Maybe they'll anyhow be able to get out of town with their stuff.

I don't run into any trouble except once, about two o'clock, I spot a beef

around Big Louis' shootin'-gallery, and I hotfoot it there.

Louis and a customer is havin' a jawin' match.

This outfit of Louis' is one of them miniature ranges where you shoot at a target very close up. They's letters of the alphabet on the target. Three shots for a dime, and a buck if you wipe out a letter completely.

This customer of Louis' claims he's got a buck comin'. Louis is standin' inside the range and he's arguin'. He's got a magnifyin'-glass in his hand.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

They both start talkin' at once. The customer claims he's shot out a letter on the target, and Louis claims he aint. Louis squints at the letter through the glass.

"Hell, you don't even need this to see they's a part of it still showin'," Louis says.

I can't see nothin' and neither can the customer.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Louis says. "You can call in a jury of any twelve impartial people." He waves toward the crowd. "If they don't say part of the letter is showin'—"

"Pipe down," I says, "and give the guy his buck."

"But Eddie—" Big Louis wails. "Look for yourself. Here—take the glass."

"Shell out!" I says.

"Okay," he grumbles. He hands the customer the long green.

"If you have any more trouble," I tell the apple-knocker, "let me know."

"Gee, thanks, Mister," says the customer, and goes off happy.

"I don't get you, Eddie," Louis says, shakin' his head. "How'm I gonna pay Sid what I owe him if I got to keep dishin' out to the customers? Sid needs that dough on account of Emmie. Things is pretty bad with her, I guess."

"Do you know anythin' about this now impetigo?" I ask him.

"No," he says, "but I guess it's pretty serious."

"Well, Sid don't want no trouble," I says. "If anyone puts up an argument, pay out! That's orders."

BY three o'clock the Midway and the sideshow tents is deserted on account of everyone is under the big top. We couldn't've ast for a better crowd. Everyone on the outside is gabbin' about the trouble, now that they got a breather. None of 'em can dope out how Sid and the Irishman is goin' to get off this Gooch dame's hook.

Along about half-past three I go up against Lefty's grease joint for a couple of hamburgers, and then I saunter out to the ticket-wagon.

When I get there, I see the Sheriff and three or four of his men is there along with Sid. The deputy with the gun and the pipe is still squattin' in the side door of the bus.

The Sheriff looks at a gold watch the size of a turnip. "Keepin' this window open pretty long, aint you, Galloway?"

"Want to collect everything we can, Sheriff," Sid says.

"Hell, the main show's almost over," says Warren. "They won't be no more customers this afternoon. Let's get goin'."

Sid looks up at Pete Williams in the window, and I see Pete nod his head.

"Well, I guess that's all right with me, Sheriff," says Sid.

We all troop over to the side door.

"Pete, hand over your cash box to the Sheriff," Sid says.

"Right," says Pete. He picks up a big metal kind of a lock-box and hands it to the deputy in the door. The deputy passes it on to the Sheriff, who opens it.

THEN I watch his eyes bulge. A dark red color sweeps over his face like a wave breakin' on an ocean beach somewheres. He starts countin' the money, and his fingers shake like he's got palsy.

"Why, you blankety-blank crook!" he bellers. "They's just sixteen dollars and fifty cents in here. That accounts for thirty-three admissions. There must be between four and five thousand people in the grounds!"

"It's been a bad day," says Pete Williams, dead pan.

"Bad day!" I think this Warren is goin' to have apoplexy. "This is the best day a show ever had in these parts. You fork over the rest of that money!"

"That's all there is," Pete says, sadlike. "It's a paper house, Sheriff." He turns back to the window, and from under the counter he brings out a couple of wire trash-baskets. They're piled right over the top with crumpled pieces of paper—Annie Oakleys. You see, when we go into a town puttin' up paper or posters in stores and restaurants, we dish out passes to the folks. Well, in these baskets is about a million passes.

"A very bad day," says Sid, shakin' his head. "Pretty darn' near everybody has come in free."

"Search 'em!" the Sheriff orders. "Search every dad-blasted one of 'em. And search this wagon."

They search. They turn the place upside down. Outside of a few bucks on Pete and Joe Marsalla, which they claim is their own, they don't find a dime.

"Okay, Mr. Slick Galloway!" the Sheriff shouts. "I'll get you for this. I'll have you in jail for life. So help me, I'll—"

"You're workin' yourself up needlessly, Warren," Sid says. "I'm sorry we had such a bad take. But there's nothing we can do about it."

"No? We'll see about that. I don't know how you done this, but I'll find out, and I'll have you locked up. I'll get my hands on that money if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Just then one of the deputies has a bright idea. "They's the money for the concert tickets," he says. "They collect that inside."

"Great Godfrey!" the Sheriff roars. "They probably got three or four hundred down there. Get movin', boys, and pick it up!" He swings around on Sid. "So you think you've outsmarted us. Well, tonight I'm puttin' my own men at that ticket window."

"Tonight?" Sid says, all innocent.

"Yes, tonight."

"I hardly think there'll be any show tonight," says Sid. "After this very disappointing afternoon—well, you can't expect us to go on again after receiving a paltry sixteen dollars this afternoon."

"You can't get away with that," the Sheriff snarls.

"I'm afraid, owing to this disappointing gate, Sheriff, that Miss Gooch is the new owner of the show. If she is prepared to guarantee the performers their salaries, perhaps they'd agree to go on this evening." He shrugs.

The Sheriff turns on his heel and races for the big top. The crowd that aint stayed for the concert is already filin' out.

"Let's go watch the fun," says Sid.

WE trail along after the Sheriff. There's a smile playin' on Sid's lips.

"How did you work it?" I ask him.

"Simple enough, Eddie. About every half-hour I've had one of our boys walk up to the window to buy a ticket. Pete's passed the dough out the window to him so it looks like he's makin' change. The last one turned up about fifteen minutes ago." He laughed. "Lord, I hated to leave even that sixteen-fifty for Warren. Babe Seboe's already sneaked off the lot with the take—about twenty-two hundred and sixty-seven bucks, plus the dough for the concert tickets."

I laughed till my belly ached. "Boy, the look on that Sheriff's face when he seen them sixteen fish! And when he finds there aint no concert money, he's gonna bust right open."

"His blood-pressure isn't going to be improved," Sid says.

THEN I sober up. "That was pretty smart stuff, Sid," I says, "but we'll be stuck here for life now. If he has to, he'll get the militia out to keep you."

"That reminds me," Sid grins, "after we've seen the fun, give the word to the boys to tear down. There won't be any night show—though I hate to pass it up. Tell 'em to tear down and get ready to bang it out of town."

"You'll never get away with it, Sid," I says.

"If you were a gambling man, Eddie," he says, "I'd—"

"I wouldn't gamble with you even if I had a marked deck o' cards," I tell him. And I wouldn't.

By that time we catch up with the Sheriff. He's just grabbed a kid who's been sellin' peanuts and candy inside the tent. There's a big racket from there, the cowboys in the Wild West shootin' off their guns.

"Where do you buy concert tickets around here?" the Sheriff wants to know.

"Five cents for de small bags," says the kid, "ten cents for de big ones."

The Sheriff shakes him. "Concert tickets!" he bawls.

"It's goin' on now," the kid says.

The Sheriff lets go and staggers into the big top, and we after him. Sid says somethin' to one of the roughies, and the gang moves in and start slammin' down the blues—bleacher seats, to you.

The Sheriff sees Mike Lewis, and takes aholt of him. You can't hardly hear yourself think with them cowboys shootin' and yowlin'.

"Where do you buy concert tickets?" the Sheriff demands.

"Why, there aren't any concert tickets, Sheriff," Mike says. "This extra show is absolutely free."

"That's a lie!" the Sheriff says. He snaffles onto a customer. "Did you buy a ticket for this show?"

"Yes sir," says the rube. "Two bits extry fer this."

"There, you lyin' skunk!" the Sheriff says to Mike.

Mike looks pained. "If there were any tickets sold, it must be the work of crooks or confidence-men," says he. "If you'll make inquiries, Sheriff, you'll find there was no ticket booth—no announcement. If Chanford is full of confidence-men—"

"What did the guy look like who sold you your ticket?" the Sheriff asks the rube.

"A short fat feller, Sheriff. Must of weighed two hunert an' fifty pounds."

Just then one of the deputies comes flyin' up. "I got a description of the guy who sold these tickets, Sheriff," he says. "He was a tall, thin bird with a black patch over one eye."

The Sheriff hangs onto his head with both hands and moans.

Another deputy comes up. "The guy that sold the tickets was a little lame fella with an iron brace on his shoe," he says.

"A deplorable situation," says Sid. "The town is overrun with thieves! Come on, Eddie. Let's scoff some pie and coffee, and then we'll be moving on."

"Why, you blankety-blank crook! They's just sixteen dollars and fifty cents here!"

HALF an hour later the show is pretty near all tore down and the boys are loadin' her up. Sid and I leave the cookhouse and walk out to the Midway. Things is just the way I figured. Out at the end of the Midway is the Sheriff and a whole army of deputies now. Some of 'em is carryin' shotguns. And right in front is Miss Gooch, brandishin' her umbrella.

Sid ankles up to 'em, I at his heels.

"Well, Mister Wise Guy," Warren says, still shakin' with rage, "you pulled a fast one on us, okay. I got to admit that. But now it's our turn. You're just six thousand nine hundred and eighty-three dollars and fifty cents short of satisfyin' Miss Gooch's judgment. You aim to pay up?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible. Such a disappointing day," murmurs Sid.

"I told you he'd outslick you, Sheriff!" Miss Gooch screeches. "Well, they's no use o' packin' up, Mr. Galloway. Nothin's goin' to move out of here—if I have to get help from the Governor of the State!"

"Oh, no one's planning to move out, Miss Gooch," says Sid. "They're just packing the stuff to protect it. We wouldn't want you to have things spoiled by exposure to the elements."

"All right," says Miss Gooch, "but you and that crooked Irishman and the rest of this outfit is goin' to stay here till you rot—or pay up."

"I'm afraid I can't stay to witness the process, Miss Gooch," says Sid. "I have my own car, Sheriff, licensed in my own name. You have no attachment against me, have you?"

"No, I aint," growls the Sheriff. "But if I could prove you handled any of that money—"

"But I didn't," says Sid. "Come on, Eddie."

"It's a funny kind of a law that lets you git off scot free," says Miss Gooch.

"I did my best for you," Sid says. "But the unfortunate take at the gate—"

He walks away, and I tail him to where his car is parked by the cookhouse.

"Where we goin'?" I ask him.

"To Hodson Falls," he says. "We ought to make it in time to get a little sleep and see Emmie the first thing in the morning."

"But Sid," I says, "the show! You can't just duck out on the Irishman and the rest of the gang."

He holds open the door of his car. "Get in," he says.

Well, I can't argue with him. Whatever Sid says goes with me. If he decides to take a powder, I'm with him—but it aint like him to leave an outfit stranded.

We drive out in low gear to where the Sheriff and Miss Gooch and the army is waitin'.

"So long, Sheriff," says Sid. "Good-by, Miss Gooch. I wish you luck with the show." He pauses to light a cigarette. "By the way, when I get to the village, I'll communicate with the Humane Society. That's my duty, you know, Sheriff."

"Humane Society?" The Sheriff looks puzzled.

"Yes. Because of the animals. The Humane Society is awfully particular about animals. You've got to have proper housing for them, and proper feeding."

"JEST what are you drivin' at, young man?" says Miss Gooch.

"Well," says Sid, "there're about a hundred horses. I guess you can rent pasture land for them. But the menagerie—the lions and the tigers and the elephants and the camels: you'll have to arrange pens for them, because unless you're travelin', the Humane Society won't let you keep them in those wagons. And of course you've got to feed them properly, Miss Gooch. I should think you could manage that for about two hundred dollars a day."

"How much?" Miss Gooch hollers.

"Oh, about two hundred dollars a day," says Sid, drawin' on his cigarette. "And if they aren't properly cared for, there are heavy fines. The Humane Society is awfully particular. I hope you've got the money to swing it until next spring, Miss Gooch."

"Next spring!" She sounds weak now, like a dyin' chicken.

"Well, I doubt very much if you'll be able to sell this circus equipment till next spring. All the shows that are going out this year already have their equipment. But I imagine you can rent a place to store it cheap—carry the whole thing for around six thousand dollars a month, I guess."

"Look here, Galloway," the Sheriff says in a strangled voice.

"Don't worry, Sheriff," Sid says. "I'll have the man from the Humane Society here first thing in the morning. He'll tell you just what your liabilities are. I wouldn't want Miss Gooch to run the risk of a fine or imprisonment out of ignorance of the law."

"Now, wait a minute, young man," says Miss Gooch, gaspin'.

But Sid keeps talkin' to the Sheriff. From File B he takes a slip of paper. "Here's a list of the men workin' for the show," he says. "I wouldn't want any outsider making claims against you."

"Claims—what kind o' claims?"

"Well," says Sid, "there'll be about a hundred canvasmen and razorbacks out of a job, unless Miss Gooch keeps up their pay. They'll be stranded here, Sheriff, and you can't hold 'em for vagrancy, because they had jobs when they came here. They'll just naturally become town charges."

"Oh, my gosh," says the Sheriff.

"They're not very particular about sleeping-quarters," Sid goes on, in his drawlin' voice, "but I advise you not to let any of the taxpayers get a look at the way they go for their groceries. Well, so long, Sheriff. Good luck to you, Miss Gooch. I hope you both get everything figured out okay."

"Wait a minute, Galloway!" Warren shouts.

But Sid throws the car into gear, and we drive off. I look at him. "Holy smoke," I ask, "is that on the level about the Humane Society?"

Sid laughs. "Eddie," he says, "I haven't the faintest idea. But I wasn't kidding the Sheriff about his town charges. I've got a hunch neither he nor Miss Gooch is going to want any part of a circus. I've suggested to Riley that he ought to be able to settle with her for her nervous shock for about thirty bucks. If you were a gambling man, Eddie, I'd bet you she'll take it."

We stop at the farmhouse where Sid has put up. He goes in to get his stuff. I knew it was all ready because he was in a hurry to get to Hodson Falls and Emmie.

WHEN he comes out of the house, he's got a funny look on his face. "Look at this," he says. "Maybe we aren't in such a hurry after all, Eddie."

He hands me a telegram, and I read it in the light from the dash. It says:

LISTEN DOPE, YOU HAVE SPOTS WITH IMPETIGO STOP WHILE MY FATAL BEAUTY IS MARRED I WOULDN'T LET YOU WITHIN TEN MILES OF ME STOP LOVE EMMIE.

Sid says: "Let's go find a drink somewhere."

We oil up on several at the local tavern. I always get to talkin' shop with a few snorts, and I'm tellin' Sid about how when I was with Sawyer Brothers we stole a freight-car off the stockyards people and repainted it right in the yards, when Sid holds up his hand.

"Listen," he says.

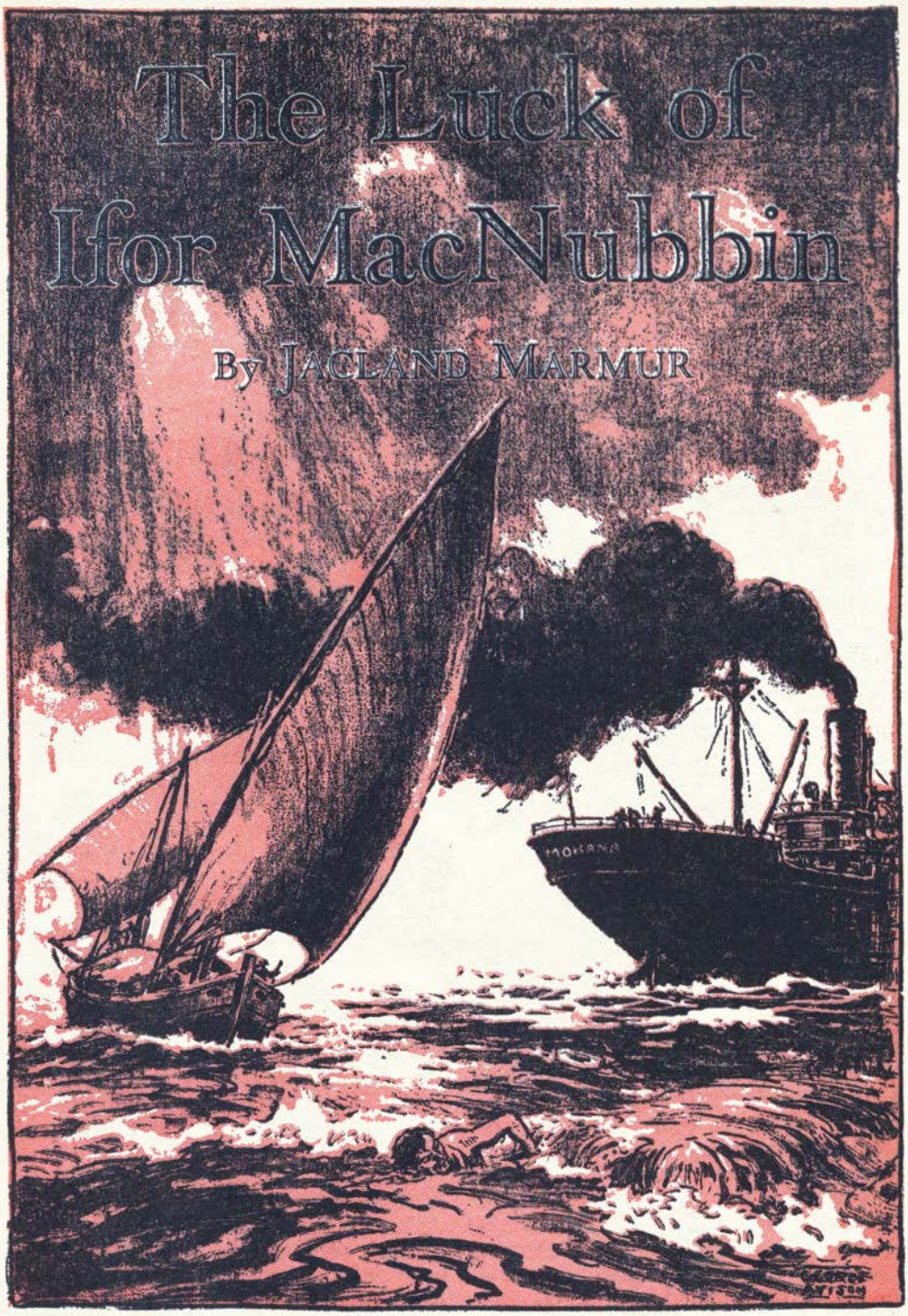
I hear the rumble of heavy trucks on the street outside.

Sid grins at me. "Riley Brothers Monster Show is on the move," he says.

"The Favorite Always Wins," a horse-racing story by Hugh Pentecost, will appear in an early issue.

The Luck of Ifor MacNubbin

By JACLAND MARMUR



IFOR CYRUS MACNUBBIN, the first assistant engineer, sat in rapt oblivion on the 'midship bunker hatch in torn singlet and underdrawers, with his rope-soled sandals hanging loosely from his feet. Because Ifor's brain was lost in an ecstasy of contemplation, it gave to his craggy, homely face that exalted and slightly foolish look attendant upon all labors of creation. The fine line between hero and fool, madman and genius, is difficult to draw neatly: but Ifor MacNubbin was unconcerned with metaphysical problems such as that; he

"Look here! See?" said Ifor. "You're my friend—you won't go stealing my ideas."

was a practical marine engineer, and his problem was clear and concrete. So he set his ingenuity to it with industry, his reasoning with the mechanical complexities of triple expansion engines punctuated now and again by soft murmurings and an occasional low growl.

"Injector," he mumbled, giving broken periods to his intensive thought. "That might do it. Certainly! Vaporize the lubricant. Then—"

He went silent, studying carefully his newest inventive possibility while under him the little ship *Mokana* surged gently against the sugar-wharf of Ahukini on the Island of Kauai. Her surging brought groans of complaint from the mooring hawsers, but the waters of the narrow bay spoke comfort in secretive whisperings about the heady northeast trade. The breakwater light kept winking in purple darkness and the coconut trees along the curving shore fanned a sky brilliantly studded with stars. But Ifor Cyrus MacNubbin was splendidly unaware of all that beauty, pondering a dream of his own. He was not aware, either, of the hilarious sounds of merriment tumbling from the gayly lighted house of the harbormaster up on the hill where the officers of the *Mokana* were having a party before sailing at daylight the following day.

There was high-hearted laughter up there, and the music of two ukuleles and a wailing steel guitar. The skipper was dancing with the harbormaster's fat wife to the strains of *"Yes sir, that's my baby!"* He was dancing with her, not because he enjoyed it, but because there was a daughter who looked pretty lush: and it certainly did a man no harm to beat a bit to windward. And the chief engineer just sat in a corner and grinned, watching the second mate put his best foot forward with a sloe-eyed girl from Lihue. But such sordid goings-on were certainly not for Ifor Cyrus MacNubbin. Down on the bunker hatch alongside the wharf, he had better things to attend. When by sheer tenacity of will and sweat you manage to keep a tin pot like the *Mokana* staggering along from the Coast on her cranky three-legger, you have got to have some relief. Ifor took it in a most peculiar way, for suddenly his eyes began to burn and he leaped excitedly to his feet.

"Jupiter!" he exploded with soft vehemence. "Why didn't I think of this before? Vaporizing injector valve! She'll never burn her bearings any more! Blast her! No, she won't. I'll draw it out before—"

In that high frenzy of creative exaltation, he went swaying hurriedly down

the alleyway to his room. Built for economy of space and expense rather than the comfort of men, the engineer's room was on top of the starboard boiler, since maritime architects seldom find it necessary to sail in cargo ships of their own design. To that steaming place full of the smell of sweating paintwork and hot engine oil, Ifor strode with glowing eyes. But with one foot over the weatherboard his face took on a wrathful look. There was the back of a man bent over his sacred drawing-board!

"You!" he demanded of it. "What the hell are you doing in here?"

The messman turned a heavy phlegmatic face, with a stiff military mustache, and shrewd little eyes. Then he straightened up.

"I thought I would tidy up, sir," he said, "while you were taking the air."

"The air!" Ifor snapped throatily. "*You* go take the air! . . . . What's your name?"

"Hans Troeffner, sir."

MacNUBBIN, stepping up, wagged his finger under the messman's nose. "You're new in the ship. So listen! Never come near this room while I'm busy with my work. Never! You understand? I won't have anyone snooping and spying into my inventions."

"But I only—"

"Clear out!"

The messman, startled at such savagery, suppressed the baleful look in his eyes and went away at once, muttering under his breath. You could hardly blame him. This was a different MacNubbin than he had ever known, for at sea the first assistant was mild and meek, gentle as a lamb. The messman didn't know, of course, what transformation is wrought in the soul of genius when the fever of creation is really on the boil. Ifor slammed the door and rubbed his hands together with genuine delight.

Between the bunk and the washbasin there was just enough room to prop up an architect's drawing-board. To this was tacked white paper covered with an intricate network of parallel lines, mechanical hieroglyphics, curls, spirals, and other symbols of the art of draftsmanship. The leather settee, too, was piled high with the tools of that craft; slide rule, dividers, compass, square, clinometer, and other things of deeper mystery. These Ifor MacNubbin apparently understood, for he seized upon one or two and sat down in his chair, the board propped comfortably on his knee. For a moment he surveyed empty space serenely. Then he reached under his chair and got hold of a bottle he seemed to know was there. Thus refreshed and fortified, he attacked in that austerity and solitude necessary for all creative labors, the magnificent problem of his life. To be sure, Ifor Cyrus MacNubbin was drunk. But if you knew the *Mokana's* engine-room, you would probably not blame him a bit.

Now Ifor was not what you could in justice call a drinking man. He was, rather, a man who had a cross to bear. From one port to another he nursed in cold sobriety with infinite patience and diligent skill the *Mokana's* cranky main source of locomotion and earning power for the owners. It was far from a simple task. Others had tried and miserably failed. That three-legger was too much for them; they gave up as soon as they could. It was Ifor MacNubbin alone who found, down in that ancient engine-room, some compelling challenge to his personal pride and his professional integrity. He accepted the gauntlet and, in a way, he triumphed. Because he kept her grinding coffee down below, and he kept her wheel revolving the way a ship's wheel should. Yet his triumph was not an easy one.

IN the stillness of a lonely middle watch at sea, Ifor would waken out of the soundest sleep, called mysteriously to consciousness much as a mother would waken at the faintest fret of her infant son. For an instant he would listen to the thump and throb of vitality vibrating his bunk. To any other ear all sounded well. But Ifor seemed to have secret communication with main bearings just beginning to heat, with boiler tubes on the verge of letting go, with steam-glands aching to give up their outraged ghosts. And whenever he came flying down below long before the bells for his watch, the juniors learned to listen to what he had to say and what he had to do. He came down there, patient with his lost rest, always mild and gentle, always sober as a judge: and he invariably went straight along the catwalks to where the trouble was. Surely he was entitled to some relief in a distant port from home, and even to a little revenge.

So while other ship's officers dreamed of the beauty of voluptuous women or of a chicken ranch in California far from

the noise of the brutal sea, Ifor Cyrus MacNubbin dreamed of an engine-room where condenser tubes were immortal and where bearings never got hot, no matter who your oiler was. And he did something about it.

HE was doing something about it in Ahukini alongside the sugar-wharf: with his architect's drawing-board propped between his knees and the washstand, he labored with what frenzied joy only the great imaginative minds of earth can know. His hair was dusty brown but his craggy brows, amazingly enough, were black. From the constant fuming of engine oil, no doubt. And these heavy brows were bent low upon his task. Now and again he mulched sustenance and spiritual fortification from the bottle on the deck. It gave his mind clarity and intensity. He made his intricate calculations to a nicety with lightning speed on the slide rule before he drew, rapidly and without hesitation, in fine lines and in complex spirals, the great fulfilling dream of every marine engineer's heart and soul. Working that way, his homely face took on an ethereal look and the shining light in his eyes was a wonderful thing to behold. And that was how the chief engineer found him when the harbormaster's party broke up and the officers of the *Mokana* came trooping noisily back aboard.

The Chief went straight down the alleyway to his first assistant's room. Hans Troeffner, the messman, ducked hastily out of the way. He had been peering intently through a porthole at what amazing thing MacNubbin was about. But the Chief went in, murmuring in his understanding voice: "Well, Ifor, how is it going tonight?"

Ifor MacNubbin looked up in an ecstasy of delight. "Wonderful, Chief! Marvelous! I think I've got it at last!"

"No!" said the chief engineer.

"Yes!" said Ifor. "Look here! See?" He pointed to his complicated drawings. "You're my friend—you won't go stealing my ideas. Look! Master injector valve—that's right here. Lubricant is vaporized under pressure—vacuum, you understand. Carried through copper tubing—fine spray. Fool-proof! Temperature controls made of metals—expand or contract with heat or cold. All leads to the master board. Instant any bearing starts heating, a bulb lights in the first assistant's room and a bell rings. Just like watertight bulkhead telltales up on the bridge of a liner. Only better. Warns you instantly!" Ifor MacNubbin's creative exuberance was beyond repression. "Think of it, Chief! Self-lubricating, completely automatic marine engine! Trouble-free, worry-free. And added economy of operation and increased speeds. Think what it would do for battleships, for instance, to say nothing of cargo tramps!"

The chief engineer solemnly nodded his indulgent approval. "By God, Ifor! You've really got something big this time." He moved closer, touching his first assistant's shoulder as he quietly suggested repose. "Better turn in now, eh?"

"Turn in!" Ifor MacNubbin was outraged. "Why, I'll have this done in another few hours. I can't—"

"Sailing at daylight, Ifor," the Chief put in gently. "Better get a few hours' rest. You can finish it next trip."

"But—"

"Come along, now. Let's lock it away and you get turned in."

UNDER such gentle and customary urging, Ifor MacNubbin slowly relaxed. He became docile as a child. With the greatest care the Chief helped him stow in its regular locker the drawing-board and all the draftsman's tools. But not till the key was safely turned and placed under his pillow did the first assistant stretch out on his narrow bed over the boilers to fall almost at once into the deep sleep of the innocent and the just. There was a smile of satisfaction on his face, too. Because he was dreaming either of his great triumph—or of Flora. Blonde, comfortable Flora who would be patiently waiting for him in the lee of the dockshed when the ship came home. Seeing that smile, the Chief turned away at last, careful to make no unnecessary noise when he hooked open MacNubbin's door and stepped out into the alleyway.

"Come along now," he whispered to the second mate, who had been waiting out there, still remembering the sloe-eyed girl from Lihue.

"Now, aint that crazy, Chief?" he judged. "That thing he's drawing looks like a Chinese puzzle to a man who's sane. He's drunk as a Persian lord. Why do you put up with a screwball like that?"

The chief engineer did not agree. "You don't know that man the way the rest of us do," he told the new second mate.

"I'll fire every engineer, every oiler, every wiper I got below—just you leave me Ifor. If you had this cranky three-legger to look after, maybe you'd know what I mean. Sure, he's drunk! Maybe you'd be, too! He does this every once in a while down here or over Honolulu way. Where's the harm? Give him a few hours' sleep—and you watch out tomorrow when you ring up full astern. I've never known him to touch a drop at sea. He's the best assistant I ever had, and they don't grow on trees these days. So you listen to me!" the Chief warned with vehemence. "You keep your mouth shut to him about this! You hear? Don't go making your bright jokes at breakfast in the saloon. That's a rule in this ship. You better remember it. He'll know how silly he's been, and I won't have him offended. He's a sensitive man, my MacNubbin is. . . . Now you get along to sleep."

The second mate found out the Chief was right. When the ship sailed with daylight, the first assistant, competent and alert, was on the control platform down below. He gave the bridge what they asked for, maneuvering his engine with speed and with accuracy. Looking at him as he stood before the gauges with one knobby fist on the throttle and the other ready at the reversing ram, you would never know that mild and gentle man had so recently scaled the rarefied Olympian heights. He listened with an expert ear to the thrusting sound the heavy crank-throws made, and his startling black brows frowned a little, watching the polished steel eccentrics flashing past. At breakfast he sat down with downcast eyes, shyly, like a child well aware he deserves a scolding and who wonders when it will come. He peeped around the saloon table at the officers gathered there with a sheepish, from-under look, not raising his head. But when the talk went on without pause and the Chief just nodded casual hello, he looked the gratitude he felt, attacking with gusto fried salmon bellies, boiled potatoes, and an egg. And the *Mokana* sailed on homeward for San Francisco Bay.

FLORA was waiting on the dockshed for him, as she always was. Flora had blonde hair, large brown eyes, and a faithful patient nature. Flora never doubted but someday it would occur to Ifor MacNubbin to ask her to marry him, but Flora wasn't a girl to be bothering a man with wanting this and wishing for that. She was a girl full of comfort and peace, and she knew things were bound to happen when they should. Meantime, she cooked him fried-chicken dinners when he was in port, after which he always took her to a show. Flora always knew when he had made a fool of himself: she could tell. She knew it this time when he came down the gangway in his pale green suit of shore-going clothes, looking small and very timid. So she just looked at him. And Ifor MacNubbin squirmed.

"I—I just couldn't help it, Flora," he ruefully confessed. "We had such trials all the way down. It's most exasperating."

"Of course it is, Ifor. I know." They were walking together along the wharf toward the Embarcadero gates.

"I wonder what they're laughing at?" Flora said.

Ifor MacNubbin looked quickly back. The second mate and the stevedore boss were enjoying some rich joke on the *Mokana's* fo'c'stle head. It made the first assistant squirm again. Ridicule made him so very ashamed. So he put Flora's arm through his own, hurrying her away.

"I'm sorry, Flora," he murmured in his soft gentle voice. "I'll try not to do it again."

"Of course, Ifor."

That was all the chiding she ever did. MacNubbin was grateful, knowing how lucky he was. "My, you look wonderful, Flora! You've put on a little more weight, too, I bet. I got no use for skinny girls."

Flora Barnaby smiled her contentment, pressing his arm with her own.

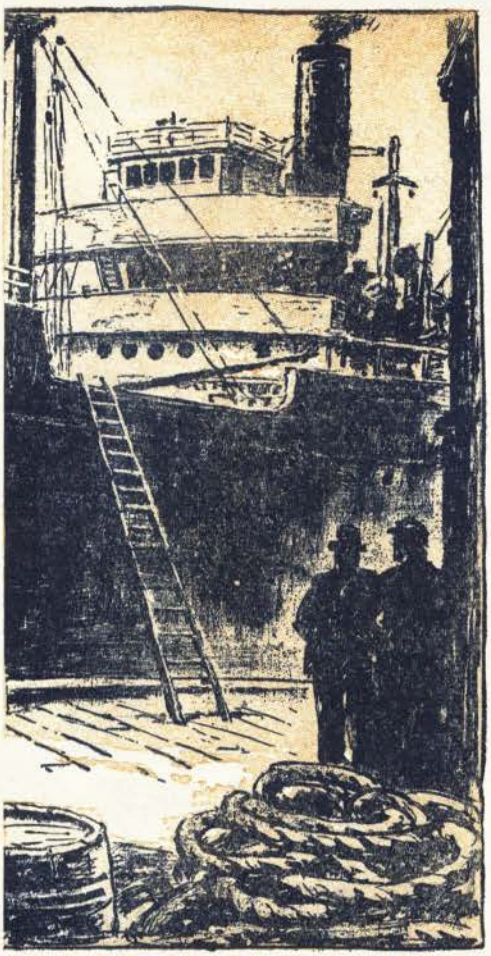
NOW, the first assistant's resolution was certainly of the best, but the *Mokana's* engines were still the same. Running north to the lumber ports, she behaved very well. But once she cleared Gray's Harbor Bar for her regular Island run, she started acting up. Her oil-pumps fouled. She wallowed a night through half a gale with barely steam enough to turn. Ifor MacNubbin made no complaint. He left that growling to the men on the bridge while he toiled in sweat and grime, mild, gentle, and patient. In the southern latitudes he repacked glands through half his watches below and he hounded the oilers on their rounds with haggard sleepless eyes. Things happened down there to make a

"I wonder what they're laughing at?" Flora said. MacNubbin put her arm

marine engineer's hair go gray, but Ifor only wanly smiled and carried his cross with saintly calm.

Somehow or another, she staggered into Hilo Bay to discharge lumber; fumbled across to Kailua; and later began loading sugar at Ahukini again. Still Ifor MacNubbin toiled endlessly below, never in any of those ports opening the locker where lay tempting release for a tortured mind. But on the run to Honolulu to top off her lading with cased pineapple and some general merchandise, came the straw that broke the camel's back. In spite of all his care, all his diligence, all his hopes of great reward—the *Mokana* betrayed him dastardly. All through a blistering afternoon, wallowing the Kauai Channel, the lot of them sweated and steamed below, rebabbitting a main bearing to save a towage charge. It was too much. It was more than mortal patience should be called upon to bear. It was unjust, and there was no reason for it at all. Of course, while the toil went on the first assistant gave no inkling of his rebellion. But when the ship lay safely at Honolulu docks and the peace and quiet of tropic night stole upon her unredeemed hull, Ifor MacNubbin, in solitary despair, unlocked the door of his dream.

THE Chief was not surprised. How could you blame MacNubbin? He found peace, oblivion, the profound joy of great accomplishment. It made a wild fire to burn in his eyes, this fulfilling masterpiece taking shape and form under his hand in the clearly understandable symbols of the draftsman's art. This toil was different; it had purpose and meaning: it satisfied the soul because it was the labor of love. No; the Chief wasn't at all surprised. After eight years of the *Mokana* he wished he had himself some richly sustaining vision such as that. So with a deep sigh he



through his own, hurrying her away.

went in some hours before sailing-time, brushing the messman thoughtlessly out of his way.

"I've done it!" Ifor MacNubbin cried out at once. "Chief, I've got it at last!" He leaned back for a moment, contemplating with awe the task accomplished and the dream fulfilled. "I'll file for patents at once," he mused thoughtfully. "And then you know what I'll do? I'll offer it to the Government for the destroyer fleet. Yes; I'll—"

The Chief nodded.

"Of course, Ifor. And very patriotic of you, too. Now let's get turned in."

Ifor made no objections this time. Why should he? The thing was done! He took out his thumbtacks and with the greatest of care rolled up his plans, locking them safely away. Then he fell happily into his bunk, still mumbling joyfully when the Chief hooked open the door to release the fumes generated in there by the superhuman activities of genius. And in due time the *Mokana* sailed for home once more.

In such a ship, you are prepared for almost anything. But not for what happened far off Makapuu. The sea was blue, undulating in a long swell from north northeast, the trade-clouds piled high along the horizon's rim. The second mate, idling on the bridge, noticed a fishing sampan bouncing head to wind just off the *Mokana's* beam. She was pretty far out, but he gave it little heed, being well clear—gave it little heed, until he heard that startling shout from the after-well:

"Man overboard!"

HE spun around—just in time to see a head bob up and arms begin to work in the strong stroking of an expert swimmer. Instinct flung him to the telegraph to ring up stop. Some one heaved overboard a ring buoy, and the second mate bellowed down the foredeck for a boat's crew to the falls. The skipper came charging aloft, too, by the time the watch officer was roaring down to the water through his cupped hands. Because the swimmer, strangely enough, paid not the slightest attention to the life ring. Instead, he was swimming strongly away from the *Mokana's* hull! And the fishing sampan was heading for him.

"What the hell!" said the second mate. "Is that guy nuts?"

There wasn't any use putting over a boat. For while they watched, the sampan came up smartly. She had her name and number blanked out with patches of canvas. Now that was a funny thing! It made the skipper frown, reaching for the megaphone just as the swimmer was hauled aboard the small craft.

"Ahoy there!" the captain hailed. "Come alongside, and—"

He stopped, because the sampan didn't. She turned on her heel instantly, and with her engine wide stood rapidly away to the south. The second mate scratched his head, staring blankly across the sea at that disappearing purple-painted hull. The skipper was looking at her through his glasses, but he put them away in disgust.

"Might be one of any hundred. Who was that man?"

The steward answered from the after well.

"Hans Troeffner, sir!" he shouted up to the bridge. "The engineer's messman. I saw him just before he fell."

"Fell, be damned! He must have jumped! That sampan was waiting for him."

"Jumped! Why?"

The skipper shrugged. "Better tell all hands to check their valuables. Something mighty fishy here. And it's no good rolling around, Mister. Put her back on the course. I'll wireless Honolulu. I wonder—"

He went below. The news spread like wildfire through the ship. What could a man steal from the *Mokana* that was worth a crazy stunt like that? The skipper thought about opium, and the Chief was sure it was a jewel-smuggling ring. But at supper that night when Ifor MacNubbin came in, blushing to the roots of his homely face, they all stopped their excited chatter and looked at him. Squirming and coughing, he shyly bit his lip in humiliating shame, till at last he had to whisper the awful truth.

"He must have broke into my locker." Ifor MacNubbin turned humbly to his friend the Chief, his eyes dumbly appealing for rescue or support. "It—it's gone," he breathed in abject despair.

That's when the second mate let out a great guffaw. This was too much. You just couldn't keep quiet about a joke like that. "Glory be!" he roared, thumping the table with his fist. "That settles it! He stole MacNubbin's crazy plans! He thinks he's got hold of something priceless! If that aint the richest thing I ever heard!"

The *Mokana's* main cabin exploded with mirth. It rocked back and forth from one bulkhead to another. It beat down without mercy upon the bowed head of Ifor Cyrus MacNubbin. He just sat there, red-faced and defenceless against all that rollicking laughter. For an instant he tried gamely to muster a sheepish grin. But he couldn't make it stick. And what was the use resenting their joyous ridicule? He deserved it; didn't he? He was a fool, and he knew it. So he just got up in his shy timid way and went slinking off, the last wave of laughter splintering around his head.

POOR Ifor suffered for all his sins throughout the voyage home. He kept clear of them as much as he could. But it was a sad, humiliated MacNubbin when the little *Mokana* shouldered the fog aside for her berthing in San Francisco Bay. But he didn't hear the end of it even then. Before she was properly fast to the dock, a squad of police swarmed aboard, took charge of her gangway, overran the ship. They wanted MacNubbin, but he wasn't anywhere to be found—until the Chief discovered him, brooding in the darkest depth of the shaft alley, and hauled him up aloft from there. The sight of a burly cop at each door of the main saloon made Ifor wince, wondering what heinous crime was his. And inside was Flora, wild with fright.

"Ifor!" she cried in dismay, rushing to him. "What have you done?"

"I—I don't know. It's that—"

THAT was all he could say—because just then the skipper came down by his private companionway, grave and serious. Behind him two men in plain-clothes, urging before them a sullen Hans Troeffner, stepped quietly into the *Mokana's* cabin.

Ifor gasped at sight of the messman; Hans looked at him with sardonic eyes.

"So you thought you could disguise your invention with a lot of silly drawings?" His lip curled. "You fool your shipmates. Yes. But you never fool me. *Nein!* Not for a minute!"

"Shut up!" one of the plain-clothes men snapped.

Ifor peered around in myopic bewilderment. "How did he get here?" he wondered aloud.

The other man in civilian clothes began to explain. "The authorities in Honolulu got suspicious. They traced him. The sampan that picked him up when he jumped off your ship with your plans put him aboard a waiting schooner called *Lorelei,* bound for Hamburg by way of Panama. She put into Honolulu for water and stores, and they picked Troeffner off her. They'd have got away with it if it weren't for the captain's radio. He was on articles as one of the crew, but his papers were faked. Then we flew him here on the clipper. Fortunately, he had your drawings in his bag, wrapped in waterproof silk. This is it, I believe. They're quite safe."

The man held something out. Ifor Cyrus MacNubbin could only gulp and swallow hard. But he couldn't say a word. The fellow showed him an official identification MacNubbin was in no condition to recognize. All he heard was a voice speaking fantastic words. "We'll take care of this Troeffner lad. Never worry about that. Your drawings aren't patented, of course, but I am officially empowered to offer you ten thousand dollars for all your rights."

"But look, Mister," Ifor blurted. "It isn't what yo—"

"Twelve thousand!"

"But I tell you—"

"Fifteen!"

"But—"

"Ifor!" Flora Barnaby silenced him completely. She smiled graciously at the man with the roll of plans in his hands. "Certainly," she said. "He'll accept."

"Here's my card. Come up to the office after lunch. Meantime, Government attorneys will get the necessary papers in order. Do you mind if I keep these drawings? For safety, you know. It'd be best."

Ifor MacNubbin fell weakly into a chair as they led Hans Troeffner away. There was a chatter and babble of voices all around him. The second mate was offering humblest apology, and the Chief was just beaming delight. But Ifor didn't hear a word. Ifor was in a daze. It wasn't till he found himself in the cabin alone with Flora that he could even try to look the world in the face.

"Ifor," she was saying, "why didn't you tell me it was important work like that you were doing? The strain must have been terrible! No wonder you needed—stimulation."

Ifor's spirit bled—but he was an honest man. "It—it wasn't, Flora." He confessed this with his eyes on the deck. "Don't you understand? I haven't the slightest idea what I drew!"

"You're just being modest. And oh, I'm so proud of you."

"No, Flora. It's the truth. If the boys ever find out—"

"Well, they never will," said Flora, who supposed genius was entitled to be humored indulgently.

HOPE leaped into Ifor's eyes. "Flora, if you promise never to tell, I—I swear I'll never touch another drop the longest day I live!"

"Of course," said Flora, who had an understanding heart. "I lied too, Ifor," she confessed. "They wouldn't let anyone come on board except immediate family of the crew. And I was so worried about you." She dropped her eyes. "So I told them I was your wife."

Ifor MacNubbin reflected: then solemnly nodded his head.

"We'll have to put that right," he said. And they did....

But there was something one of the men from Washington still didn't understand, after they had Troeffner safely caged away. "Larry," he told his colleague on the Federal Building steps, "there's something about this don't make sense. I looked at those drawings that engineer made. Looks like a Rube Goldberg cartoon to me. You mean to tell me it's worth fifteen thousand bucks?"

Larry lit his cigarette. "He's got a weird idea for a master injector valve that a corps of engineers might be able to make something of. The rest's nonsense. . . . Do you ever go fishing for trout?"

"What the hell's trout got to do with it, Commander?"

Larry grinned. "The most important thing in fishing for the wily trout is to know what pools they're likely to be in. Otherwise you're just taking exercise, putting flies on the flood. See? So we put on a grand play about this MacNubbin's naval invention. Then we let Troeffner escape, or we release him for lack of evidence. He'll head straight for the Mexican border so he can send home his wonderful news. After that, to keep them encouraged and hopeful, we get a flock of engineers at work developing this marvelous thing in Washington. It'll draw secret agents the way honey draws flies. That way we know where the trout will be. And maybe we can catch some fish."

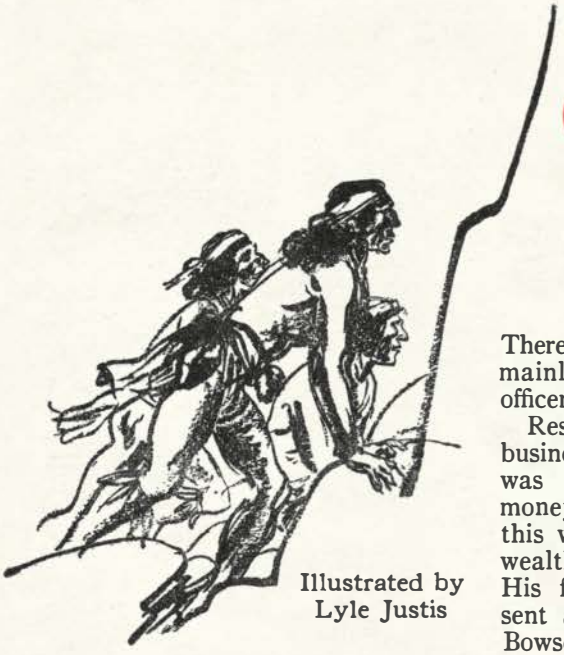
IFOR MacNUBBIN never found out about that. What's more, he didn't care. Flora cooked him a wonderful fried-chicken dinner that night, after which he took her to a show. And Ifor was a man of his word. He wouldn't have Flora made out a liar, even to a policeman on his beat. She said she was his wife. So he made an honest woman of her; she made a sober man of him; and everything turned out right. But it was the skipper of the *Mokana* who summed up neatly the whole affair to his friend, the chief engineer:

"Some men," he said, "are born great. Others have greatness thrust upon them. And some," he added dryly, "have just got the luck of marine engineers."

Which wasn't so far from the truth. Although Flora Barnaby MacNubbin, buxom and full of pride, stoutly insisted she had always been sure her famous husband—inventor of the MacNubbin Injector—took the soul of authentic genius with him on the sea. Which also may not have been so very far from the truth.

Apache

A vivid drama of the old Army, by the author of "They Lived by the Sword."



Illustrated by Lyle Justis

LIEUTENANT MARTIN BOWSER leaned against his dead horse and scribbled on the leaf of his field notebook. The Apaches, fearing to ride in upon his service revolver, held off. He had time in which to write.

His enormous mustache white with alkali dust, his eyes baked in his swimming head, all his being one intolerable twitch of pain, he laboriously pushed the pencil:

CONFIDENTIAL. To C.O. Fort Adams, N.M. Ter. Dcc. 25th. Colonel: The location we have in view—you, wife, self, boy—is a basin in shallow valley of Padernal Mts.

He paused, gloating upon the words. The Colonel would understand perfectly, but no one else could steal the secret. For the first time in dreary years, Martin Bowser was filled with glorious hammering exultation; wild blazing triumph that dwarfed life and death and pain and destiny. Triumph!

Christmas Day, too! A gift from heaven, no less. And how he had cursed the orders sending him from Fortress Monroe to New Mexico territory—an artillery officer, condemned to lone duty amid cactus, rattlesnakes and nimble Indians, his command one mountain howitzer!

Easing himself against the dead horse, he thought back. Fort Adams, in the Mescalero Apache region. One mountain howitzer. And he had to obey. He had commanded a battalion when the Civil War ended. Now, fifteen years later, he was a second lieutenant, fifty years of age. Promotion was slow in the artillery. There were only five skeleton outfits, mainly at healthy seaboard posts. The officers were long-lived.

Resign? He was too old, too set, for business in the civilian world. And there was the boy in Harvard; that cost money. So he had headed west. Well, this was Christmas Day, and here was wealth to be poured into the boy's lap. His future was golden! The thought sent a fresh blaze of triumph through Bowser. He resumed writing, slowly.

—valley of Padernal Mts., running n.e.-s.w., about 10 miles—

Ten miles? Yes. He must make everything clear to Peterkin. Thought of the Colonel brought a chuckle to his lips. By gad, he could well afford to laugh now! He thought back to the day of his arrival at the post, on a wagon-seat, two hundred miles from Santa Fe.

A little man scant five feet five; shoulders a trifle wearied, doggish brown eyes, grenadier's mustache. Fort Adams! A damned mud post for infantry. . . . And then Peterkin—Major and Brevet Colonel John G. Peterkin, a pompous old boy of the Civil War period. And their first interview, explaining for the first time this strange transfer.

"Been expecting you, Mr. Bowser. I applied for an artillery officer to be detailed to this post, for the purpose of putting the battery-piece in efficient state."

"Battery-piece, sir?" echoed Bowser blankly.

"A twelve-pounder mountain howitzer, Mr. Bowser. You'll have a squad of infantry to act as artillerists. I desire, sir, that you instruct them and have the gun ready for instant service."

The Colonel paused, and pawed his goatee and pursed his lips.

"You have—er—been in the artillery branch some years, Lieutenant?"

"Quite so," assented Bowser. "I noticed a piece mounted on the east side of the parade. That's the howitzer, sir?"

"Pointed at the main gateway as defensive measure. The Mescaleros are always uncertain. The post is here to

Gold

By GORDON KEYNE

protect citizens of the Territory. We must be prepared to take the field with all equipment; my application emphasized this argument."

Peterkin was throaty, important, picayune in attention to needless detail.

"We have an old brass three-pounder as sunset gun. The howitzer, with a few shells, was found among the post ordnance stores when I took command in '66. It has not been discharged within my knowledge. It seems to have been listed I.C., Inspected-Condemned, but it needs only a little overhauling by a competent artillery officer."

Bowser went forth from the interview with his head reeling.

A mountain howitzer was not essentially of the artillery arm; it could be attached to any column, foot or mounted. The Colonel must have influence in high quarters, to get an artillery officer detailed to Fort Adams for this petty job. So much the better! Such influence must be cultivated, decided Bowser.

AT mess, he learned more about the Colonel.

He was not blind to facts; he had faced unpleasant facts all his life. One pair of red stripes challenging the white stripes all around. One wizened second lieutenant, among striplings who at his age would wear the gold oak leaves of a major. An artillery officer for one I.C. howitzer—but not I.C. himself. Not by a damned sight!

"Not a bad life out here, Mr. Bowser," the infantry captain was saying affably. "The water's vile, pay generally three months overdue, mail from the States irregular, and a newspaper ten weeks old rents at a dollar an hour—usually by I.O.U. No women at the post, except Mexicans or Indians. We're down to one deck of cards till the next express comes in. We blister all day, freeze through the winter months; otherwise, you'll find Adams a prize post, sir!"

"Quite so," murmured Bowser, with a swallow of coffee and a swipe at his mustache.

"Have you heard about the gold mine?" asked a youngster.

Bowser stared. "Gold mine?"

"Yes. Colonel Peterkin's mine. He doesn't know where it is, but he gets nuggets—"

"Gentlemen!" the captain intervened sternly. "The topic is not one for discussion. Mr. Bowser will no doubt get his information when he dines at headquarters."

At first, Bowser had thought they were chaffing him; not so. He discerned an undertone, a hint of envious irritation. So the Colonel had a gold mine! . . .

Now, sitting under the blazing sun, about to write down the exact location of that gold mine, he knew he must make it clear to Colonel Peterkin and no one else. In case the Apache arrows finished him off, the secret must be made known. He squinted at the paper in his hand, at the last words he had written:

—about 10 miles due n.e. of Post.

All correct so far. Now for the exact location! The effort to pick the right words hurt like blazes; shafts of pain from his hurt head blinded him. He closed his eyes, to rest them; his heart expanded with glorious happiness.

Dodging ill luck all his life—and now came this, on Christmas Day! Wealth, triumph, security, all in a moment. His mind went back to the first time he had heard about this mine, at his courtesy dinner with the C.O. Just the two of them present.

Glimpses of the Mexican woman cook. An enlisted man as striker, shaved and scrubbed, who served the meal. The old colonel was a thorough host and the meal was excellent. At the close they sat over decanter and cigars, and the striker withdrew. The Colonel, a bit mellowed, unbuttoned with a sigh of relief.

"The War Department shoves us old fellows away and forgets us, but there's

always hope, Mr. Bowser. And dash it, sir, I have a look ahead. My own future is settled. One moment, if you please."

The Colonel ambled heavily into another room, returning with a small buckskin bag.

"Are you familiar with native gold, Bowser?" he asked, more intimate in his manner.

"Not at all, sir."

"Nuggets, Bowser! Just look at 'em—nuggets!" The Colonel dumped his sack. Blackish pebbles? No. Heavy, glinting where scratched. Gold! He went on speaking, complacently.

"One was traded to the sutler, who passed it to me. I had the Indians informed that I'd pay a dollar for every such curious stone. The redskins are, of course, acquainted with gold, but not in this form. You'll observe that the nuggets are coated with some sort of blackish mud, so hard it must be chipped off. Very curious. A vast deposit somewhere near by, Bowser! As you see, the Indians have brought in many of the nuggets."

Bowser fingered them wonderingly, enviously. What luck some men did have!

"A fund for your retirement, sir! Do you know where these come from?"

"The Indians refuse pointblank to say," replied the Colonel sadly. "Somewhere in the Mescalero country. Now I fancy the Padernals; again I incline to the Cerro Montoso in the southwest. Tantalizing to think this untold fortune may lie within a day's march of us, eh? As to retirement—hm! You understand the situation yourself, no doubt?"

"Only too well, sir."

"The limitations, Bowser! Retired officers limited to four hundred, by the act of 1872. Applications must wait till deaths reduce the list. I'd retire a poor man; an invalid wife in the States, doctors' bills and all that. But now, egad! I can resign and be sure of an income. If I locate that gold, my days and those of my dear wife will be finished in comfort. What d'ye think of that, Bowser?"

"IT'S wonderful, sir, wonderful!" And Bowser's eyes shone with such sincere warmth that the Colonel's heart was touched. "You have my very best wishes and congratulations!"

"Ha! It's not accomplished yet." Peterkin leaned back. "We're two old soldiers, Bowser. I dare say that as a second lieutenant, with a boy in school, you're—hm! I understand, Bowser; but you stick with me. Do your duty, win approval, and we'll share that gold. You have my word, sir! Four shares. You, I, wife, boy!"

The Colonel closed the buckskin bag with its pucker strings.

"Now let me hear about the howitzer. The Mescaleros are uneasy. I look to you, sir, to offset the deficient infantry force. Mention in dispatches, Bowser; by the Lord Harry, you'll retire with the title of major and a share of the gold mine, I trust!"

A heartening man, Colonel Peterkin. When he left, Bowser wore captain's bars, in prospect; promotion, retirement with honor, the boy well established—that is, if the mine were located. God bless the Colonel! The deadlock of fate had been broken!

NOW, under the blazing sun, how strange this same fate seemed in its workings! Sprawled against the dead horse, Bowser rested his notebook on the hot saddle. He shot a glance around the horizon. No sign of the Apaches; they were holding off, now.

He read over what he had written, nodded, tore off the leaf, copied it with racing pencil. He tore up the first draft, and blinked the dazzle out of his tortured eyes. His exultation was almost choking in its intensity. Today, Christmas, of all days! A Christmas gift for the boy—wealth! And queer, too, how it had come about.

He thought back to his own room in the adobe row, his artillery manuals on the shelf. Nothing in them about mountain howitzers, but he had the special War Department pamphlets covering their operation. He had worked like a dog on that mountain howitzer, getting the piece cleaned, the men drilled, infantry mules wrangled from the quartermaster and trained. And, by Jasper, he had made a proper show of it! He smiled proudly to think of that exhibition before the fort.

Light artillery practice, the straddled mules twitching the gun hither and thither, cannoneers riding the trail or bolting after, his own red stripes glued against his horse, saber flashing. Unlimber — mules to rear — load — fire! Cheers from the officers and soldiers. Compliments from the Colonel, and another dinner invitation.

But, behind all that, was a growing unpleasantness that irked him pitifully. It was nothing new, of course, but he

had somehow thought all that was left behind him. When he overheard the name, without stopping to reflect that men in the ranks possibly preferred officers of their own stripes, he summoned the sergeant to book.

"I caught a remark or two among the men, Sergeant. Something about Old Bow-wow—I fancy, in reference to me?"

The sergeant coughed behind his hand. "Oh, that, sir! Sure, it's not to be minded, sir; no disrespect intended. You know soldiers, how they put a name to each other and to officers as well!"

Bowser smiled. "Very good, Sergeant. The men will address me properly. That's all."

Still, it rankled, all of it. His own niggardly counting of pennies hurt. Mails were slow, pay was irregular. Expenses were high, and with sutler's goods freighted in by wagon, the mess extras cost heavily; and the boy was always writing for money. He faced the facts calmly, doggedly, as ever.

Still, there was new hope here, for the Colonel had influence. The howitzer was in perfect shape, a report had been forwarded, the Colonel was pleased; promotion for "distinguished service" might come now at any time. So ran the optimistic heart, though reason spoke against it. . . .

A ribald set, these infantry officers; Bowser had caught snatches of talk not meant for him. They laughed at the idea of a mountain howitzer here on the desert; a howitzer for Apaches, whom not even the cavalry could sight! Mules, packing a dead weight of gun and shells across sand and rock where only lizards and 'Paches could live.

LIEUTENANT BOWSER was abruptly jerked out of his reflections by a savage yell, a swish, a stir of hot air about his head. He sat up, blinked, jerked up his revolver.

Apaches? An arrow? Not at all. Merely a buzzard, now sailing on like a dark shadow, to settle beyond him with uneasy twitching shoulders. His revolver fell again, and he croaked out a laugh.

"Ha! You blasted scavenger, you'll get nothing from me on Christmas Day! When luck turns, it turns completely. I'm the one to do the laughing, from now on!"

As though assenting to his words, the bird lifted heavy wings into the air. Bowser chuckled. The little incident

had cleared his head. He looked at the notebook, still resting on the hot saddle, and caught up the pencil. Now to locate the gold for Colonel Peterkin's eye.

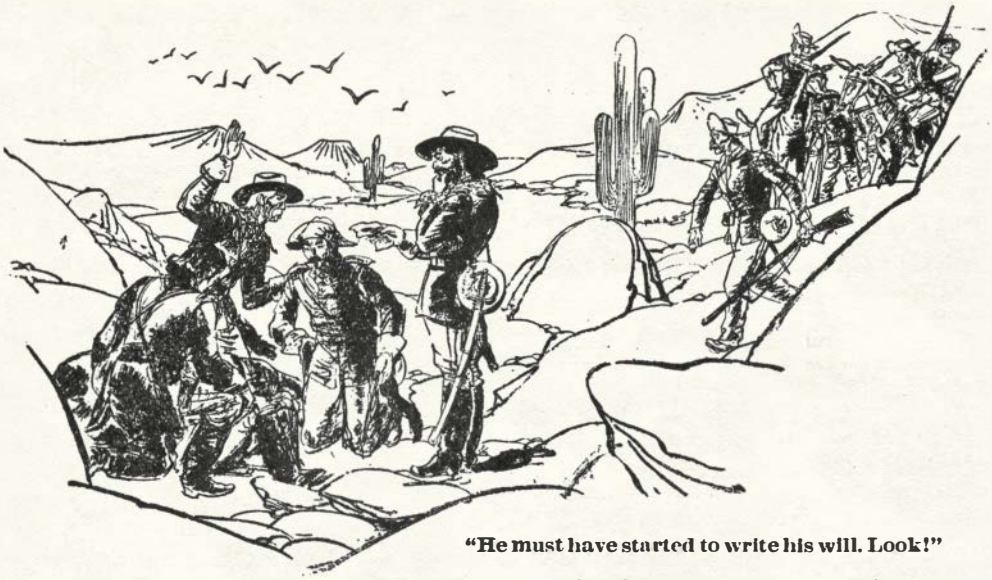
"Angle of fire—" No! He scratched out the words, as too technical for an infantry officer. Better refer to the reddish rock cliff above. "Objective" was the word.

"Objective designated by reddish cliff at head of valley."

The very thing! The Mescaleros were lurking somewhere around that cliff; he darted a painful gaze toward it, but discerned nothing moving except heat waves. Now he could go on to locate the water-hole more exactly; he must be careful of the wording, however.

His thoughts drifted. Strange, how the years had culminated in a moment, how little things had suddenly converged to spell destiny! It all began when the orderly summoned him, when the Colonel cleared his throat and finally came down to business.

"A dispatch from department headquarters at Santa Fe informs me that a party of recruits assigned to the post have arrived there." Colonel Peterkin puffed out his cheeks. "Your duties



"He must have started to write his will. Look!"

here have been arduous, Mr. Bowser; you need a little relaxation. You will leave by horse in the morning and proceed to Santa Fe by the most direct route north."

"Christmas Day, sir?"

"Ah, so it is, so it is! You will bring the recruits by the most convenient way. You may obtain a wagon from the quartermaster at Marcy. There should be artillery timber among those recruits, Bowser! Keep a lookout for roving Apaches, of course. You'll find Mexican ranches along your route—"

So there had turned destiny! Now he sat here scribbling, and the world was his!

Not a day's march from the post, indeed. He recalled the sudden alarm—the gleeful Apache whoops, the bursting forms of redskin horsemen, the smart whistle of shaft and ball and his own revolver speaking. Then the frantic race for cover in the fluted hills, with his canteen banging and his saber clashing at every jump of the horse.

God! To think he had been sent alone, without a corporal's guard of escort! The old Colonel had not dreamed, of course, that the Mescaleros were actually on the warpath.

"Just my bad luck, as usual," thought Bowser, and chuckled. "My bad luck—the very tag end of it, leading to the turn and the change of luck."

THE redskins outdistanced, the horse at a labored gallop, terribly harsh of breath. Water! Find water and hold out until relief came! Up the shallow, blistering valley. The horse pricking up ears. Sure enough, a water-hole, bones whitely gleaming, just short of the high reddish cliff that buttressed the valley end. The horse had plunged down just before reaching it. A bad fall among the rocks, a terrible fall, the poor animal breaking its leg. One cartridge used there. Like a symbol, reflected Bowser; this had been the tag end, the absolute finish of his years of ill luck, running to its very close. . . .

The fall had hammered him frightfully, taking him headlong among the rocks. The blood was dry and caked in his hair, his leg was badly twisted and hurt. Thank God, the Apaches had been too afraid of his revolver to follow! This marked the turn of fate's wheel. They were back there, watching, but they feared to come on.

SO he finished the poor horse and crawled to the water-hole, dragging leg and saber, mouth under his mustache in a pucker of agony. The scant hole was surface-dry. Balancing, he dug with the saber. He got into the seepage, found water, moistened his tongue. He dug on, for more. The sun-cracked muck was black, and came away in friable chunks. And then the wild thrill of discovery, of recognition!

Blackish nodules studding the chunks, breaking from them. Nuggets, by Jasper! Heavy blackish pebbles, glittering gold to the saber-scratch. The Colonel's Apache nuggets! Here, after all the circumlocution of fate, was found the gold!

No wonder he had gone out of his head at first. Now, thinking about it, he chuckled again and hefted the first nugget, the one he had kept out. It was real. He jabbed at it with his pencil,

laughing. Promotion be damned! Now he could resign and snap his fingers at life and luck. Christmas gift for the boy! He and the boy were fixed for life.

And if anything should go wrong before help reached him, the boy was fixed. Nothing else mattered.

His head jerked up suddenly. What was that? Figures—his howitzer squad, standing there watching him, laughing at Old Bow-wow? He passed a hand across his eyes. No. Just buzzards, perched between loose wings.

"Here, here, this won't do!" he muttered. "Must get back to work."

A little water in his canteen, more gathering in the blackish hole. He drank the warm drops and made a wry face. No danger of death from thirst; that damnable crack over the head was what hurt. He had worked hard covering up the nuggets, all except one that would prove his find. One was enough to prove everything. . . .

Relaxing against the dead horse, he scribbled hard, finishing the note. It was sweltering here; the pain in his head was blinding, made him gnaw his dusty, brittle mustache. The sun, aslant, blazed down as upon a furnace. He found it hard to focus his gaze on the paper; his head throbbed with every heartbeat. However, he got it done:

Resp'f'ly rec'mend investigate waterhole approx. 500 yards below cliff. Notify boy, my expense, out of next pay.

Done, at last! He must make certain it was right. This note was more important than life itself, for the boy's future was bound up in it. What did life matter, now? Not a damned thing. It was dwarfed to nothing by exultant triumph, by failure and ill-luck at last overcome. Fortune's wheel had turned, with Christmas Day!

Bowser focused his eyes again on the paper. He signed it laboriously, with shaking pencil. Then he studied the words carefully:

CONFIDENTIAL. To C.O. Fort Adams, N.M. Ter. Dec. 25th.

Colonel: The location we have in view —you, wife, self, boy—is a basin in shallow valley of Padernal Mts., running n.e.-s.w., about 10 miles due n.e. of Post. Objective designated by reddish cliff at head of valley. Resp'f'ly rec'mend investigate waterhole approx. 500 yards below cliff. Notify boy, my expense, out of next pay.

Martin Bowser, Lieut. 3rd U.S. Art.

A nod of approval. He wrapped the paper about the blackish nugget; and with fumbling fingers stuffed them into his pocket. A sigh of happiness, and he relaxed.

"Life's well paid, well paid!" he muttered, and smiled. "To fight a long, hard fight and never weaken—and then triumph at the end! Nothing's sweeter. No reward's any greater. Well paid! Even if those damned redskins get me, the boy's fixed."

He sat with revolver ready. If they came, he must save one bullet for himself, to avoid scalping, torture, mutilation. According to the newspapers, the Indians had not touched Custer, for a certain reason. Good! They must not touch him, either, if the worst happened. He could save that message, must save it, even at the final cost!

The pain in his head suddenly ceased. It was blessed relief. A surge of joyous ecstasy swirled in upon him, and he closed his eyes. Life was well paid, well paid!

WHEN the detachment of hastily mounted infantry came hammering up, they dismounted with a blare of excited voices.

"There he is! Gad, he's smiling! Never knew Old Bow-wow could smile like that—"

"Ah, those damned Mescalero boys! They said they chased him for a lark. Sergeant! Any water in that hole?"

"Yes, sir, but it's bad water. Is the Lieutenant bad off, sir?"

The assistant surgeon, who had been kneeling beside Lieutenant Bowser, rose and glanced around at the men amidst sudden silence.

"Poor old chap! He's gone. —Here, look at this, Captain. A paper wrapped around a stone in his pocket."

The Captain eyed the stone, carelessly tossed it away, and smoothed out the paper. He scanned it frowningly.

"Odd! Marked confidential, and addressed to the C.O. He must have started to write his will, perhaps. Hanged if I can make out another word. Just a meaningless scrawl. Take a look at it!"

The assistant surgeon looked, shook his head. The captain crumpled up the paper and dropped it.

"Drank the bad water and went off his head, eh? Damned shame. I can't get over that smile of his; wonderful! All right, men! Gently, now—gently!"

LADY

This memorable novel of a desperate and daring lady and the men who offered their lives in her defense here comes to its stirring climax.

The Story Thus Far:

"*AUX armes—alerte—aux armes!*" Lieutenant Torval leaped up the narrow stairway leading to the machine-gun platform where the sentry stood. For Torval was responsible for Post Moziba, a few square yards of sand surrounded by ineffective walls, occupied by but twenty-eight Legionnaires, close to a hostile zone swarming with tribesmen to whom guns and cartridges were more precious than gold.

"Why did you shoot? What made you call out?"

"I heard a shot, Lieutenant. Then I heard somebody inside our wire."

Torval sent up a rocket, and by its light spied several figures running a short distance outside the wire. A spot of fire blinked; the crack of a rifle followed. The Legionnaires opened fire, and the strangers vanished. Silence now.

"I spotted one that fell in the wire, Lieutenant," said Corporal Rochas. How about letting me down with a rope?"

Torval gave the order. Five minutes later the Legionnaires hauled up the unconscious figure of a wounded girl. . . .

Next day, restored under the care of a native woman, she told a strange story:

"I am Louise Sauvain. I was born in Oran. I lived there until I was seven years old. Then my father, who had been employed on the railroad, lost his job. We moved to Morocco, my father, my mother and me. My father became a trader among the soldiers. The Chleuhs surprised us, killed my father, took my mother and me as slaves.

"We were not badly treated. After a while, my mother became the wife of an important man. She wanted to send me back, to be French, but they would not let her write. Then, one day, she died.

"My mother's master said I was his property. And a price of eight hundred douros was offered for me. I had seen the man. I said he was too old to wed. He is a chief, but he has a white beard, and his mouth has no teeth.

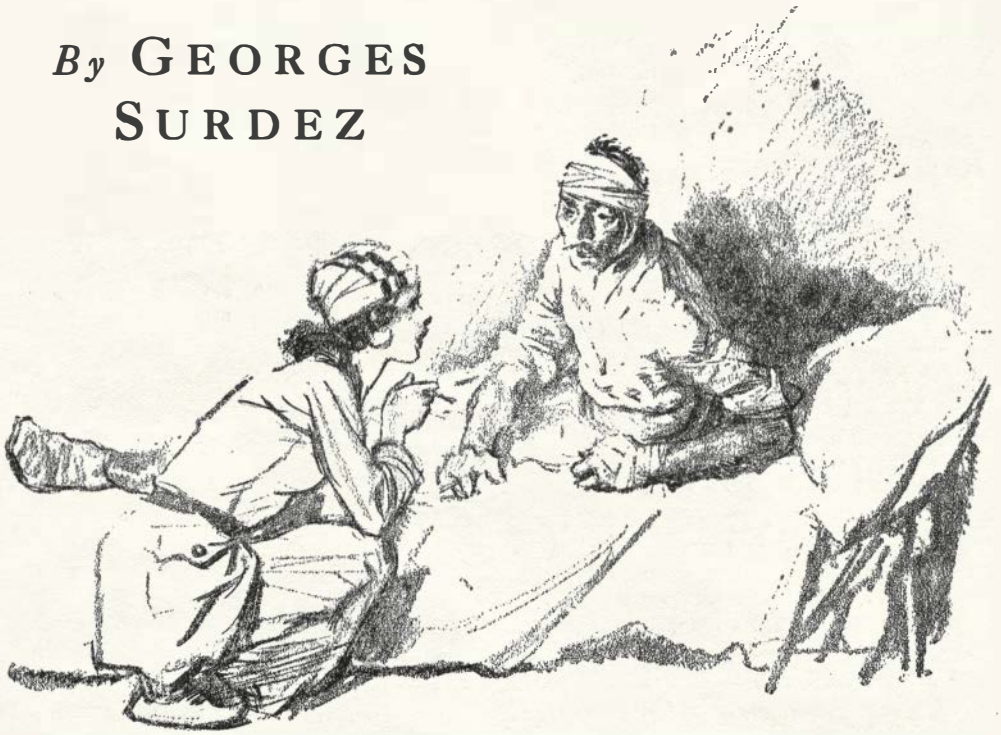
"But they said I must marry him. And so—last night I ran away."

Later that day a deputation of Arabs arrived and demanded the girl; they said her story was untrue, that she was an Arab, Zaya bent el Tobbal. Torval refused to give her up; and the Arabs threatened to come with thrice five hundred men, and destroy this little French outpost. Soon after, the attack came, and savage fighting followed. The Arabs were beaten off—were beaten off a second and third time. But the Legionnaires suffered losses; and all knew that soon they must be destroyed. Communication with Headquarters had been maintained by radio; Torval had been ordered to deliver up the girl to the Arabs, and on his refusal he had been officially relieved of his command—but the fort was too remote to expect either aid or a superseding officer for some days. Scouting airplanes did appear, but they could not land, and their foray proved of little help.

And now came a new factor: a strange Arab-garbed man slipped into the post;

of the LEGION

By GEORGES SURDEZ



he identified himself as one Yusuf, and in part corroborated the girl's story. He offered, for a price, to take Zaya away, under cover of darkness, and get her to the safety of the French garrison at Béchar. The arrangement was made; and then, in order to make sure that the Béchar commandant should not surrender Zaya to the Arabs, it was decided that Torval should marry her, and thus extend to her the protection of his name and French citizenship. One of the Legionnaires knew the laws and rites necessary for such a wedding. Preparations for the ceremony had been completed; and the scanty store of champagne distributed to the wounded and the battle-weary survivors when—the Arabs again swept forward to storm the walls. *(The story continues in detail:)*

THE first questing burst from the machine-gun drove them to cover again, and the flashes of their guns crackled intermittently. Once more, the air vibrated with the flight of bullets. When it was evident that the rattle of detonations would not cease completely, Torval permitted men to go down, three at a time, for the champagne.

The popping of corks matched the thuds of remote detonations.

The night wind had not yet lifted, and the heat was stifling. Through the stench, and the reek of burnt powder, rose pleasing aromas: The smell of hot pastry, and the smell of boiling coffee. It seemed to Torval that he was living more keenly now than he had ever lived. Yet the drowsy flies that settled on the tables where food or wine had left stains, would live longer than he. When next the sun rose, they would buzz as usual.

And he would be nothing, nothing in this world. As for the other world, he had given so little thought to it that he felt a bit self-conscious about hoping to enter now. His thoughts functioned as if his brain had split: he accepted the evidence of death, but refused to believe it.

Having come quietly behind the crew of an automatic, at an angle of the wall,

he overheard the gunner consoling his assistant: "Well, what have you got to kick about? Want to kick off in a ditch or in a charity ward? Anybody'd think you were a millionaire! Here, feel in my pocket—I swiped some anisette. Take a swig—just one."

Torval would have liked to speak to these men, to thank them for their devotion. But that would embarrass them. He left without being noticed.

He knew, from what he himself experienced, that he had subjected them to another torture: They had accepted death last night, death for them, for all in the post. Now, two beings within the walls were to leave, to flee toward life. With their eyes, their eyes which would no longer see tomorrow, they could see two persons who would see the sun, and many suns afterward. They had lost something precious, the privacy of their last moments. Someone was here who would live on and remember. . . .

"Holzhauser," he called, "put out those damn' lights. They draw bullets." And as the old man below hobbled about putting out the lanterns—for the last time—Torval added: "Better look in and see how Chapuis and the other guy are feeling. Leave them a lot to drink."

FOR a moment, he felt weak. Poor Chapuis, with his mangled jaw! He had stitched the flesh together, made a cast. Knowing the uselessness of that! But as long as you were alive, you had to do things as if you would live forever! Seven dead last night—and by dawn all of them! And whether he liked the idea or not, it was partly because of him, his sentimentality. Thirty for one—

A strong hand closed on his elbow.

"It's hard to be a chief!" Yusuf said in French. Then he went on, in Arabic: "To the strong, men are not flesh, but a sword for them to wield. What is written is written, and all the wise men of Bagdad could labor an eternity without changing a hair to a bristle. But it may be best that I hasten away."

How easily he had read Torval's thoughts! And how easily the young officer read his! Yusuf did not need to say: "If it were my choice, I would die in your place." Torval knew that without word, and even guessed the reason.

"Yes, we must get it over, Yusuf."

The garrison could not be gathered in the yard, as had been planned, for the shooting was continuous and might indicate a rush. Instructions had to be given to the acting-sergeant; small details cropped up, multiplied.

It was Brichaux who screened the window of the office with a wooden panel, who lighted the acetylene lamp. They could hear the impacts of missiles against the wall. Torval, Charanov and Brichaux signed the first affidavits.

Yusuf was present, squatted against the far wall. He was spinning the cylinder of a service revolver given him by the officer, and he would hold the big cartridges in one palm, scanning them as if he found exquisite beauty in the brass shafts and stubby copper-clad points. Then he replaced them in their chambers one by one with great care, in a series of small, irritating clicks.

Zaya entered and stood beside Torval. She wore muslin skirts and the *burnous* of fine white wool. Around one wrist was a massive silver bracelet which he had given her; and from her neck, on a thin gold chain, hung a small cross presented to her by one of the men, doubtless a personal relic. She was beautiful, but rather barbaric; and Torval thought she resembled a gypsy.

Again his imagination went off on a long flight. He imagined his mother being present. The poor, gentle lady! Torval knew exactly what she would utter, in that breathless voice she reserved for tragic incidents: "Why, Jean is marrying a pagan!"

"I'm going to call Vergak," Brichaux said. "He can't stay long. Better have everything ready. Got a ring?"

"Take this one," Charanov said.

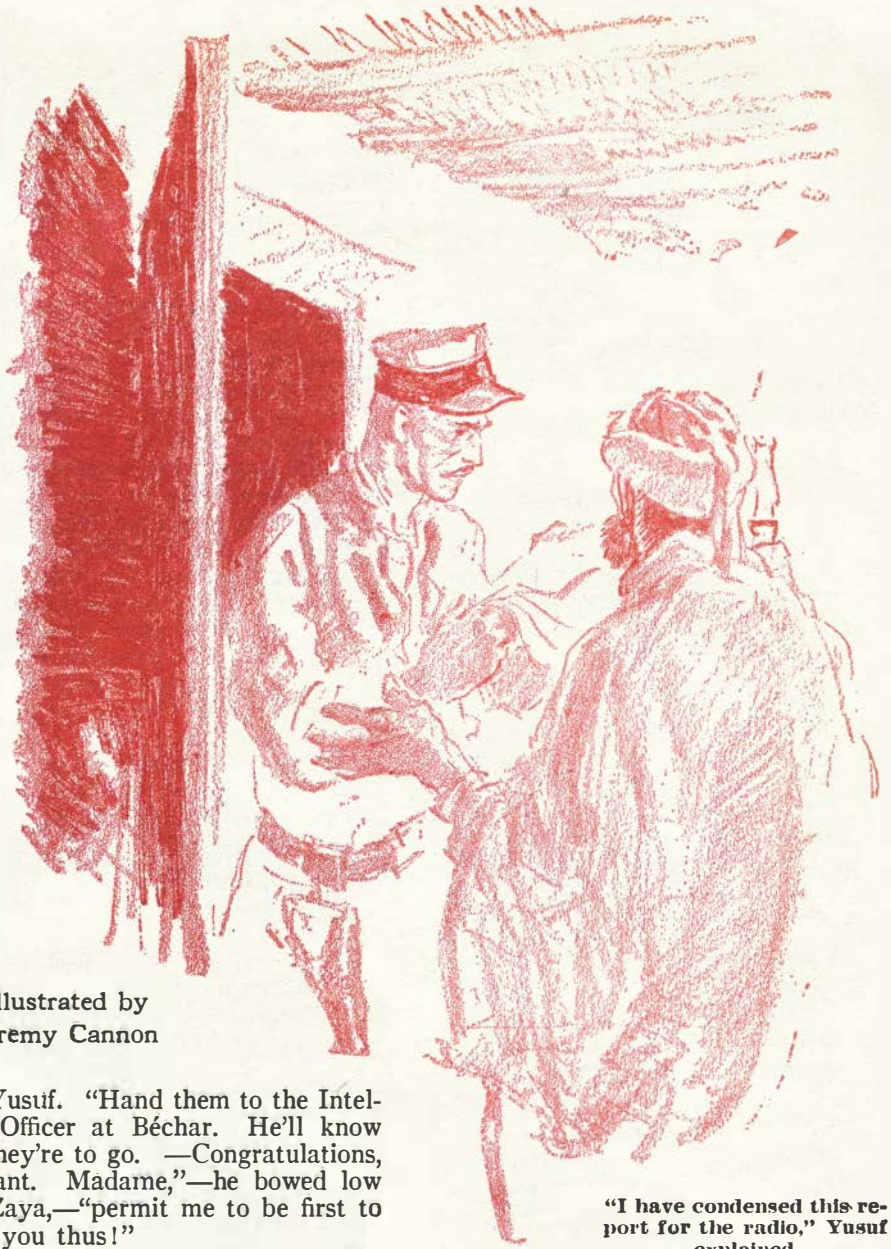
It was a small circlet of white metal. Torval appreciated the gift, for he knew that Charanov considered it a fetish. It was made of the platinum taken from the tip of a lightning-rod of a destroyed church in Galicia. The sergeant picked up a sheet of instructions prepared by Brichaux, and they hurried through the civil ceremony. There were more signatures; the stamp came into play again.

"Eh, Vergak!" Brichaux shouted then. "Ready."

The Legionnaire appeared in a few seconds, rested his rifle in a corner, hung his képi on a hook.

"Kneel," he said. The two knelt.

IN five minutes Vergak was back on the wall. There were more papers to sign. Zaya signed in Arabic characters. Then Brichaux applied a blotter, gathered the papers, glanced over them a last time. With a snap of the wrist, he handed the



Illustrated by
Jeremy Cannon

"I have condensed this report for the radio," Yusuf explained.

roll to Yusuf. "Hand them to the Intelligence Officer at Béchar. He'll know where they're to go. —Congratulations, Lieutenant. Madame,"—he bowed low before Zaya,—"permit me to be first to address you thus!"

Like Vergak, he reached for his rifle. Torval intercepted him at the door, offered him two bills: "Your fee, old chap."

"Suppose we do this, Lieutenant," the Legionnaire suggested: "Double or quits. You give me four hundred if we both get out of this, nothing if we don't."

"Agreed; but that's all your way, Brichaux."

"Should I?" The soldier laughed and ran out.

Torval looked at Zaya, who was smiling. This was the queerest situation he had been in. That girl was his wife, had the right to be called Madame Torval! The marriage no longer seemed a joke.

"Well, Lieutenant, my compliments." Charanov offered his hand. Then he bowed to Zaya, kissed the tips of her fingers: "And my respect and admiration, madame." He turned at the door: "I'll call you if you're needed, Lieutenant."

Torval opened the door linking the office with his room, a door he seldom used. He turned, saw Zaya looking at him, standing very straight, her hands clasped together. Yusuf had not moved.

"I have a letter to write to my father," he said. "There may not be time later."

His wife followed him and closed the door. She rested her hands on Torval's shoulders. He saw that she was smiling. And that smile hurt him. She was glad to feel secure, to escape. But he wished she had shown more concern for him.

"Good luck, Captain!" . . . And in another instant the older man had climbed over the parapet.

"Jean, you're not ashamed that I am your wife?" she asked.

"Why should I be?"

"Because I know I am like a wild girl to your people. I don't know how to speak rightly; I cannot even understand all I read. But I can learn, Jean, I can learn—"

He drew her into his arms, and tilted her chin.

"You're very beautiful; you're very sweet. Many men will tell you so. No, I am not ashamed, and I'm not sorry. It must be I love you—to do this." His voice grew a bit hoarse with emotion: "I love you. Love you for what you are, and for what I have done. You'll understand, some day." He broke into a short laugh: "You're the wife of my youth, and the wife of my old age!"

"My husband," she whispered, "my husband, Jean!"

Their lips met, clung in an endless, passionate kiss. And when he kissed her, his resignation to death melted. He wanted to live, to hold her. He found his mind caught in a maze of sensations strange to the present, as if her feminine perfume were an incantation against death and danger. So close to her, he felt an absurd security. He urged her away, his fingers quivering on her shoulders.

"Go, now. I may be called. I must write to—" But she slipped between his arms; very close again, her slim arms clasped him. His powerful soldier's fingers seemed nerveless against those tiny hands. Her eyes closed; her lips sought his.

"Zaya," he insisted, "you must go. Yusuf is waiting to take you away—"

"No. Yusuf knows that he must leave alone, Jean: I told him. You are my husband, Jean—Jean! The marriage was for fooling, if we live. But if you die, Jean, if you die, I die also." Her voice grew eager, pleading: *"Ya, quolbi, ya, aynin!* Oh, my heart, oh, my eyes, my Jean, I don't even know the words of love in thy tongue, Jean, but I love thee—I love thee—"

Torval's throat contracted.

"Madness—for an hour, for less? Yusuf must take you away."

"I am your woman, your wife." Zaya's tears were salty beneath his lips. "It is you I must obey—obey forever. But if you order me to go away, I will not go. I love thee—"

"Darling!" Torval returned her kisses.

He no longer could hear the rifles crackling in the hot night.

CHAPTER VII

"CHARANOV, Charanov! . . . Where's the Sergeant?"

The Legionnaires on the platform parted before Torval quietly. And he heard his own voice growing strained, shaking. Then a long, shadowy silhouette stood before him, saluting.

"Acting-Sergeant Rochas, Lieutenant. Sergeant Charanov has been killed."

This news struck the young officer with the impact of a physical blow. He had never thought of how strong his friendship for Charanov had become, after these months of companionship. He made an effort to pull himself together, to steady his voice.

"Why wasn't I informed immediately of this?"

"You were not in the office, Lieutenant." Rochas detached the words one by one. "Sergeant Charanov's last order was that you were not to be disturbed unless there was an actual attack. He's over there."

Torval followed the gesture, discerned a long, dark bundle laid against the foot of the parapet, between two loopholes. He knelt by the body; someone flashed a small flashlight, and he lifted the handkerchief covering the face. Charanov's fine features were relaxed, peaceful. His half-opened eyes, the twist of his lips, gave a gruesome semblance of his smile of self-derision.

"When did it happen? How?"

"How?" Rochas paused, as if startled by the question. Although it was nearly midnight, the moon was still strong and bathed the plateau in a luminous, milky mist. Rifles and carbines cracked from the natives' positions, not in a steady fusillade, but in bursts of two or three shots at intervals of seconds. Those shots were aimed at the post; and the air whispered, vibrated constantly. Yet one grew so accustomed to those sounds that their lethal import was almost forgotten. "Maybe forty-five minutes ago, Lieutenant. He was standing there, talking to me, and we were laughing at something he'd said—I forget just what. All of a sudden, he starts falling. He was dead."

In the beam of light Torval saw the slender, muscular hands of the dead man, which someone had piously folded across his breast. There was a thin white streak on the little finger of the left hand, the trace left by the lucky platinum ring which Zaya wore now. Torval's grief was fused with remorse and disgust at himself. He was tortured by unspoken thanks which he could never utter.

He straightened, wiping his face; and the flashlight went out suddenly. They seemed to read his mind, his longing for something to show his grief, his respect. Rochas spoke.

"Might as well keep him up here, Lieutenant," he declared. "He isn't in the way, you know. He'd like it better with us. The radio-operator wants to speak to you."

Torval descended to the yard, entered the wireless-shack.

"Lieutenant, Headquarters orders a man kept on constantly. Wants a report on everything as soon as it happens. They claim it's important. May I have my assistant take over?"

Eight killed, two seriously wounded, four men crippled enough to cut down their efficiency—and now another man had to be immobilized at the radio. That would leave but fifteen really valid men on the wall to beat off the expected onslaught. Far too few, far too few!

"Stay here yourself, my friend," Torval advised. "And don't worry; no one can accuse you of ducking. Tonight, one place is just as dangerous as another."

HE went into the office, noting at once that the door connecting with his private quarters was closed. Yusuf was seated before the table, drinking hot tea, smoking one of Torval's cigarettes. The man appeared grave, but unworried, enjoying the moment. Somehow, his calm made Torval furious.

"Make yourself at home," he said ironically, in French.

Charanov was dead, and this chap behaved as if nothing had happened. His attitude seemed to underline Torval's own carelessness, his guilty concentration on problems other than the defense of the post. Yusuf spoke in French also.

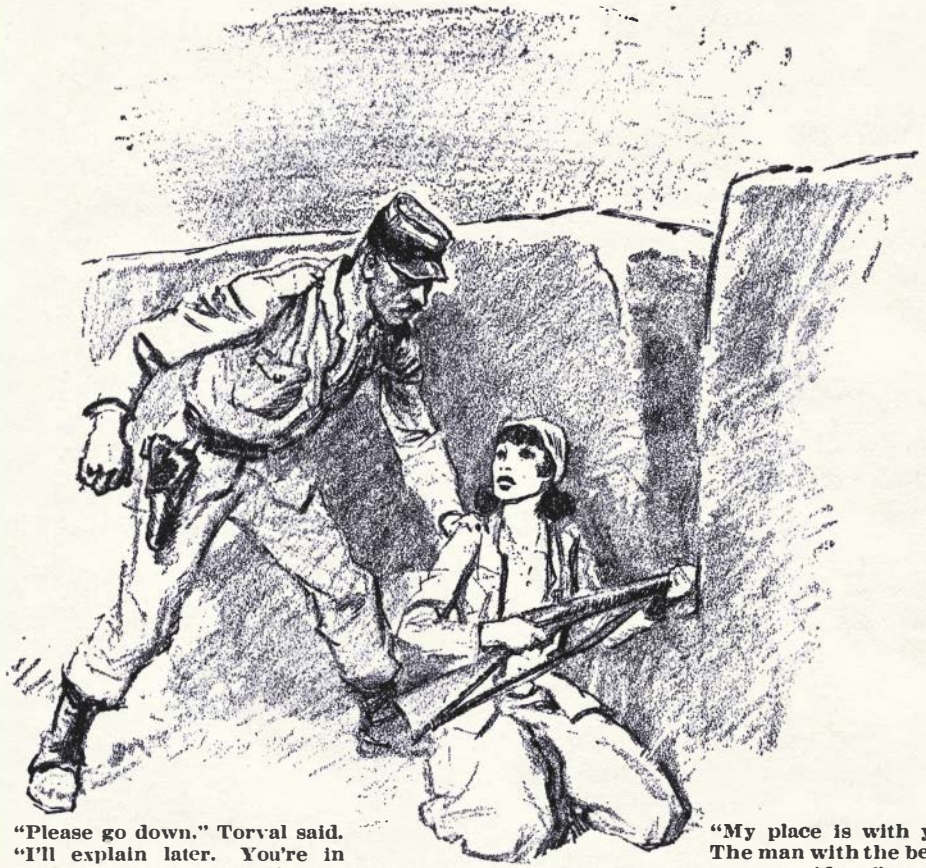
"Thank you, Lieutenant. It is seldom that I can smoke such excellent tobacco. I have been thinking. I have a proposition to make. You can wireless in any information I give you? I have withheld much, as a matter of policy. But the time has come to speak."

"Go ahead." Torval went to the door, and called out to Rochas that he would be in the office for a few minutes. "Now, what have you to say?"

"I have been speaking to the girl. She says that you will be in serious trouble even if you do not die here tonight. Because of her! It seems that this attack will be blamed on your refusal to yield her. I can give proof that your action was a pretext, that the attack on this post was planned several years ago, when the road was building, and this place established to protect it. Four months ago, it was scheduled for this week."

"Why didn't you inform the Intelligence Service?"

"I had my reasons."



"Please go down." Torval said. "I'll explain later. You're in the way up here."

"My place is with you. The man with the beard said so."

"They must know that the French will beat them in the end," Torval stated. "What do they hope to gain?"

"You'll understand. Even in the days when the Moroccan Realm was independent, this region, Draa and vicinity, was only nominally under the Sultan. Moulay ben el Haj Mohammed is at the head of the present movement. He hopes to become some sort of sultan under a protectorate distinct from that of Morocco beyond the Atlas. He fights, because fighting leads to negotiations. The plan is to establish a sort of confederation of tribes south of the mountains, to be considered a separate nation.

"He had no trouble convincing the local chieftains, because a separate rule means an established situation and revenue, guaranteed by treaty. The mass of the people think they will drive you out; but those in charge know better: they are fighting for concessions. The moving spirit is that fat fellow Blameni. He agreed to let Zaya escape here, in a deal with her father; then used her presence as a pretext for the attack. Because it appears as if the French were interfering with local family customs, it gives his side a semblance of right.

"He probably intends to show himself off at the peace conferences, and become accepted as a mediator by the French, which means an important position, much money and decorations. He has used us all for his purpose."

"Can you prove it, Yusuf?"

"Easily. I can give you a list of the notables present at the secret *jema,* tribal conference, that decided the action. The bands now surrounding you are armed—they have been for months. Hundreds of military rifles have been smuggled in, cases of grenades. Hidden in a small oasis not remote from Tafilalet, they have a small arsenal, with hand-machines to reload empty cartridge-shells. You saw how rapidly the warriors assembled.

"You can make clear that this post fared better through your disobedience than it would have otherwise. There was an ultimatum, a chance to prepare. Suppose it had been a surprise attack, some early morning? You and your garrison would have been wiped out in an hour. But that would have been a meaningless military success and not a diplomatic mix-up as this is." Yusuf picked up a pen, drew a notebook nearer: "I have decided to do something." He indicated

the door: "I'll need a few minutes. She will not come out, because, she says, you ordered her to stay in there. Why not—"

"No." Torval shook his head. "I was absent when Charanov was killed. My presence wouldn't have changed it. But you understand why I can't be missing again if anything occurs. The men—I'll be back in a few minutes, then." He halted at the door, looked at the native awhile: "But do you know how to write French?"

"Yes." Yusuf half-smiled. "One has to know many things."

Torval went to the platform. Most of the men were sitting down, backs against the parapet. They screened their pipes and cigarettes, talked in low voices. A few bottles were passing from hand to hand. The Lieutenant could say nothing: He had not given a good example.

He sensed what any real chief would have sensed, the sagging of discipline. These Legionnaires were beings of flesh and blood—and nerves. They feared death, and the long wait for the final rush was telling. Their voices rose at times in a note of suppressed excitement.

The Lieutenant knew that his relationship with them had changed subtly. Brichaux and Vergak had assisted him in a personal problem; the death of Charanov had affected them all. They perhaps knew too much of his personal life, had discovered that he had faults as a leader, that his first concern was not always of them. If he uttered a sharp order now, against drinking, someone was sure to make a sharp retort. Why not, when they were sure to die?

He strode to the wall, then leaped up on the parapet, field-glasses in hand. It was an endless fascination to focus the lenses on an obscure patch of ground, to see the details merge into sight after a few seconds: a boulder and its shadow, here and there a man stretched on the ground, lengthened by the rigid, faintly gleaming line of the rifle-barrel.

THE enemy outside could see him dimly in the failing moonlight, standing there above the others. The bullets started to nose about for him. He was not afraid, had an odd sensation of invincibility. He wanted to do as Charanov had done the other night, to light a cigarette. But that would have been out of character—these men would merely have thought him a fool.

They were silent behind him now, watching, speculating how long his luck would hold. And his mind was not on danger, but on them, and on Yusuf—Yusuf, who spoke and wrote French, who had to know many things!

"Better come down, Lieutenant," Rochas said at last; "they can see you."

He hopped down to the platform lightly. He realized what had been in his mind. He had wished to show them that he was not afraid, that he was as brave, as ready to die as the Sergeant. The slight episode had eased the tension; conversations resumed; laughter followed.

BEFORE long, Torval looked down to see Yusuf outlined in the door of the office, opened on the lighted room. He joined him.

"I have condensed this report for the radio," the man explained. "But the Intelligence officers will have no trouble understanding it, as they already have leads." He smiled faintly when the French officer stared at the document. "I was trained to make reports in the army, years ago, you know. This envelope is for you, if you get out of this alive."

"For me?"

"Yes. It explains itself." And Yusuf walked to his former place, limping. "I must leave in a short while—before the people outside move in close, too close for me to escape undetected."

"And what do you intend to do, Yusuf?"

"What is there to do? Two men inspire all these poor fellows. Attacking walls is not a favorite sport for Saharans. They are ready to quit. They underwent fearful punishment last night; the tents are crowded with wounded. Some of the chieftains were ready to quit this morning. Moulay and Blameni made them stick it. If anyone kills those two—"

"You'd certainly be killed."

"If I remain, I'll be killed as surely."

"True. But why should you stay here? I count on you to take away the—well, I might as well call her my wife."

"You might as well, yes," Yusuf said, smiling. "But she will not come with me. I did not argue long. When a young woman loves, argument is useless. I have been young; I have been loved—and I remember."

"Sit down," Torval urged. "My dear chap, I may be a sucker, but I am not a damn' fool. She won't escape with you, and therefore you'll sacrifice your life to give her a chance. To use your own

words, that would not occur to a Saharan. I have been on the track almost since you came, couldn't be sure. Your resemblance to someone I knew—to her. That bandage about your knee, to explain your lameness, when her father's name is El Tobbal, the Lame One! You're her father, of course?"

"Of course."

"So you'll die for her." Torval laughed nervously. "Touching if belated paternal devotion! It would have been simpler to send her away, rather than allow her to grow up like—like a primitive. My curiosity may seem impolite, but even with so little time left, I'd be curious to know whom I married. You are French, aren't you? Hence a renegade, a traitor, surely—and probably an assassin."

"None of those," Yusuf said. "Just an unfortunate fool. I have never fought against my country. I'm Alexandre Sergueny, ex-captain of cavalry. You remember that name."

Torval had no difficulty identifying that name, in fact. He had heard it often enough during his childhood, shouted in long arguments at the dinner-table, when his father received military friends—a *cause célèbre* which had aroused almost as much controversy in army circles as the Dreyfus case.

TWENTY-FIVE years or so before, Sergueny, a young captain who had won some fame in African campaigns, in Chad and Wadai, had been in charge of a squadron called out for strike duty in a manufacturing city of France. Some of his men—they were conscripted young fellows, not one of them over twenty-three—had been pelted with stones by a mob, and had used their carbines. Six had been held for trial; and as there had been four deaths, in days when life was sacred, they had been sure to draw long sentences in prison camps. They had admitted that they had received strict orders not to shoot, that they had lost their heads when they had seen a comrade knocked out of the saddle by a paving-stone, lying bleeding on the street.

Sergueny had come forward, stated that his orders had not been clear, that he felt he should shoulder the blame. He was the chief, he said; the responsibility was his. He had been forced to resign his commission, had been acquitted of murder charges only after a long, bitter trial and a great scandal. Most army officers had considered him a martyr to the civilian hatred of his class.

Then his warmest friends had been forced to silence. For Sergueny, living under an assumed name in Morocco, had killed a man.

LIKE most people, Torval had imagined Sergueny dead or rotting in prison. As this second trial had taken place during his early childhood, he had but a vague idea of the case.

"Alexandre Sergueny," he repeated. "Well—she cannot help that. No more than she can help her Moorish blood."

"You have no right to presume that I—"

"No right?" Torval shrugged. "My dear chap, speaking of my rights is amusing. Zaya is a splendid girl; I'm not sorry that I did what I could to help her. But that doesn't mean that I condone your own behavior—"

"Listen to me!" Sergueny intercepted him as he reached the door. "Oh, you have time, young fellow. They won't attack until the moon is gone. And you don't mind being absent when it suits you—" He smiled scornfully as the Lieutenant lifted his hand. "I wouldn't advise that, Torval! You may say that I am an assassin and a renegade, but you lie when you say Zaya's mother was Moorish."

"You've been out here twenty-odd years, and—"

"I was engaged to the daughter of one of my father's colleagues, a major in the Army. The families, naturally, broke it up when I lost my commission, left France in disgrace. She was promised to another man. She wrote me that they were forcing her into marriage, that I should come for her. We eloped, and we disappeared in Morocco, which was being conquered by our armies, where no one asked questions of casual traders.

"The other man traced us. He deemed that he had a grievance. He explained that he had been made publicly ridiculous by his fiancée's flight on the eve of the wedding. He was a cavalryman, as I had been; and remember, it was many years ago. So we both agreed on the logical course: sabers. The town where we were was quite small—forty or fifty Europeans. He had come alone, and so the witnesses were acquaintances I had made.

"I did not want to kill him, because I felt no hate: he was the loser. Also, he was a rather charming fellow, of good family, and was very polite about everything. Regretted that his personal hon-

or should inflict this further annoyance on me, and all that. But you know how it is: after two passes, I felt I was the better swordsman. I decided to tire him out and disarm him. That took time, for even if he was not skilled, he was strong and patient. When he guessed my intention to spare him, he became furious. Suddenly he swung low—*le coupe de Jarnac,* you know. It worked—slashed my leg, severed tendons, made me lame for life. I was losing blood, could not fight long on one leg, did not want to die. The agreement was for a fight to a finish; our witnesses were inexpert and took that literally. I took advantage of the next opening he left, and unluckily reached his jugular....

"I surrendered, thinking that the worst I had to fear was the charge of homicide through imprudence, usual in duels. But things worked against me: the nature of my wound, for instance, which, the prosecutor claimed was proof of a criminal attack on my part, as a cavalry officer in good standing, such as my adversary had been, would not have used an unfair stroke! My witnesses, upon being examined, turned out to be, as is not rare with civilians in the colonies, former common-law convicts, deprived of civic rights. I was declared guilty of manslaughter, sentenced to eight years penal servitude, which meant life in Guiana, with the *doublage.*

"I was not taken to prison at once, but kept in a hospital for treatment of my wound. I escaped and fled outside the zone held by the French. Against my advice, my wife followed me very soon. The problem was not so hard for us: both of us were officers' children, had spent much of our childhood in Algeria, knew Arabic and Berber dialects. The authorities knew where I was, tried to get me to surrender. Then the war broke out, and I was forgotten. I did not even have the recourse of ordinary fugitives, enlisting under an alias and rehabilitating myself at the front: I was a cripple, a lame man.

"We roamed from tribe to tribe. My wife died after two years of that nomadic life. I was left with a baby daughter, baptized as Marguerite. As the French pressed on, I migrated southward, to Rish, to Tafilalet, to the Draa. People had forgotten my origin. Between a French mountaineer, like myself, and a Berber mountaineer of unmixed blood, there is little physical difference. I might have been a Riffi, a Koulougli, a Kabylian, to judge by appearance.

"The marriage was for fooling, if we live. But if you die, Jean, I die also."

"I did not wish to fight, and my leg exempted me. I engaged in trade, first general stuff, sugar, tea and so on, then cattle, sheep, camels—then leather, gum arabic. For the past three years I have been supplying fine dates for the European market. I am a wealthy man, with a few hundred thousand francs banked in London.

"I had hoped to take Zaya to France, when my case was outlawed. But for various reasons, blanket pardons did not cover my situation. I had but eighteen months to go, when Moulay saw Zaya and wanted her. I was—still am—a member of the tribal council, the *jema.* As a Saharan, his offer was flattering; all my colleagues urged me to accept, not only for me, but for the tribe. I agreed, but set an extravagant dowry in silver. Moulay paid it without blinking. I hid the girl. He had to leave, to organize this attack, but left Blameni to secure her.

"I made a bargain with Blameni, that she would be escorted by men of our tribe.

It cost me a large sum. But she escaped, because I had a faithful chap in the lot who covered her flight to a large extent, led the others on the wrong path several times. I believed that as soon as it was learned she was French, a plane would be sent for her."

TORVAL listened, impressed by the man's obvious sincerity.

"Just one question: How did you know about the massacre of the Sauvains, if you weren't there?"

"I could not prevent raids." Sergueny shrugged impatiently. "And there was one type of loot I would purchase which ordinarily was a dead loss to raiders: books, papers, magazines. I collected many documents, perhaps with some vague idea of sometime returning them to the parties interested. I looked through the stuff, and found only one name that fitted. Small girls are seldom taken into the danger zone, you know! Louise Sauvain—I thought that would be accepted at once. But Moulay's claim caused a thorough investigation. What are you laughing at?"

"Just thinking that if your soldiers had been more careful with their carbines, before I was born, I would not be in this mess. Thinking of them, married, with families, fat and fiftyish— But, Sergueny, why didn't you inform the French of the conspiracy?"

"I am not a spy. Those people sheltered me."

"And now—"

"Now I understand that if I want my daughter to be French, I must consider myself French. And I don't want you in trouble—if it can be avoided. My daughter loves you. I hope to do something that will save you both. It is important that you should live, for another reason: that envelope has papers disposing of the funds in various banks."

"In my name? I can't accept—"

"She's a child. Someone must help her. Who else can I turn to?" Sergueny's voice broke; he held his head in his hands for a brief moment. "I must hope, I must hope. I'll leave now."

"I can't let you. It's—"

"What else is there to do? If I stay here, all die. And I can't let her die—and I live on. You see that yourself."

"Just a moment." Torval went out and returned with two grenades. "Know how they work? Good. They might be handier than the revolver. Perhaps you could use them to cover your escape."

Sergueny nodded, slipped the explosives into the capacious pocket in the front of his *gandoura*. He rewound the rag turban carefully.

"Ready. You better show me out."

"Don't you want to—" Torval indicated the closed door.

"No. She'd know that I was not leaving to escape without her. Might be hard on everybody." Sergueny smiled, shook his head. His eyes were moist; he lowered his voice: "Listen, Torval: If you both get out of here alive, try to ease things for her—until she gets used to life again. There's enough money to hire competent tutors to teach her to read, to write, to act French. But she will be bewildered, trust everybody, because she thinks that Europeans—"

"I love her," Torval said quietly.

"For the moment. But she will be awkward for many months. As you said, she has been brought up like a primitive. I want her hurt as little as possible. You're a young man, a proud man; I can't ask too much, too long. But be gentle, give her a chance—"

The young man tried to speak, to reassure Sergueny. He could not voice what agitated him, his resolution to be fair, his conviction that he would be. Sergueny's eyes held his own; then the older chap nodded, as if satisfied. He glanced toward the door a last time, strode out of the building.

ON the platform, Torval explained the situation to Rochas.

"Keep their attention on this side; fire the guns."

"A demonstration, sure. Understood, Lieutenant."

"A rope!" Torval ordered.

He escorted Sergueny to the north side. A leather rope was let down the wall. It was held by Legionnaire Brousson and a comrade. For several seconds Sergueny leaned over the parapet, scanning the maze of barbed wire, almost intact at this spot, planning his path. Then he straightened and held out his hand.

"Well, Lieutenant, *au revoir*."

"Got everything you need?" Torval asked. "I mean, extra cartridges—you know—"

"I shall not need them."

"Of course. Stupid of me."

"But where is the young lady?" Legionnaire Brousson made bold to ask. "I thought—"

"She's staying." Torval's voice broke. "Well, good-by—good luck, Captain!"

Sergueny held on to his hand, hesitated. Torval knew he wished to ask him again to take good care of Zaya. Then the two men clasped each other's shoulders, and their cheeks touched in a brief accolade. In another instant the older man had climbed over the parapet. His weight tensed the rope. Then the soldiers were hauling the straps upward again.

The three on the wall strained forward, saw Sergueny dimly, crouching to slide beneath the first strands. He crept this way and that, rapidly. Behind them, the machine-gun was fired according to instructions. The north face of the post, known to be but scantily manned, was not being fired upon. The crawling man was through the wire, beyond the zone obscured by the shadow thrown by the wall. He straightened, paused for a moment. Probably he had turned about, instinctively, for a last look at his friends.

AT the brink of the cliff, he crouched low, then vanished. The young officer listened tensely, and started violently when Legionnaire Brousson spoke in a normal voice at his elbow.

"Beg pardon, Lieutenant."

"Shut up! Did you hear anything?"

"No, Lieutenant."

"A call?" The private did not answer. Torval held the glasses, watched the open ground beyond, a particular patch of light which he believed Sergueny must cross. His imagination tormented him; he swelled the slight sound he thought he had heard into a scuffle, a muffled shout for help. The minutes dragged, and he saw no sign of the other. Then, slowly, he reassured himself: Sergueny had not lived years in the desert without learning how to avoid being seen! Obviously, he would avoid the lighter places.

"What did you wish to say, Brousson?" he asked.

"Nothing, Lieutenant, except—" The man was embarrassed now: "You called that guy a captain. Is he?"

"He was."

"Why didn't he take the young lady along, Lieutenant?"

"She'd sooner stay with us."

"Pretty swell, Lieutenant. Say, if that guy's a captain, and he leaves a woman here, he must be going to try something, eh? To get us out of this mess, maybe? He acted kind of like a man who's getting primed to pull a stunt."

After all, Torval thought, why not let them share his hope?

"One chance in a thousand, Brousson."

"Ten thousand times better than no chance at all, Lieutenant."

Yes, the Legionnaire was right. Any hope was worth clinging to. It was the certainty of death that sent one's brain spinning. Somewhere in that patchwork of light and shade, Sergueny was crawling, crawling patiently. He would be killed; that was sure. But he was a brave man, with a purpose; there was a chance that he would succeed in killing before being killed. But how long after the death of Moulay would the natives keep fighting?

Torval looked at his watch: It was almost two in the morning.

The moon was gone.

And when it disappeared, the twenty-four hours of reprieve for the small garrison ended. Still several hundred yards away, in an elongated crescent-shaped line, the tribesmen were advancing. They were still waiting for the gusts of wind to cover the sound of their approach, to gain twenty or thirty yards at a clip. But that they had started was sure: the supporting fire had lifted higher, clearing the approaches to the post. Very few missiles struck the wall, but the air three or four feet above it was alive.

"Inform Headquarters they're coming," Torval ordered the radio-operator. He grouped the acting-sergeants around him, told them where the fuse should be lighted at the finish, in case he fell.

HIS messages to Headquarters were acknowledged, but no information, no orders, no comments came through. Although he had reported Charanov's death, he had received no instructions to assign any commander beside himself. Probably they had grown to realize that out there, it was useless and sardonic to bombard men about to die with orders they would not carry out.

"Machine-gun, automatics, at my orders."

"Standing by, Lieutenant."

"Sergeant, check the posts."

Rochas obeyed, and the voices tolled back one by one. There were cases of grenades opened, and within reach. Each automatic had a large number of clips ready. As Brichaux remarked, it was comfortable fighting, "war in an easy-chair."

Such was their acceptance of fate that when the order to fire was given, it seemed almost a routine matter. The machine-gun and the automatics pounded

away for a few seconds. There was a great noise of running feet outside, then quiet. Then the volume of fire directed against the post swelled, directed particularly at the spots where the muzzles spitting flames could be seen. Through the metallic vibrations rose a dull smack, like a hammer struck on meat. It was followed by the crashing sound of a fall.

"Done for," Holzhauser's voice floated up from the yard.

Then silence settled down again suddenly. Not a flicker of flame outside, not a detonation, nothing but the wind and the night. Torval wondered who had been hit, who was done for. One of those along the wall to his right, between the machine-gun and the first automatic. One of three men—which one?

Nine dead.

The crippled men had been assigned as number-two men on the automatics, purveyors. They could be useful, refilling the magazines as they popped out of the breaches. But who was done for? The question tormented him; yet for some obscure, superstitious reason, he did not want the man's name shouted aloud.

"They're fooling around the wire!"

"Fire."

The detonations ripped out once more. For the second time the reaction was slow. There was no rush, as there had been the night before, and no howling. The sharpshooters in the distance fired at maximum speed for a few seconds; then silence returned.

"Not so much pep tonight, eh, Lieutenant?" Rochas said.

"They're learning the business," the officer answered. But he acted on a premonition: one did not need to be a military genius to guess that the casual movement straight forward, so easily checked, and the bursts of intense firing straight ahead, were meant to draw attention from some more important undertaking. He summoned the crew of number-two automatic, took along a private as a grenadier, and went to the northern corner. "Keep quiet, now."

This was rather better sport than the rest, as it combined danger with a guessing game. If Torval were right, there would be a number of targets crowded in a small area, between the outer wire and the cliff. The Legionnaires held their breath, and when the wind died down somewhat, they heard the familiar sound of scraping, the vibrations of the wire.

Torval grinned in the darkness, tapped the gunner on the shoulder, replaced him. He stretched flat on the parapet, one leg braced solidly. Mechanically he touched the magazine, to make certain it was in place, ready.

"Grenade!" he whispered.

BY the brief flash of the explosion, he saw what he sought: More than a score of men in the wire, pushing their way through. His whole being seemed concentrated in his eyes, in his fingers. The great throbbing of the massive stock against his shoulder gave him a feeling of immense power. The detonations of his gun covered other sounds. He was but vaguely aware of shouting. But there were several glassy crashes, which he heard. And the useless cry of warning rose again:

"Look out! They've got grenades."

Yes, they had grenades, but they used them badly. They threw them too hard, to fall into the empty yard, or too easily, to strike the wall and drop back. The Legionnaires, well drilled and throwing from above, scored perfectly. The un-

even exchange lasted less than twenty seconds before the night closed down.

"Check your posts, Rochas."

"Right, Lieutenant. One?" And the calm voices tolled again, until the acting-sergeant reported: "Everybody on the job, Lieutenant."

"Stay here," Torval ordered the grenadier. "I don't think they'll try this side again. But one never knows."

"Right, Lieutenant." The man added, with a chuckle: "But I hope they use their own junk to throw at me. They tossed in a couple of heavy babies, C. F. grenades, if I ever heard one. They went off like navy shells!"

"Whatever they use, we're stuck, old man," Torval laughed. "So why worry?"

HE sent the automatic rifle back to its original emplacement, reached the platform. He figured that he had from ten to twenty minutes to rest. It would take that long for the groups of natives to retreat, reform and be coaxed forward again. Irregulars, even Saharans, do not reorganize quickly under fire.

"Shall I try a rocket, Lieutenant?" Rochas inquired.

"No. Not yet." Then he realized that the man had asked the question only to draw him aside. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know what to do, Lieutenant."

"About what?"

"About her. You gave no order. So when she came up here, I just asked her if it was all right with you, and she said yes. I don't want to be blamed if she catches one, Lieutenant."

Torval glanced at the dim forms around him.

"Where is she?"

"Over there, second man—I mean second from the machine-gun."

On looking closely, Torval identified the crouched form of Zaya beside an embrasure. He strode to her side, lifted her by the shoulder none too gently.

"Get below at once."

"Where is my father?"

"He—he stepped out," Torval said, lamely. "Please go down. I'll explain everything later. You're in the way up here."

"I have a gun, and I can shoot," she said. "Sergeant Charanov said I shoot as well as anybody here." She was very calm, far calmer than Torval. "My father has gone to die. Otherwise, he would not have left me."

"Who gave you a carbine?"

"Nobody. I took it from little Heinrich."

"Took it?" Torval understood suddenly, knew who had fallen down to the yard. He grasped the weapon: "Let go—leave that here and go below. Your place isn't here."

"My place is with you. The man with the beard said so."

Torval mentally cursed Vergak and his advice. That was what the lout had meant, was it, by instructing her on the duties of a Christian wife. Couldn't he guess that this primitive little fool would take things literally? Well, he would settle with the Legionnaire later.

He was growing angry, struggled with her. It was no help that the men were beginning to laugh. Naturally! They would die; that much was understood; but it still struck them as humorous to see a husband quarreling with his wife! And such a recently wedded pair. It was like everything in the past few hours, intensely tragic and utterly ridiculous: The long and complicated preparations for a marriage, so that Zaya could leave. Then her remaining; his own resolution to save her by marriage, and her using that marriage as her excuse!

What was even more annoying was that Zaya, brought up out of doors, accustomed to the normal chores of native women, was as strong as the average European male of her weight, and far more supple. By exerting his strength, the officer would manage to loosen her grip in one place, but never could he displace both her hands at one time.

"Let go—let go!"

"No, Jean, no. I want to stay—"

"Do as I tell you," he panted; "will you do as I tell you?"

"I won't be alone. I want to be with you!"

They paused for breath, breast to breast, their hands clenched on the carbine between them. Torval was in such a blind rage that he had forgotten who he was, where he was, knew only that Zaya was disobeying him. He decided to be crafty, groped for a good hold, so as to tear the gun away with a quick wrench. His fingers closed on her left hand, he felt metal: The platinum circlet, Charanov's lucky ring.

IT was almost as if he had seen the Russian's quiet smile, heard his drawling voice. He grew calm without reason. Superstition, perhaps. He released the carbine, stepped back.

"All right. You can stay here. But keep your head low."

Before turning away, she clutched at his hand and pressed her lips to it. Torval hoped that none of the men had eyes keen enough to pierce the darkness enough to discern this. But he need not have worried; the prevailing emotion was amusement. When Zaya was back at her chosen place, a dim, small white huddle against the parapet, Rochas sought to console him.

"She's just as safe up here, Lieutenant. *Mektoub,* as they say out here: It is written. If her hour had come, the bullet would go and find her in your room. If it hadn't, nothing could touch her. Don't be sore at her, and don't worry about it, you know. All women get stubborn like her, once in a while. I knew a guy once whose wife insisted on going to the café to play billiards with him, and—"

Rochas was tactful, calm, as if this family scene was normal, yet more important than the danger they shared. But the young man was conscious of her presence. He feared for her more than for himself. Suppose she were killed before his eyes? Suppose she died, like Charanov, like Heinrich? A metal slug through that soft warm flesh, a gaping hole—blood—

"They're somewhere near again, Lieutenant. Wish the searchlight was working."

For there were parts of a searchlight in the post, almost a complete apparatus, as provided by regulations. For nearly a year, Torval had been trying to obtain the needed spare parts, which had been misdirected and shipped to another post. But it was like the supply-corps to send cases of milk to a blockhouse, and grenades to the hospital. Grenades!

Grenades! . . . Sergueny was dead!

THE remark of the grenadier about the use of C.F. grenades by the natives snapped back to mind. Torval had given Sergueny two C.F. grenades, Citron-Foug type, heavy and efficient within a radius of three hundred feet. The natives had been using light offensive grenades, similar to the French O.F. type, with a radius of forty feet maximum. The grenadier had said that they had used a brace of C.F.'s. Those must have been the two that he had turned over to Sergueny. No possible doubt of that.

Once given the clue, it was so easy to know what had happened: Sergueny had gone from sight to drop among the men of the raiding-party waiting on the north side. Torval had been right: he had heard a scuffle—and the muffled cry. And there was no sense hoping that they had spared the man's life: Saharans obtain silence with the knife.

Within the Lieutenant, hope melted like a snowflake. And in his sudden, utter discouragement, he knew how strong that hope had been. Well, that was settled: Sergueny, the poor devil, had sacrificed himself in vain; and he, Torval, must become accustomed to accepting the thought of certain death all over again.

A BURST from the machine-gun kindled the fusillade again. The attack resumed. Now the natives came in small groups, progressed in alternating rushes, scattering and taking cover when the machine-gun turned on them, reforming and advancing as soon as the rake of bullets had passed by. The flashes were so continuous that there was sufficient light to aim.

Even in the tumult, Torval's glance sought Zaya. She was performing like an Amazon. She rose to one knee to fire the three shots in a clip, the detonations widely spaced, so that he knew that she was aiming each shot. Then she dropped back on her haunches, reached for the ammunition in a small heap on her right.

The grenades were exploding again. The attacking parties lapped nearer and nearer. Heavy blades hacked at the poles and the wires, slashing a lane. The gateway appeared to be the goal now. But it was protected by a *chicane* wall, which formed a narrow aisle before the portals, an aisle easily cleaned out with an automatic. Like shooting fish in a bucket!

Then a knot of attackers reached the top of the wall on scaling-poles. Torval had given orders for such an emergency. At the sound of his whistle, the Legionnaires at the spot dropped to the yard; the nearer automatic swerved and slashed waist high. Two or three natives contrived to leap down into the courtyard, and were disposed of with pistols.

"All clear below," Holzhauser reported.

But when the rush ebbed away, two more Legionnaires had been killed, one wounded. Vergak was one of the dead; Brichaux was the wounded man. That smote Torval with superstitious horror: of the immediate wedding gathering, only he and Zaya were left untouched. Charanov, Sergueny, Vergak, Brichaux . . . And his mind picked up its sinister, re-

morseless arithmetic: Nine plus two, eleven dead. Three gravely wounded—fourteen out of thirty out of action. With the wireless-operator, fifteen!

Unbidden, the classic message of a Legion sergeant commanding an outpost, a good soldier with more courage than wit, floated into his mind: *"Half of us killed; morale excellent; all goes well."*

But the natives must have suffered once more. *Their* morale could not be excellent. A Saharan is brave, but by preference he fights for profit. Those fellows must be thinking that they were paying a very large price for the rifles and ammunition stored in the post. The number of their dead must have approached the hundred mark the preceding night, and tonight had cost them at least forty to fifty more.

How long would their xenophobia, the religious zeal induced by speeches, hold sway over their common sense? But they were probably doing their own figuring, knew that the defenders were dwindling. Men will sometimes fight on without reasoning, without hope. And there were the dead to avenge.

"Alerte!"

The machine-gun reopened fire. The clamor of the preceding night was heard again as the Saharans rolled forward like a surf. They had been brought to the highest pitch of excitement, sensed victory near, and as the bursts cut down the leading groups, the fallen were trodden underfoot.

"Grenades, use the grenades!"

But they would not stop, although the post seemed to explode like a crater. The tips of the scaling-poles appeared over the wall, were shoved back. Here and there shadowy shapes leaped into sight, fell back again. But they were replaced by others, half-nude warriors with contorted, screaming mouths. The mêlée was beyond control, beyond check.

IT was but a matter of moments now. The bitter taste of despair was in Torval's mouth; panic was gripping him. His pistol was empty; there was no time to reload. He must run below and end it—but he would not leave without Zaya. He must find her, see her a last time. Why? What did it matter if they died a few feet apart? He did not reason.

The others were on the platform now, and he clubbed his way into the packed mass, with the barrel of the pistol. He was screaming for Rochas to go down and do what must be done. It would be too late very soon. He vaguely felt impacts against his body, against his head, his side, his legs. His consciousness was sliding away, and the effort to keep on his feet was unutterable agony.

HE felt that death was near, for the faint drone of the wireless-motor below had swelled a thousand times, filled the universe with terrifying thunder that dominated the shouts and the detonations. And although he knew that the machine-gun had ceased firing seconds ago, he could hear its hammering, amplified and distorted as if machine-guns were pounding away in the sky.

There was light, glaring light, which threw everything into sharp detail: The brown, hairy faces of the tribesmen showed greenish, sickening high-lights. He caught sight of the machine-gun's barrel, a glowing, bluish streak, fringed by mauve steam. Then Zaya's face floated into sight, lips parting, screaming. His arm went up and down again, like a flail. The impacts numbed his wrist.

Then, suddenly, the natives melted before him. He saw them literally diving off the wall, into the wire below. And he caught Zaya in his arms, held her close. The platform had become an islet of calm; the Legionnaires stood petrified, faces upward. Some were shouting, but their voices were faint, remote, like a tenuous embroidery of sounds against the immense din.

A gigantic shadow passed overhead, another, a third: Planes, planes swooping in the light of their rockets. It was their motors which Torval had heard, and their machine-guns.

They were not the scouting machines from Colomb-Béchar or Bou-Denib, but smaller, streamlined planes, two-seaters of a type he had not seen before. They darted like monstrous metal birds over the plateau, a snowy spread illuminated by several rockets swaying down, hanging from small parachutes. They were everywhere at once, machine-guns streaming bullets on the fugitive Saharans.

One of the machines, zooming upward at the end of a slashing drive, passed a few feet above the platform, so low that some men instinctively ducked. The Legionnaires waved their arms, howled greetings to a grinning, dirty face under a helmet. It was a swift vision, but all saw plainly that the fellow held a thumb against his nose.

And all understood that this was revenge for the aviators, payment for the

The mêlée was beyond control, beyond check; vaguely Torval felt impacts against his body, his head. . . . Then the universe filled with terrifying thunder.

sign displayed mockingly during the day: *Zero*. Tonight the planes were scoring.

"Five of them," Torval said. "Where in hell did they come from?"

"Regular aviation, from Oran. Spot the markings, Lieutenant."

Helpless because of the glare and camouflage during the daytime, the aviation had resorted to a night attack when they knew they would find their foes in the open. The Lieutenant understood now why he had been asked to keep an operator on duty, to report events as they developed. Those machines must have left the field as soon as the start of the attack had been reported.

They had covered the distance, over which troops had been plodding for two days and would plod for other days, in under thirty minutes. Thirty dangerous minutes, for a forced landing anywhere meant death in the crash at best. At worst, hours without help, possible capture and the tortures inflicted upon pilots. There was record of an aviator skinned alive.

Many miles away, they had cut off their engines and glided toward the post, easily discerned by the flashes. The garrison had not heard them; neither had the natives, engrossed in the struggle. The roar of their motors had been enough to drive the nearest attackers off the walls. Outside, the horde scattered, in full flight.

The young pilots from La Senia airport were enjoying the reward for their long trip and their danger. They flew very low despite the treacherous light, and constantly seemed on the verge of crashing. But they knew their business, had studied the ground on the maps. Having cleared the immediate vicinity of the post, they circled widely; their rockets blossomed in the distance, followed by bomb explosions.

Here and there, a Saharan forgot his panic through the temptation of such superb targets, halted and sniped at the machines. But they were deceived by the tremendous speed of the planes, by their nearness. Never before had they beheld such velocity; their previous experience

had been sniping at slow observation buses at extreme range. The dry crepitation of the wireless resumed, as the operator reported the success of the raid.

Swiftly the plateau emptied of life and movement. The rockets went out; the sky was dark. For long minutes the planes circled overhead, invisible. Then a last rocket streaked the night, bloomed out. The machines swerved, one by one, dived for the courtyard, zoomed again into space and out of sight.

When the light went out, the small garrison heard the motors recede in the distance. The wind could be heard again, sobbing in the broken wire.

"IT missed the articulation, Lieutenant," Rochas said, some minutes later, as he adjusted a bandage. "The others are scratches. I'll give you injections tomorrow morning." He dipped his hands in the basin of disinfected water: "I better go back, in case they try anything."

"You may go. Thanks. I'll manage to come up, some way, if I'm needed."

The Sergeant left the room. Zaya squatted on her bare heels near the couch. A bruise was showing on her right cheek, from recoils. That, and an abrasion over one eyebrow, gave her a bellicose aspect amusing to Torval. Her cheeks were stained with tears and soot; her eyes were red. But she had recovered her usual poise, as natural as that of a child.

"Zaya—or should I call you Marguerite?"

"No. I am Zaya." She stroked his hand. Then she resumed thoughtfully: "When my father was alive, he never called me Marguerite. I hoped that when I learned a lot, dressed and talked like a French girl, people would call me Marguerite. But I wouldn't want you to do that. I am Zaya. My father always called me that."

She knelt, rested her head on her arms and sobbed a while. Torval stroked her hair, her cheeks: "He may still be alive, Zaya. Who knows? Perhaps—"

"No. I know he is dead. I feel it here." And she pressed his hand against her breast. "I made him wait too long before starting. But it was written. He is dead, I know. And you must not be ashamed because he should have been in prison. He liked you very much, and said, 'Of course, Zaya, if you love him, you must stay with him.' And he said also that if we lived, I must do as you ordered. He said I must understand that you were a chief of soldiers and must obey rules.

"He said perhaps you could not keep me as a wife, because of what he had done, and because it would be bad for you to have a woman who did things Frenchwomen never do, like sitting down on the floor before people, and asking for anything they like, which only small girls do in France, he said. He said that I must make no trouble for you, should not even cry when you told me to go away—"

Torval drew her close and kissed her lips.

"I love you the way you are, Zaya. The rest you could have learned in less than a year." He laughed feverishly. "The trouble would have been with you, not with me. You would have had money, beautiful dresses, and your beauty. You would have met men. I'm just the first of your race you met. You would have seen many others, richer, handsomer. And I would have been very poor, a *meskin,* when I lost my commission."

"Like a rich man losing all his camels?"

"Precisely, Zaya. I would have lost all my camels."

"Then I'm glad we're here."

Torval nodded. Twenty-four hours had made a great difference. He had sacrificed himself by marrying Zaya. Now he wondered at his egotism. She had not changed; he had merely learned that she was all French, that she was comparatively wealthy. From a sucker he had blossomed into an opportunist. But there was no need to worry about that: there were three hours of night remaining.

Long before dawn, the natives would have recuperated. The post had been saved twice, miraculously: first by Heinrich, then by the planes. Heinrich was dead, and the surprise raid would not work twice.

Fear again had left him. He could not feel afraid before her calm acceptance of fate. There was a strength and a fineness in her that constantly amazed him. Her soul was as solidly set as her body was strong and perfect.

"You love me, Jean?" she asked after a while.

"Much more than that, *chérie,*" he replied: "I'm in love with you."

"MADAME TORVAL," the young lieutenant said.

Major Resseguier, of the Native Intelligence Service, had risen when Zaya entered the office. He lifted the small hand offered him to his lips; and he, who knew Arabic better than most *talebs,* spoke in

French to the girl in ragged skirt and tunic—as if she had been a marquise.

"Madame, I salute in you a rare combination, beauty and heroism. I beseech a favorite place among your friends, as I knew your gracious mother and your father, many years ago." And as Zaya arranged herself in a chair, a very absorbing occupation for her, the tall, graying officer caught Torval's eye and gestured meaningly. It was obvious that he understood his subordinate's action and sympathized with him. "I was discussing matters with your husband, madame. You shall have to take him in hand. He is a stubborn pessimist."

"Ah, yes," Zaya replied vaguely.

TORVAL knew she did not understand the word *pessimist*. This was the first test, and he could not feel any humiliation. Words could be learned. He had been in a daze ever since dawn, when, instead of a renewed attack, he had seen a plane land down-slope from the post.

"I have explained to him again and again. No one intends to make trouble for him. You see, we knew what was being planned. But out here, we are not free; there is the Paris Government to consider, and the Paris Government said no fighting—gave strict orders to temporize, gain time. The local authorities were not even authorized to move troops to meet the emergency. Until we were actually attacked, we had orders not to offer the least provocation. We even had to quarrel to obtain permission to use the aviation, making it clear that it was for defense. Using aviation against natives is unpopular in France. The Government is afraid of journalists, madame. Do you know what they are?"

"No, monsieur."

"I'm much afraid you'll find out. They are people who, through relating events, have started to believe they cause them. To come back to our sheep, madame: Your husband was given certain orders, of which I am most ashamed upon seeing you. But we figured that as he was twenty-five years old, a lieutenant, he would know when to obey and when not. I hope there isn't in the army, a single officer who would have behaved otherwise."

Resseguier shrugged.

"However, we must save appearances. Lieutenant Torval is wounded. He will have to spend some time under medical care, let us say three or four months. Then he will obtain convalescent leave, another three months. After that he can apply for six months of leave. He will be out of reach for a full year. Long before that time, we out here will have squashed all unpleasantness. Things went well for us, you see. Moulay was killed by the planes; and a notable, Ahmed Blameni, immediately decided the rest were to cease fighting. He shall—"

"Blameni should be killed too," Zaya said clearly. "He is a disgusting beast."

"Bah!" Resseguier smiled lightly. "How could intertribal politics be carried out without disgusting beasts? You wrong him somewhat, for in a talk I had with him this morning, he expressed gratification that you were well, safe. I have to leave you shortly for another conference with him, at the palm grove."

Zaya hesitated.

"But you will return for tea?"

"I shall be delighted."

Torval escorted him to the gateway, and the Major spoke rapidly: "It will not be all as smooth as I told her, young fellow. But we'll arrange matters."

"And about my permission to marry, Major?"

"No difficulty. We'll locate Father Joseph. Nothing against her family, really. That Sergueny business is so old! You can go through another ceremony in Béchar."

"If she consents."

RESSEGUIER laughed.

"I have seen her look at you! She's superb, really, magnificent. And, Torval—" The Major dug a finger into the lieutenant's side: "You're a very lucky man. You can educate her, shape her just the way you wish. Marriages would be happier if it were always the case. Moreover, she is a proper woman for a soldier. I shouldn't have to tell you that." He extended his hand, which Torval took. "Congratulations! Go back there, and propose for an official marriage."

The young man went back to Zaya.

"What did he say, about me?" she asked.

Torval held her with one arm.

"He said you should obey me, even when you don't feel like it."

He kissed her. "I also have to marry you over again."

"You want to, Jean?"

"As many times as you wish, darling." He laughed: "And anyway—it's orders!"

THE END

Georges Surdez will contribute a colorful short story of the Legion to an early issue.

They Also Serve

The dramatic story of counter-espionage work in London.

By TRACY RICHARDSON

THE R. A. F. I., that little-heralded branch of the British military service whose function is to furnish information on everything connected with aviation, domestic, foreign, allied and the enemy, was in a literal dither of uncertainty. They didn't like to admit it, but for the past fortnight some brazen ass who dubbed himself "Yank" had been putting them on what he called the spot. And the spot had been getting hot.

Not that the R. A. F. I. cared one little damn about any Yank, spotted or otherwise; but it so happened that he had called the turn every time. He had warned them of an impending submarine raid on Scapa Flow, and they had laughed at the nerve of him; and the Navy had lost a major ship. Twice he had warned them of air-raids on M rendezvous of the British fleet, and both times they had jeered and been wrong. He had given them advance information that a fleet of enemy seaplanes was going to mine the North Sea and the English Channel along the path of merchant vessels, British and neutral.

He had warned them that these were not ordinary mines, but a new "magnetic" mine. Again the R. A. F. I. had laughed at such fantastic ideas, and now terrific toll was being taken of British and neutral shipping by mines that so far had baffled the best efforts of the mine-sweepers. It was preposterous.

Instead of meeting the warnings with action or even investigation, Wing-commander Bent, in charge of the R. A. F. I., had branded them the delirium of a crackpot and had sent most of his force scurrying around trying to locate the Yank. This surprising state of affairs had finally leaked through to Admiral Yardley of the Naval Intelligence and sent him storming to the headquarters of this the Royal Air Force Intelligence.

"Has anyone the slightest idea of the identity of this phantom who signs himself Yank?" demanded Admiral Yardley as he paced the floor of the office of Wing-commander Bent. "I for one don't give a hoot if he's a Yank, Jew, gentile or a Turk. If he's got a better source of information than ours, we're fools not to avail ourselves of his services. By your own admission he's been right in every one of his warnings, and you also admit you've ignored every one of them, with dire results. Now dammit, if you're smart enough to get me in touch with this Yank, I'll make it my duty to see him."

Illustrated by Austin Briggs

"But Admiral," protested Wing-commander Bent, "we don't know anything about this Yank person except that he cuts in on our radio and that we can get him the same way. The Yanks are given to gross exaggeration, you know. I couldn't hear to it."

"*You* couldn't hear to it!" blasted the Admiral. "I'm not asking you to hear to it! Probably wouldn't speak the same language, anyway. Put me in communication with him, and I'll do the rest. I

"It's there, Crane, but I just can't put my finger on it. There's something in that voice."

belong to the senior service, and the Navy's not too proud to accept help where and when we can get it."

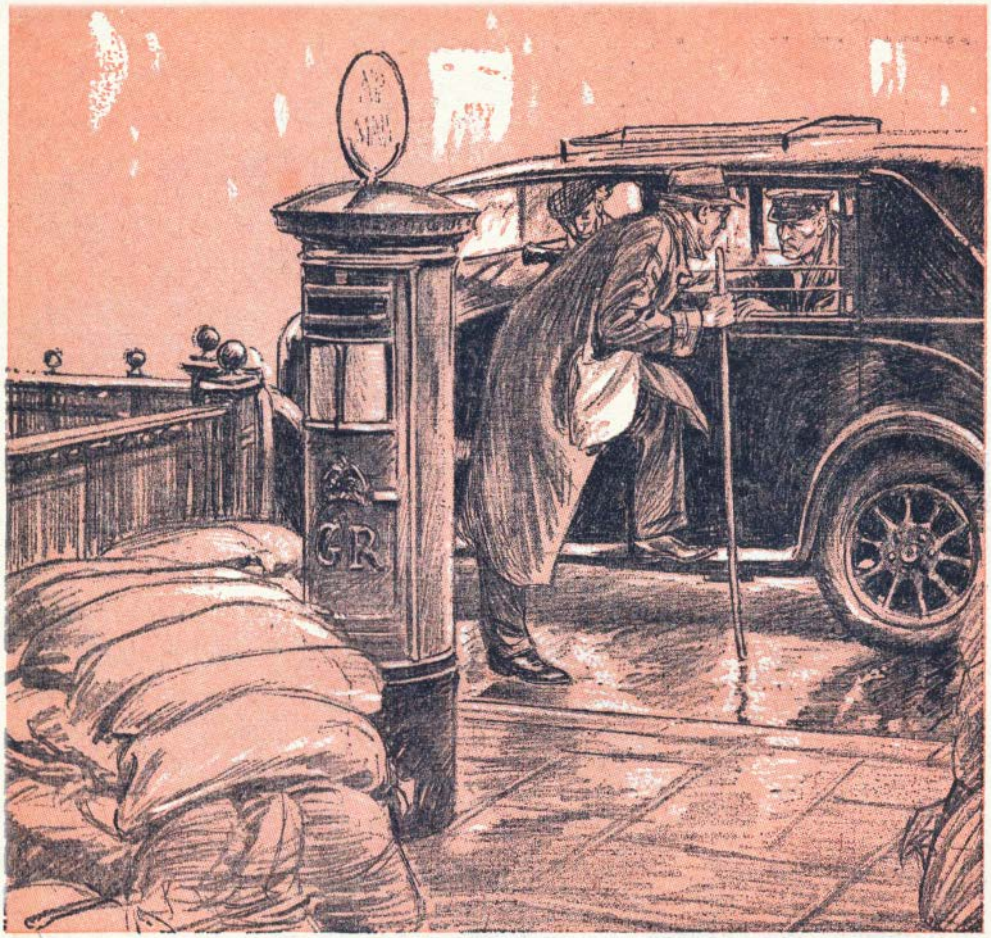
"Very good, sir. I'll have our radio operator get in touch with this Yank at once."

Commander Bent left the room, his face red and his shoulders at an angle in excess of that called for by military training. It was scarcely more than a minute before he was back.

"If you'll be so good as to come to the communications-room, sir, you can talk to this Yank person yourself. Perhaps you will be able to make a contact where we have failed. I warn you he is no respector of rank. He's ribald; he's blasphemous; and I still think he's some sort of a crank who has made some lucky guesses."

"That so! Well, a man who can guess like that will be well worth knowing. I'll form my own conclusions," snapped the Admiral. "Lead the way to this den of yours where all this information is received but never acted on."

Silently he followed Wing-commander Bent down a long corridor, through a



"All right, Yardy! Melodramatic, perhaps, but

locked soundproof door, through another corridor, past a guard who stepped aside and saluted smartly, and then into a long room that was a beehive of activity. Ranged along tables that occupied the entire floor-space were a score of men with earphones clamped over their heads. The tables were covered with an orderly mass of radio equipment.

Here all the short waves emanating from Germany were picked up and passed on to experts to decode. Every dot and dash that filtered through the ether was recorded and given over to technicians who studied it or passed it on as routine. This communications-room was the lifestream of the British Air Intelligence.

"Take this seat, sir," Commander Bent said to the Admiral. "As soon as the contact is completed, you can use these phones and mike." A technician was talking into the set.

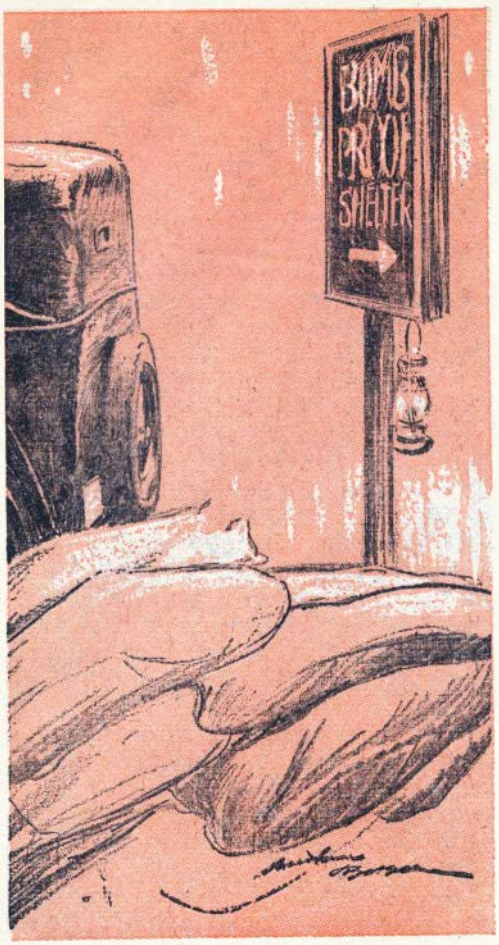
"All right, Yank, come in. Admiral Yardley standing by. Come in, Yank."

"Here you are, sir," he said as he handed the phones to the Admiral. "The Yank's waiting."

Yardley adjusted the phones and then growled: "All right, Yank, go ahead. This is Yardley standing by."

The listeners could not hear the words that came through the air into the earphones, but they saw that Admiral Yardley was startled. In the Admiral's ear a voice spoke, sardonic, jeering: "Yardie! Why, you old pirate! So that's where they've kept you hiding all this time. I've wondered. Say, Yardie, old top, whatever became of that red-haired nurse that was in the officer's ward down at the Chatham Naval Hospital?"

"Why, dammit, I married her!" replied the Admiral without thinking; then he caught himself. "I say, who the devil are you? How'd you know about that? Did you know Lady Gotham? I say, you're not a Yank. I—I say, what the devil d'ye mean, anyway?"



it gets results."

An amused chuckle came to him over the air. "Just checking, Fish-pots, just checking. Wanted to be sure it was *the* Yardley. What's the number of your car?"

"Why you—you—" sputtered the Admiral; and Wing-commander Bent was beaming with enjoyment. It was evident that the Admiral was getting a bit of wind taken out of his sails. "I'll—I'll—I say, where'd you get that name? Haven't heard it since training days down on the Boston Wash. My car is R.N.L. 892."

"Admiralty car, eh! That's too good an advertisement. Take a taxi. Drive through the Arch at exactly high noon, and I'll make contact with you. And Fish-pots, come alone." The reedy chuckle sounded again: "Mysterious, eh! Well, we'll have a spot of lunch and talk over old times. Is it a go?"

"Dammit, man, can't you be more explicit? I can't just pick up and go traipsing around the country at the beck and call of every will o' the wisp. I say, are you there?"

But the mysterious Yank had closed his circuit.

For a full five minutes Admiral Yardley ranted and raved. Why hadn't they located the station where the call came from? Why didn't they use their directional finders to locate it? How long had this damned impertinence been going on? Damned hoax! And then he looked at his wrist-watch, and noting that it was less than fifteen minutes to high noon, he rushed to the street, dismissed his official car and looked for a taxi. Taxi-cabs were not plentiful in these days of petrol-shortage and close regulations, but one slid up to the curb almost as soon as he appeared.

"Here you are guv'nor. Tank full of petrol. Where to, My Lud?"

Yardley stepped into the cab, and they slid off through the traffic toward the Arch. Presently he looked at his watch—two minutes to go. "Push it along, cabby, I want to get to the Arch at exactly high noon."

"Never a fear, Guv'nor. Right there on the second. Here we are, sir."

The cab slowed; the cabby reached back and swung open the door—and a man wearing dark heavy goggles and carrying the long staff affected by the blind, slid into the cab. Admiral Yardley half-raised his stick, when a chuckle greeted his astonished ears.

"All right, Yardy! Melodramatic, perhaps, but it gets results." He spoke to the cabby: "Pete, if everything is clear, head for home."

"Yes sir! Everything clear," said the cabby; and the tires screeched as he made an abrupt turn and headed back toward Trafalgar. They turned again and headed past the Park, and after a few minutes' run drew up to the door of a solid-looking four-story house.

The blind man shed his glasses and cap as he left the cab and said simply: "Will you be so kind as to follow me, Admiral Yardley?"

AND the Admiral didn't have a chance to say a word. They were admitted to the house by a quiet servant, English to the very backbone, and with a look of beef about him that caused the Admiral momentarily to wonder how he had managed to keep out of the military service.

Once inside the living-room, the guide turned toward the Admiral with out-

stretched hand. "Taking a rather unfair advantage of you, sir. Remember me?"

For a moment it looked as though the Admiral was going to explode. But it was only astonishment. *Mel Service, the Yankee flyer!* "Why, you poker-playing, wine-guzzling flying fool! *Mel!* Say, is this a joke?" Then he stuck out his hand, and his face wrinkled into a delighted grin. "Mel, I thought you were killed. After all these years, I'm glad to learn otherwise. But by gad, I certainly wasn't expecting this. Are you by any chance the man who sends in warnings and signs himself 'Yank?'"

"I won't try to hide my shining light from you, Yardley. I'm the man. And I'm mighty glad you barged into this affair. Didn't know you were in Intelligence, or I'd have got in touch with you before this. Now perhaps we can get somewhere."

"But Mel, how do you manage all this? You cut in on the radio, and that's against the Crown regulations. No private radio station is allowed to operate during the emergency. You can be jailed for that."

Service laughed at Yardley's outburst. "Don't forget, Admiral, that I lost my citizenship when I flew with you blokes during the last war. I've never been back to live in the States since that time, so legally I'm a British subject. Either that, or a man without a country. It's a long story, and I haven't time to tell it just now. I've got some information here that you may want to transmit to your bureau, and then we can have a bit of lunch." He handed the Admiral a sheet of paper.

Admiral Yardley read the message. He hesitated; his face flushed, and he reread the lines. "You want me to believe this?" he finally demanded.

"If you don't, chances are you'll lose a battleship. If you do, you stand a good chance to bag or destroy three submarines. I've given several good tips to Wing-commander Bent, but he hasn't seen fit to act on any of them. Now, if *you* don't want to act, I'll be forced to give the information to the papers, and people will begin to wonder just what is being done to win the war. How about it?"

"You always were a crazy devil, Service, but a damned good fighter. I'll take a chance. I'll relay this message through, impossible as it seems. Better still, I'll issue it as an order. May I use your telephone?"

Service grinned. "Telephone too easy to trace. I'll have them cut you in direct to your headquarters by radio. Bent's been trying for weeks to locate our station, but they are still in the dark. Come along."

All Admiral Yardley saw was a portable mike and a head-set. He spoke into the mike and heard the reply from Naval Headquarters. Quickly he identified himself and issued crisp orders—interception orders that called for the convergence of aircraft, destroyers and minelayers, and the laying of a small minefield before a small land-locked harbor

that had always been considered too small for any naval use.

He laid down the mike with a sigh. "There, Service, I've done it! I've broken all British tradition! I've given orders without knowing why, without proper information. Everyone who has to act on them will do so thinking I'm screwy, lost my punch and all that. Now do you feel like telling me why?"

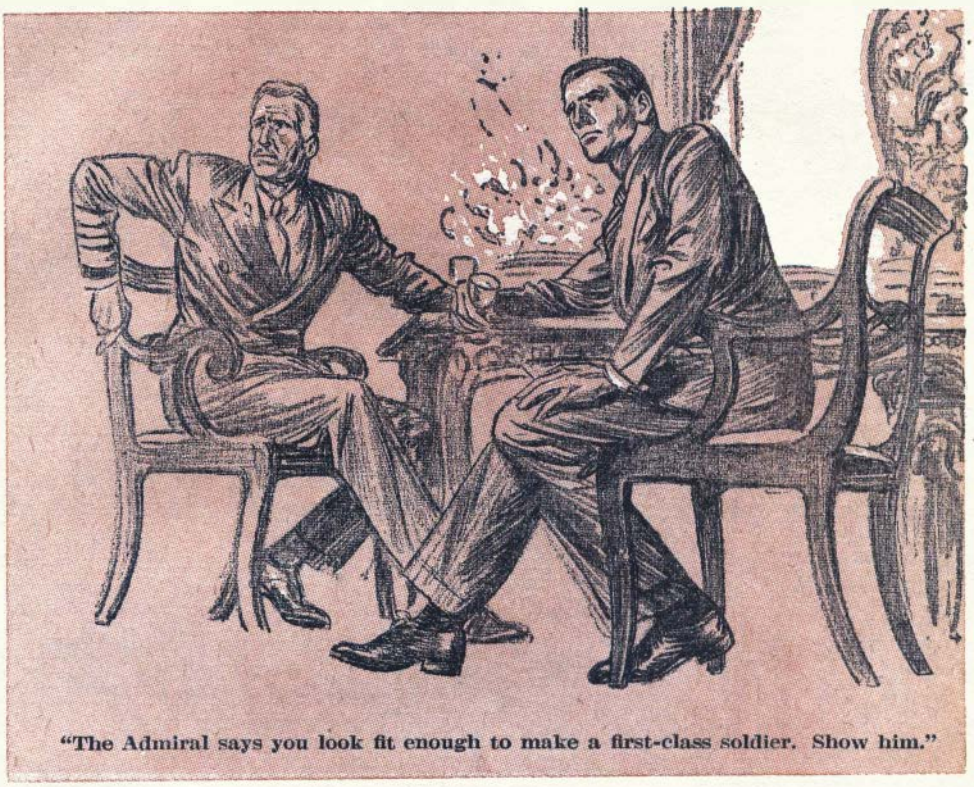
"Just, as the message says, there are three German subs hiding in that harbor, and your mine layers will bottle them up, the destroyers will prevent help from getting to them and the aircraft will spot them and prove that you were right. What they do after that is up to you naval people. I tried to work through my old service, the air corps, but no go. There's something decidedly rotten down there, or I'm a Dutchman."

"But how do you know all this? It's incredible, if true."

"Yardy, that's the reason I could always beat you Britishers playing poker. You always wanted to know what kind of cards I held. About all you know about playing poker is, 'I'll see you.' Come along—let's get a bite of lunch."

The Admiral followed Service like one in a trance. He took his place at the table, and still hardly knowing what he was doing, began picking at the food.

"Here," said Service with a grin, "have a spot of this Rhinewine—German, but it's a top-flight appetizer. The bacon's Irish, the butter Danish, the jam Australian, and the melon comes from Chile. Then there's the meat, the bread and the coffee—and not a damned thing English grown. Ever stop to think what you'll eat if the Germans tighten up on this mine warfare? What are you Navy people going to do—wait until you've one ship left and then go out and win the war?"



"The Admiral says you look fit enough to make a first-class soldier. Show him."

"Oh, we'll find the solution before long," said the Admiral with a wry grimace. "We always win the last battle, you know. Old British tradition."

"Yeah, tradition," said Service grimly. "And in the meantime the men of England are going down with their ships, and taking precious foodstuffs and war material with them. Women and children are kept running through the dark of the blackout to their funk-holes, in constant fear of the rain of bombs. If you're so fond of tradition, why don't you go back to your wooden ships and the days of iron men? Now what are you going to do, twiddle your thumbs?"

"That's just it," groaned Yardley. "What? The North Sea and part of our coast is strewn with mines that we can't sweep up. There's fame and fortune in it for the person who has the right answer. You're so good at guessing, or something—what's your answer?"

Service smiled at Yardley's seriousness. "Oh, don't be too grumpy about it. You'll catch a mine-layer one of these days, or some of them will wash ashore and you'll discover that they are nothing so wonderful after all; and then you'll kick yourself for getting all het up. War's gone scientific, and we can expect anything. Anyway, I'll promise to give some thought to the idea."

"You an expert along such lines, Service?"

"Not I. But there are experts and men the Government never heard of. There's a scientist here with me named McTavish who, I think, is one of the country's greatest electrical engineers. I'll turn the idea over to him to play with."

"Apparently," said Admiral Yardley as they sipped their brandy and smoked, "you've got considerable of an organization here, but still I can't understand it. How do you keep men of military age out of the armed service. That butler of yours seems just about the age limit, but he's strong; and if I ever saw a soldier, he's been one. Looks to me as though you were treading on rather dangerous ground, what."

"Well taken, Yardley. You saw the butler and the taxi-driver—oh, yes, he's one of my men. Well, I'll explain the entire organization with the butler." He pressed the service button, and Miller, the butler, entered.

"MILLER, Admiral Yardley wants to know how you manage to keep out of the armed service. Says you look fit enough to make a first-class soldier. Show him."

Miller's face spread into a broad smile. "With pleasure, sir." From his pocket he took a paper and handed it to the Admiral. As Yardley read, the butler calmly pulled up his right trouser-leg, displaying a mechanical limb of metal and plastics that ran all the way to his hip. The paper was an army discharge showing that Sergeant Albert Miller of the Iniskillen Dragoons had lost his leg in active service of the Crown.

Admiral Yardley was very thoughtful as he surveyed this evidence. "And you've taken these men and molded them into an organization for espionage! Service, it's fantastic. Why, you're not even an Englishman! You even sign yourself 'Yank.' Why, man? *Why?*"

"In the first place, Yardley, you're not altogether right. This is not what you'd call an organization for espionage. Primarily it is purely a commercial organization. I'll give you a brief outline, if you've the patience to listen."

"Patience! Man it looks to me as though I were doing more for England today than if I had captured a sub. Go on, you have my undivided attention.

"WELL, when you knew me back in the last war, I had nothing but my flying pay and a thirst for adventure; and I guess I was about as wild a youngster as ever hopped an S.E.5. In '18, just before the Armistice, I got a few pieces of archie shell in my innards. After that, it was hospitals, hospitals and more hospitals. The doctors said I'd never be able to get around again, so I was resigned to spend the rest of my life in a hospital bed, with an occasional spree in a convalescent home.

"Later an uncle of mine brought in an oil-field on some land he owned in Texas—that's in the United States of America, in case you don't know—and then he died and left me more millions than I'll ever be able to spend. I left the hospital, bought this place, hired the best doctors it was possible to find, and made up my mind I was going to get well. They operated; they probed, sewed nerves together and grafted, and I did get well, so much so that today I can just about whip my weight in wildcats.

"But I was lonesome through all of this. I'd spent over ten years in hospitals. I've read and studied almost everything under the sun. I hired tutors to teach me languages and something of the arts. Everything that caught my interest I studied. Then I got to thinking about some of the poor chaps I'd known in various hospitals: men who had as much on the ball as I did, only they didn't have either the money or the incentive. Take the legs off a man, and you kill something in his soul. I remembered a young Scotch electrical engineer who had lost both legs. I had him brought here. That man was McTavish, who today is a great creative engineer. That was the start of the organization.

"I searched the hospitals and convalescent homes for technical men who had lost their legs, one or both—men whose

physical injuries barred them from their chosen professions. Officially this place is a convalescent home, and that accounts for the number of men living here. We established schools, set up laboratories for research; and as an outlet for some of our industry, we went into business. As our numbers increased and were turned out fully trained in various branches of profitable works, we set up agencies in various parts of the world, mostly as points of information about world markets and news.

"We found so many men of literary and newspaper training, or with ambitions along that line, that we went into the publishing business. You'd be surprised if you knew the stock in British newspapers we control, and the number of men we have on papers throughout the world; and every one of them went through this convalescent home and our training, all members of the Legion of Cripples. Are you beginning to get the picture?"

"SERVICE, I'm dumfounded. I think you could teach this government something, any government! Why, I never heard of anything like it. I'll take it back: it's not fantastic—it's magnificent. Go on, man, tell me more. I'm a naval man, and we've a war on our hands, but I'm glad to know that there is some hope for after the war."

"Well, we've gathered some of the best brains of the country. Their physical handicaps have not impaired their brain-power—rather, enhanced it. This venture, born through loneliness, has gone far beyond anything I ever dreamed of. I thought to help a few unfortunates back to a useful, cheerful life, and I've developed a business that is paying dividends enough to make every member of the organization financially independent."

"I still marvel, Service. I just can't believe that such a thing could happen here in these tight little islands and no one ever hear about it. But tell me, how do you get all this information you've been passing along to the R. A. F. I.? You say you're not engaged in espionage."

"For that, I'll have to give you a bit more detail of the organization. Our greatest development has been in the way of communications. McTavish is responsible for that. His electrical genius has developed several new ideas in radio transmission and reception. One is a radio that operates on low voltage in a wave-band that is never touched by standard or short-wave broadcast. He has largely eliminated static and mechanical interference. We have sets so small you can carry one in your coat pocket and carry on a two-way conversation up to five hundred miles. Our more powerful sets will cover the world. We have the finest voice radio service in the world, bar none.

"That's the picture, not complete, for it would take days to tell you all the details. It's like a giant spider-web radiating over the world and having its converging lines centering here in London—in fact, here in this very house. We have news-analysts in every nerve-center of the world, most of them capable of passing as nationals of the country in which they work. Their handicap of lost legs precludes their being called to any army and diverts suspicion.

"If things work out, Yardley, some day I'd like to take you through our headquarters. Our organization is one hundred per cent patriotic, and they have all voted to do their best to serve England during this crisis. Right now our greatest need is a sure and secret way of turning such information as we get over to the government without disclosing our hand. That's where you can function."

"Count on me to do my best. Now I'd better get along. After what you've told me, I'm going to 'tend to this interception job myself, and see to it that those subs do not escape. I'll leave word at Headquarters that the Yank is to get through to me at any time, wherever I am."

"Thanks. That will help, and will do until we can work out a better system. It's not all beer and skittles, you know. The Germans know someone is turning in some of their important secrets, and they're nearly crazy trying to break our system of communication."

For a long time after Admiral Yardley had left, Mel Service sat before the grate

fire, smoking, and sipping at a brandy. It looked as though his organization was going to be forced into an important spot where their services would be of value not only to England but to the entire civilized world. If he and his men could by their help destroy the vultures fighting to destroy the civilization of the world, he would be well content. His meditations were interrupted by the butler, Miller.

"Sir, there's an article in the morning *Express* that merits your attention. I've taken the trouble to make some inquiries and I find that Wing-commander Bent of the R. A. F. I. is responsible. His motives seem rather obscure."

"Good, Miller, I'll look it over."

HE spread the paper and read the short note: an article that was part of an informative gossipy column of so called inside information. It read:

> America is neutral. Most of us are glad of that. We'd hate a repetition of all the arguments as to who won the war. But neutral or not, we understand there is a certain Yankee here in England trying to mix into things that do not concern him, or them. This is another war, and the crude efforts of the Yankee in question to break in will only bring down reprisals on innocent heads. Their system is good—good and fantastic.

There was a gleam in Service's eyes as he finished. "Miller, it looks as though we had stepped on someone's toes, and it looks very much as if those toes belong to Bent of the R. A. F. I."

"I thought you'd be interested. Looks sort of like a silly break, though."

"It certainly was, but Miller, we don't always know the driving force behind the other fellow. Tonight I'll give Graves the material for a blast in the *Times* that will start Mr. Bent's boat to rocking. I think things are beginning to pop."

"Crane just reported that he had received an interesting flash from Stevens in Leningrad. He thought you might want to look in on it, sir."

Service crossed the room, pressed a button, and a panel slid back, revealing a well-lighted stairway leading downward. The floor was revealed as of several feet of concrete; and below was a series of large rooms, soundproofed, and separated by heavy plate-glass, and lighted by an indirect system as soft as daylight.

The main room in many ways resembled the communications-room at the Air Service Headquarters. It was more compact; the radio sets were smaller, and connected with recording sets. Men were seated at tables busy taking down what come in over various sets. Next was the code-room, where men worked on messages that needed decoding. There was a photographic room equipped to do everything photographic, from making the simplest prints and copies to transmitting pictures by radio. There was a machine that seemed all whirling disks and vapor lights. This was the set that transmitted pictures direct from negative to negative; and due to the diminution of static and mechanical interference, the transmitted negatives were nearly as clear as the original.

Service found Crane in the record-room where all messages and information were filed for reference. All recordings were on metal strips the size of sixteen millimeter film. Crane already had the message-strip from Stevens threaded into a voice-projection machine. As Service took a chair, he started the machine. Crystal clear came the voice that just a few minutes before had been talking from distant Leningrad.

"The Russians are preparing for a tremendous push against Finland. They are assembling submarines to attack all shipping in the Baltic, over which they intend to establish complete control. Thousands of wounded are coming back from the Finnish front, but they do not stop here. People are beginning to ask if Russia is at war. Great uneasiness here among the populace, but the government is cracking down with an iron hand. Those who know say it is easier to die here than it is at the front. Present Russian war plans call for complete subjugation of all Scandinavian countries."

For a long time after he had listened to Stevens' voice from Russia, Service sat with his head buried in his hands. He was trying to recall a voice, a voice that had been haunting him for days. He was trying to remember where he had heard the voice of Wing-commander Bent and just why it intrigued him. "Bring the voice-strips that were recorded when I talked to Commander Bent on the standard wave," he said to Crane.

A MINUTE later the metal voice-strip was being run over the voice-projector, the two-way conversation. Service's voice was high and nasal, for he had talked through a thin metal tube. Bent's voice came in brusque and annoyed, a

voice that had a natural ring of command. There was a slight drag to certain words, almost amounting to an accent on certain syllables.

Over and over Service ran the metal voice-strip, slowing it down and speeding it up to catch any change of inflection; but at last he gave up with a mutter of disgust. "It's there, Crane, but I just can't put my finger on it. There's something in that voice."

"We have another voice-strip of Bent," said Crane, whose memory was almost as perfect as the records he filed away. "There was a strip made when he flew one of the planes that accompanied the Minister on his trip to Munich. Tillson was covering that job as a correspondent, and was equipped with one of our pocket transmission-sets."

"FINE, Crane. Let's have it."

Again Service sat before the voice-projector and listened to every intonation of the conversation recorded. Over and over he ran it, and a gleam of understanding brightened his eyes. He was listening to a conversation between Wing-commander Bent and a German flying officer called Ludwig. He had to strain his ears to distinguish which one was talking, Bent or the German officer. Recorded, their voices blended so smoothly that it sounded like one man asking questions and answering himself. Finally with a grim look on his lips Service carried the voice-projector and the metal strip to the communications-room.

"Get Admiral Yardley on the standard wave-length and tell him the Yank wants to talk. Important—rush it."

"Yes sir. Right away."

It was ten minutes before they made contact with Yardley; then his voice came in clear and excited. "Yank, just got a report from the air-fleet, and they have located three subs in the designated harbor. You take the first trick. Anything new?"

"Yes! Vital! Got to have action right away, with no questions asked. Post a guard of fifty military police in the building occupied by the R. A. F. I. Have them check everyone by signature and fingerprints—act knowing as hell, but don't actually molest anyone. Can you do it?"

"Irregular, but after those three subs, I'll chance anything. They'll be there under a special Intelligence officer within an hour. How long are they to remain?"

Service chuckled grimly. "Tell the officer to call you every half-hour, then use your own judgment. If anything goes wrong with my plan, I'll call you. Remember, it's your responsibility and your glory. Not a word about the Yank."

An hour later Service had a connection made through to the headquarters of Wing-commander Bent. When Bent's irritated voice came over the ether, Service said:

"Bent, you think the Yank's rather boastful, do you? How do you like the display of military police around you?" He chuckled as Bent's explosive curses told that the shot had hit home. "Here's something else, Bent, a little record of two men talking in Munich. I think you'll know what to do about it. . . . Happy landings."

He switched on the metal voice-strip, and the conversation made months before sped out over the air, true to life. Before it was half over, Bent cut in. "You win, Yank. But I'd give a lot to know who you are and how you've managed to accomplish the impossible. . . . So that's why the police are here. Well, thanks for the tip. Good-by."

"Wait!" shouted Service. "Where's the real Commander Bent?"

"I'm sorry about Bent, Yank," came the voice over the radio "but we couldn't take chances of his getting word out. War is a dirty game, and for men doing our line of work, the end is usually the same, *Ich Dien.*" (I serve.)

SERVICE leaned back in his chair. Cold sweat beaded his forehead; he stared at the dead transmitter in front of him with unseeing eyes.

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked Crane, who stood at his elbow.

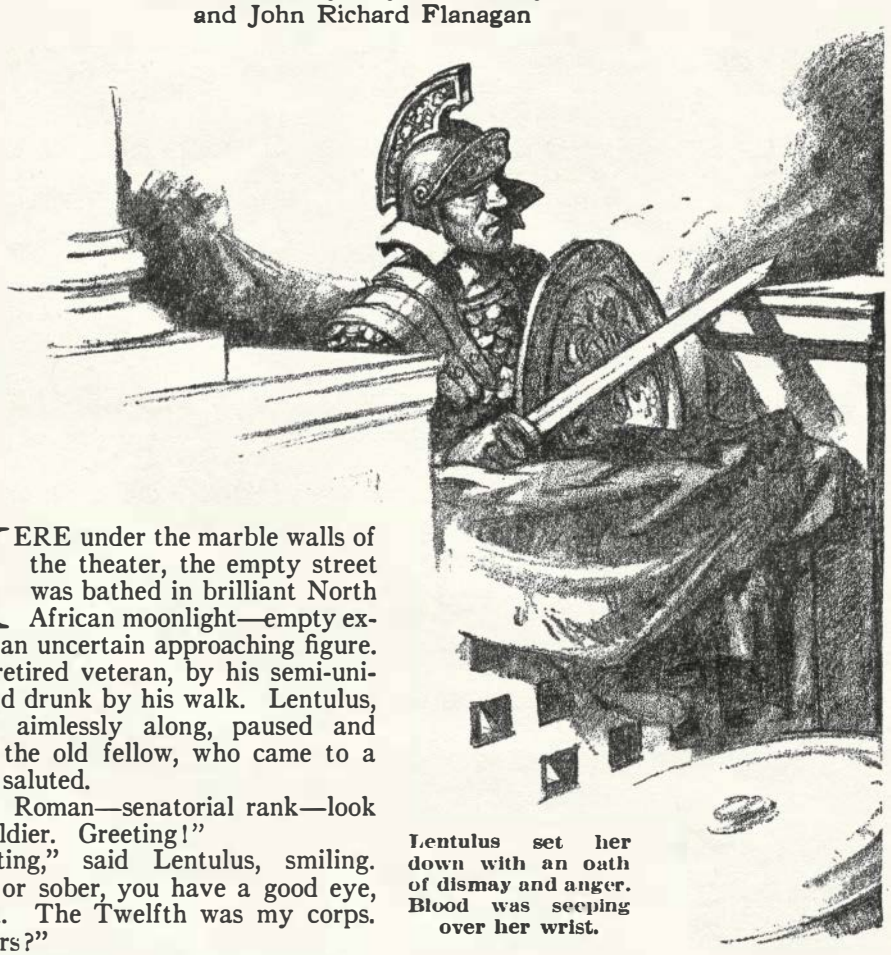
"No, Crane. Everything's worked out perfectly. But I just heard a brave man pronounce his own death-sentence. He said, *'I serve,'* and that it would be the end of all of us who so serve. I hope he is not prophetic."

"Not a bit of it, sir. Only God can know the future."

"Perhaps so, Crane. But there are a lot of people in this world trying to set themselves up as gods. It's really a pretty good world we live in—just gone a bit crazy for the nonce. Now take me, for instance. I'll prophesy that within an hour we'll get word that the German officer Ludwig, who has been posing as Commander Bent, is dead. Then we can close the record. Our work is done."

Daughter Of Cleopatra

Illustrated by Raymond Sisley
and John Richard Flanagan



Lentulus set her down with an oath of dismay and anger. Blood was seeping over her wrist.

HERE under the marble walls of the theater, the empty street was bathed in brilliant North African moonlight—empty except for an uncertain approaching figure. An old retired veteran, by his semi-uniform, and drunk by his walk. Lentulus, strolling aimlessly along, paused and awaited the old fellow, who came to a halt and saluted.

"Ha! Roman—senatorial rank—look like a soldier. Greeting!"

"Greeting," said Lentulus, smiling. "Drunk or sober, you have a good eye, my man. The Twelfth was my corps. And yours?"

"Centurion of the Twentieth, sir." The old fellow drew himself up. "There's a colony of us veterans settled here, up the valley. Stranger in Cæsarea, sir?"

"Just landed today, Centurion," rejoined Lentulus. "A beautiful city you have here."

"Isn't a patch on Rome, sir," hiccuped the veteran. "Not a patch. Have you seen the Queen yet?"

"Not yet. Nor the King."

"Ha! King Juba—he's an old drone who writes books. Roman puppet. Selene was married to him and shipped off here to Africa—saved her life. Old Octavian would have her murdered in a minute if she showed any political ambitions! Selene, named for the moon goddess. Daughter of Cleopatra and Mark Antony—ha! There was a man for you! My old commander, sir: Antony. Wonderful man, wonderful! Well, well, I must be getting along. My wife will be waiting. She's a terror, sir. 'Night to you!"

This second story of the series "The World Was Their Stage" takes us back to ancient Alexandria and a drama memorable indeed.

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

"Good night," said Lentulus gravely, and the veteran meandered away down the street.

The young Roman drew the balmy air deeply into his lungs, and gazed about. He could appreciate the loveliness of this city, the capital of Numidia; he knew, too, that the veteran had voiced something of the truth regarding the queen of this land.

Selene, Daughter of the Moon, was also daughter of Antony and Cleopatra. She had been shunted off here by the evil old Octavian, to get her out of the way; it was true that Octavian would have her murdered in short order if he suspected her of ambition.

"That's why he sent me to make a report on her," murmured Lentulus, gathering up his toga. "But what a city she's built here! Ruler and goddess alike, transplanting here all the Greek culture she so dearly loves.... Ah, it's beautiful tonight!"

Beautiful, indeed, this city modeled on Selene's beloved Alexandria. Here were the same wide streets, the same two harbors, similar buildings, in some cases built with actual stones and columns brought from Alexandria. And here was the most beautiful theater in the world, a Greek theater. Lentulus turned to it, and strolled into the building.

ALL deserted in the moonlight were the marble walls, the lower boxes for people of quality, the stage dominated by its triple row of pillars with Corinthian capitals. Beyond and below, down the hillsides of the city, the forum and royal palace, the baths and public buildings, stretched to the sea. But here was regal beauty, empty and lovely in the staring silver moonlight.... Not empty, either! A voice sounded from the stage, a voice like a sigh. Nothing moved there. The voice came from the wings, a voice gentle as the very moonbeams, restrained and silvery.

"What a night it would be to give the Agamemnon, the immortal drama of Æschylus! Moonlight, and a flaming torch, and the tragedy of a hero! What a performance it would be, here above the moonlit sea—how much better than a daytime performance in sun and heat!"

"Oh, Æschylus is too highbrow, too hard to understand," drifted another voice, also that of a woman. "Euripides is far better. More action in his dramas! Take the Hippolytus, for instance—"

"Very well, then take it!" broke in the first voice, with a tinkle of laughter. "Let's see, now; what's that chorus we like so much? It goes like this—"

The voice lifted in the rolling Greek lines, soft-cadenced and lilting. Lentulus stepped forward a little, entranced by that voice. He knew those words very well:

Could I take me to some cavern for mine hiding
In the hilltops where the sun scarce hath trod,
Or a cloud make the home of mine abiding
As a bird among the bird-droves of god—

The voice failed, then sounded in mild irritation.

"There! I've forgotten the next verse!"

From Lentulus broke a soft laugh. At the corner of the stage, he could now detect a small, exquisite figure in the moonlight. He turned, lifting his voice against the resounding marble wall behind him, and continuing the quotation in superbly cadenced Greek:

To the strand of the Daughters of the Sunset,
The apple-tree, the singing and the gold;
Where the mariner must stay him from his onset
And the red wave is tranquil as of old!

He stepped forward. The shape of the woman moved, her bared head and massed hair enveloped in misty radiance. She made direct inquiry, in that voice of lingering music.

"You are no actor! A Roman—and by your toga, of senatorial rank! Who are you, friend?"

The young man smiled up at her.

"Charming nymph of the moonlight, names no longer count in Rome, where any tradesman can buy adoption into an old family! Mine is Lentulus. And yours?"

"Oh! You are Lentulus!" she exclaimed. "Well, I am Olympia. Wait a moment."

She slipped away into the shadows. Lentulus caught a murmur of voices, both liquid-silver and enchanting. He waited, amused by this adventure on his first evening in Cæsarea. Presently Olympia returned, small, dainty, flower-perfect.

"You speak beautiful Greek, Lentulus! Are you a stranger in town?"

"I arrived today from Ostia and Rome."

She peered at him curiously, a smile on her lips, and then nodded.

"I REMEMBER, a report came to the palace. Lentulus, of patrician family. Until three years ago, an officer with the Syrian legions; military attaché to the court of King Herod of Judea; then back to Rome, and now in the service of the emperor. A simple traveler in Numidia—in reality, here to report on political matters to Augustus."

The young man stood transfixed and chilled by these words. At his chagrin, his disconcerted air, Olympia broke into a gay trill of laughter.

"Oh, we're in constant touch with Rome, my friend! I'm one of the queen's ladies. We shall treat you as a guest, not as a spy—one who speaks such perfect Greek deserves our hospitality! Come, I shall take you in charge myself, and you shall give me all the gossip from Rome. I have a villa in the west end that I'm not using. Will you let me place it at your disposal, and my friendship with it?"

"Daughter of Cleopatra and Mark Antony — ha! There was a man for you! My old commander, sir, Antony."

For a moment the Roman was staggered by this offer. He perceived instantly that he was dealing with no palace servant, but with some great lady of the land. It flashed upon him that the intelligence service of Queen Selene must be nearly as good as that of Augustus, and was infinitely more charming. His decision was immediate.

"With all my heart, if you're in earnest!" he said cheerfully. "I've heard of African hospitality—"

"Even to a spy," she broke in, with a brusque gesture. He recoiled from the word, and she broke into a laugh again. "Come! Can't you take your part, your rôle, in good grace? We're in the theater, friend—be an actor! Well, then, suppose we leave the stage. Escort us back to the palace."

"Gladly," said he.

"And after that, the night's young. I'll go with you and see you safely established in the Villa Olympia. Don't expect litters and slaves and Syrian or Roman luxury. Here in the land of Berbers, we stand on our own feet, and ceremony be hanged. Come!"

HIS astonishment deepened, as he obeyed. Olympia and her companion preceded him from the place; he followed in surmise. The second figure was draped, her voice low, her face hidden. Evidently women of rank. Mystery, however, enveloped that second woman; when they reached the palace gates, the guards saluted and stood away. The second figure passed in; Olympia turned to Lentulus.

"Shall we go to my villa and talk, while slaves fetch your luggage? Spy of Cæsar and spy of Selene—eh?"

"Your frankness," he rejoined dryly, "captivates me. By all means!"

As they went on past the palace and turned westward, he marveled at this royal dwelling, for Rome herself had nothing like it. The moonlight softened and enriched its lovely marbles; diorite columns, serpentined Italian marble, porphyry from Egypt, dazzling white Greek and Carrara marbles, all brought to enrich this royal palace in Cæsarea, the new Alexandria.

Passing to the west of the Circus, where games and gladiatorial combats like those of Rome were coming into great vogue, the two reached the fashionable residential part of town. Lentulus was struck by a sudden thought; who could that mysterious companion have been, except Selene herself, the Daughter of the

"You are no actor! A Roman—and by your toga, of senatorial rank! Who are you, friend?"

Moon? He recalled the murmur of voices. The Queen had set her companion to entangle this emissary of the old and dying Augustus—

His train of thought was abruptly broken off. They had reached a glorious little villa built of the beautiful yellow and rose Numidian marble. Slaves greeted them; lights were brought; and Lentulus found himself transported into luxury and beauty that could only have been equaled in the Greek Orient.

There was nothing of the Roman in this charming villa. The rooms were grouped about a central patio, where gay tiles, fountains, mosaics and statues met the eye, and huge water-lilies floated in the ponds as in Alexandria. Here Lentulus sank down on soft rugs beside Olympia, while slaves brought fruits and wine and cakes; a freedman took his signet, in order to get his luggage from the tavern—for he had come to Africa as a simple stranger.

He resolved upon swift and abrupt attack. Even as he was choosing his words, however, awareness of the girl beside him set his senses reeling. He looked at her, and broke into impulsive and unintended speech.

"Strange, strange! You are woman, not a goddess—yet this is like the other time. A sense of strangeness, of mystic influences about me; as though I were in the very presence of the gods! You are only a woman; yet I can feel it—"

He broke off abruptly. She smiled, but watched him intently, and spoke.

"I look like my mistress, so perhaps you take me for a goddess also! But what of the other time? When was that? Are Romans so intimate with the gods?"

Lentulus flushed, but went on awkwardly: "It's not easy to tell. It was four years ago, just before the death of King Herod. The crazy old despot sent to kill all the children in one of his villages—he had no end of damnable de-

lusions, you know. I was on the highway that night, riding to inspect the summer camp of Herod's legions, when I met a man, a woman and a baby. The woman was in a bad way. Later, I realized they must have been in flight from that village, though at the moment it didn't occur to me. Not that it would have made any difference—"

His voice trailed off. Presently, in the silence, he went on:

"I HELPED them, gave them food and directions for the Egyptian caravan route, and a bit of money. They were only Jews, of course, but they impressed me, and I felt that strange sensation of tingling awe. Perhaps it was the baby; I don't know. I asked where they were going in Egypt. They did not know. The Jew was a carpenter by trade. He said, I remember, that it did not matter whither they went, and used the curious phrase: 'Tomorrow all roads are one!' I've often thought of it since. A certain truth in it. Well, they went their ways; I went mine, and that's all. A lame little story."

"Lame? No," came her rich voice, deeply stirred. "Who knows, Lentulus, when one meets the gods? They come, they speak, they pass—we don't suspect. Tomorrow all roads are one! Yes, a deep meaning in those words, perhaps."

"I didn't mean to bore you with all that," he said, abruptly conscious that he must get to prosaic things. He looked at her again. Selene! A stupefying sense of shock smote him. Selene! No, no, it was impossible. Her name was Olympia. She merely looked like Selene.

"That's not what I meant to say at all," he went on, hesitant, awkward. "It's something important. You could help me get the message delivered, if I dared trust you."

"Trust," she ordered laconically. Lentulus frowned slightly. He felt helpless before her. Trust? It meant putting his life in her hands. Trust her, indeed? This woman seemed a girl, but she was woman—thirty, perhaps. One could never be sure of age; she was one of those rare women whom life and love and childbirth and suffering touch lightly and leave eternally youthful. She was small, exquisitely made so far as one could tell for her modest, snowy robes; and she was not beautiful; yet she was marvelous in sheer beauty. In animation, in speech, in laughter, she changed and fairly radiated a magnetic charm.

"All right." Abruptly he produced a coin, a silver denarius of Queen Selene. He pointed to her silver head, and to the disk and plumes of Isis. "Here's your Selene," he said, almost roughly: "born on the feast of Isis, Daughter of the Moon, hailed with prophecies. Do you know the prophecy made at her birth?"

"Do you?" asked Olympia.

"Yes; that in her the East and West should be united, the empire of Rome and Egypt be made one—in other words, that she would destroy Rome, as Anthony and Cleopatra almost did. Augustus gave her this kingdom, with a complaisant, scholarly husband. They've made it a great and wealthy empire. They can call up a hundred thousand fighting Berbers. Their navy is powerful. Theirs? Hers alone. She, Selene, is the real ruler here."

"True, perhaps," she commented, and nibbled at the luscious grapes.

"What's the situation in Rome? She has enemies there, bitter enemies; at last they've won the ear of the old, doddering, dying Augustus. Livia, the Empress, the mistress of poison and assassination, hates Selene and fears her. Augustus sent me here to make a report on Selene, on this province of the empire, her kingdom; if I report that she's a menace to Rome, he'll not hesitate to destroy her."

Olympia's face paled a little. Her eyes, searching him, rebelled with inner fires.

"Did anyone else send you?" she asked.

"You seem well served with spies here yourself," he retorted. "What do you fear?"

"I don't fear; I hope," she said softly.

HE drew a deep breath and smiled.

"One man in Rome is the friend of Selene, has been her friend since boyhood," he made slow answer. "Some say he loves her; I don't know. He told me to deliver a message to her, secretly, as soon as possible. Can you get me an audience with her?"

"I can," she rejoined. "What's the message?"

"That's none of your business."

"So? Does it come, by any chance, from Tiberius?"

He started. "Yes! Tiberius, who'll be the next Imperator when Augustus dies."

"I thought as much. The message is important?"

"More; it's urgent," he replied curtly. Then, as she measured him with thoughtful gaze, he made an impulsive, irritated gesture and flung caution to the winds.

"Hell take all pretense and sparring! Look at the face on that coin, and at your own; you're Selene herself, as I thought. I must give you the message, for it means life or death. Beware, said Tiberius, of the Greek physician Loxias; he pretends to come from Alexandria, but he was sent from Rome. There you have it."

SHE betrayed no astonishment, but her eyes widened a trifle.

"Indeed! The physician Loxias arrived last week from Alexandria; the Queen was ill, but he has cured her. I'll see that your warning reaches her at once. You'll see her at the Festival of Isis, day after tomorrow. The moon will be at the full two nights from now."

She paused, twisting the ring on her finger.

"Don't deceive yourself," she went on. "I'm not the Queen; I'm Lady Olympia. It's my task to learn your secrets, to inspire you with the proper report for Cæsar's ears. But I do carry the Queen's signet." She removed the ring and handed it to him. "It is her dearest possession. The head upon it, like the head upon the coin, does look like me."

Lentulus examined the crystal intaglio. "Exquisitely done. It's the Queen?"

"Not at all; it's her mother, Cleopatra. This ring belonged to Cleopatra; it's the only thing of Cleopatra's that Selene possesses, and she treasures it for that reason."

Watching her replace the ring on her left hand, Lentulus felt the contrast of her quiet poise with his own tumultuous confusion. Not the Queen, after all! He had been hasty, impetuous, boyish in voicing his thoughts. She looked at him and smiled.

"You're not like most Romans," she observed slowly. "Rarely are they generous, noble and impulsive of heart; they're like Cæsar himself, shrewd and crafty and subtle. But you are different, Lentulus. With you I can talk freely, even if you're a spy. Strange words, those you quoted! I can't forget them. 'Tomorrow, all roads are one!'"

Lentulus leaned forward. The moon had risen higher, and a drift of silver struck down into the patio, touching her with misty radiance. It was March, and spring; the balmy African air was sweet with flowers. Everything combined to stir the heart in the young Roman.

"Very well," said he. "Whether you're Queen, slave-girl or courtesan, matters nothing; in my eyes you are yourself, the most beautiful of women! There need be no secrets between us. Remain here in your own villa. Stay with me; as you've been ordered to do, learn all I say and do and think—I ask no better. Tomorrow the festival of Isis begins. They tell me people are already crowding into the city. Be my companion for the festival!"

A smile touched her lips, faint and mysterious; her eyes were amused.

"You flatter me! Certainly you don't lose any time—"

"Don't be obvious," he broke in, a little hoarsely. "I'm not joking; it's as I told you: the second time in my life I've had this feeling that the gods were close. It's so now. If you're not the Queen, then you must be even more of a goddess than she is. I ask nothing of you, Olympia; merely fulfill your duty, be my companion!"

"Oh! Then you don't know what our festival of Isis means? What it is?"

"I know nothing about it," he said frankly. "The worship of Isis is forbidden in Rome. I care nothing about it. All I care about is to be with you."

She looked at him for a long moment, then rose.

"I believe you." She held out her hand to him and smiled. "Good night. I grant what you ask; I'll return here in the morning, and until this time tomorrow night we'll be companions. One day out of life—why not? I never met a man like you. Good night."

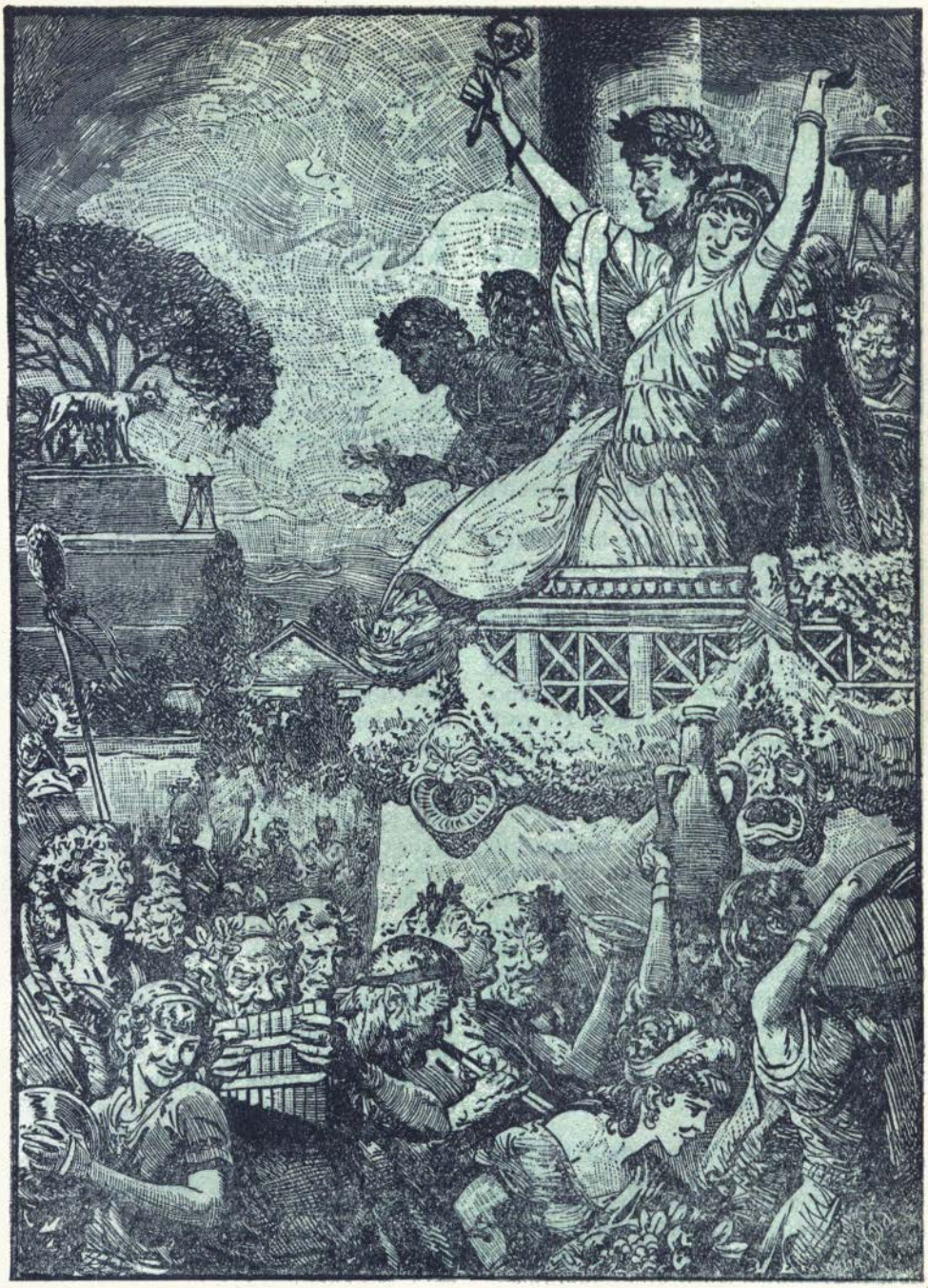
She turned and started away. "Wait! Don't forget!" he exclaimed sharply. "The warning to the Queen!"

She stopped, still smiling. "I don't know why Cæsar, old and suspicious and dying, should have trusted you, Lentulus; but I know why any woman would trust you. Good night."

AND this time she was gone, and the night was empty.

He dreamed of her as he slept, thought of her when he waked. Her profile, like that of the Daughter of the Moon on the silver denarius; her radiant, shining presence, moon-misted and serene and aloof. Some breath of the gods was surely in her. He had felt the same about that Jewish family fleeing the sword of Herod; a sureness, a serenity, a godlike radiant presence. Four years ago, that was; yet he remembered it as though it had been yesterday.

He had come to Africa filled with speculation and curiosity respecting Cleo-



"Life's everywhere; just enjoy it, you and I! Now's the time for freedom, for wine and flowers and dancing!"

patra's daughter; now it was gone. He could vision this Olympia as the real power behind Queen Selene, shrewd, wise, tactful. She resembled the Queen; she probably steered the policies of the kingdom. That the guards knew her crystal intaglio ring, was highly significant.

With morning, he questioned the slaves he found attending him. They spoke freely; Lady Olympia was the daughter of a Berber chieftain, now dead; she had traveled afar, was the confidante of the Queen, and had never married. All this confirmed his opinions. He could not better fulfill his mission here than in following his heart's dictates. Scarcely had he breakfasted, when she arrived, alone. Her appearance startled him.

He exclaimed with surprise. "Olympia! But it's not you at all!"

"On the contrary, good sir!" She broke out laughing. "If I'm to guide you about the city, I don't want to be recognized. Are you disappointed? Perhaps you don't want to be seen in the company of a plain Berber girl?"

"In any guise, you're the loveliest woman in the world!" he exclaimed gravely. "I dreamed of you; I think I'll dream of you all my life."

"Then let's be off, and temper dreams with reality," she retorted.

They departed together. She wore a dark Berber gown, hooded, half concealing her face; and her face had been touched with blue lines, imitating the tattoo marks on cheeks and brow and chin worn by the Berber woman. She would pass unnoticed in the throngs.

Throngs such as Lentulus had seldom seen, even in Rome; and he discovered that this festival of Isis corresponded to the Saturnalia of the world's capital, a feast of love and fertility and reproduction when all restrictions were lifted and the balmy African air was one long amorous sigh of unrepressed desire. He realized with a shock why Olympia had been amused by his innocent request. Then he thrilled to memory of her reply: One day out of life—why not?

Berbers by the thousand, shaggy tattooed warriors; veterans from the camps and colonies of Roman legions, old soldiers who had campaigned in Syria and Germany and Britain, men who had served under Pompey and the first Cæsar, Julius the Divine. Nomads from the desert in the south, Greeks from the east, Romans everywhere, Egyptians everywhere, black Sudanese; Armenian and Carthaginian traders.

WHERE to? They discussed the problem as they headed for the Forum; Lentulus found his companion effervescent, carefree, bubbling with girlish laughter and eager for mad, wild pranks; it was the carnival spirit all around them. The Circus and the games? No, said she with a grimace; too bloody. The theater? No; a stock company of slapstick comedians was performing there for the troops. Too vulgar.

"Suppose we merely circulate?" she suggested. "Life's everywhere; just enjoy it, you and I! A Greek company will give some classical drama next week—Sophocles; but now's the time for freedom, for wine and flowers and dancing!"

"Done with you!" he cried with a rush of boyish enthusiasm. "Come on—don't stop to think—into the procession yonder!"

He caught her hand, forced her into a run, and they broke through the gay crowd.

A procession was passing in the middle of the street—elephants, dancing girls, priests of Isis, carts of flowers being flung broadcast, tipsy legionaires and shrieking *hetairæ* aflame with carnival madness. They broke into it midway. Lentulus leaped to a cart, seized garlands of flowers, caught a shepherd's pipe from the hand of a frenzied dancer—and turned to see Olympia despoiling a scandalized Egyptian priest of his sistrum, a string of bells mounted on a holder. The priest shrieked for help; the crowd roared with laughter; Lentulus hung Olympia with flower-wreaths, and with pipe and sistrum they lost themselves in the throngs, dignity flung to the winds.

Cafés and wineshops were cramped; shops were closed; and everywhere was entertainment. Jugglers, buffoons, peddlers abounded; wherever there was room to make a pitch, a crowd had massed close.

NOW and again Lentulus noted a Greek, a thin dark limping man, who stayed well away from them yet was ever recurring on the scene. Someone spying on him? It was possible; he dismissed the matter carelessly.

As the afternoon wore on and wine got in its work, as the fiercely chorused yells of thousands lifted above the city from the Circus and the games there, spirits became more riotous. Music ran higher; madder and more delirious waxed the crowds. Night would soon come, and the glorious moon herself to climax the first day of festival, with temple groves resounding to torchlit dancing and the laughing sighs of lovers.

Sunset flared. Olympia, drunk with laughter and excitement, was dancing with gay abandon amid a throng of shaggy Berbers, men and women; Lentulus looked on, listening to the raucous voices and barbaric tongues. She staggered at last out of the wild uproar and caught his arm.

"Enough, enough!" she gasped with ebbing laughter. "Day is going, and—"

A burst of maudlin yells rocketed up. A party of drunken seamen from the fleet struck into the crowd full tilt and seized on the Berber girls. Knives flashed. Instantly the whole wide street was in a snarl of savage tumult.

Blood flowed fast. Curved Berber knives ripped from waist to gullet; seamen's dirks stabbed home; men died. The scene became wild riot and fury unleashed.

Hands snatched at Olympia. Lentulus put her behind him; he struck out shrewdly and coolly. His shouts brought a pack of Legionaires into the uproar. A staggering rush bore him off his feet. Recovering, he saw Olympia in the arms of three seamen, fighting with them. He leaped in; the Legionaires burst the crowd asunder, and Lentulus picked Olympia up in his arms. He carried her out of the storm-tossed area to comparative quiet, saw that she was senseless, and looked around to see the limping Greek approaching.

"Ah! The lady is hurt!" exclaimed the Greek.

LENTULUS set her down, with an oath of dismay and anger. Blood was seeping over her left wrist and hand; in her forearm was a jagged rip from a knife-point.

"I can take care of it, master," said the Greek quietly. "I have much skill with hurts; this is nothing serious, but must be bandaged. Give me a strip from your toga." He produced a wallet and got out a little vial of unguent. "Here's a salve that will cure the hurt and cause it to heal without a scar."

The fellow took charge, with deft dexterity. Lentulus gave him a strip of his toga, and the Greek smeared the salve on it, then bandaged the hurt arm neatly.

"Don't disturb nature," he said warningly. "Let her waken by herself; all's well."

He turned away. Lentulus thanked him, offered him a coin, but with a slow smile he refused any payment, and disappeared in the gathering twilight.

Looking around, Lentulus saw that the theater was close by, apparently deserted. He lifted Olympia in his arms; in two minutes they were away from the crowds and tumult of the street. He felt her arms tighten about his neck, heard her laugh a little, and knew she was awake.

"The theater!" she said softly. "Why not? Tell me, what happened?"

"You fainted; your arm was scratched by a knife, and we're out of that mob."

"Stop here, before we come to the stage —there's running water. I need a drink!"

He halted. Her face was close to his, and in his arms he held her against him; the perfume of her was in his nostrils. Her slender, fragile, exquisite perfection stirred him. Briefly, hungrily, their lips touched.

After a moment, he set her down beside the fountain. She quite ignored her hurt arm; a splash of water, a laugh, and she was dragging him toward the stage.

"Come! There's no one here. I've always wanted to take the part of an actor; it's absurd, that they don't allow women on the stage! I'll be an actor, without a mask, just as I am. A rôle—oh! You know Euripides?"

"Every line," said Lentulus, chuckling.

"Every line! Of all his ninety-two plays? You must be a paragon! Do you know the place in the Andromeda, where *Perseus* is hiding behind the rock, and they both speak to the moon?"

"Yes."

"Good! We'll do that. Then we'll go home and bathe and rest and watch the moon come up." She drew him to the stage. With sudden recollection, he interrupted her:

"One moment! I quite forgot to ask you. Did you give the Queen warning about that fellow Loxias, from Alexandria?"

"Oh! Yes, yes! She was startled, anxious, grateful; she dismissed Loxias at once and forbade him the palace. She wants to thank you herself. She'll see you tomorrow evening." With this, Olympia whirled, took actor's pose, made believe to adjust her mask, and spoke softly. "Ready? Make believe there's a rock to hide behind. Pretend the chorus is along the back—leave out the strophe and antistrophe. We'll give the lines to the moon; and perhaps, when she rises later, she'll answer the prayer!"

SHE was in an impish, sprightly mood. The vast theater, cloaked in gathering night, was like an empty hollow shell; the stars faintly pricked out their wonted patterns upon the faintly greenish sky. Her voice lifted and took on surety, in those words of sheer romance in which lovers across the ages had echoed the great romantic poet.

'"Gild the gray stars, and weave upon the night thy robe of lovely silence! Mother Moon, linger awhile upon the steeps of dawn, and grant my heart's desire in mystery!"'

'"Aye, mystery!"' declaimed Lentulus, picking up the rôle of *Perseus*. *'"Against the harsh gaunt day defend, with all thy silvern wizardry, my longings and my love. Aye, gild the stars till every twin-*

kling starry point takes tongue to tell her of my love! Hear me, O Moon! When evening steals the dim day's life away and in thy beams the dark world glorieth, hear me and grant my prayer, and bless my love!"'

'"Ah, bless my love!"' Olympia's voice was very music; in those words of the hapless *Andromeda,* those words so mystic and tender; booed off the stage at first hearing, they had gripped the hearts of lovers in succeeding centuries. She went on, softly:

'"Ah, bless my love! Whether on land or sea, wafted within some billowing high-flung cloud, or lost upon a far heroic quest in some lone land where no man wandereth—"'

Her voice became faint, and failed. Lentulus, thinking she had forgot the lines, gave low prompting:

'"Bear him my love, and bless—"'

She made no answer. In the gloom, he found her hands outreaching. He stepped swiftly to her, and she clung to him with a quick cry.

"No use, no use! My head's swimming, I've lost the mood. Give me your arm; we'll get back to the villa, and by moonrise I'll be myself again. I'm tired, and my feet hurt."

At these prosaic words, he broke into a laugh, and they left the theater together.

When they gained the villa, she had recovered her high spirits. A bath, a change of garments, wine and fruit and delicious repast—

"And the moon!" added Lentulus. "The day you promised me isn't over yet, you know!"

"I know only too well," she said softly, and left him to ponder her meaning.

THE moon lifted, round and nearly at the full. The little patio was quiet, peacefully remote from the roaring, careering city. Lentulus, in grateful relaxation, sipped his well-watered wine and talked of the East—Alexandria, Judea, Antioch. And she, nestling among the thick rugs woven by Numidian tribes, spoke of the Pillars of Hercules in the West, and the islands afar in the ocean beyond them which King Juba had discovered and named Canaries, after the wild white dogs roaming upon them. The moon rose higher; magic filled the night. Presently they were talking of themselves and of destiny.

"Remember, I'm a spy," he said, smiling. "What shall I tell Cæsar about your Queen, whom they call the Daughter of the Moon? Is she ambitious? Does she hope to throw off the yoke of Rome, the Rome which destroyed her mother, her family?"

"No," she said gravely. "When Selene walked in golden chains behind the triumphal car of Cæsar, as a girl, her spirit was broken. Now she has a docile, unloving husband, an enormously wealthy kingdom; she speaks all tongues, studies philosophy, is content. Her mother, Cleopatra, loved greatly; but Selene has never loved, or betrayed love."

"SUCH are the externals," said Lentulus. "What's the reality?"

She turned to him, all shimmering pale and lovely in the moonlight.

"The reality? An uphappy woman, whom you've saved. Who sent that Greek? The Empress Livia, the mistress of poison! You've saved the Queen from him. She'll reward you. Wealth; a principality in the mountains, power here in Cæsarea. The Berber tribes worship her; the Roman legionaires, who loved her father Antony, love her. The Roman *procurator* here is a weak and greedy fool. Juba, the king, will do as he's told. What do you see in all this?"

"You," said Lentulus. A sudden sense of shock ran through his veins, as he perceived the drift of her words. He touched her bandaged arm, gently. "I'm still surprised that blood came from this hurt, and not the divine ichor flowing in the veins of the gods! All the things you mention, fail to dazzle me, Olympia. I've no great family or position—"

"You have honesty," she broke in.

"Honesty, then," said he. "Betray Rome? In a minute, to win you. Yet it would not be treachery; I owe Rome nothing. Yet I've nothing to offer you."

"Everything," she said in a low voice. "Everything! More than I can make you see, my Lentulus. You make the whole world different. Augustus sent you because he trusted you. Tiberius gave you that message, because he could trust you. I've spoken frankly with you, because I could trust you. And yet, Lentulus, I've lied to you in one thing."

He laughed, and stooped his lips to her hurt arm, and kissed it.

"Never mind!" he checked her swiftly. "Tell me tomorrow, if you like, when I come to the palace. Here beneath the moon, I swear myself to you; I transfer all allegiance to you—my life, my heart, my soul!"

The Greek recoiled with one wild shriek —a shriek of horror and comprehension.

"Very well. Tomorrow, then; and tonight—this one day out of life—"

Higher climbed the round silvern disk across the sky. The blissful hymn of the nightingale had sunk to rest. Suddenly a queer, sustained sound began to drift up from the city; it was felt rather than heard, at first. Lentulus lifted his head, listening; something in that sound, some note in it, disturbed him.

Olympia stirred, and sat up. "My hand throbs!" she murmured, and took the crystal intaglio ring from her one hand, transferring it to the other. A startled word escaped her. "That sound—what is it? Listen!"

The sound increased. It took on an accent of fear, of dismay, of terror. Into it crept a deeper voice; the rattle and roll of Berber drums across the night.

"Something's happened!" exclaimed Olympia. "That sound—the wailing of people by the thousand! What is it? What can it be? Ah—by the gods! Look!"

She pointed upward. A gasp broke from her. Lentulus glanced up at the moon; something wrong there! Realization jerked at him. The black segment of a circle was creeping into the edge of that silver disk. An eclipse!

"Be calm, be calm," said Lentulus, feeling the woman beside him clutch at him, sensing her tremor of fear. He drew her gently to him, and kissed her lips. "It will pass. An evil omen, I grant you, but—"

She broke in, almost wildly:

"An omen? No, no! Worse than that —ah, you don't understand! The Queen, Selene, the Daughter of the Moon! This betokens something terrible to her. That's why all the people are in fear. An eclipse, just now, at the very festival of Isis—ah, be careful! You hurt my arm—"

He was startled by the hot touch of her skin; and she had said her hand was burning! But before he could speak, she sprang erect. From the street outside came a mad clatter of hooves, the clang of chariot wheels.

"They have sent for me! I must go to the palace!" she exclaimed. "No; wait here, my dear. Don't stir. I'll go out to them—Quickly! One last kiss!"

He caught her in a swift embrace; she clung to him for one long moment. Then, as voices reverberated on the night, she tore herself away, and with a low sob was gone, running.

Lentulus reached for a goblet of wine, and sipping it, sank back on the soft rugs. He was rather amused by her terror, by her wildly disturbed air. Like the average cultured Roman of his day, he viewed omens and portents with callous skepticism.

So he sat watching while the circle of blackness cut into the moon's silver face, and listened to the faint tumult rising from all the city—the mingled voices, the drums, the chanting. Darkness came and passed again. Gradually, the moon crept clear of the fateful shadow. Lentulus, finishing the flask of wine, laughed at thought of the terrorized Berber hordes. Covering his face from the moon, he stretched out and was asleep instantly.

WHEN he wakened, a slave was shaking him. He sat up; morning, by the sun, was well advanced. Blinking, he heard that a messenger had come from the palace, one of the Queen's ladies. He hurriedly brushed up, and was aware of a swelling, mournful ululation that came from everywhere and hovered above the entire city, as though uncounted thousands of voices were blended in some wailing chant.

At sight of the palace lady, he halted abruptly. She was a grave and matronly woman, her features so stricken with grief that the Roman was seized by a sense of shock.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I have a message from Queen Selene, lord, and I bear a gift for you," she said, extending her hand. Into his palm fell a ring. A crystal intaglio, a glorious thing graven with the profile of Selene and the insignia of Isis. Queen Cleopatra's ring.

"Oh! Lady Olympia's ring? What does this mean?"

"There is no Lady Olympia," she said. "This ring belonged to the Queen of Egypt, and to her daughter Selene. She who sent it to you has passed through the door of death to more radiant life, as those who know the mysteries of Isis are aware—"

Deathly pale, Lentulus caught at her.

"Stop prattling!" he cried hoarsely. "By the gods, say what you have to say!"

"An hour ago, lord, the Queen died. She ordered me to bring you this ring."

"Died! She—the queen? No, no! She can't be dead!" stammered Lentulus.

"A hurt in her arm was poisoned, lord. She bade me give you this ring, and tell you to remember the words of the Jew. What she meant I do not know, for her speech was difficult. It was something about tomorrow, about all roads being one."

Lentulus, convulsed by a spasmodic horror, scarcely heard these last words.

"Poisoned? You say the scratch in her arm—poisoned?"

As the meaning of the words, and their implication, reached his brain, he started back, staring wildly. Then he drew the edge of his toga across his face and stood motionless, frozen by an awful and ghastly realization that stopped his very heartbeat.

Poisoned. His own hand had helped apply that bandage, had held the wounded arm. He remembered, now, the salve applied to that bandage, and a fearful conjecture wrenched at him. He bared his face and turned his burning eyes to the woman.

"Tell me something. Do you know of a physician named Loxias, who was forbidden the palace?"

"Yes, lord."

"What did he look like? Describe him."

"He was a thin, dark man, and limped slightly as he walked."

A groan burst from Lentulus. He groped for a seat, sank into it, and again covered his face from sight. The ring was grasped in his hand. Now, too late, he understood the lie she had told him; that ring made everything plain. She had been Selene, even as he first suspected. Selene! Dead.

LATER that day, amid the wild lamentation and mourning echoing up from all Cæsarea, Lentulus walked into a tavern on the waterfront. He had been seeking, seeking, and now he had found his man. The man was here, booking passage aboard the first ship leaving for Rome, a trireme sailing this very night.

The limping Greek recognized him with a sharp start, and then turned to him with a fawning smile of greeting.

"Ha, lord, is it you again? Well met. Great things have happened, it seems."

"They are still to happen," said Lentulus, and put his hand to his girdle.

The Greek suddenly shrank away from those grim, blazing eyes—recoiled with one wild shriek that rang terribly, a shriek of horror and comprehension and terror, ending in a groan as the steel drove home.

"Give me passage to Ostia in this ship," said Lentulus to the crowding shipmen. "My errand in Africa is ended. Here are my credentials—on official business of the Emperor!"

His errand, indeed, was ended.

Another story in this colorful series is scheduled for our forthcoming June issue.

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

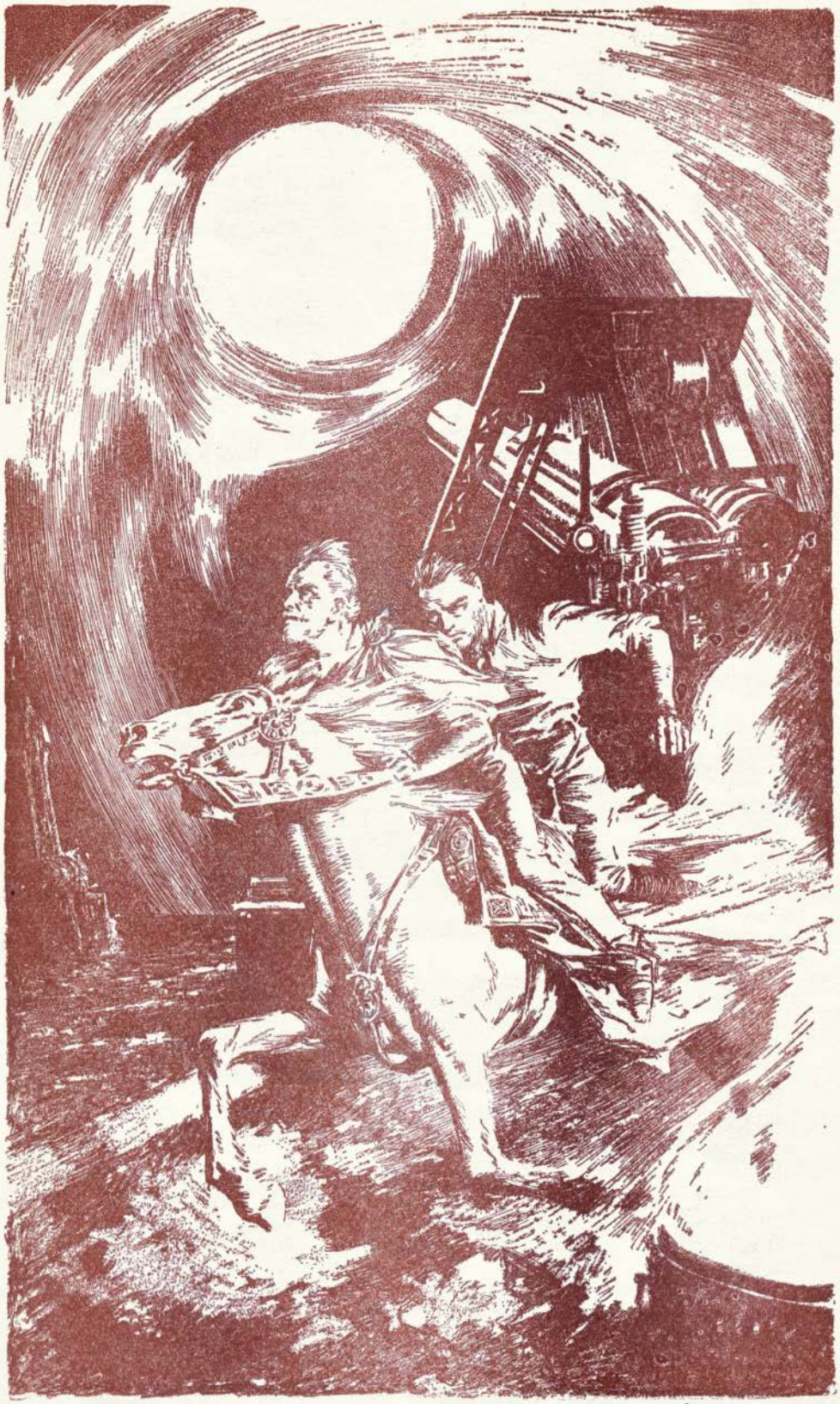
EXILES OF TIME

By NELSON BOND

Illustrated by Percy Leason

THE COMING OF A COMET THREATENS ALL LIFE ON EARTH; AND OUR EXILES OF TIME BUILD A COSMIC CANNON TO FIGHT IT OFF . . . . A NOVEL WHICH WILL RICHLY REWARD YOU FOR WHAT COLERIDGE CALLED "A WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF."

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE



"To MacHamer's well! There we have a chance of surviving." Leif's horse took their combined weight with a neighing whimper of panic.

EXILES OF TIME

By NELSON BOND

LANCE WALDRON paused on the edge of the sharp defile. Here on the crest of the rose-shadowed ravine was at least a bit of breeze. Where the workmen labored below, the air would be still and stifling and dusty.

He hesitated, reluctant to take the first step into those sultry depths. But Al-Hamid was at his side, prodding him on with the eagerness of one who already hears the clink of promised gold in his pouch.

"Below, Akid!" he said. "See—a cleft beneath the rock. A tomb, by Allah!" He added, with greasy piety: "May His Name be exalted!"

Lance shrugged off the dragoman's clutch. He didn't like Al-Hamid; nor did he trust him. But the man *was* useful. Without him this expedition might have proven as unsuccessful as dozens of others. It was Al-Hamid who had gathered the crew of fellaheen who served them as laborers. It was he who had greased the palms of the *commissionaires* in Maan, making it possible for Forsythe and his assistants to dig so near the ruins of Petra. Now if he had, as he claimed, discovered an ancient tomb in this cleft—

"All right," said Lance. "But take it easy. I want to *climb* down; not slide."

He started the tortuous descent. His preoccupation with the task of reaching the hollow below left him no time to marvel at the surrounding beauty. They were a fantastic maze, these cliffs in which he and his fellows of the Forsythe Archeological Expedition dug. Mauve, scarlet, rose-red and golden peaks, cliffs, crags; an incredible range that surged like a sea of flaming color against the dun desert land of northern Arabia.

This was the mysterious mountain refuge of the Nabatæans, an Arab race whose recorded history dates back to 312 B. C. Once these spired hills had enfolded an empire. Only desolate ruins now marked the spot. At Petra, a few short miles away, had been unearthed many marvels from the past: Great temples—not built stone upon stone, but *carved* from cliffs of solid rock! Huge mazzeboth, graven in long-forgotten symbols to which there was no key. Massive altars, houses. Most important of all—tombs. Tombs of the ancient ones, clasping within their stilled grasp secrets into which archeologists delved eagerly, seeking knowledge of the customs and lore of an elder day.

It was Dr. Forsythe's contention that Petra was not the only wonder in this ancient land.

"Near every large city, past or present," he reminded his two young assistants, "we find smaller towns—the suburbs. In these, long ago—even as today—lived the wealthy and cultured people. We should find as much beyond Petra as in the city itself."

THUS their present location. At first their digging had brought only disappointment. A few fragments of pottery, a bronze toga-clasp of definitely late period, scattered odds and ends. Then, recently, had come encouragement. Their men had uncovered the ravaged façade of an antique villa, then a series of baked-clay conduits, feeding a ruined fountain. A tiled pool, carvings, furniture. And now—

Lance and the dragoman had reached the bottom of the defile. The fellaheen, noting their approach, had stopped to rest, leaning on their tools.

"For all the world," thought Lance, "like the W.P.A. back home." He raised his voice in sharp rebuke. *"Ayb!"*—"Shame on thee! To work, thou lazy ones!"

NO expression marred the impassivity of their lean, dark faces. But their veiled hostility rose to challenge the young man with an almost physical impact. Just for a moment. Then, sullenly, the laborers returned to their task. Coarse shale and gravel, the inevitable "drift," choked the superheated air. The opening grew wider, became large enough to admit an agile man.

Al-Hamid gloated, weaving his fat, moist fingers in the edge of his *kaffiyah*. "Behold, *Akid!* As I pledged thee—a tomb!"

"Or," commented Lance dryly, "a fault in the rock. Well, we'll soon find out" He moved forward, the laborers giving way before him grudgingly. At the mouth of the cleft he stopped, sniffed, struck a match and thrust it as far into the blackness as his arm would reach. The match burned, and Lance nodded. "Air seems to be all right. I'm going in. Al-Hamid, send a *rafiq* to bring the other *akidi*."

The dragoman purred a few swift words in Arabic to one of the workmen. The courier pattered away. Lance drew his flashlight from his belt and squeezed into the tomb.

For it was a tomb! A single glance told Lance that the expedition's search had finally been successful. It was a tomb—and an old one!

The room in which he found himself was evidently an antechamber. It was square, low-ceilinged. It was sparsely furnished. A resting-perch for the dead man's *Ba**, an ornate water-cask, and an altar were its only pretensions toward decoration. But from the inlaid mosaic of the floor, the gilded walls, the carvings on the door that opened into the burial chamber proper, Lance recognized that this vault was the last resting-place of some once-important personage.

There were strange, formalized devices painted upon the walls; pictographs akin, though not identical, with some Lance had seen in the Valley of the Kings. From these Lance could guess the date of the chamber within a half a century. If he was right, the Nabatæan civilization was older than anyone had dreamed. For these gaudy devices belonged, not to the third century before Christ, but to the eighth!

"Surely the eighth," muttered Lance. "Perhaps even earlier."

Then his eager gaze turned from the pictographs to the doorway. It was sealed, of course. He had expected it to be so. And not without the leader of the expedition at his side, would he presume to break those seals.

He was afire with excitement. Here was success—fame and recognition for all of them. For Dr. Forsythe, for Jack Trumbull, for himself. He could content himself for the time being with seeing those things which were in this antechamber.

The altar beside the doorway, for instance. On its pedastal stood an alabaster jar. Lance, seeing it, frowned.

"Not a canopic jar, surely," he mused. "Not here!"

He picked it up. It was curiously light. Its cover rattled loosely. Wondering, Lance lifted the lid, shook out into his palm the object that had reposed within—

AND then he gasped!

That which caused his eyes to stare so incredulously was a blood-red jewel of gorgeous tone and lustre. But Lance was not gaping at the sheer beauty of the stone. There was a greater marvel than that. The bloodstone was set in an intricately designed brooch or clasp. And the mounting was made of *aluminum*—or at least of some white metal that was very light in weight.

It was three paces to the aperture through which he had entered. Lance covered the distance in two, the amazing amulet clenched in his fist. He burst into the raw Arabian sunlight like a madman, scarce noticing the heat that folded down upon him like a swaddling blanket.

The startled workmen gave way before him, but he had no eyes for their disturbance. He was peering up toward the camp, straining for a sight of Dr. Forsythe, bellowing at the top of his voice,

"Doc! Jack! Hurry! Look what I—"

Al-Hamid was at his side, oily and unctuous as ever. He purred: "You are pleased, ya *Akid*? You have perhaps found something of value?"

**Ba*—A wooden effigy of a bird with a man's head, carven to represent the dead man. In this simulacrum was supposed to reside the imperishable soul of the buried person, awaiting the Day of Resurrection.

At this moment, Lance welcomed any audience. Feverishly he clutched the dragoman's shoulder.

"Al-Hamid, you'll back me up? You know I found this in *there!* That I didn't have it when I entered?"

He held the amulet before the dragoman's eyes. For a long moment he waited breathlessly. Then:

"Well?" he demanded.

STILL Al-Hamid did not speak. It was the fellaheen who made the first move. As they saw the glowing stone Lance held, they dropped to their knees, covering their faces with their hands. Sounds of awed worship, curiously like groans of fear, saluted the amulet. Their voices blurred on unfamiliar words. "Ya, *Nur-ed-Dam!*" the laborers moaned.

"Ya, *Nur-ed-Dam*"—"Light of Blood!"

And Al-Hamid, his swarthy face sickly green, made a swift gesture of fright.

"Put it back, O Master! Return it to the tomb; let us seal again the crypt. Had I known *this* was inside—"

He shuddered. But his strange plea heaped new fuel on the fire of Lance's curiosity.

"Why, Al-Hamid? Why do your men act thus? What is this mystery? Why do you dread this stone?"

Al-Hamid said fearfully: "It is *haram,* O Master—forbidden! And the crypt whence it comes is *dakhil*—inviolable."

Lance bellowed disdain. "Ridiculous! Rise from the ground, ye sloths and sluggards! Al-Hamid, let us go swiftly to the camp. The white *akidi* must see this!"

Some of the dread had seeped from the dragoman's palsied limbs. The color returned to his face, and there was a new authority in his voice.

"No, Akid, you must do as I say. Return the jewel to its resting-place, and let us close again the forbidden crypt."

"What?" Lance laughed belligerently. "Not on your life. Al-Hamid, you don't understand. This mounting is made of *aluminum!* A metal that was unknown to ancient man, that was still only a laboratory curiosity until 1886. Why, this discovery will turn the scientific world topsy-turvy!"

Al-Hamid insisted stubbornly: "Of such things I know naught, O Master. But of the ancient legends I know much. I know it is forbidden that a man should remove *Nur-ed-Dam* from its place of concealment. They who touch it may cycle and fade; may disappear from the very world."

He reached for the amulet. Lance brushed away his outstretched hand.

"Not so fast. You forget yourself, Al-Hamid! Cycle and fade? Disappear? Save these legends for Dr. Forsythe's ears. He will want to learn them. But now I must hurry and show him what I have found—"

Once again he turned toward the path that led up to the camp. But this time Al-Hamid abandoned all pretense of humility. He set himself squarely in Lance's way. His dark face was flushed with determination.

"In the Name of Allah the All-Merciful, the Compassionate, may thy blindness be forgiven, Ya Akid! But thy servant cannot allow thee to remove *Nur-ed-Dam.* For the last time I demand that you return the stone!"

"And for the last time," barked Lance, "I order you to stop being a damned fool. Now stand aside!"

Al-Hamid did not move. Nor did the fellaheen rise from their knees, though their heads lifted and they watched the pair with beady eyes dangerously attentive.

"Aside, I said!"

Lance's hand edged toward his belt, toward the gun which swung cradled in its holster there. For a long moment the eyes of the young archeologist met those of the Arabian in silent conflict. Then Al-Hamid wilted. He touched a fat hand to his *kaffiyah.*

"So be it, Master!" he said.

Shoulders stiff, Lance brushed past him, stalked up the road that led to the higher plateau. The hot sun pressed down upon his shoulders like a massive fist. Beneath his boots, ruddy gravel rasped crisply. A murmur, like the angry buzz from a stoned hive, rose from the outraged workmen.

Lance pretended not to hear it. He did not once turn to look back on the little group of natives. But his forehead was damp when he finally reached the upper road.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY OF THE DRIFT

JACK TRUMBULL'S pink face beamed. He was extremely fair; he never tanned. He said, enthusiastically: "Golly, I wish I'd been with you when you went in. Gee, Lance! This is terrific. What a find!" There was a note of wistful envy in his voice.

Lance said: "Cheer up, guy—this is just the beginning. We haven't even cracked the inner chamber yet. If we find a thing like *this* in the antechamber—" He turned to his party leader anxiously. "Well, Doctor? What do you make of it?"

Dr. Forsythe had been fingering the amulet, turning it over and over, studying it from every angle. Now he said slowly: "I don't know what to think, Lance. It is so utterly beyond comprehension."

Lance was bubbling inside with excitement. He said: "Don't I know it? Aluminum! In a period at least six centuries B. C. That will stagger the so-called 'authorities.'" Then, with a frown: "I've told you how the natives reacted. Maybe their legends would help explain the mystery?"

Dr. Forsythe nodded.

"Maybe. I'm sorry you found it necessary to create such a disturbance amongst them, Lance. But you did what had to be done under the circumstances. Only—now we may find it difficult to make them talk, tell us whatever legends tie in with this amulet. What was the name they gave the stone?"

"*Nur-ed-Dam,*" said Lance. "I interpreted it *'Light of Blood.'*"

"Or," conjectured the older man, "it could be *'Fire of Blood'* or *'Rain of Fire'*—" He started. "Lance! What was the depth of the crypt? I mean the depth from surface, not the true depth. The periodic depth?"

"Definitely modern. Not more than three thousand years old, I should judge."

Dr. Forsythe seemed almost disappointed. "Of course it was madness," he said, more to himself than to his assistants. "I should have known that. But—"

He paused then, for the tent flap opened, admitting a slim figure. She must have been about sixteen years of age—a beautiful creature, lithe, already mature with the early womanhood of all Bedouins. Warmth glowed in her sun-bronzed cheeks; her raven hair and high-bridged nose bespoke the pure Ishmaelite breeding. The creamy whiteness of her *aghal* only heightened the allure of her midnight eyes.

ON tiny sandaled feet she slipped silently across the rough goatskin matting. She laid a tray before the old doctor, murmured in a soft, liquid voice: "Food, O mu'allim. Thou forgettest to eat."

Dr. Forsythe said abstractedly, "Thank you, Leyéef." And Lance echoed the words, smiling: "Thanks, Leyéef." The girl flushed. She bent, pretending to arrange something on the tray, and her slim brown hand brushed lightly as a moth against Lance's.

This time it was Lance who flushed and moved his hand hastily. Jack Trumbull chuckled. Leyéef's black eyes caressed the young American for a moment. Then, softly as she had appeared, she glided from the tent.

Forsythe frowned: "Really, Lance! You should know better than to—"

"Who, me?" complained Lance. "Hell's bells, Doc, I haven't made any passes at her. She—" He stopped, confused and uncomfortable.

TRUMBULL rallied to his defense. "It's not Lance's fault, Doctor. Leyéef's carrying the torch for *him*. I saw her the other day hugging one of his boots, when she was supposed to be polishing it." He laughed again. "Maybe you'd better stay in Arabia, old boy. Start a *hareem*. With Leyéef for a start—"

Lance grumbled, "Aw, nuts!" and Dr. Forsythe's lips thinned disapprovingly.

"It's really no laughing matter, Jack. These native *mésalliances* are dangerous. Lance, you must let Leyéef know, kindly, but as soon as possible—"

"I will," Lance promised swiftly. Then, to change the subject: "But about the amulet, Doctor? You were saying something?"

"Oh, yes, the amulet. Or perhaps I should say, the mysteries of the East—" Forsythe pondered silently for a moment. "For there *are* mysteries in the East, you know. A great many of them. Even our present-day science, great as we like to think it, cannot decipher all.

"You have heard of the 'Seal of Sulayman.' But do either of you know what it is—or was? Does anyone? No—yet the legends tell us that Sulayman-ibn-David was a great and wise king who had at his command a Seal which possessed strange virtues. With it he was able to emprison the *djinn*—those fabulous monsters, half-beast, half-man, certainly not flesh and blood, which at one time roamed and terrified the world."

Jack Trumbull interrupted: "You think this bloodstone may have some such powers, Doctor?" He was a young man, was Jack Trumbull. He tried to appear scientifically critical, but a distant wonder was in his voice.

"I do not know, Jack. Frankly, I do not believe in 'magic' as such. *Magic* is the ignorant man's word for that which he cannot understand. It is easy to see how a simple savage would call 'magical' the mixing of two dry chemicals and ordinary water to create a fire. Or how the child mind of an aborigine would worship as 'magical' our modern airplanes, radios—all those things we accept as commonplaces.

"My years have taught me that wherever the ignorant mind sees magic, there is some inexplicable mystery which lacks only the key. Behind every rumor lies a distorted bit of truth. Beneath folk legends lie facts, if we can sweep away the veil of confusion—"

Lance nodded. "You're thinking now," he said, "of things like the Atlantis myth? And the lost Antilles?"

"Yes. Although these are remote examples. I know some even more recent samples of man's incomprehension of the past: The great temple at Angkor in Cambodia, for instance. Buried in the heart of a riotous jungle, north of the Mekong Basin, a vast monument to a civilization that is utterly lost. The natives in the jungle, asked who built this massive structure, answer: 'The gods.'

"But who were these gods? When did they live, and where did they come from? Where did they go? What terrible catastrophe struck a once great city which housed millions, causing the people, the language, everything to disappear almost overnight?

"FOR want of a better name, we say the 'Khmers' inhabited Angkor. For want of more certain knowledge, we place their period about the Fifth Century A. D. But we do not know. All we *do* know is that their chief god was Hanuman—the monkey god whose antiquity is as great as man's."

Lance said humbly: "I see what you mean, Doctor."

"That is but one example. Consider the unexplained mysteries of Chichen-Itza. The Maratan Plateau in Peru; the necromancy of Thibet; the legend of ravaged Bifrost.

"What power destroyed Baalbek? How arose in Egypt a complete civilization—out of nothing? How may we offer an explanation for the gigantic statues on Easter Island, an island whose natives are rank primitives?

"Why does parallelism exist between the tribal names of Arabians and American Indians? How is it that in the Seventeenth Century a young Welshman, visiting North America for the very first time, met an Indian and conversed with him fluently?

"All these things, and many more—"

LANCE had fallen under the spell of the older man's word-weaving. He was beginning to realize the truth of the adage that the wise man is he who realizes how very little he *does* know. Now he said:

"Yes, Dr. Forsythe. But what have these mysteries to do with our present discovery? This amulet is set in what seems to be aluminum. Perhaps there *were* other civilizations in the past. But we know there has never been a mechanistic civilization to match the present one. So how can we explain *this?*"

He pointed to the crimson bauble, set in its silvery mounting. Dr. Forsythe sighed and shook his head.

"Sometimes I wonder why I waste my breath. Haven't you heard a word I said? Do you still dare boast, so boldly, that there was never a civilization to match ours?"

Lance said defensively: "We are scientists, we three. We can't drag an ancient legend into our conversation blindly and label it *Truth.* We can't say, without proof, 'There was once a civilization known as Atlantean, or'—what's the other one?—'Murian,' then declare this ancient civilization had inventive genius as great as ours. It isn't logical."

"Nor is nature logical, Lance. Things happen, and we do not know why. Satellites revolve about their parents in the wrong direction. Extremes of temperature which but a century ago were considered fatal to the human body are used therapeutically today. The same sun that turns your skin red turns the leaves of trees green—"

Jack added whimsically: "Black cows eat green grass and give white milk."

"Yes. It's an old joke, Jack—but why does it happen? Simple chemistry, yes. But other things are not quite so simple. This amulet, for example: it is a fantastic thought, but could it not be connected with the mystery of the Drift?"

"The Drift?" Lance glanced at his chief strangely. "You mean 'till'? Hardpan? There's nothing unusual about that. Everyone knows the Drift is the result of glaciation from the last Ice Age."

"I WONDER," mused Forsythe. "I wonder if you would still think so if I were to tell you a few facts about that layer of shale and gravel we call the Drift?"

Jack Trumbull reached for a tidbit of *kabob*.

"*I* know something about 'till,'" he grunted. "It's darn tough stuff to dig through. When I was still in school, we were looking for early Indian mounds in Ohio, and—"

"Suppose," suggested Lance, "you let the Doctor do the talking."

Forsythe smiled.

"I hardly know where to begin, Lance. First let me ask you: 'What *is* till?' You know the answer. We find, as we dig in many parts of the world, that first we penetrate a few inches or feet of surface soil. Then we come to a vast deposit of sand, gravel and clay. We must pierce this fifty, a hundred, perhaps even five hundred or more feet, before we reach *true* rock—the rock in which is imbedded the fossilized record of life.

"The till itself contains no fossils. However, we do find in it a characteristic type of stone: boulders, not waterworn or angular, but *striated!* Scratched by deep lines and grooves running parallel to their longest diameter.

"Above this till is a deposit called 'boulder clay,' containing even more immense boulders. One unearthed in Massachusetts some years ago weighed over two thousand tons. And above the boulder-clay we come again to beds of loose gravel and sand mixed with the remains of animal life. These are obviously of later period, and show signs of having been worked upon by the action of water and ice.

"Consider! A thick layer of unfossilized—therefore presumably unearthly—sediment between two normal strata! This is the phenomenon known as 'The Drift.'"

Lance said: "Hardly a phenomenon, Doctor. That word implies something unusual—"

"The Drift *is* unusual, Lance. Science has attempted to explain it in many ways: Waves, floods, icebergs, glaciers. The theory to which we were ultimately reduced, since no other was plausible, was the presently accepted theory of a Continental Ice-Sheet. . . . The Ice Age—the time when Earth was covered with a vast, mile-high sheet of crushing, terrible ice that swept all before it with irresistible force. But this theory does not take into account several facts of vital importance:

"Science claims that during the Ice Age, these continental ice-sheets crept down from the north to 40° of latitude. Why, then, do we find Drift in the equatorial regions of the world?

"Again—if there was cold great enough to cause an ice-sheet of this tremendous scope, why did the ice-sheet cover only *one-half* the earth? This is what we are forced to concede. For we find Drift in the United States in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa—but none in the neighboring States of Nebraska, Wyoming or the Dakotas. Surely a glacier that covered all the eastern part of our country as far south as Tennessee should have also covered at least the more northerly sections of the West?

"The ice-sheet, so-called, failed utterly to ravage such normally cold areas as Alaska, Russia and that bleakest of all spots—Siberia! Yet the Drift, which it is supposed to have left behind, is found in the Sahara, in sunny Spain, South America, Florida, the West Indies!"

Jack Trumbull's mouth had dropped open. He gasped:

"Hey, that's right! There's no drift in Idaho, but it runs as thick as three hundred feet in Venezuela—"

Lance interrupted: "You make the Continental Sheet sound like a fairy-tale, Doctor. But if we throw that theory overboard, what are we to believe? Surely there *was* an Ice Age at some not too remote time. Ignoring the Drift, there are sufficient evidences that a great glaciation at one time covered vast areas of Earth."

"QUITE right, Lance. But the Ice Age came *after* the Drift—not before it. It did not *cause* the Drift, and the subsequent striation of Drift-rock. It was caused by the same catastrophe!"

Lance said, "Huh?" He knew he must look silly. He felt that way.

Dr. Forsythe smiled. "Ice," he said, "is caused by condensation and cold. Consider how great the condensation must have been, sometime in the past, to evaporate sufficient water from Earth's seas to create an ice-sheet a mile thick, cover-

ing Earth down to latitude 40°. What mighty power drew that much water into the clouds?

"There is only one thing could have done so! *Heat!* Terrible heat, greater than man can conceive of. Here is the simple sequence. If there is no heat, there is no evaporation; no evaporation, no clouds; no clouds, no rain; no rain, no ice; no ice—no Drift!

"But there *is* a Drift. And as the Ice Age meant a stupendous mass of ice, then it must have been preceded by heat on a stupendous scale! When we seek the cause of the Ice Age, we must look for something that would prodigiously increase the heat of Earth's atmosphere. Find that, we find at once the reason for the Drift and the ensuing Ice Age."

Jack Trumbull leaned forward eagerly.

"And was there such a cause, Dr. Forsythe?"

"I think so," nodded Forsythe thoughtfully. And he turned the amulet in his fingers as though its cool sanity might overbalance the incredibility of his next words. "Yes, I think so.

"The Coming of the Comet. The Day of Ragnarok. The Twilight of the Gods!"

CHAPTER III

The Day of the Comet

TRUMBULL said: "Ragnarok, Dr. Forsythe? Do you mean the Day of Darkness written about in the Norse *Edda*? We read that in college. But I always thought it was a legend, like that of King Arthur, or—"

Lance said, intently: "Comet, Doctor? The Coming of a *Comet?*"

Forsythe templed his fingers, nodding.

"I have already tried to show you how only terrific heat could cause the condensation necessary to bring about an Ice Age. Now, if you will view the matter with an unbiased mind, you will see that the only plausible way in which our Earth could be subjected to such heat would be through the visitation of a comet.

"Look closely at the Drift. Nowhere else on Earth today do natural forces leave a residue even remotely similar to it. But comets consist of a fiery nucleus and a tail of ponderable, separated matter such as stones, gravel, clay and dust. Could not the Drift be the residue left by the tail of a comet blazing its path across Earth?

"That would explain the striation, caused by the constant grinding of stone against stone in the tail of the comet as it coursed through the vast reaches of the cosmos. Also, it would explain the absence of fossils in Drift-rock. And the fact that Drift covers hot and cold areas alike—all on one hemisphere. The side that was struck."

"But," said Lance, "the probabilities of a visitor from space striking Earth are so remote. One in billions!"

"NO, Lance. The probability of an *extra*-solar visitor striking Earth may be that remote. But comets are a part of our solar system, just as truly as any planet. They are constantly weaving amongst the orbits of the planets. Lambert once estimated that the comets belonging to the solar system, within the orbit of Neptune, numbered more than five hundred million!

"Nearness? Consider these facts: In the year 1779, Lexell's comet approached so near Earth that, had its mass equaled that of Earth, it would have increased the sidereal year by three hours. It plunged on to make a fiery path through Jupiter's satellites. The ponderous mass of Jupiter destroyed it. Lexell's comet lost its original orbit, whisked off into infinite space, and has never been seen since, though previously it was a twelve-year comet!

"In 1832, Earth missed direct collision with Biela's comet by only *one month!* The great comet of 1843 grazed the surface of the Sun. This comet was so huge that its tail reached from Sun to Earth, with fifty million miles to spare!

"Since, as you know, a comet's tail is always turned away from the sun, the appendage of this flaming giant, in *two hours,* described the arc of a circle six hundred million miles long! If frictional speeds of a mere 100 miles per hour will ruin automobile tires on a race-track, what havoc would be wrought on Earth's surface by a rock-and-gravel laden tail of a comet sweeping across its face at the speed of three hundred million miles per hour?"

Lance whistled.

"Puh-lenty! Why, it would scorch black every living thing, animal or vegetable. Scar Earth. Raise tidal waves with whatever water was not instantly drawn into condensation. The only safe place for man would be in caves—"

"Yes," nodded Forsythe. "And afterward, Lance?"

"Clouds. Terrific banks of clouds, miles deep. A blotting out of all sunlight. Midnight darkness—"

Lance stopped. Understanding lighted his eyes.

"Darkness!" he repeated. Now I see what you mean. The many legends of the Day of Darkness!"

Jack Trumbull saw too. He quoted, softly, "*'And darkness was upon the face of the deep—'*"

"Yes. We have the record in the Bible, though long years of transcription and interpolation have changed many of the verses, made the true story hard to decipher. But we can find the same story elsewhere in more accurate form. In the Younger *Edda* of the Norsemen. The tale of the fiery serpent who destroyed the gods—"

"Three serpents," said Jack.

"There are comets," parried Forsythe, "with double and triple nuclei. This unearthly visitant may have been one of those.

"We have the Greek legend of Phaæton, son of Phœbus, who drove the chariot of the Sun too close to Earth. In the tale, as told by Ovid, we read of terrible heat, a hail of stones and embers, the pitchy darkness.

"In the *Codex Chimalpopoca,* the sacred book of the Toltecs, we read the same tale. 'There fell a rain of fire; all which existed burned; and there fell a rain of gravel.'

"In every ancient legend—if we read with an open mind—we find the same sequence of events. The advent of a serpentine flame from the void, the poisonous gases, men seeking shelter in caves. Earth afire; the season of floods; then the black, eternal night of biting cold."

Trumbull cried excitedly: "But Doctor Forsythe—if you are right, there should be some legend of the catastrophe in our Bible. It is the ancient record of an ancient race."

BEFORE Forsythe had time to answer, Lance spoke:

"There is! There is! A whole book of the Bible—though it's in the wrong place—"

"What do you mean?"

"The book of Job! Is that right, Dr. Forsythe?"

Forsythe nodded, gratified. "That has always been my opinion, Lance. And one that I share with many scholars. The Book of Job is admittedly the oldest book in the Bible. Some authorities believe the events described in it occurred twenty-five thousand or more years before the birth of Christ.

"In Job's story we find not only a description of the plight of mankind; forced to hide in caverns in the bowels of the earth and subsist on grass and those few animals who survived the holocaust, but we have a description of the Coming of the Comet, and of the Comet itself. Do you recall the Leviathan?

"The Job story parallels the comet legends of every other ancient literature. Always there is a demon—the Antagonist—who rises from space to threaten the god—or the life-giving Sun. The god is temporarily overwhelmed, but in the end, wins out—"

"How would you explain this?" asked Lance.

"I do not know. It may mean that after long years of darkness, the clouds were dispelled and the sun returned to man. Or it may mean that some superior race of men attempted to fight off the advent of the Comet. We will never know, now. The record is lost forever. We can only read—and wonder."

HIS words dwindled into silence. For a long moment the two younger men sat quietly, digesting these strange new thoughts. Then Lance roused himself to the matter at hand. He touched again the amulet which had started the discussion.

"And this?" he said. "Do you believe that this may tie in somehow with the race of Early Ones? Those who lived before the Coming of the Comet?"

"I cannot help but think so, Lance. As you pointed out, aluminum is a metal but recently become common.

"But bauxite, the ore from which it comes, is quite common. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that the ore was mined, the amulet devised, by a great scientific race who once peopled the earth."

Lance's eyes glowed.

"Not only possible, but darned likely. And the ancient legend of that race would explain the natives' superstition." Then he frowned. "But say, what do you think we should do about it, Doctor? Put it back in the tomb, as Al-Hamid demands? Or—"

Trumbull said hotly: "What? Give in to that greasy Arab? Like fun! We started out to find remains of an elder race. We've found something beyond our wild-

est hopes, maybe the greatest discovery in recent years. I say we should get to work on that inner chamber—and the sooner the better."

"We must be careful," Forsythe advised. "We are but three against their score. So far, we have managed to get along with the Arabs very well. But they are Mohammedans, swift to anger when their religious beliefs are offended. It might be well to temporize. To pretend—"

"Wait a minute!" Lance held up his hand for silence. "Did you hear anything?"

All three froze, listening intently. Again Lance's ears caught the tiny, surreptitious scraping sound. Motioning his comrades to maintain their quiet, he rose and tiptoed to the flap of the tent, lifted it and peered cautiously out.

He saw no one. In the *dira* adjoining the camp, the camels lolled, languidly chewing their cuds. A blazing sun poured a hot cascade of gold upon the parched sands. But a few feet away, in the tent he shared with Jack Trumbull, the young archeologist glimpsed a movement. A momentary bulging of the black goatskin wall that bespoke the presence of an intruder. Behind him, Trumbull whispered: "Lance?"

Lance turned, nodding. His mouth was grim. Tight lips framed the words: "In our tent!" Then, sliding the .44 from its holster, he tossed back the tent-flap, raced across the few intervening yards, and broke into his own shelter.

A startled figure rose from a crouching position to face him. It was the dragoman, Al-Hamid.

THE Arab started, frightened, as Lance burst in upon him. For a moment his swarthy features showed anger and defiance. Then he smiled apologetically, rinsed pudgy hands in a humble gesture.

"Hail, Ya Akid!" he purred. "Well met. I came seeking thee. The sun is less warm now. It was my thought that if thou intended to open the inner crypt today—"

Lance glanced around the tent. The bedding of his cot was disarranged, his neatly piled clothing rumpled. One of his bags had been pried open and pawed through. Another still lay at Al-Hamid's feet.

A hot flush darkened Lance's cheeks. "Not only art thou a thief," he scored the dragoman, "but a liar as well. What is it thou seekest here? Nay, never mind. I know. So it was this, eh?"

He drew from the pocket into which he had a moment before placed it, the bloodstone amulet. As the object met the light, Al-Hamid's eyes reflected its ruddy glint.

"Well, you're not going to get it!" continued Lance stormily. "Now or ever! Now—get out before I throw you out!"

FOR a tense moment the two men faced each other—then, with a sharp cry, the dragoman blurred into motion. It seemed incredible that one so fat could move so swiftly. One instant his hands were twining aimlessly before him; the next, a hand had darted to his belt. Tawny light shimmered on the cruel, curved blade of a native *khanjar*.

Lance gasped, and hit the dirt. Steel flashed past his head like winged death. Al-Hamid, fingers outstretched, dived toward him, groping for the amulet.

The gun had dropped from Lance's hand, but with a roar of rage he sprang forward. His jolting left lashed through the dragoman's puny defense. It smashed Al-Hamid back on his heels. The Arab swayed, cried hoarsely, and charged in again like a blinded dervish. Lance put an end to the unequal battle with a final blow that took the man off his feet and dropped him in a crumpled heap on the ground.

Lance bent over his prostrate opponent and fanned him swiftly for other weapons. Finding none, he lifted Al-Hamid like a sack of meal, carted him

from the tent and tossed him onto the sand.

The sound of the fray had brought an audience. From the gorge below had come a handful of workmen. They stood silent and impassive, as Lance picked up the *khanjar* Al-Hamid had thrown at him and tucked it in his boot. From the cook's tent, the veiled heads of two women watched cautiously: old Mateya and the girl Leyéef.

And from the portal of the adjoining tent, Forsythe and Trumbull stared in astonishment. Jack called, wonderingly: "Lance, what's the matter? What—?"

Lance motioned to one of the fellaheen. "Take this fellow away! When he revives, give him water and food, bid him leave this camp."

WITHOUT answer, the fellaheen slipped to Al-Hamid's side. The fallen *wukil* groaned feebly, stirred. Lance went back into Forsythe's tent. To his superior he said, regretfully: "I'm sorry, sir. I wouldn't have done it. But when he threw *this* at me—"

Forsythe sighed. "I know, Lance. If only this does not heighten the ill-feeling amongst the laborers. Jack, what are they doing now?"

Trumbull stood at the tent-flap.

"They've just finished bringing him to. You socked him plenty hard, Lance. Now they're helping him away. He's throwing back dirty looks."

Lance grinned. "Dirty looks won't hurt us."

"No," agreed Forsythe, "but he has more power with the laborers than we have, Lance. I'm very much afraid we'll have to abandon our digging for the present. We'd better go into Maan or Petra and get a new crew—a crew we can trust."

"What? And leave the crypt unexamined?"

"Well—" Forsythe hesitated reluctantly. "I suppose we can make a preliminary survey."

Trumbull said: "Now, eh? Right now? We've got two or three hours before sunset, Doctor."

"Very well, then." The expedition leader gathered together some instruments, started toward the outside. Lance stopped him.

"Just a minute, Doctor. You'd better take this."

"This" was the leader's rifle. Forsythe accepted it somberly, slung it over his shoulder.

"And I'll get ours," said Trumbull. "It's better to take no chances—"

He ducked into the adjoining tent, emerged with his rifle, Lance's, and full bandoliers of ammunition. The three moved across the camp. The place was deserted.

They reached the top of the ravine. Trumbull took the lead as they started down the precipitous incline; Forsythe followed, and Lance brought up the rear. The afternoon sun burned like a huge white eye in a lidless sky. As they entered the cañon, a silence so great, so engulfing, arose to greet them that they could almost hear its stillness. The rose-red cliff echoed no sound but that of their footsteps, the dribble of scuffing gravel beneath their boots. . . . Until they had almost reached the bottom. And then Lance cried, suddenly: "There's someone following us!"

The three spun as one man, and their eyes sought back the trail whence they had come. Lance stripped his gun from his shoulder, held it poised and ready. But the figure which rounded a crag to fill its sights was one that made him drop the rifle, grinning.

"It's Leyéef!"

And it was. But there was startling intensity in the speed with which the girl was racing, sure-footed as any desert gazelle, down the treacherous path. As she drew nigh, her excitement became evident. She had drawn her skirt above her knees for greater haste; her white *aghal* had whipped back to reveal pearly teeth clenched anxiously on a ruby lower lip—and the girl was too intent to show shame!

She reached them, panting and dishevelled. For a moment she could not speak, but her hands sought Lance's in a despairing gesture.

"FLEE, Ya Akidi!" she gasped. "Flee—or die! Al-Hamid has roused the fellaheen against thee. Even now they plan a *ghazu*—a raid!"

"A raid!" roared Lance. "Why, those scoundrels—"

Forsythe said: "I was afraid of something like this. We should have stayed in the camp above. Now we must go back, before it's too late. If we can get to the camels—"

Leyéef shook her head.

"No, mu'allim. You must not return. The men guard the camels." She thrust a bulging shawl at Lance. "Here are food and drink for thee. Fly to the tomb

for refuge. After dark I will steal mounts for thee that thou mayest escape—*Aie!*"

Her words died in a frightened scream as the whine of a bullet punctuated the sentence. Lead splatted on a rock scant feet from the little group, ricocheted off, humming a song of death. Involuntarily, Lance ducked. Then, rising, he saw the man who had fired upon them. He jerked his rifle to his shoulder and returned the shot. The man ducked. But as if that swift interchange had been a signal, there poured suddenly from the hills above a howling burst of gunfire.

Lance glanced about him wildly. It seemed that rain of lead must surely pour death upon each of them. But old Dr. Forsythe, in the moment of crisis, proved his leadership.

"Down!" he cried. "Lie down! We're in a natural hollow here. They can't touch us."

HE was right. The spot in which they had waited for Leyéef was a cuplike depression, surmounted on three sides by high crags, open only in the direction of the crypt itself. The Arab gunfire was terrifying but not immediately dangerous. Above the din, Lance could scarcely make himself heard as he shouted to Jack:

"Those devils! Have they gone mad?"

Jack shook his head, signifying that he could not hear. There was a grin on the youngster's face. He worked his rifle muzzle out from behind the shelter and pressed the trigger.

"Got one!" he exulted.

A high, shrill scream burst from the top of the ravine. A figure tottered at the top, then dropped, plummetlike, into the depths below. There was a momentary cessation of gunfire.

There came another cry from the brink of the plateau. Swift words in Arabic, too distant for those below to distinguish. Lance looked at the party leader.

"Truce?" he wondered aloud.

Forsythe shook his head. "I don't know."

They soon found out. Dark figures limned like silhouettes against the bright sky. They crouched, impossible figures at that distance, and ran deftly along the lip of the ravine to duck out of sight. Leyéef gasped.

"*Ya hayat!*" she cried. "They are going to attack from below!"

"Below?" demanded Lance.

"There is another path," explained the girl. "Down that way. See?"

Lance looked. She was right. There was another and smaller path, heretofore unused because of its steepness. It led from the plateau to the spot where the expedition had dug. If the Arabs gained that vantage-point, their gunfire could rake the Americans freely. Lance jumped to his feet recklessly.

"Come on!" he roared. "We've got to get out of here!"

But a bullet drove him to cover again. A voice—Forsythe's—yelled: "But where can we go? They've left a guard above. We can't get out that way!"

"The tomb, Akidi!" cried Leyéef. "It is the only refuge."

Lance bellowed, "But to reach the tomb, we have to cross *that!*"

He pointed to an open space, every bit of two hundred yards wide, exposed in every direction to the raking cross-fire of those above.

Trumbull shrugged. "We can't help it, Lance! That's our only chance. We've got to take it." He scrambled to his knees, preparing for the dash.

Forsythe agreed.

"Leyéef's right. We must all start at once. Spread as wide apart as possible—and run zigzag. We may make it safely."

Lance spun to face the Arab girl. It was a suicidal risk they planned. He snapped: "Leyéef—do not come with us. These are your people. Go back to them."

The girl lifted her head proudly.

"No, Akid! Death would be my lot now, anyway, for having betrayed them. I am not afraid to die—with you. As for my people—" She raised slim, brown fingers to her aghal and ripped it from her face, disclosing a firm, haughty smile. "See, now, I renounce them!"

Lance could not help but marvel at the dignity of this strange, half-savage, half-civilized girl. The baring of her face—which from the cradle she had been taught was shameful—she bore without flinching. He touched her hand, a new tenderness welling somewhere within him.

"So be it!" he said simply. Then he looked at Dr. Forsythe.

THE leader was crouched for the dash. Jack Trumbull was ready too. He had slung his rifle over one shoulder; a .44 was clutched in his fist. He was still grinning delightedly.

"Ready?" asked Forsythe.

"Ready!" agreed Lance. The others nodded quietly.

"Then—let's go!"

In one motion the four rose from their hiding-place and raced out across the open plain.

CHAPTER IV

DEATH IN THE DESERT

FOR a moment, Lance thought they were all going to make the security of the crypt without challenge for they covered the first fifty yards without one single shot being fired upon them.

Then the hail broke. First the piercing whine of death in the air; then puffy pockmarks in the sand, feathery fronds of dirt kicking where a bullet struck; then the boom of the distant guns, echoing endlessly in the walled hollow until the roar deafened the eardrums.

Lance was conscious of flying heels before him—Forsythe's heels. He was aware that Jack Trumbull was off to his left, and that behind him was Leyéef. Above the din and clatter he heard the sharp, familiar blast of Trumbull's revolver.

A shift to the left—to the right—to the left. A rock looming large before him: the rock which meant safety, the portal of the crypt. They were going to make it!

Already Forsythe had raced recklessly into the shadow of the rock, was crouching now, squeezing himself through the narrow crevice. Then Lance and Jack, approaching from opposite directions, reached the opening at the same time.

Both hesitated. Jack grabbed Lance's shoulder. "Go ahead!" he roared.

"Leyéef!" panted Lance. "She—"

He turned swiftly, just in time to see the girl, who had fallen behind during the race with death, stumble and pit h headlong to the ground. She twisted an agonized face to see them, clutched at a slender ankle.

"Akidi!" she screamed. "Do not mind me! Conceal yourselves—"

It was no question, now, of which should go first. In a split second, they had retraced their steps. Lance was at Leyéef's side first. He swung her to his shoulder, spun about. Jack Trumbull was yelling in his ear: "Get her inside! I'll guard you from behind!"

Again Lance dived for the narrow orifice. He could hear the patter of racing footsteps now, as the Arabs came tumbling down from their hillside perches. Behind him Jack's revolver spat fire and thunder.

He swung Leyéef in through the opening into Dr. Forsythe's arms, squeezed in after her. He turned.

"Jack! All right, Jack! Come along!"

But at that instant, from the southern end of the defile broke a bellowing horde of the Arabs. A half-score rifles spoke with a single roar. And Jack Trumbull jerked as though a gigantic fist had smitten him. His knees faltered. He stumbled.

Lance cried: *"Jack!"*

Then, miraculously, Trumbull was on his feet again. Swaying, tottering, all color drained from the death's mask that was his face, he grinned a horrible, leering grin, and his lips moved painfully.

"It's—all—right—Lance—"

Lance swore mightily, tried to push through the opening, but Forsythe strove to bar his way.

"It's no use, Lance."

With a last futile burst of strength Trumbull hurled the revolver into the faces of the Arabs. Then blood gushed in a crimson stream from his mouth, his eyes set, and he fell forward into Lance's waiting arms.

He was dead when Lance dragged him into the crypt.

THERE was no time for mourning. For that same mob which had killed Trumbull was now bearing down on the crypt-opening. Outside, a rifle cracked, and a bullet slapped over the heads of

the emprisoned trio to bury itself in the wall beyond.

Forsythe had ripped the thick wooden altar from its place, and was tugging it now toward the opening. He panted to Lance: "The cask, Lance! A barricade—"

Lance swung into action. He upended the huge water cask, rolled it to the doorway and rammed it into position. It and the altar made a crude barricade, but an efficient one. For a moment, at least, they were safe from the Arabs.

There came a sound from the far corner of the antechamber. It was Leyéef, struggling to her feet. There was a furrow of pain about her eyes; her lips were tight, but she persisted gamely. Lance moved to her side.

"Lie down!" he ordered gruffly. "Let's take a look at that ankle—"

The girl pushed him away.

"It is but a sprain, Akid. Let be. I will be an *askar* along with thee and *mu'allim*." She hobbled to where Trumbull lay, removed the unused rifle from his shoulder. But as she would have stripped off the bandoleer too, Dr. Forsythe stopped her.

"NEVER mind, Leyéef," he said. "Lance and I can do the fighting. There is something else for you to do. Something just as important. Lance—give her your *khanjar*."

Wonderingly, Lance took the keen-bladed knife from his boot, handed it to the girl.

Forsythe said: "This door, Leyéef. It leads to the inner tomb. Dig open the seals and unbar the passage." To Lance he explained: "It may mean the difference between life and death to us, Lance. It is our only chance. Our food and water won't last long. If they don't kill us in here, they can starve us out."

"But the tomb—?"

"If we can find enough objects of value, perhaps we can buy our lives. The only thing greater than an Arab's hatred is his greed."

The two men went back to their posts on either side of the opening. Leyéef began digging the age-hardened clay from the cracks of the door.

Outside, the din of battle had abated. Intermittently one of the Arabs would fire a vain shot at the barricade. But these served more as reminders to Lance and Forsythe that their attackers still surrounded the place, than as c use for fear.

In the new silence, other sounds began to make themselves heard. The soft *shuff-shuff* of sandaled feet gliding over the sand, voices whispering gutturally.

A bullet slapped into the wood scant inches from Lance, and he bobbed down.

Forsythe warned: "Careful, Lance!"

"Sure, Doc. But I'd like to know what those devils are planning. I don't like this. It's too—"

A shout from outside interrupted him. "Akid!" It was the voice of Al-Hamid. Lance looked at Forsythe questioningly. Again the cry: "Akid!"

Lance muttered: "He's stepping out from behind the rocks, Doc. He's waving a white cloth." He raised his gun. "The dog! This is for Jack—"

His finger tightened on the trigger. But Forsythe dragged down his arm.

"No, Lance!" Sharply. "It is a sign of truce. I know how you feel about Jack, but now we must think of our own safety—" He raised his voice. "We hear you, Al-Hamid. Be swift! What is thy mission?"

The *wukil* moved forward even more boldly. Lance saw with approval that not only did his eyes and puffed lips show evidence of his beating awhile ago, but there was also, now, a bandage tied about his right arm. Someone's shot had found him.

"WE wish but peace, Akid!" said the dragoman in a grieved tone. "We want no more of this slaughter. If thou willst but accede to our one unimportant demand—"

"And what is that?"

Al-Hamid shrugged, moving a step nearer the barrier.

"The *haram* stone, O Master. Give it to us as a token of good faith, and I will give the men orders to stop firing. It is sacred to us. But to thee it is of no importance—"

Lance gritted: "The liar! Don't trust him, Doc!"

But Forsythe said, speculatively: "No, Lance, I believe he means it. I think we should do as he says. Where is the bloodstone? You have it?"

Lance passed the amulet to him.

"You're the boss. But don't get too near him when you give it—"

"Ridiculous, Lance!" snapped Forsythe. He stood up. "Here—help me roll away the cask."

Together, the two men rolled away the upper part of the barrier. Forsythe

scrambled over it awkwardly. He held the amulet high.

"We hear your demands, Al-Hamid," he cried, "and we agree to them. Here is the amulet. Now withdraw your men!"

Al-Hamid was within yards of the barricade now. He was standing within inches of the spot where Jack Trumbull had fallen. It was all Lance could do to restrain his finger on the trigger, but he gritted his teeth and held tight to sanity. Forsythe was undoubtedly right. He—

Al-Hamid was bowing and scraping humbly. He cried, "Throw me the stone, Akid! Then we will depart."

"Call off your men first," suggested Forsythe. "It is a bargain—"

HE was standing atop the altarpiece in the aperture of the tomb. His right hand, upraised, held the amulet. As he spoke, he stood defenceless, trusting the Arab's truce. The servile look faded from Al-Hamid's face. Suddenly his "wounded" arm whipped from beneath its concealing sling; his hand held a revolver!

"Thy bargain is with death, *Ya gûm!*" he screamed—and fired!

Forsythe's lips stiffened in mid-sentence; then he coughed, a short, choking rattle. His upraised hand unclenched; the burning bloodstone dropped, and Forsythe fell backward into the crypt.

With an exultant cry, Al-Hamid leaped forward. But even horror could not destroy Lance's lightning speed, his deadly accuracy. His taut finger tightened; the rifle flamed point-blank at the dragoman.

Al-Hamid's cry of triumph turned to a scream of pain that died a-borning. He slumped into a mute heap. The blood that stained his burnouse mirrored palely the glint of the coveted stone which lay just beyond his death-stiffened fingers.

Then, for a moment, Lance went mad. Snarling like a beast, he hurdled the broken barrier before him, raced two steps across the sand and scooped up the amulet, darted back into the tomb.

About him, leaden pellets whipped the air like frenzied hornets, but there was a charm upon him. A cold rage flamed through his veins as he rammed the water-cask back into place. Then he turned to Forsythe, his fingers trembling as he pressed them over the old man's heart.

There was still pulsation there, but very faint. A fist clutched Lance's throat; unheeded tears streamed down his cheeks. Forsythe stirred feebly and opened his eyes. His mouth twisted into a hollow smile.

"You were right—my boy—" he said.

Lance cried harshly: "Thank God you're alive! It's going to be all right, Doctor. I got Al-Hamid—"

Forsythe hushed him.

"It does not matter about me. The—inner tomb? Is it—open?"

Lance had almost forgotten Leyéef and her labors. A swift glance and he nodded eagerly.

"Almost. There, now—" He sprang to his feet suddenly, aided the girl by throwing his weight against the door, which she had finally unchinked. It gave, with a great creak and a rain of dried plaster. Falling back, it disclosed an even larger room than that they occupied. "It is open!"

He bent to pick up the fallen scientist. But Forsythe stopped him.

"No, Lance. Just flash your light—on the walls—that I may see—"

Blinded with tears, Lance could barely distinguish the wall decorations of the inner crypt. He was dimly conscious of carvings far different from any he had ever seen before. One that looked like a crude globe, except that its topography was all wrong. Lines upon lines of carved inscriptions. A gigantic wheel-like painting, graven with strange symbols.

Dr. Forsythe sighed.

"Death—is a great adventure, Lance. It opens—the eyes—to so many things."

Lance cried angrily: "You're not going to die, Doc! We'll be safe in here."

"Don't, Lance. I have so little time. And it seems that in—these last moments—I know so much. . . .

"I see a great wheel spinning, Lance. And its time is *now*. Oh, so soon! There will be—a great adventure for you. For you and Leyéef. Keep her—near you."

He said no more. Beneath Lance's fingers, the soft pulsation faltered—and was gone.

CHAPTER V

ESCAPE

IT was Leyéef's warning that roused Lance to their immediate peril. She had stepped into the inner room, was standing there like a dim wraith in that ebon darkness. Now she cried out, her voice echoing hollowly.

"Swiftly, O my Master! They attack!"

It was sheer instinct that caused Lance to throw himself backward and to one side even as he rose. And it was well that he did so, for at that instant a dark, savage face appeared in the outer doorway, sunlight glanced brilliantly off the barrel of a rifle, and a roar throbbed fire through the anteroom.

Lance's answering shot came from the hip—and was true! The Arab fell, like a grotesque scarecrow asprawl over the flimsy barricade. But another figure took his place in the doorway—and another—and another.

Lance dived for the inner crypt. There, with the girl to aid him, he strained the sealing slab back into its former position. Darkness closed in upon them, and silence that beat soddenly upon the ears after the hubbub that had gone before. Lance swept his flash around; jabbed its probing finger of light at bulky objects.

"That chest!" he snapped. "And that slab. Against the door!"

At another time the archeologist in Lance would have been horrified at the thought of using these treasures from the past as crude props to barricade the portal. But ruthlessly he and Leyéef dragged the heaviest of the tomb's furnishings across the floor, braced them against the unchinked slab. Finally the door was secured. Lance grunted and mopped his brow.

"Well," he said, "we're safe for a while, anyway."

He could not help but admire the girl's aplomb.

"Yes, Akid. And after?"

"WE'LL take care of that," said Lance, "when it comes." And he turned away from her gravely questioning eyes. He did not have to tell her that there was no "after," that with the barricading of the door they had prolonged life but sealed their doom. For there was obviously no other way out of this crypt. They were, to all intents and purposes, buried alive here beneath the rose Arabian cliffs. They had food enough for one day; water for perhaps twice that long. Outside, patient as only sons of the desert can be, the Arabs would wait—until hunger or thirst or lack of air drove their quarry out into their hands.

Air? Lance wondered how long the air of this tiny room would remain breathable. Then he cast the thought from his mind.

"Let's see what we've got here," he said. "Maybe there's a chance yet. If there's something valuable. Forsythe thought we might buy them off—"

Leyéef shook her head.

"You do not know my people, Akid," she said. "In the beginning, yes. Before their anger was roused to white heat. But now—" Again that shrug of abnegation. "It is the will of Allah. Gold will not buy them from their vengeance."

LANCE scarcely heard her. He was swinging his flash around the narrow confines of their prison-refuge, and what he saw brought exclamations of astonishment from his lips. Even now, he could not restrain his enthusiasm at the discovery the ill-fated expedition had made.

"Look at that, Leyéef!" he cried. "That sarcophagus—perfect! That architrave over the door! There's nothing Roman about *that*. Early. Lord only knows how early! I've only seen one thing like it—the earliest Phœnician work!"

He stopped before that bas-relief of a great wheel, which revolved on a single spoke about a central hub.

"And that! What in the world does *that* represent? A single-spoked wheel? It can't be a mechanical contrivance. Such a wheel would be useless—" He peered at the painting more closely. "Leyéef, look! The hub of that wheel! Do you recognize it?"

The girl shook her head.

"Then take a look at this!" Lance removed from his pocket the aluminum-set amulet which had started all their trouble, thrust it before the girl's eyes. "It's a ringer for the stone painted in the hub of that wheel. See, they've even painted it red. And the rim itself—"

He had to confess defeat.

"I don't get that. They found wheels painted on the crypts in Ur of the Chaldees. But they were symbolic emblems. Sometimes they represented movement, sometimes travel, sometimes the passage of time."

The girl, with her first sight of the amulet, had started violently. Now she pressed closer to Lance, laid a trembling hand on his arm.

"*Nur-ed-Dam!*" she gasped. "Thou hast named it! It is the Stone of the Passage of Time! The symbol of the hub!"

"Huh?" demanded Lance. "What's that? What do you mean, Leyéef?"

The girl shrank back.

"I do not know exactly, Akid. I am but an ignorant woman. Only a *mu'allim* or *katih* could tell thee the true meaning of *Nur-ed-Dam*. I only know the legend."

"And that is?"

"The stone and the setting," said the girl, "are not of our time. They belong to the future-past. To the Wise Ones of the Elder Race. It is told that some day those who touch the stone shall cycle and fade—"

There it was again! Lance pounced on the mysterious words eagerly.

"*Cycle and fade!* That's just what Al-Hamid told me. What does it mean? And what do you mean by future-past?"

But the girl shook her head.

"I know nothing more, O Master. Never in my lifetime, nor in that of my father or my father's father, has anyone beheld the *Nur-ed-Dam*. But it is told by the *kafihs* that their number is many. And all dread them. For he who holds one when the Moment comes—"

She stopped suddenly. In the semi-gloom her face lifted, her sensitive nostrils dilated.

"O Master!" she whispered fearfully, "The door!"

LANCE had smelled that keen, biting odor too. He threw the narrow flashlight beam against the slab that sealed them from attack. The portal held, but through its chinks at side and bottom writhed a filmy veil. It was this that slowly, inexorably, was fouling the air.

"A fire!" he roared. "They've built a fire against the doorway. They're trying to smoke us out like rats!"

The next few minutes found Lance nearer to panic than ever before. He was not afraid to die.

But to die thus—in a narrow room in the bowels of the earth! Panting, gasping for breath like a landed fish, struggling against a foe who will not stand and fight.

A host of half-formed thoughts raced through his brain. He circled the four-square walls, beating upon their priceless murals as though sheer frenzy should drive a hole through one of them. Then he moved to the doorway itself, began to tug recklessly at the barricade.

The girl threw herself upon him.

"What doest thou, Master?"

Lance coughed and spat. The smoke from the *ghada*—the evergreen tamarisk of desert wastelands—is rank. Its stench stung his nostrils, choked his throat, filled his eyes with tears.

"Do?" he rasped. "I'm going out there! I'd rather go out swiftly and take a couple of those devils along with me than suffocate here!" His great shoulders bulged as, unaided, he dragged another blockade from the portal.

Leyéef's arms fell away meekly.

"So be it, O Master!" she agreed. But there was a note in her voice that stopped Lance more effectively than a plea. Suddenly he remembered a sight he had once stumbled upon in an abandoned desert camp. The remains of an Arab whose tribe had condemned him a traitor.

He thought, horrified, of Leyéef's treatment in the hands of that mob outside. His death would be easy compared to hers. To take him, they would have to kill him. But she would die more slowly.

He paused. Then, forgetful in the last extremity of caste and creed and color, he circled the girl's shoulders with a protective arm.

"All right, Leyéef. We'll take it this way. And if death is too slow in coming, there is a swifter way out."

He touched the .44 swinging at his hip. A wistful smile appeared on Leyéef's lips.

"Death at thy hands would not be unwelcome, Akid."

"Nor would it be painful at thy side, *Ya Sabah*—O Virgin Bride of Morning!" said Lance softly. Then he flung himself to the floor, dragged her down beside him. "Breathe lightly," he said, "and stay as close to the ground as you can. We're not licked yet. There's always a chance they may figure they've killed us, and go away. We must take it."

BUT even as he spoke, he knew he was lying. Leyéef knew it too. Her hand in his pressed once, warmly. Then a paroxysm of coughing seized her as the pungent *ghada* smoke tortured her lungs.

Lance unhooked the canteen from his belt, moistened two handkerchiefs sparingly. One he passed to the girl; the other he fastened about his own nose and mouth.

"This will help for a while. Keep it damp!"

He lay motionless, breathing shallowly. His thoughts ran riot as the fouled air fogged his mind. He thought briefly

of Dr. Forsythe, and of the strange pseudo-prescience that had preceded the old man's death. His lips twitched wryly.

"*'A great wheel spinning, and its time is now,'*" he thought. "*'A great adventure—'* Delirium, of course. The last thing he saw was that painted wheel—"

Thought of the wheel brought a sharp memory. He shoved a hand into his pocket, rose to his hands and knees. Beside him Leyéef whispered: "What is it, Akid?"

"Just remembered something," said Lance. The tomb was thick with smoke now. When he turned on his flash, the weaving spirals formed a solid wall before his eyes. And he coughed, choking. "Something I've got to do. If *I* can't have this, those devils won't, either!"

HE meant the amulet. Now, with it clenched in his hand, he was crawling across the floor, searching feverishly for a hiding-place. The floor was smoothly plastered. Also the wall. But where floor and wall met, beneath the painting of the cryptic wheel, Lance's knife chipped gouts of baked clay. Put it in there—cover it up. Maybe some day another scientist would find it.

It had been silent in the tomb, save for the scraping of Lance's knife. Now suddenly hollow reverberations beat through the thick, foul air. The beat of wood against yielding stone, the *shuff* of footsteps, the far-off snarl of hate-filled voices.

Leyéef cried: "They come!"

Lance's teeth grated.

"They think we're done for. Coming in to finish off the job, eh? Well, we'll show them!" He got his revolver ready beside him, returned to his digging with redoubled fury. "Soon as I hide this. . . . There! That's deep enough."

The noises from outside heightened. There was the grating of wood as the crude barricade strained beneath the pressure from beyond. In his haste Lance dropped the amulet. It bobbled from his fingers. His hand, groping after it, met Leyéef's. Both hands tightened around the bloodstone at once.

"Got it? All right—shove it in the hole!" ordered Lance.

But a startled cry came from the girl's lips.

"Akid! Where are you! I am falling—"

There was no answer from the American. For with the meeting of their

hands upon the stone, he too had experienced that mad, incredible sensation of bottomlessness!

Beneath him, the floor of the crypt seemed to give way. He was rocketing headlong and helpless, down a tunnel of Stygian dark. His body was strained, contorted as though through passage along fantastic angles. Pain rose to smash a fiery current along every nerve and fiber of his being. A thin, high wailing was in his ears; unbearable cold pierced his heart.

He thought, with a vague astonishment: "This must be death!" But it could not be that, for through those untrammeled depths down which he plunged, he was aware of the warmth of Leyéef's hand upon his own, a strange, surging vibrance that emanated from the stone both clutched.

Then the howling of the demoniac winds increased; the incalculable pressure forced the breath from his lungs. His voice cracked on a final, despairing cry.

"Leyéef!"

Then something snapped. The world reeled giddily. A cosmos of flaming stars exploded within his brain, and he was alone in a void that roared with mocking laughter.

CHAPTER VI

The Incredible Awakening

THERE should be rough stone beneath his fingers. A flickering knowledge told Lance that. There should be the stench of burning *ghada* in his nostrils, the clamor of blood-lusting Arabs assailing his ears. But there were none of these things.

He lay on something soft and yielding. Smooth was that surface, and sweetly scented. Silken in texture. The air was clean and pure. The darkness—

Lance opened his eyes. There was no darkness. The room wherein he found himself was bright and cheerful. The dusty rays of a setting sun filtered through a tiny window set high in the moulding.

"What the—" muttered Lance. "How the—" And he struggled to his feet. In

doing so, he discovered another strange thing. His body, which had been bruised and sore, was at ease now. His clothing was clean; the caked blood and grime had vanished from his face and hands. His only *malaise* was a feeling of vast weariness.

BUT surely that could not be all? He glanced about him wildly. Had he gone mad? Was this peace the ineffable peace of insanity? Or was he—dead? And was this the Paradise of which men dreamed?

"If it is," thought Lance aloud, "an architect was the dreamer, not a preacher."

For the room was more modern than the most futuristic concepts of a stage designer. Smooth gray metal walls, rounded at bases and corners. Curved furniture, at the same time lovely, comfortable and utilitarian. The cot on which he had rested was luxuriously strewn with silks.

There was a chair, a table, a thick soft rug on the floor. Press-buttons in the walls, the purpose of which he could not guess. A grilled panel on one side. But no door.

For a moment Lance stood stock-still, dazed. Then recollection, complete and terrifying, flooded back upon him. He raised his voice in a great shout.

"Leyéef!" he cried. "Leyéef!"

There was no answer. The placid quiet of the room invited peace. Lance called again.

"Leyéef!"

This time his cry was answered—but in a bewildering fashion. There came a faint sound from the farther wall. Lance swung about in time to see an apparently solid section of metal slide back on an oiled groove. A man entered.

But—what kind of man? He was tall and stately, a giant who moved on swift, sure feet. His shoulder-long hair and curled beard framed his coppery skin with gold. And his well-muscled body was draped in a loose-fitting toga; laced sandals shod him.

His forehead was broad and high, sloping back just a trifle. Lance, fairly expert ethnologist that he was, knew instantly that this man did not fit the physical characteristics of any known race of mankind. But the stranger's blue eyes were kindly.

"Ley—yeef?" he said.

Lance swallowed his surprise. He said: "Yes, that's right. Leyéef. The girl who was with me when we—when we did whatever we did," he ended foolishly.

"Ley—yeef," said the bronze man painstakingly, "is safe. Do not—worry." He spoke the words hesitantly, as if unsure of himself. "You must—be *famm?*"

The last was a question. But now it was Lance's turn to be puzzled. *"Famm?"* Who was this person who spoke English like a child toying with a strange tongue? Then the meaning of the word struck him. "You mean—*faim? Mais oui, m'sieur, j'ai faim. Aussi, je ne comprends pas. Ou sommes-nous? Est-ce que vous êtes français? Parlez-vous français?"*

But again the visitor shook his head. And he spoke in a language that Lance knew must be native to him, by the speed and assurance with which he used it. Unfamiliar syllables rippled hopefully. Lance grinned ruefully.

"Sorry, pal. I don't get your lingo any better than you get mine. Let's skip it for now. Yes, I'm famished, or hungry, or whatever you want to call it."

This time the man's eyes lighted happily.

"Hun-gree!" he said. *"Famm*—hungry! Yes."

He slipped from the room. A few minutes later he returned, bearing a tray. Lance took one look at its contents, and smiled. This, at least, was one familiar sight in an incomprehensible world. It was good old-fashioned grub. Beans and potatoes. Meat, simmering in tempting gravy. A clear, ruby wine.

"Okay, brother," he sighed. "I don't know where the dickens I am, or how I got here. But unless there's hunger in heaven, I reckon I'm still alive."

And he attacked the meal. The stranger watched him eat for a moment, then turned to leave. At the door he said, pointing to the cot: "You rest more. I will—be back."

Then he was gone.

Lance finished his repast in solitude. His host had left the door open. Evidently, then, he was not a prisoner. For a while he considered making a trip of investigation. He got so far as to stroll outside, glance up and down the long, metal-walled corridor. Then he discarded the thought.

A YAWN was the keynote of his change of plans. His body was still dull with weariness; the food and drink had made him pleasantly drowsy. And

the yellow-whiskered guy, whoever he was, had said that Leyéef was all right—

Lance stretched himself out on the cot again. It was restful. The quiet soothed his tormented nerves. He thought, lazily: "Funny old coot. I wonder what it's all about? Maybe it's a nightmare? Or—"

Then he wondered no more. Sleep pressed soft fingers to his eyelids, and he fell into a second, a refreshing and completely dreamless, slumber.

How long that second sleep lasted, Lance never did learn. But it must have been some hours later that he woke suddenly, aware that some disturbance had roused him. Even as he wondered what it might have been, it was repeated. A woman's scream—from the corridor on which his room lay.

In a flash he was on his feet. His hand groped automatically for his gun-belt, but found it gone. The sunlight had entirely disappeared from the window now. That high rectangle framed a star-dotted patch of blue. A chink of artificial light welled into the room from the adjacent hallway.

The cry repeated. It was the voice of a girl. Not Leyéef. But a woman—and a woman who needed help.

LANCE was in full stride as he hit the doorway, burst into the corridor. The lights dazzled him for an instant. Then he saw, some fifty yards away, the reason for the disturbance. A girl, slender and beautiful, was wrestling to free herself from the clutch of a man whose type Lance knew well: an olive-skinned, sleek-haired man in too-well-tailored Twentieth Century dress. A man who laughed amusedly as he pinned the girl's arms to her sides, forced her backward, trying to press his lips to hers.

So intent was he on his conquest that he did not even know Lance was near until the young archeologist's hand gripped his shoulder, wrenched him loose. Then it was too late. For with an angry heave, Lance sent him spinning back against the wall. And:

"I'm afraid," grated Lance, "the young lady doesn't care for your attentions, stranger!"

The girl cried: "*Care* for them! I don't even know the man. I just came from my room to—to see where I was, and he—"

Her sleek-haired assailant had recovered, now, from his surprise. His eyes narrowed. He said, roughly: "Shut up, sister! As for you, wise guy, maybe you don't know who I am? I'm Lucky Costarno!"

He grinned derisively, eyed Lance as if expecting to see the young man wilt at the mention of his name. If so, he was again surprised. For Lance said stolidly:

"So? Sorry I can't say I'm glad to meet you, Costarno. I'm Lance Waldron, if you're interested." Then, to the girl: "I'd be glad to see you to your room, Miss—"

The girl's hand leaped suddenly to her mouth. "Behind you!" she screamed.

Lance wheeled. His action-trained muscles moved as his eyes caught the blur of Costarno's hand thrusting beneath his shoulder. It was no moment for genteel sparring. He kicked swiftly; his heavy field-boot drove his assailant's arm high, and the man howled. Flame mushroomed futilely from a snub-nosed weapon that bounced ceilingward.

The automatic fell and Lance scooped it up. Costarno continued to howl with pain, and to curse in a steady stream. Lance brought his open palm flat against the man's profane mouth, silencing his curses into a muted whimper.

"Quiet, you! For two cents, I'd—"

There came the scrape of many footsteps in the hall. And a voice broke in on Lance's threat.

"Say, what's going on here? What's all the fuss?"

Lance liked the look of the man behind that voice as well as the voice itself. He was a big, broad-shouldered lad of college age. Not only that, but he evidently was a collegian. His mop of red, unruly hair was hatless. He wore tweed slacks and a dark green crew-neck sweater emblazoned with the white letter, "M." He was almost as deeply tanned as Lance, and there was a rugged set to his jaw. Just for a second the two young men appraised each other; then the newcomer's eyes shifted to the still-mewling Lucky Costarno. He made a snap decision.

"THIS guy been getting out of line?" he asked.

Lance nodded.

"A little. But everything's under control now—I think." He ran his hands swiftly over Costarno's frame, satisfied himself the olive-skinned one had no more concealed weapons. "Stop whimpering! I'll take care of you later."

And he turned to look at the score or more of others who had followed the

red-head to the scene of the disturbance. His eyes widened at the incredible sight of them. For here, unless he had gone completely insane, were representatives of a dozen assorted races, colors and creeds of man! Behind the collegian was a short, hook-nosed little man who muttered to himself words in yiddish. Off to one side was a giant blond garbed in the oilskins of a professional fisherman.

A few paces down the hall two almost naked Africans huddled together fearfully. A saffron-skinned coolie whose feet were splayed with years of treading rice-paddies stared about him open-mouthed. Next to him stood a trim young man in whipcord breeches and sun-helmet, an engineer by his looks.

There were men and women, old and young, black and white and all shades of yellow. All, at first, had been too stunned to speak. Now, as if all voices had returned at the same moment, they spoke—and a Babel clatter echoed in the metal-lined hallway.

Lance stared at the girl he had rescued. She shook her head, her eyes as bewildered as his. The college lad pressed forward to join them. His Bull o' Bashan voice penetrated the confusion behind.

"Folks, my name's Don Frey. Who and what I am doesn't seem to matter right now. I judge we're all in the same fix. Suppose we sneak away somewhere and talk it over? See if we can figure out this mess?"

"GOOD idea!" shouted Lance. He turned to face the heterogeneous mob once more. "Will all those," he bellowed, "who can speak English please join us?"

The words had no effect on fully three-quarters of the assemblage. But from here and there Lance was joyed to see a face lift comprehendingly, a figure slip forward. An old man, grizzled and contemplative, started from his reverie, pushed his way through a jabbering knot of peons. The young man whom Lance had thought was an engineer smiled and moved forward. So did the little Jewish chap.

An elaborately rouged and eyebrow-penciled girl in a form-fitting peignoir stepped up inquisitively. Then a hulking, beetle-browed chap. And a small, weasel-faced stranger in revelatory denim, who pawed at Lance's hand.

"Gee, bud! Gee, I was never so glad to hear a guy talk English in all me life! What's this all about? What are we doin' in this joint? Who—"

LANCE brushed him off quietly but inoffensively. Perhaps this little man *was* a convict, that girl in lacy garments a street-walker. Maybe Lucky Costarno was a rat. But all of them, good and bad alike, were victims of the same inexplicable happenstance. It was to their mutual benefit that they confer, try to find out where they were and how they had come here.

"Come with me!" he called. And obediently the tiny collection of English-speakers followed him to his room. Behind, the remainder of the crowd split into little groups as each member found others with a smattering of his tongue. A short while, Lance hoped, and a way might be found to communicate with these others.

Then the pent-up curiosity of all this band seemed to break at once. Reaching Lance's quarters, all began speaking at the same moment.

"Does anyone know—" "I wish somebody would tell—" "When and how did we—"

Lance cried: "Quiet! Quiet, please! We'll never get anywhere this way. Will you please line yourselves in an orderly fashion around the walls? Let's look at each other and get acquainted. Introduce ourselves. Then we'll all have an opportunity to contribute our knowledge to this mystery. In turn, we'll tell what happened to us, and how—"

The gray-haired man whom Lance had noticed before nodded his head approvingly.

"That's a very good idea, lad!" he said. He moved to the wall; others followed his example. "Now, if you wish, I will introduce myself. I'm Gordon MacHamer, late of Edinboro, Scotland. Though where I am now, and how I got here, I do not know."

The next in line, Lance's collegian friend, spoke up:

"I'm Don Frey, senior in Midland University, Middletown, Nebraska."

"And you?" Lance addressed the girl whom he had met first. He couldn't help feeling surprised that here, when so many other things were vitally important, he felt so strong a curiosity about her. A curiosity that touched not only his mind, but made him tingle inside, warmly.

Her sapphire eyes met his gratefully.

"I'm Vale Marlowe," she said in a voice that thrilled Lance inexplicably. "My home is—or was—in Philadelphia." She hesitated, then continued swiftly: "I'd like to take just a moment for something I hadn't time for before. To thank you for—"

Lance said, feeling an unwonted warmth on his cheeks and throat, "Oh, that's all right. It—it wasn't anything. Just a misunderstanding, I guess."

Lucky Costarno took that as his cue. He broke in, eagerly: "Yeah, that's right, cowboy. I didn't mean any harm to Miss Marlowe. I—I guess I lost my head a little. If she'll accept my apology—"

His manner was suave, ingratiating; his apology too facile. Costarno, Lance thought, was like a panther. Smooth and graceful—but dangerous. But Miss Marlowe nodded.

"Very well," she said. "We'll forget the incident, Mr. Costarno."

CHAPTER VII

The Forgotten Land

IT was at this point that there came a sudden flurry in the group that lined the walls. It was the little convict in denim. He ran up to Costarno, groped for his hand, pumped it wildly.

"Costarno!" he yammered. "Gee, are you Lucky Costarno? The big-shot gambler? I'm Blacky Gordham; remember me? I was with Butch Lafferty's mob the night you—"

At this point, another voice made itself heard. The deep, booming rumble of the burly towhead Lance had seen in the corridor. Now he was rocking forward on beefy legs.

"Costarno? Say, Mr. Costarno, I'm sure glad to see *you* here. I been lookin' for you a long while. My brother used to be one of your mob. Joe Hermant, remember? The Feds nabbed him in Saint Looie. I'm Dutch Hermant. If you can use me, I'd like to—"

Costarno's narrow, sallow face beamed. He lifted a triumphant eyebrow in Lance's direction.

"WHY, sure, boys." he said easily. "I can use both of you." There was new assurance in his voice, now that he was flanked on either side by a man of his own caliber. To Lance he said: "See, pal? I make friends a little quicker than *you* do, seems like."

"Yes," said Lance distastefully, "it seems you do." He swung once more to the others of the group. "Shall we go on? I suppose you're wondering who *I* am, that I should take the initiative here. I'm Lance Waldron."

The engineer pushed forward.

"I'm Joe Turner." He spoke in short, crisp phrases that told volumes. "Civil engineer. Utah Power Control Co. I'm—" He too glanced at Costarno's brace of companions as if they put a sour taste in his mouth. *"You* make friends fast enough to suit me, Waldron," he said significantly—and stepped back. Costarno glowered.

The little Jew had been watching the proceedings, his beady black eyes alive with understanding. Now he winked at Lance.

"How I'm getting here," he said, "and where I am—don't ask! But since it's introductions in order, I'm Hymie Dahl. *'Cash in a Flash; My Money Never Gives Out!'* Private loans with no embarrassing questions. Call me Uncle."

Lance grinned. Behind him, Don Frey chuckled. The final member of the group spoke up.

"I'm Dolly," she drawled. She let her heavy-lidded eyes rove Lance's figure speculatively. "I don't know where I am or how I got here, and to tell the truth, I don't give a damn. The food's better than in the—the place I *was* living."

She grinned impertinently. Then, in that throaty voice: "What do *you* say, handsome? Or am I speaking out of

turn? You're not married to that sheep-eyed blonde, are you?"

The question exploded a bombshell of confusion into Lance; an embarrassment that he shared with Vale Marlowe. It took Dolly's question to make him realize that since entering the room, he had had eyes only for Vale, and that she had been returning his gaze. Now he burned scarlet.

"I—Miss Marlowe and I—" he stammered, "just met. I—I have no wife."

IT was at this moment that the door burst open, and a familiar slim brown figure darted in to throw herself, sobbing with relief and joy, into Lance's amazed arms.

"Ya Akid!" she cried. "We live again in Paradise together! You and I, forevermore. It is Kismet!"

Don Frey snickered. Lance untwined Leyéef's tendril-like arms desperately, and said: "Leyéef—stop it! This is *not* Paradise! You—"

Frey said to the ceiling: "Well, it's all in the way you look at it, I suppose. Now for my part—"

Dolly grinned. "Well, handsome," she conceded, "for a man who's not married, you do all right by yourself."

Lance swung to Vale Marlowe.

"I assure you, Miss Marlowe—" he began.

But the warmth had died, suddenly, from the girl's eyes. Her head was proud on the slender column of her neck.

"I'm sure, Mr. Waldron, that your personal—entanglements are of no interest to the rest of us. I believe it was our intention to discuss the situation in which we find ourselves?"

Auld MacHamer, the Scot from Edinboro, took the situation under control. He stepped forward quietly and said:

"Now that we know each other, I think we should do just that. That is, unless those who own this place in which we find ourselves have other plans—which I doubt. I have seen but one man since I—er—arrived. And that was several hours ago. At—at—" He stopped, staring at his watch incredulously. He shook it. "I'm sure this can't be right. Does anyone have the correct time?"

Costarno, Vale and Turner spoke at the same instant. That is, each *started* to speak. Then—

"My watch seems to have stopped!" said Vale.

"Mine too!" echoed Costarno and Turner, and MacHamer nodded agreement.

Little Hymie tugged pridefully at the billowing chain that laced his vest.

"*Nu,* such cheap watches!" he clucked disapprovingly. "Rather you should have a good one, like this—" Then his face went blank. He gasped. "*Himmel!* Seventy-eight fifty, no more, no less—and it stops! At four seventeen on the dot!"

Vale Marlowe said: "That's funny. That's when mine stopped!"

Turner, the engineer, disagreed.

"All right on the seventeen part," he said in his terse manner; "but I make it *one*-seventeen."

Lucky Costarno said, smiling: "My watch agrees with Miss Marlowe's."

Auld MacHamer scratched his grizzled pate. "And I make it *nine*-seventeen! Nine— Just a moment! Dahl, did you live in New York?"

"Did I say no? The Bronx."

"And so did you, Costarno?"

Lucky nodded.

"And Miss Marlowe—Philadelphia?"

Joe Turner got it. He snapped: "Utah—three hours difference. Scotland—five hours the other way!"

"Right!" MacHamer looked at Lance. "Waldron, here's another angle to the mystery. Each of our watches stopped at precisely the same moment, allowing for time differences. And that time was—"

Vale Marlowe supplied the rest.

"The moment when," she cried, "we—we *fell!*"

In the seconds that followed her words, blank astonishment seized the group. For the first time Lance realized how desperately far from a solution they still were. But the word, *"fell,"* and the way in which it had been received by all the others, convinced him of one thing: That he had not been the only one to experience that dreadful moment of giddiness. That each one of his comrades had known the same terror, and that terror was somehow allied with their being here in this weird place.

"NOW," he said, "I think we're beginning to get somewhere. Miss Marlowe, you say you *fell?* Where were you at the time this happened? And what were you doing?"

"Why—why, I was dressing for tea. I was upstairs in my boudoir, trying to decide which necklace I should wear, when suddenly a giddiness seized me. I cried out—"

"And then?"

"That's all. Everything faded. When

I awoke, I was in a metal-walled room. Down the corridor from here."

Lance spun to Frey.

"And you?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, Waldron. I was studying in my room in the fraternity house."

Turner said curtly: "I was buying my girl a present. Her birthday next week. Wonder if she'll ever get it." He grimaced. "Don't care much. We weren't getting on very well."

"MacHamer?"

"Preparing an exhibit for the Museum," said the old man. "I'm one of the curators, you know."

"Dolly?"

"Don't you wish you knew, handsome?" The girl grinned impishly. "No, I'm just kidding. Truth is, I was trying on bracelets."

Lance turned to the trio of underworld men. All had to contribute if they were to ever learn anything. "Gordham?"

"Sittin' in my cell," said Gordham. "What did you think I was doin'? Playin' polo?"

"Hermant?"

The burly man flushed dully.

"I aint tellin'," he growled.

MACHAMER snapped: "Don't be an ass, man. This is for the good of all of us."

"Awright, then. But you can't pin nothin' on me, see? I was doin' a h'ist job."

"A what?"

Costarno purred: "The gentleman means he was playing Robin Hood, Mr. Waldron. With—er—modern variations."

"Oh. And you, Dahl?"

The pawnbroker looked woebegone.

"It shouldn't happen to a dog," he wailed, "what happened to me! For a nice profit I was about to sell a nickel-plated piece of glass to a *goy,* when—blooie! Like that I'm here. And where am I?"

Lance shook his head.

"I wish I knew. There's just one point that occurs to me. Most of us seem to have been handling jewelry at the time of our 'fall.' But that can't be awfully important—because the particular jewel *I* was holding—"

He paused then, and like everyone else in the room, he turned to face the door, which had eased open. For in the portal stood the golden-haired stranger.

The man was smiling as graciously as the first time Lance had seen him. He seemed pleased that this group should have congregated and should be discussing their plight. The stranger stepped forward. Leyéef's hand tensed on Lance's, and her slim body shrank closer to him. A startled whisper, almost too low for him to catch, broke from her lips: "*El Padishah!*—He-Who-Rules!"

Vale Marlowe missed the words but caught the motion. Disdainfully she looked away. But Lance was staring transfixedly at the stranger.

"Welcome!" said the man in the toga. He tapped his breast. "I am Cal-thor."

Mechanically, Lance acknowledged the greeting.

"AND I'm Lance Waldron. These others speak my tongue." He introduced his companions swiftly; Cal-thor smiling, nodding to each in turn. Then: "We are confused, Cal-thor. We wish to know how we got *here.* And where we are?"

Cal-thor fumbled with the obviously unaccustomed English tongue.

"It is—difficult," he said hesitantly, "to tell—in your language. I had planned—to teach you mine."

"I understand." Lance spoke slowly, striving to employ simple words. "But can you give us a hint? Everything is so strange. We *are* on Earth, aren't we?"

Cal-thor smiled.

"Earth—yes."

"And the time? The era? There seems to be strangeness there?"

"The time is long-ago-to-come," said Cal-thor.

Little Hymie groaned. "It gives double-talk!" he wailed.

"Quiet, Hymie. Give me a chance!" pleaded Lance. And to Cal-thor: "Just one more thing. *Where* are we?"

This Cal-thor understood perfectly. His reply was prompt.

"Merou," he said.

Lance repeated wonderingly: "Merou?" The name meant nothing to him. He looked helplessly at his companions. But he saw no flicker of recognition in their eyes. Lucky Costarno growled deep in his throat.

"If you ask me, Waldron, this is a frame of some kind. Dutch—go to work on old whiskers. We'll darn soon get to the bottom of this!"

Dutch Hermant grinned and spread his hamlike hands.

"Sure, boss!" he said cheerfully, and stepped toward Cal-thor. "So you aint givin' out, eh, bud? Well—"

"Just a moment!" Auld MacHamer's voice, sharp and incisive, halted Dutch Hermant even before Lance had a chance to intervene on the golden stranger's behalf. "I think I'm beginning to understand—" He swung to face Cal-thor excitedly. "Merou? Was that what you said?"

"Yes."

"By any chance," demanded the Scotsman, "would this Merou be an *island?*"

Cal-thor admitted: "Merou is an isle. Yes."

"And tell me—is your Merou the seat of the world's civilization?"

This time there was pride in the coppery man's reply.

"Yes."

Auld MacHamer passed a shaking hand across his brow. More to himself than to his comrades he muttered: "It cannot be! This is madness. But—"

Lance stared at him. He demanded: "What cannot be? What do you mean, MacHamer?"

And the old man answered shakily: "It is incredible, Lance Waldron—but it must be so. Somehow all of us have been transported back through centuries of time! To a period more than thirty thousand years before the birth of Christ!

"'An ancient civilization on an island! The legends know but one with such a name. Merou is another and earlier name for—the lost island of *Mu!*"

CHAPTER VIII

The Colony of Tomorrow

THERE were only two others in the room, besides Auld MacHamer, who grasped the meaning of that name, "Mu." These were Lance Waldron and, surprisingly, the college athlete Don Frey. But if Mu meant nothing to the remainder, "30,000 B.C." did! A half-dozen voices rose at once; and to Lance it seemed that the ejaculation of each person was indicative of that person's characteristics.

Joe Turner said, "Hmmm! Long time!" and grinned a dubious, lopsided grin. Vale Marlowe was silent, but grave. The little pawnbroker groaned and wrung his hands. *"Oi!"* was his complaint. "Twelve years I pay premiums on a life-insurance policy. Now the company aint even born yet!"

Costarno's dark face grew surly; to Lance he stormed gruffly: "See here, Waldron, this is all a gag of some kind! Nobody in a set of false whiskers and a silk nightgown can do *me* this way! I'm going to take this lug apart and see—"

Lance said wearily: "Lucky, there's no use making matters more difficult. I know it's an insane situation—but it exists, and there's an end to it. Cal-thor isn't lying. He has no reason to. And I dimly suspected something like this from the beginning. Look at this room, the walls, Cal-thor's appearance and dress. That's token enough that we are experiencing something fantastic.

"I advise that we follow his suggestion. Accept the situation and study Cal-thor's language. It won't take too long to get a smattering. Then we can find out why we're here, and how we got here."

Joe Turner said bluntly: "Not much of a linguist, Waldron. But I'm game." And Auld MacHamer nodded his approval. "That's all we can do," he said.

COSTARNO grumbled suspiciously. Of Cal-thor he demanded: "Look here, Whiskers. I'll stand pat with the others for a little while. But we aint prisoners here, are we?"

The Murian repeated, wonderingly: "Prisoners?"

Lance explained: "He means are we free to go where we will?"

Cal-thor nodded. "Yes." He waved a bronzed arm in a sweeping gesture. "In Great Hall now. City outside. Go see—all you want."

"See, Lucky? That's fair enough. And when we aren't sightseeing, we'll study their language—" Lance remembered something which had puzzled him. "You make a good stab at English, Cal-thor. Why?"

Again Cal-thor's explanation was vague.

"Past-coming in books," he said. "Mind gets flashes."

Don Frey snorted.

"That makes it clear as mud."

"I'm inclined to believe," pondered MacHamer, "it is a sort of telepathy. 'Mind gets flashes.' This 'past-coming in books' I don't understand."

"Well, maybe we'll learn later," said Lance. And he smiled at Cal-thor. "You'll start teaching us the language soon?"

"Tomorrow," promised the Murian. "I go now. You do what you want." And he stalked away.

Lance turned to Vale. "I know you'd like to have a look at the city outside. Shall we go see it?"

The girl's tone was chilly. "Are you sure your—er—companion won't mind?"

Unexpectedly, Joe Turner stepped up. "Take care of her myself," he said. "What's her name? Leyéef? C'mon!" With a backward glance for Lance's freely given approval, the Arabian beauty allowed herself to be led away. Frey and MacHamer also accompanied them. Hymie Dahl looked anxiously at Lance.

"You don't think they'd be charging admission, no?" he asked. When Lance shook his head, Hymie sighed in relief. "Good. Then let's you and me go too, Dolly."

Their departure left only Costarno and his henchmen, who wandered off in another direction. Lance and Vale were free to make the first of what were to be many pleasant strolls through the city.

FOR there were many strolls, and there were wonders beyond counting to see. Three weeks passed; three thrilling weeks which aroused in Lance Waldron's heart strangely chaotic emotions.

The archeologist in him could not help but be stirred at the vast city of Spel, through which he and his time-exiled comrades were permitted to roam freely. He learned many things; things that he hoped, with a desperate, forlorn hope, he might some day be enabled to carry back with him to his own proper time.

His scientifically trained mind discovered the solution to many mysteries that had evaded the researches of man. According to the stodgy Twentieth Century textbooks, man of this period was supposed to have been a crude savage, living in caves, huddling over a tiny fire of twigs. That this was erroneous, Lance knew now. The Murian civilization was not like that at all. It was—

Well, it was curiously paradoxical! It ran to extremes that Lance could not explain. He was constantly being forced to recognize, here a superiority to Twentieth Century existence, there a primitive trait. For example, the Murians had motor-driven means of transportation that nearly drove engineer Joe Turner to distraction.

"Don't get it, Lance!" he protested one night. "I took down one of their motors, looked at it. Nothing to it. Spiral. Three wires. Hunk of metal. Shouldn't run—but it does!"

"Electrical?" hazarded Lance.

"Must be. Can't find out, though. Must be strange metal."

"Then analyze it," suggested Lance.

"Just it. I can't. Murians scientific geniuses—but have no laboratories. No analytical equipment!"

Then there was the question of architecture. These strange people built—or evidently *had* built in the past—gigantic buildings towering to the sky, vast amphitheaters, tremendous statues of intricate designing. But wherever one of these buildings had fallen, through age, decay or accident—there it lay! Evidently the modern Murians made no effort to reconstruct the dwellings of their ancestors. In amazement, Lance asked Cal-thor about this.

"ANCIENT Ones built them," the Murian scientist told him. "Today we do not build."

Further than that, Lance could not learn. He turned to his study of the Murian language with redoubled intensity, determined to probe these paradoxes.

Auld MacHamer was beside himself with excitement at all which was transpiring. To Lance he said: "Lad—this is the greatest thing that ever happened to a man! Some of my findings upset all scientific theories about man's antiquity, the birthplace of tongues, the origin of the species.

"This Murian tongue! Don't you find it comes easily to you? Almost *too* easily?"

Lance had noticed that.

"It is a *root* tongue!" MacHamer continued. "Yet it is more than that. It is

a *key* tongue. A composite, like—well, something like those the Ro and Esperanto futurists of our day tried to put across. It tends always toward simplicity. Monosyllabic in style. Non-agglutinative."

Lance said: "Has it ever struck you as odd that the spoken language is so simple and the written language so strange? Their speech is more advanced than ours, but their carvings are intricately formal in character. No wonder, when we were back in our own time, we could make no sense out of the few scattered remnants of Murian civilization we found!"

MacHamer smiled sadly.

"So you've recognized some of them too? I wondered if I were the only one. No, perhaps it's not too strange, Lance. I'm developing a theory about the growth of the Murian written language. I think it ties in closely with the progress of English in *our* day! As you know, Murian writing is highly pictorial. The handwriting was on the wall, if we had but seen it, in the deluge of picture magazines that were so popular in the United States of the—the future."

MacHamer, like all the others, sometimes found himself hopelessly confused trying to think of the world out of which he had come as being centuries beyond this in which he now lived.

"THEN you think," asked Lance, "that all languages eventually tend to become pictorial?"

"In the written form—yes."

As the days sped by, these wonders piled upon one another to an extent that would have staggered Lance had he not had other personal problems to ponder over. There was Vale Marlowe. Her pique had long since died away. Soft Murian moonlight had done that, strolls in the shaded gardens of the Great Hall of Spel, and daily contact with Lance.

These two young people had come to realize that here, in a great land that had existed thousands of years before either of them had been born, they had stumbled upon that one timeless thing which is man's birthright. Their minds were concerned with the unsolved mystery of their being here; their hearts did not care. All they knew was that they had found each other, and they were content.

These three weeks had wrought changes in others of the time-traveling crew too.

Don Frey, he of the magnificent physique and devil-may-care frame of mind, had already made himself popular with the Murian people. True, he spoke their language ineptly as yet—made grotesque errors when he stopped, as was his wont, to talk to Murians in the streets of Spel.

"But I like these guys!" he told Lance. "They have copper-colored skins, sure. But they're natural. My kind of people. And athletes—whew! You should see Jarlon work out on the discus. He'd knock the Olympic record sky-hooting if we were back in our time."

Don Frey, Lance thought amusedly, had gone Murian. He was even letting his beard grow. And the red-gold facial adornment was not unbecoming to him.

Turner, with the studious detachment of his kind, was making rapid strides with the Murian tongue. Hymie Dahl was less apt. Said he: "So what kind of language is it, anyway? I ask them how to say 'ten per cent interest,' and they tell me they got no words for it. Phooie!"

ANOTHER newcomer to the group was a welcome addition. His name was Leif Frazier; he was the oilskin-clad fisherman whom Lance had noticed that first night in the corridor. His native tongue was Norwegian, but as all the exiles began to learn more and more of the Murian tongue, he attached himself to the former English-speaking group. He was a grave, quiet man, but dependable. Lance liked him. And so did another one—Leyéef. The Arabian girl, sensing from the start her former *akid's* growing attachment for Vale Marlowe had, with the calm acceptance of her race, ceased to annoy Lance with her attentions. She and Leif Frazier had now become almost inseparable—much to Turner's disgust.

"Eight ball!" he grunted. "That's me! Oh, well—"

There were many of the time exiles who never did adapt themselves to their new environment. The Chinese coolie was one of these; the two African savages also, as well as a child of indeterminate parentage, and a peon from Mexico, who stubbornly refused to learn Murian.

Then Lucky Costarno and his associates Hermant and Gordham. They studied Murian—that is, Costarno did; but Dutch and Blacky could not progress beyond the "I am" stage—grudgingly. As the weeks went on, this trio became more and more dissatisfied, finally openly rebellious.

"I'm telling you," Lucky Costarno warned one day, "I aint going to stand

much more of this. This town's too damn dead for me. No night-clubs, no girls, no shows, no roulette wheels. No nothing."

Lance said: "Take it easy, Costarno. Everything's going to be all right soon. When we learn what it's all about, we can make some changes—"

"Sure. It's all right for *you* to talk! You've got a gal to keep you from getting lonely," the ex-gambler taunted boldly. "But these damn Merou girls! When I tried to give one the old come-on the other day—"

Lance's face hardened, drained of color. He gripped Lucky's lapels, shook him as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Another crack like that about Miss Marlowe and me," he warned, "will be your last! Cut it! And as for these Murian girls—if you know when you're well off, you'll leave them alone. We're outnumbered here, thousands to one. If you create any trouble—"

Costarno paled. He said, shakily: "Aw, lay off! I was only kidding. But if something doesn't happen pretty soon—"

Something did happen—two nights later, after dinner. Lance and his immediate group of friends were having a talkfest in Lance's room, when the door slid open and a smiling Cal-thor greeted them.

"Good evening, my friends," he said in the language of Merou. "I have decided that you know my tongue sufficiently well, now, that we may converse. Will you follow me?"

CHAPTER IX

The Secret of the Amulet

LANCE thought he had viewed many wonders in Spel of Merou. But nothing had ever amazed him so much as the chamber to which Cal-thor led him and his friends. It was a huge room, set high in the building called Great Hall. Like the others, it was metal-sheathed, indirectly illumined with the cold light about which Lance had often wondered but never asked. But there the similarity ceased. For this room was what Joe Turner had complained Spel lacked—a scientist's laboratory!

There were the usual chairs and desks. In addition to these were a number of mysterious machines standing on deep bases of what was apparently insulating material. What the purpose of these instruments might be, Lance could not even guess. One bore a resemblance to an old-fashioned battery-set radio—numerous verniers marked its surface; wires and coils bulged from its open top.

Another was a gigantic chamber, roughly globular in shape. There was a great hinged door in one side of this, and its top was surmounted by a glistening crystal sphere out of which twined a maze of spiraling wires.

As the others seated themselves, Cal-thor noticed Lance's wondering gaze.

"YES, Lance Waldron," he replied to the unspoken question, "these are connected with your being here. But let me begin from the beginning."

For a moment he paused, summoning his thoughts.

"You have no doubt discussed amongst yourselves the reason for your being here in Spel, city of Merou. Have you yet discovered the reason?"

As usual, Lance acted as spokesman for the group.

"We have not, Cal-thor. There seems no rhyme nor reason to our being here; nor is there any logical explanation for the dissimilarity of our interests. I am a scientist; so is Dr. MacHamer. But Don is a student, Joe a civil engineer, Uncle Hymie a pawnbroker. And there are still others not of our group—savages, laborers, criminals—who came into the past as we did. We do not know why. There is no one thing we have in common."

"Ah, but there is!" Cal-thor corrected.

"Yes? Then it must be"—Lance was remembering an idea developed during the confab that first night—"connected with jewelry? We discovered that—"

"Quite right. Your acumen does you credit. Jewelry—and a particular kind of jewelry. Is it not true that shortly before you were transported from your time to Merou, you were holding in your hand or wearing upon your person a bloodstone set in metal?"

Lance gasped: "Why—why, yes! That is right. But it disappeared the first day I was here. I—I thought maybe you removed it when you took away my sidearms," he appended sheepishly.

"It is true that I removed it, Lance. But only because its purpose had been accomplished. You others, did you not also wear or carry the bloodstone?"

Don Frey looked at his broad hands curiously. "Hey, I had a class ring set with a phony red-streaked stone. It's been missing now ever since I—I fell."

"I owned such a stone," chimed in Vale, "but I had no idea it was connected with *this*."

Hymie Dahl clutched his thinning hair.

"Trouble! Always trouble! Wasn't I telling you how I was about to sell a stone in my store?" He glared at Cal-thor accusingly. "So you're taking it away from me, eh? *Gonif!* Was worth at least ten bucks, that stone."

Cal-thor smiled benignly.

"You may have it back—" he began.

"*Nu,* don't being so hasty! For eight bucks you can keep it, but I'm losing money. On easy payments, maybe?"

The man of Merou continued, "Because, as I said before, it has now fulfilled its purpose. And that purpose was—to bring you men and women of the Twentieth Century back to Merou."

Auld MacHamer frowned.

"Just a moment, Cal-thor. Do you mean to say these bloodstones were the instruments for our—er—translation?"

"Exactly. You are no doubt familiar with the principle of geodesic disposition?"

Joe Turner answered for the crowd. "You've got us there, boy," he said.

"That is strange. I should have thought your civilization," said Cal-thor, "so vastly in advance of ours, would utilize that commonly accepted principle. However, it may be elementary to you, too commonplace to bother with."

LANCE interrupted: "Perhaps if you'd explain—"

"But certainly. Our scientists, ages ago—the Ancient Ones, in fact—discovered that every object possesses what might be called a 'world line.' This, you will agree, is obvious. The 'world line' is that position which a given object occupies in space at any given time.

"These 'bloodstones' are actually laboratory-devised stones similar in composition to the Piazzi crystal, which has a susceptibility to high-wave-length vibrations. Another attribute of the stones is their ability to bring back with them through Time any living creature which happens to be holding it, or them, at the moment the frequency is aroused."

Lance halted him.

"Just a moment, Cal-thor. I'm afraid you're going too fast for us. Do you mean to say that these stones translated us from our own, normal era back to yours?"

"Yes—just that." Cal-thor strode to the pair of instruments. "You might, if you wish, speak of these activated bloodstones as being 'temporal deflectors.' This machine is called the 'temporal connector.' You will notice that its verniers cover centuries of time. The machine itself has the power to bring the bloodstones—and their human cargo—sliding back along its world line to this era.

"I MYSELF distributed these bloodstones! We made fully five score of them, sent them by our finest ships and planes to all corners of the globe. Then we set into motion the temporal connector. Its action projected the talismans down through their future world-lines to the era from which you came.

"Then, when I judged their distribution sufficient and that the proper era had been reached, I shut off the temporal connector, reset its dials for my time. The bloodstones returned to Mu, bringing with them each of you who chanced to hold one in your possession.

"As you came, your hand, holding the jewel, gathered up the entire world line of that jewel. Wrenched it out of the hands of people, out of the ground, out of every place it might ever have been, through all the ages of backward flight.

"Thus the jewel, though it has passed through innumerable hands and places throughout more than three hundred centuries, now has no longer been in those places! In other words, in any given day and age, your hand had torn away the previous 'world line' of the amulet. Do you see?"

Hymie Dahl answered for fully half the group. "No!" he said flatly. But others were not so sure. Joe Turner's brow was furrowed with the amazing thought. Auld MacHamer's head nodded slowly. And Lance said:

"I think so. That is why we are such a mixed group? Because the stones could exercise no selectivity. It could be, at the moment you closed the switch of your connector, in the hands of anyone—ignorant, cultured, honest, criminal?"

"Yes. Unfortunately that is true."

MacHamer said: "I wonder if this could account for some of the amazing

mysteries which the late Charles Fort attempted to solve? As our hands, sweeping the world-line of the stones backward through time, uprooted those lines, could we not also cause mystic phenomena on earth? Translations of physical matter? Disappearances? Alterations in the things-that-be?"

Cal-thor said apologetically: "That I do not know. The name of Charles Fort is unfamiliar to me, and the phenomena you describe unprecedented."

Lance burst out: "But Cal-thor—when did you distribute these amulets?"

"Within the past three moons, Lance Waldron."

"But that is impossible! How could an object which was distributed only three months ago go into the future and bring back a man who is not to be born for approximately thirty-two thousand years?"

Cal-thor looked disappointed.

"I had expected you to know that without my telling. Surely the men of your advanced era know that time is merely a fourth dimensional projection of space? And that highly activated structures can be moved through Time?"

"Advanced era!" Lance wiped his brow in mock despair. "Why, Cal-thor, you make us feel like infants. I can assure you that no one present in this room ever dreamed of such a thing!"

UP to now, the Murian had been smilingly gracious. But at Lance's words, his smile faded, and the shadow of a dreadful doubt crept into his eyes.

"You jest, Lance Waldron!" he cried sharply.

"Nothing of the sort. I'm serious. Why, man—in my day we never conceived of such knowledge as your race possesses! The only thing I can't understand is—how could it have ever been lost to mankind."

"Why was this knowledge ever lost? What happened to Merou that erased all vestiges of—"

"Lance Waldron!" Cal-thor's voice was agonized. "I must ask you—did not your era know of ancient Merou?"

His cry was heart-melting. Lance hated to answer him with the blunt negative that was required. It was sage Auld MacHamer who replied:

"Cal-thor," he said, "we of the future bring you evil tidings. In our day, your race, your name, your great civilization was naught but a fabled myth, which almost all men doubted. Only a few more daring minds believed that there had once been an island called Mu."

"And this island—" faltered Cal-thor in a hoarse voice, "what say the men of your day befell it?"

Auld MacHamer shook his head sadly.

"Men say it sank beneath the waves—or that it was destroyed in a fiery holocaust beyond description. The records are faulty, men's memories weak."

Cal-thor cast his last vestiges of dignity aside. Wildly he cried: "A holocaust! Fiery disaster!"

"Aye, my friend from the Past."

"Then all is lost!" cried Cal-thor in a dreadful voice. "I have failed, and all indeed is lost! For that is my reason for having brought you here. To forestall the very thing which you now tell me is inevitable!"

Lance felt a chill, like a cold wind out of space, touch his spine. A foreknowledge of horrors undisclosed ran through him. He wet his lips.

"Inevitable, Cal-thor? What is this thing? What is it that rouses your fear?"

Cal-thor turned haggard eyes upon him. "It is that which was and that which is to be. The end of Merou, queen-empire of the world. The end of our great civilization. We have seen it in our observatories, watched its approach with growing dread. We sent into the future for *you*—the dreamed-of Supermen—to tell us how to avert it. But you and we are alike futile before it!"

"What is it, man? Speak up!"

"The Comet!" croaked Cal-thor. "The terrible Comet from outer space which, even now, races toward its rendezvous in space—with Earth!"

CHAPTER X

The Heavenly Scourge

THE sheer despair in his voice brought a stunned hush upon his audience. In that moment of silence, Lance felt the fingers of delirium touching his brain. It was as though he listened to a phonograph record whose needle had caught in a groove, was playing one fragment of sound over and over—over and over.

Then suddenly memory clicked—and he remembered why the comet *motif* was familiar to him. Once again he heard the voice of old Dr. Forsythe—slain, now, in a musty crypt in far-away Arabia, but paradoxically not yet born—speaking of mysteries unsolved by man.

"It is not beyond the realms of possibility that the amulet was devised by a great scientific race who once peopled the earth—before the Coming of the Comet!"

Too late, Lance saw that Forsythe had been right in his fantastic dreaming. His imagination had come much closer to the truth than the emotionless delving of pedants. For Mu was the land of a great scientific race that had devised the time-warping amulet. And it had been—and was to be—destroyed by the onslaught of the heavenly scourge!

Lance said, gently: "There is nothing we can do, Cal-thor—we of the Twentieth Century. Our knowledge is not so great, even, as your own. You should have chosen a later period for your experiment. Perhaps Man, another five or maybe ten thousand years in the future, would have learning which would aid you. But we—"

HE shrugged. And Don Frey said: "I don't see where that would do any good, Lance. If a comet once did strike the earth, then the collision is a matter of record, a closed book. The greatest scientific brains of the future, drawn to this era, could not prevent from happening that which is already written on the scrolls of Time."

"I wouldn't be so hasty in saying that, Don," intervened Auld MacHamer cautiously. "The very fact that there is a geodesic distortion factor which permitted us to come back to ancient Merou, proves that time is elastic; that the world line *can* be changed by the man who knows how to utilize this elasticity.

"Look ye! Here *we* exist—Waldron, myself, yourself, all our friends—in a time which *was* thirty-two thousand years before our time. Yet it is certain that, centuries ago, when Merou was threatened, we did not return thus. Mayhap there was, then, no Cal-thor? Or perchance his time-traveling machine failed to operate?

"I can understand how these things might be. And if we could, by some miracle, find a way to prevent the oncoming comet from destroying Earth, Merou would live!"

Turner said: "Yes. But the whole course of man's history would change too. Might never be a Rome—a United States."

MacHamer nodded thoughtfully.

"You are perfectly right there, Joe. The pattern of time is a progressive one, based on the immediate result of each immediate cause. To prevent that which *did* happen from happening to Merou, would make improbable the world's history as we of the future know it."

Lance looked at Cal-thor with vast pity.

"Well, Cal-thor?" he said.

The Murian's eyes were sad, but he forced a smile.

"This is a sad moment for me, O my friends of Time-to-be. I selected your era at random, feeling sure that the passage of so many centuries would see mankind developed to a godlike race. I had not allowed for the dead spots that come between peaks of civilization.

"But the impending grief is not yours to bear. You shall all be returned to your proper time, and Merou will fight this battle alone."

MacHamer suggested: "Cal-thor—why don't you build similar machines, thousands of them, and gather your fellows into them? Seek sanctuary in the future?"

"That is impossible, my friend. For, you see, we never *were* in that time," answered the Murian.

"Nonsense! The future is not the past. You *can be* in the future, without violating that which has been—"

"Do you not understand—" began Cal-thor. Then he paused suddenly. For outside the laboratory there came the sound of loud shouting, the rush of trampling feet. Then, a startling sound in the quiet, the staccato bark of a weapon!

For the first time Lance Waldron had an opportunity to see how swift and dependable were these newfound companions of his. In a flash he was streaking toward the door, but other shoulders were rubbing his own—Don Frey, Turner, the gigantic fisherman Leif Frazier. And even little Hymie Dahl had started from his seat, and was waddling after them, bleating as he ran: "What is? It gives trouble again?"

LANCE never found time to answer that question, for at that moment, the door burst open from the outside. Three figures crowded into the room, three menacing figures. Lucky Costarno and his two henchmen Hermant and Gordham. Each held in his hand an automatic. Costarno jabbed his into Lance's ribs.

"Sit down, everybody! Sit down and keep your yaps shut!" Then, as the

group froze motionless before him, his lips curled in a grin. "That's better. Dutch, keep an eye on the door. Blacky, you watch old Whiskers there. So he don't get any smart ideas."

Lance fumed: "Where did you get those guns, Lucky? And what's the big idea of breaking in here like this?"

The sleek-haired man placed a hand against Lance's chest, shoved him away negligently.

"Nosy, aint you, boy scout? I don't know that it's any of your business, but we located the hardware the other day. Whiskers, you don't have very good locks around this joint."

CAL-THOR said haughtily: "There is no need for locks in Merou."

"That's what you think! Well—" Costarno glanced at the assemblage suspiciously. "What's going on here, anyway? What's the conference about?"

Lance stalled, talking while his mind searched a way to overcome the threat of the three armed men.

"We have just been learning from Cal-thor where we are, why we came, and how we got here."

"Oh, yeah? You hear that, Dutch? Whiskers finally come through with the lip. Well, cowboy, what's the answer?"

"Precisely what Cal-thor told us several weeks ago. We are in the land of Merou, an ancient island which existed more than thirty thousand years ago. We were brought here to help the Murians escape an impending catastrophe."

Dutch Hermant rumbled admiringly: "He talks pretty, don't he, Chief? What's he mean?"

Costarno snapped: "He's lying. He's lying, or else he's a sucker. Listen, cowboy: those fairy tales are oky-doke for kids—but not for us, see? What's the straight goods?"

"It is just as Lance Waldron has told you." Cal-thor moved forward, disdainful of the gambler's hastily raised automatic. "I did not deceive you, my friend. I would have explained everything to you when first you arrived, had it not been necessary to teach you the language of Merou."

"Yeah, and it's a bum language, too," blustered Costarno. But the Murian's sincerity had disturbed him. He looked at MacHamer. "Pop, is that right?"

MacHamer nodded. Costarno gnawed a tight underlip. He said: "Well—what are we going to do about it?"

"Do about what?"

"About—about being here." Costarno's intentions crystallized. "Listen, Whiskers, I don't understand any of this time business, but I know what *I* want. I want to get back to little old New York. I've got a penthouse there that's costing me plenty of rent—and me not in it. And a racket that's going to get out of hand unless I'm there to watch it. So I'm getting out of here, see? What's the next move?"

Cal-thor suggested quietly: "I would suggest that you put away your weapons and discuss the matter sensibly—"

"Oh, no! Don't give me any of that grift." Lucky backed away. "Maybe you don't know it, but there's a couple of your redskin pals taking the long snooze outside because they didn't believe I'd pull this trigger. I'd just as soon push a hole in you, too. How do we get back where we came from?"

Cal-thor looked at Lance, who shrugged. He was waiting for the moment when Costarno's guard might be relaxed. But now, with all three of the mobsters so attentive, was no time to quibble. It was not physical danger to himself that bothered him, so much as the fact that there were defenceless women present—Leyéef, Dolly, Vale.

"Well, speak up. My finger's getting itchy. What do we do next?"

The Murian nodded toward the spherical machine on the far side of the room.

"That is the machine which will carry you back to your own time."

Costarno looked. "That buggy?" he said. He strolled over beside it, inspected it with beady eyes that understood nothing. "How does it work? What are all these gadgets?"

"YOU would not understand," said Cal-thor stolidly, "its principle of operation. But you will see beside the portal a dial. If you will set it at the proper notch—"

Blacky Gordham burst out: "Don't trust him, Chief! He just wants to get us into that there box. Don't do it!"

"Shut up! I'll handle this." But a cunning look crept into Costarno's eyes. "You want us to get inside, eh?"

"It is the only way you can make the trip."

"Okay, pal. Then let's see *you* do it first!" Lucky pushed his gun in Cal-thor's back, prodding him forward. "I aint buying no blind goods. You get in; I'll push the buttons."

Lance started forward, horrified.

"You can't do that, Lucky!" he shouted. "He can't use the machine. It would kill him!"

Costarno wheeled as though stung.

"It will, huh? So it *was* a trick!" With a swift, slashing gesture, he smashed the barrel of his automatic down upon Cal-thor's unprotected head. The blond Murian fell as though poleaxed, slumped to the floor like a broken toy, with a fresh, crimson stain spilling from his scalp. But even unconscious he was not free of the mobster's wrath. Costarno kicked him contemptuously.

Lance's body jerked with the impact of Costarno's toe, as though it were he who was being kicked. Anger brought that red haze to his eyes. He rasped: "You fool! You damned, murdering fool! He couldn't use that machine because he wasn't one of us! *We're* safe in it!"

"Yeah?" Costarno said the word caustically, but he felt the truth behind Lance's protest. He shrugged. "Well, no harm done. He had it coming to him, anyway. Do you know how to operate the buggy, boy scout?"

Lance took a deep breath.

"Let me take a look at the dials—"

"Go ahead. Help yourself. Blacky, shoot him if he gets frisky."

Lance walked stiffly to the machine and studied the dials Cal-thor had mentioned. He was not surprised that he could not understand their markings. He had not expected to. But if he could fool Costarno into believing so—

"I can set them," he said.

"SO they'll take us back to our own time, eh?"

"Yes."

"Okay! Then do it!" Lance adjusted the dials. He had no idea what place along the world-line the setting governed, but he did not care. Once the three got in the machine, and were carried from this place, his worries would be over. Perhaps Costarno and his gang would appear, suddenly, in ancient Greece. Or in the France of Villon's day. Maybe without the activated stones in their grasp, they would meet a speedy destruction. Grimly, he hoped so. He turned, nodding. "They are set."

"That's fine. You're sure they're right?"

"Positive."

"Swell, pal. Because we're taking you along, just to make sure. Come on, Dutch—Blacky!"

Auld Gordon MacHamer hunched forward. He cried:

"Lance, you can't do this! You—"

Like all the others, MacHamer had guessed Lance's intention, had held his tongue so long as it seemed the plan might work. But now he was unwilling to allow the young man to sacrifice himself.

But Lance's voice interrupted his protest. He said: "I know what I'm doing. All right, Costarno, let's get going."

Costarno scanned his face and nodded, satisfied.

"Okay, cowboy. Let's go." He started for the door of the machine, motioned Dutch and Blacky to enter first. A dreadful silence fell over the room. And then—

"Wait a minute, big boy," drawled a throaty, husky voice. "Is this a private party, or can anybody play? I'd like to get out of this dump too."

DOLLY, her diaphanous gown clinging to professionally displayed allurements, swayed forward from the tiny group of spectators. Her lids drooped low over eyes that promised much. Her stride was languid, tempting. Dutch Hermant paused. "Some babe!" he acknowledged. "Where you been keeping yourself, sister?"

Costarno, with an effort, wrenched his gaze from the girl. "Get back in line, honky-tonk!" he snarled. "We're not taking any tramps along. Get in there, Blacky! And you too, Dutch. Stop staring. Aint you never seen a woman—"

The faintest suggestion of a flush tinted the girl's cheeks at Costarno's frank appraisal of her. But not once did her step vary, her glide lose that wealth of animal charm. And her voice throbbed enticingly.

"Don't be nasty, friend. I don't like this joint any better than you do. Get me out of here, and when we get back to New York—"

Lance had watched as long as he could. Now, desperately, he cried: "Dolly! I won't let you—"

The girl's eyes raked him scornfully.

"Nuts to you, lollypop! I'm talking to a *real* man, now. We understand each other, don't we, Lucky? You'll let me go back with you?"

She was at Lucky's side now. The gambler was still wavering, unsure whether to reject or accept the girl's obvious offer. For a flicker of an instant his eyes studied her hungrily. Her slim

fingers touched his arm cajolingly, stroking it. Then—

"Grab him, Waldron!"

The girl's harsh scream, the roar of Lucky's automatic, the belated echo of Gordham's and Hermant's guns, split the room with a dreadful cacophony.

CHAPTER XI

A Weapon from the Past

IT was the moment for which Lance and his companions had been waiting. There was one concerted rush forward. Lance saw, in fitful glimpses, Don Frey leaving his feet in a diving tackle to topple Dutch Hermant to the floor, Joe Turner bearing recklessly down on Blacky Gordham, little Hymie Dahl and Gordon MacHamer surging forward as reserves.

But his main attention was centered on Lucky Costarno. The sleek-haired man, for a stiff instant, had stood petrified at the unexpected movement of Dolly. Then his finger tightened on the trigger, and the girl fell back, clutching a breast that blossomed swiftly with the red rose of death, her breath expelling with a thick, choking sob. But even as she fell, she gave Lance the needful, precious margin of time. Her clawing hands dragged at Costarno's knees, throwing him off balance.

And in that second, Lance was upon him, rage snarling in his throat, hands leaping for the gambler's windpipe. Costarno struggled like a floundering fish. His eyes bulged. A convulsive heave of his narrow shoulders—and he lay still.

Lance glanced behind him swiftly. But his assistance was not needed there. Hermant, his beefy face battered, lay prostrate between the outstretched legs of Don Frey. Blacky Gordham, squealing frantically, writhed in the grasp of Joe Turner, while before him a tiny, dancing figure howled: "Thief! Murderer! You should live so long!"

Lance wrenched the automatic from Costarno's still fingers and touched a probing hand to the gambler's breast. He felt fluttering pulsation. To Frazier he cried, "Watch this man!" and tossed the gun. The big Scandinavian nodded grim consent.

Vale Marlowe was already kneeling at Dolly's side. She had torn the flimsy gown away at the throat, exposing a ragged wound from which still welled a sluggish trickle of blood. Lance had

only to look once to know the truth. "Water, somebody!" he cried. "And a doctor—if there is one!"

Dolly's eyelids opened. Her hand moved vaguely to the wound, fell away. She whispered, huskily: "You—got him?"

Lance nodded. "Got them all. Everything's under control, Dolly. Thanks to you. But you shouldn't have done it. I—"

A mirthless chuckle parted her white lips.

"I—had to. A girl like Vale—couldn't have done it. Only a tramp—"

Vale sobbed. A tear dropped from her cheek to the dying girl's arm. Dolly's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"What's all the—fuss about? You've got nothing to cry about. You've got—a good man." A violent tremor shuddered through her. For a moment her eyes were alive with panic; then their old mocking look returned. She whispered: "Lance Waldron—"

"Yes, Dolly?"

"I bet you'd have liked me—if I'd been a lady like Vale."

AND she grinned, a wan shadow of her former impish grin. Then the light faded from her eyes, and she was still. Lance lifted Vale and led her away.

Costarno had been restored to consciousness. His knees still sagged treacherously beneath him, but his captors were in no mood to grant him such courtesies as a chair on which to sit. They

were a hard-faced tribunal of justice; a single thought dominated them. Shrinking Blacky Gordham read this thought in their eyes, and pled frantically for mercy.

"I tell you it was all a mistake, Waldron!" he begged. "Just a gag. We was just having some fun. We didn't mean to do nothing—"

Lance ignored him. He turned to the man beside him; the blond Murian whose creased and bleeding scalp had been given hasty first-aid.

"WELL, Cal-thor? What shall we do with them? Take care of them in our own way, or turn them over to your local courts of justice?"

Cal-thor spoke hesitantly.

"That is what we *should* do, Lance Waldron—but I hate to do it. We few scientists who know of the impending disaster have tried to keep it a secret from the populace. If we hold a public hearing, the news will come out. It may create a panic that will sweep through all Spel like a whirlwind."

Leif Frazier folded corded arms across his chest.

"It is not necessary to create a panic," he rumbled. "Give us privacy. We know how to take care of such as these."

He spoke, as did all the comrades now, in the Murian tongue. Of that assemblage, only Dutch Hermant and Blacky did not understand. Dutch asked now, tremulously:

"What's he saying, Waldron? What are you going to do with us?"

Lance was in no frame of mind to bandy words.

"Stamp you out," he growled curtly, "like the lice you are. Where shall we take them, Cal-thor?"

Blacky Gordham, with a strength born of desperation, tore himself from his captors' grasp. His face a contorted mask of fear, he threw himself at Lance.

"You can't do this to us, Waldron! You can't! Gee, we was just trying to get back where we come from. That's natural enough, aint it? We didn't ask to come here—"

Lance nodded to Joe and Don.

"Take them outside!"

But Cal-thor halted them with a gesture. With the calm benignity that underlay his every motion, he motioned Blacky to be still. He said: "The man is right. We cannot set ourselves up as his judges. Indirectly, I am responsible for the actions of all three of them."

Lance snapped: "Don't be foolish, Cal-thor. These men were rats in their own time—are rats now."

"And it was I who led them into this maze. Therefore their lives are my responsibility. I must let them go free."

Turner stared and frowned. "One of our companions dead. Two of your countrymen shot down like dogs. And you talk of freeing them?"

"I talk of sparing their lives. As Gordham rightly says, they did not ask to come here. We will rid ourselves of them. Send them back where they came from."

Cal-thor turned to the temporal connector. It was the first time anyone had glanced toward the machine, so hectic had been the events of these past minutes. Now the Murian's eyes widened, a cry broke from his lips.

"The sphere!"

His meaning was apparent. Lance remembered Lucky Costarno's final shot, the tinkling sound that had accompanied it. Now he knew where that lead bullet had spent itself: Against the crystalline sphere that topped the connector. And the sphere had been smashed into a thousand tiny fragments. Broken filaments writhed from the jagged shards that now remained.

Joe Turner said laconically: "Busted. Need a new one, Cal-thor."

And Cal-thor replied: "New one! It took our most accomplished craftsmen a full year to construct that! The connector is useless!"

IT was a despairing crew of future Earthlings who sought their beds that night.

For if Cal-thor was right in saying another crystal could not be made for the temporal connector, all the Earthlings-of-the-future were destined to remain in ancient Merou; meet, with this elder race, the colossal judgment meted out by the approaching flame from the void.

"For it is coming," Cal-thor had acknowledged, "all too swiftly. Our astronomers say it will intersect Earth's orbit approximately two months from now."

This was the tidings they were left to digest in the dark loneliness of their separate rooms. Little wonder that sleep came slowly to Lance, to all of them. But—with the pale light of morning came new hope.

Costarno, Gordham and Hermant were now under guard in an upper

chamber of the Great Hall—a strange thing for Spel, which, as Cal-thor had said, knew neither crime nor the need for bolts and bars.

In conference that morning were Lance, Don and Joe, MacHamer, Frazier, the Murian, Cal-thor—Vale Marlowe and Leyéef, and little Hymie Dahl. It was Dahl, strangely, who started the ball rolling.

"I aint saying, y'understand," he said, "that I'm smart, like Lance or Mr. MacHamer. But I been thinking—if this thing which is going to happen, the coming of the comet, *did* happen—everybody wasn't killed by it, else there wasn't any United States or stuff? So, aint that good news?"

Lance said: "My old employer, Dr. Forsythe, said a few scattered remnants of mankind escaped the catastrophe by hiding in caves."

"So? Couldn't we in caves be hiding, *nu?*"

Cal-thor looked at MacHamer hopefully.

The old man shook his head. "Not on *this* island. For by the legend, which is rapidly disclosing itself to have been based on truth, Merou sank beneath the great tidal waves that accompanied the catastrophe. However, we could instigate an evacuation of the islands, Cal-thor?"

The scientist nodded assent.

"I had hoped to thwart disaster without terrifying my people; but the time for half measures is past. If Murian civilization is to endure, the island must be abandoned."

Don Frey said: "You see, Lance? Already we're beginning to clear up that point that troubled us last night. I mean about the 'inevitability' of things past. The very fact that we are here, and have advised Cal-thor of Merou's sinking, and he is planning to abandon the island, proves that the past *can* be changed."

JOE TURNER, more practical, looked at the scientist doubtfully.

"Got a big population here," he stated.

"Yes. More than eighty million souls. About three million in the city of Spel."

"Only a couple months to work in. Tough job, getting them all off the island."

"We have a vast fleet," said Cal-thor, "and a great air armada. We can save most of them. Only those who live in the hinterlands—"

"Fuel!" grunted Joe. "Takes lots of fuel to fly."

"Not in *our* planes. We do not operate on a combustion principle. We utilize the gravitational drag."

Joe scowled.

"Come again?" he invited.

"The gravitational drag. A repelling beam, you know. A—well, you might call it a force-beam emanating from the plane which keeps it at a constant height above the earth—"

"You—you've got *that?*" exclaimed Joe Turner.

"But yes. Why?"

"Why?" roared Turner. "He asks me why! Lord, man, if your science knows the secret of a force-beam, there's no *need* to evacuate Merou. We've got the damn comet licked!"

CHAPTER XII

The Trouble-Shooters

LANCE'S heart leaped at the open enthusiasm in Joe's voice. He demanded: "How, Joe?"

"Well, now, maybe I was a little hasty. How powerful is this force-beam, Cal-thor?"

"It's more potent than any use to which we put it," said the Murian. "I should judge that its force is limited only by the mass of the earth, from which it draws its reactionary power."

"I'm right, then. Chances are millions to one that the comet's mass will not be greater than the earth's. Size—yes. Mass—no. Comets are loosely integrated things. Lots of gas and stuff.

"We'll toss an earth-mounted force-beam against the comet. Sort of a cosmic cannon. Shove the thing to hell and gone, off its orbit. Into the sun, if we can!"

Cal-thor shook his head sadly.

"I'm sorry, my friend. Did you think we had not considered that possibility? By the time the comet draws close enough so that the force-beam will reach it—"

"Earth burnt to a crisp?" snorted Joe. "Ridiculous! Can use force-beam as soon as the comet is visible. Focus it on light rays. Light has mass!"

Cal-thor repeated, stupidly: "Light—has mass?"

Again Lance was reminded of the paradoxical nature of the Murian civilization. Here was a race which possessed a secret mankind had not found in the

Twentieth Century—the knowledge of gravitational disattraction. Yet Cal-thor's physical knowledge did not include the elementary fact that light possessed mass as truly as any tangible body.

"You bet your sweet life light has mass!" shouted Don Frey. "They crammed that fact into even *my* thick skull when I was taking Physics 103 at Midland. But Joe, if you build this force-beam cannon, where will you mount it? Here at Spel?"

MacHamer had his own opinion.

"I would suggest," he ventured cannily, "that we do not let our new enthusiasm overbalance our common-sense. It would be wise to plan the evacuation of Merou—just in case. But I agree with Joe that the force-beam can be utilized to throw the comet from its orbit. I would suggest that we determine that spot on Earth which will receive the brunt of the comet's wrath—or, I should say, *did*—"

Lance said: "Forsythe told me that the comet confined its worst terrors to one half of the globe. That portion between Nebraska in the United States, and Turkey in Asia, including all of Europe, South America, Africa and the Atlantic Ocean.

"Of course the whole world felt its onslaught. In tidal waves and earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and storms. The subsequent Ice Age was no respector of zones. But the Drift covered this area, indicating it to be the center of the comet's activities."

MACHAMER nodded. "I should have liked to have had the pleasure of knowing your Dr. Forsythe, Lance. So *that* explains the mystery of the Drift? But now—" He thought for a moment. "The best place for our force-cannon is the center of that area. A solid, mountainous land preferably, one that will not be swept by tidal waves, and does not have any active volcanoes—"

"You are speaking," said Leif Frazier, "of my land. This Drift you speak of covers its mountains rods deep. And our race has legends of the comet's coming."

"Right! Scandinavia. The tip of the rocky peninsula, just before the North Sea intervenes between it and England—"

Cal-thor said hesitantly: "I know the section which you are speaking of. But the words you use are unfamiliar to me. England? Scandinavia?"

MacHamer grinned. "The House of Lords would cheerfully exile you for that remark, Cal-thor. You don't know of England? The snug little island off the coast of Europe?"

Again Cal-thor shook his head.

"An island, no. A peninsula such as you mention—yes. The Bifrost Bridge. There is a race there, a race of fine, strong humans. Not so advanced as we are, but sturdy men, and good."

Lance said: "That's it. The same place. There's a legend that England was once connected with the continent

by means of a land bridge. That must be this Bifrost Bridge. . . . Well, gang?"

Leif Frazier said: "Almost I am glad the way to our return was blocked. I will like to see the land from which my homeland arose."

Little Hymie Dahl asked, wide-eyed: "You mean we're going there?"

"That's right. If you're all game."

"All my life," sighed Hymie, "I been wanting a trip to Europe. Now it gives a transatlantic crossing free, gratis, for nothing. Is a bargain!"

"Well," said Turner, "there don't seem to be any complaints. So let's get to work. Cal-thor, suppose you and MacHamer and I go into conference on this force-beam? I want to know all about it."

So began the preparations for the battle of science against the fiery cosmic visitor. The group split into smaller groups. Those schooled in physical research, Turner and MacHamer, studied under the Murian the theory and technique of the gravitational drag. They saw the small machines which operated the Murian air- and sea-going craft, studied their operation with a thoroughness unparalleled in the later-day Murian knowledge. Lance Waldron was one of their unit from time to time. But for the most part he assigned himself to another task, one which Don and Leif shared with him: the task of preparing and equipping the ship in which they were to make their flight.

Lance wished, not once but many times, that aviators of the era whence he had come might see the *Naglfar*. It was a splendid sight, this ship in which they

were to make their flight halfway about the globe. With the gravitational drag at their command, the Murians had no need of such useless impedimenta as wings, propellers, ailerons. The *Naglfar* was a smooth tear-drop of metal, equipped fore, aft and on either side with ports. Almost all the space inside was available for luxurious cabins. The motor control was a tiny unit operated by a single lever similar to the joy-stick of a Twentieth Century airplane.

Tilting this determined the direction of the ship's flight. The depression of a notched handle regulated the force-beam, thereby raising or lowering the ship. Lance never did understand its workings completely, but Joe Turner did, and was openly enthusiastic.

"When all this fuss is over," he pledged, "and we get back to our own

time, we'll make a fortune out of this. Cheap, foolproof power. Why, with this we can even begin thinking seriously of space-flight. The conquest of inter-planetary travel—"

"When," Lance reminded him, "we've finished the job in hand. How are you coming along, Joe?"

"Okay. MacHamer and I just polished up the designs for the force-beam cannon the other night. Cal-thor has men working on them now."

"Them?"

"We're making three. Just in case one goes screwy. Best to take no chances." He grinned. "You know, this is a crazy situation. Here I am, talking about going back to our own time when we finish this job! Did it ever occur to you that if we *do* finish the job, we'll change the whole history of the world? And that if we return to the future, thirty-two thousand-odd years in advance, we may not find the world we used to live in?"

The scope of the thought was too great for Lance. He shifted to an immediate problem that had troubled him.

"How about Costarno and his cronies? What shall we do about them?"

"Leave 'em here!" grunted Turner.

"But Merou is being evacuated. That is, it will be very soon. If we fail, and a tidal wave engulfs the island, they'll die—"

"A good thing, too!" said Turner.

So the matter was dropped. But in a high tower in the Great Hall, Lucky Costarno had other ideas. He was looking, from a window, down upon a great open space, in the center of which lay a glistening silvery ship. His beady eyes were bright with planning.

With all their haste, there were hours of relaxation too. And it was in these hours that Lance and Vale found their companionship growing ever dearer to them. Long since, Lance had blurted out his feelings toward the girl—and she had gladdened his heart with pledges that matched his own.

Once Lance said, in a moment of uncertainty: "Vale, I can't help thinking how impossible this would be in the world from which we came. I am—or was—a poor junior archeologist. A digger-in-the-ground. And you were—well, Junior League, country club set. All those things. The salary I used to earn would not have paid for your amusements. We come from different worlds—"

Vale hushed him, a soft finger to his lips.

"From different worlds *to* different worlds, Lance. In our old time, in this strange era in which now we find ourselves—we would still have met, somewhere, somehow. I really believe that. It was meant to be so."

"But when we return?" asked Lance. "What then?"

"You will still be the man I want." Vale laughed and drew his attention to a moonlit walk in the garden down which strolled, arm in arm, the figure of a huge blond son of Vikings, and the slim daughter of the desert, Leyéef. "I think our worlds were no farther apart than theirs, Lance."

Then she silenced his further protests with her lips against his.

Thus, with love and happiness, toil and study, the swift days rolled by, turned into weeks; and a month—six weeks had passed. Time was growing short—too short. Cal-thor's usually serene brow was permanently creased with furrows, and he drove his workmen night and day to complete the necessary armament.

AGAIN and again he checked the computations of his astronomers. Once he took Lance into the Spel observatory, let him peer through the telescope there at a faint, white dot rising from the constellation which, with difficulty, Lance recognized as Draco.

Lance said: "That? At such a distance? Surely *it* cannot be the comet you fear!"

"Ah, but it is, Lance Waldron. We have watched it with growing dread from the moment it was first discovered. Now we are *sure* its path will intersect that of Earth—and all too soon. All too soon that tiny flame will grow to a flaming orb that crimsons the sky. Our precious margin of time wanes. Haste, great haste, is necessary."

THE labor of the past weeks came at last to fruition. Joe Turner returned from the shops to Great Hall with the news that the cannon had been completed, and that even now workmen were placing them aboard the *Naglfar*.

"Our part's done," he chortled. "How about you, Lance? Everything set?"

"The *Naglfar's* shipshape and ready to sail," replied Lance proudly, "—tonight, if need be."

"Tonight?" roared Frey. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's get going?"

Vale gasped. Until this moment the impending conflict had seemed like part of an evil dream. Now its nearness brought a cry to her lips.

"But not *now!* Tomorrow, maybe—"

"So what's the difference?" piped Hymie Dahl. "If we're going, let's get it over with!"

There was no reason for delay. With one accord they sought the ship which was to bear them north and east. They clambered aboard, Cal-thor nodding approval of the preparations that had been made. A curious throng had gathered to see them off. To the leaders of these, Cal-thor gave last words of advice concerning the evacuation soon to begin.

Everything was ready—or almost everything. At the last moment, Lance remembered a loose end: he called a messenger to him, gave him a message to bear to Costarno in the tower.

"Tell him," he said, "that when we return, he will be liberated and returned to his own time. His danger is no greater than that we go to face."

The messenger nodded and departed. Lance closed the port. "All right, Cal-thor."

The Murian pressed a button. The faint hum of a concealed force sounded through the control room. "In a moment we will leave. When the force is fully generated—"

Lance stared through a quartz viewport at the crowd standing in the plaza of Great Hall. He saw the lights of the city, long, straight lines like those of any metropolis in the time he had left; and the sky, a velvet pall blossoming with pinpoints of light. A gibbous moon hung low over Spel's mighty towers. It was a sight to touch the coldest heart with warmth. Lance wondered if indeed their expedition would be successful—or if all this glory must die beneath the lashing scourge of the sea.

The thin humming died into silence, and a tremble coursed through the *Naglfar's* shining frame.

"We're off!" cried Cal-thor.

And at that instant a tiny figure burst from the main doorway of Great Hall, plunged recklessly down the steps, across the plaza to where the *Naglfar* was lifting into the air. He was waving his arms, gesticulating madly. Vale saw him and cried, "Lance—your messenger! He wants to tell you something."

Lance grinned, feeling the surge and power of the ship raising them now with inconceivable force.

"It'll keep till we come back. We're off, friends! Off to do something no one has ever done before. Destroy a comet—and change the history of mankind!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Stowaways

HYMIE DAHL turned from the porthole through which he had been watching the earth spin past beneath them. He essayed a grin which didn't quite jell.

"Is making me dizzy to look," he said. "Should be I'm getting sick it feels like—only I aint!"

Don Frey chuckled. "If you get sick on this crate, it'll be imagination, pure and simple. This has the old-fashioned air-travel licked three ways from the ace. No bumps, no air-pockets, no motor roar, no fumes—"

Cal-thor nodded gravely.

"Thank you, my friend. But the credit is not mine. It goes to those of the elder race who left to us their knowledge and their mighty machines."

MacHamer suggested, "We have several hours of inactivity before us, Cal-thor. Suppose you tell us something of this elder race?"

"I am afraid my knowledge of them," confessed the Murian ruefully, "is as poor as your knowledge of *us*. As I mentioned recently, the history of civiliza-

tion is a recital of high and low culture-peaks. We are at the top of such a peak now; our ancestors crested another. But in between was a period of ignorance similar to that which you have told me ushered in the inventive genius of *your* age.

"The legends say, however, that our ancestors were a vast and mighty race of men. They not only possessed all the knowledge we now boast, but many other secrets as well. It was they who built the massive buildings which now topple into ruins in Spel—buildings which we do not even try to imitate.

"They knew the secrets of Space and Time; they established at least one colony on a neighboring planet—that known in your tongue as Venus."

Lance said excitedly: "They did? Then that explains an unsolved mystery of my day! There is an ancient temple in India which has upon its wall a great mosaic mural. On this are depicted the planets Earth and Venus, with a connecting line drawn between the two. We often wondered just what it meant."

Cal-thor continued: "It is told that these ancient ones were farther advanced in the science of *things* than in the art of living together. They were not of one race, dominating the world, as we of Merou. They were of a hundred sects, creeds and countries. And each knew jealousy for its neighbor.

"They perverted their mechanical genius to the art of creating terrible weapons of destruction. With these they rained fire and death upon each other; waged a mighty war which bled all lands of their youth and vigor. And the inevitable result was"— Cal-thor shrugged —"the ensuing age of bestiality, from which my countrymen are newly risen. That is why we know some of their secrets; not all. Records have been lost, whole cities destroyed."

LANCE laughed mirthlessly.

"That's one part of your story we can understand," he commented. "In our own day, another such cataclysm is an ever-present threat."

Cal-thor looked at him curiously.

"Ever-present, Lance Waldron? Hardly that—"

But he did not finish his protest. For at that instant Leyéef came running into the room to grasp Lance's arm fearfully.

"Come quickly, Akid," she cried. "Leif has found them in hiding below."

Lance said: "Them? Who?"

"The evil ones."

Joe Turner roared, "Costarno!" and Vale Marlowe's eyes clouded with recollection. "Lance, that must have been what the messenger was trying to tell you! That Costarno and his men had escaped, were aboard the *Naglfar*."

Lance caught her last words on the run, for already he and Turner, Frey and Cal-thor had turned toward the companionway. Within seconds they had reached the storage hold below the main deck. There they found Leif Frazier, grimly covering with his revolver the triumvirate of stowaways. A caustic grin touched the big Norwegian's lips.

"It is not only sailing vessels that carry a quota of rats, Waldron. The *Naglfar* is not immune."

Lucky Costarno smiled a confidence that he did not feel. He said, placatingly:

"NOW, look here, fellows—there's no use getting upset about this. Sure we stowed away. But we just did it so's we could make peace. You see—"

"Peace!" roared Don Frey. "You don't know the meaning of the word!"

Blacky Gordham gave ground before the angry athlete. Dutch Hermant stood motionless; waiting. Lucky wet his lips.

"You see, we heard you were going somewhere to put up a scrap—and we figured that after all, since we're all in the same fix—I mean, we're all in this cockeyed time, out of the world we belong in—"

Lance stared at the man. He could hardly credit his ears. He had never suspected Lucky Costarno of an altruistic strain. Yet here the man was volunteering for the most dangerous kind of mission—

He said slowly: "Lucky, do you know what you're saying? Do you know what this trip is all about?"

Costarno's confidence rose. He sidled forward; a wise grin touched his lips.

"Well, I'm not on the inside—but I've got a fair idea. I'm not exactly dumb, you know. I saw the set-up at Spel."

"The set-up at Spel?" Lance repeated. "What has that to do with our trip?"

Lucky leered knowingly, and chuckled, with a sidelong glance at Cal-thor: "Old Whiskers is the only Murian on board, isn't he, Waldron?"

"Yes."

"That's what I thought. I guess I underrated you, cowboy. It's a clever

scheme, and if you want, me and the boys will play ball with you."

"Play—ball?" Lance was still dazed.

"Sure. You've got Whiskers out here alone where you want him, aint you? From now on, it's all smooth sailing. Knock off a couple of the outlying colonies. Get together an army. Why, shucks, man—you can be dictator of Merou in two shakes of a lamb's tail. And for a percentage of the take, Dutch and Blacky and I will help you."

His words were so glib, his manner so convincing, that Lance knew the man thought he was making a *bona fide* offer. Stark astonishment sealed his lips.

BUT if Lance was stunned into silence, not so Frey.

"You—you guttersnipe!" he bellowed. "You rotten little guttersnipe! I'm going to rip you apart with my own hands!"

And he made a lunge for Costarno, who fell back. Dutch Hermant, loyal even to an ignoble cause, growled deep in his throat and blocked Frey. Pitched battle hung in the balance for a split second. But the cool head of Cal-thor staved off the moment.

"Stop!" He looked at the ashen-faced Costarno. "I am sorry for you," he said soberly. "Truly sorry. That a human brain could be so twisted, I can scarcely believe."

Lucky yammered in rodent defiance, "If it aint that, what is it, then? There's something funny going on here. I got a right to know what it is, aint I? I—"

Lance gritted: "You wouldn't understand if we told you, Costarno. Your mind is too full of evil to grasp a good cause. But this is the last time we'll have any trouble with you. I don't know how you escaped from the Great Hall—but I'll warrant there's at least one sad woman grieving over her husband because you did."

Blacky Gordham gasped, "No, Waldron. That aint so! I swear it aint. We clipped the guy an' tied him up, but he aint—"

"However that may be," persisted Lance, "our present undertaking is too precarious to risk your being along. —Don, Leif! Take them away!"

But Cal-thor placed a restraining hand on Lance's arm.

"No, Lance. I have told you that these men are my personal responsibility. I brought them to Merou. And I will return them whence they came."

Lance cried: "What! You mean we must take them with us to Bifrost Bridge?"

"No. I have another plan. You equipped the *Naglfar* with plenty of supplies? Food, water, equipment?"

"More than enough."

"Very well. Then we shall drop these three somewhere along our line of flight. Leave them there with the necessities of life. Pick them up upon our return."

Turner protested: "But if they escape—"

"There will be no purpose in their leaving the spot where we drop them. To do so, will be to lose themselves in a strange land, forfeit all hope of ever returning to their own native land and their own time. You understand that, do you not?"

The last remark was to Costarno. Lucky's face was an indelicate shade of green. He snarled:

"You can't do it! It aint human! There might be wild animals—or cannibals—"

"You will be supplied with arms and ammunition." Cal-thor strode to the sole porthole of the storeroom, looked down upon the terrain below. "Ah, I thought so! We are not far, now, from a suitable place. See, already an island rises from the ocean's green—"

The protests of the stowaways were overridden. In the length of time it took Cal-thor to stop the ship and settle it to the island, Lance had supplied Costarno's crew with all necessary provisions.

"Until we return," were his final shouted words as the *Naglfar* prepared to rise again. "Which will not be long now. And if you're smart, you'll not try any funny stuff with *these* when we come back. Or you'll end your days here."

"These" were the guns and ammunition he tossed overboard to the trio. Then there came that familiar, quivering jolt, and the *Naglfar* rose. Earth dimmed into a flat map. The last Lance saw of the castaways was three tiny figures shaking their fists in a gesture of angry despair.

CHAPTER XIV

Bifrost Bridge

LANCE and Vale stood spellbound, staring at the scene beneath them. Beside them stood Hymie Dahl. The little Jew was the only one who could summon words to his lips.

"Is gigantic!" he was muttering in awe. "Is colossal. Terrific. Stupendous. Is—is—*beautiful!*"

There was no gainsaying his words. What speed the *Naglfar* was capable of, Lance did not know. But he *did* know that it must be speedier than the swiftest aircraft of the Twentieth Century. Dusk had seen their departure from Merou. It had been at the first blush of dawn that they had discovered the three stowaways and dropped them on the island of Hel. Now it was bright morning—scarce twelve hours since they had left Spel—and already they were nearing their destination.

Or so, at least, Cal-thor had said a few minutes ago. But Lance could not believe it.

"YOU must be mistaken, Cal-thor," he said. "We are bound for a land in the Temperate Zone—the joining place of England and the Scandinavian peninsula. The climate there is coolish, crisp, ofttimes foggy, the vegetation decidedly that of a cool climate. This beneath us—"

His gesture indicated the lush tropical verdure of the forests below. Almost junglelike they were: high-fronded palms and massive ferns, tree-tall.

Cal-thor looked puzzled.

"So often you speak in riddles, Lance Waldron. A cool climate? A temperate zone? What do you mean?"

Lance stared at the man. MacHamer cut the Gordian knot of his curiosity.

"I'm surprised at you, Lance, my lad. It was your hints that made this situation clear to me. Yet you yourself do not seem to understand.

"Think, son! What caused Earth to develop its polar caps, hence the climatic zones?"

Lance said: "Why, the ice, of course. The—" He paused, looking sheepish. "Oh! The glacial era!"

"Of course! You're forgetting, Lance, that we are now in a time when the comet has not yet come. There has been no Ice Age. This is the fabled world of antiquity; the time when the world was a veritable garden spot, an Eden, a Paradise." MacHamer glanced up sharply as the *Naglfar* tilted its nose groundward. "We are there, Cal-thor?"

"I believe so. See? There are the plains called Vigrid. Beyond is the city of those who dwell in these parts."

Lance looked and saw the city. It was not so large as Spel; nor did it evidence a people of such intellectual attainments. It was such a city, Lance thought, as voyagers to ancient Persia must have found in the days when Darius led his people forth to conquest.

It had many buildings, but save for the central structure, the ruler's castle or temple, they were low. It was walled, and at intervals there were great gates in the wall. Now, as the *Naglfar* nosed to the ground, rested there softly as a falling feather, one of these gates opened, and there came charging across the plain a host of mounted men, clad in armor, bearing shields, swords, lances, guidons that fluttered brilliantly in the breeze. Their shoulder-length manes of golden hair escaped from beneath emblazoned helmets.

Cal-thor threw open the main port of the ship. As he did so, there sounded across the plain the stirring peal of trumpets mingled with the cries of the men who bore down upon them, the trample of horses' hooves.

Lance cried: "They're attacking, Cal-thor!"

But the Murian only smiled.

"No, Lance Waldron. They are men of action, these—but a friendly race. It is their fashion to ride thus." And he stepped fearlessly from the *Naglfar*, raised an unclenched hand above his head in token of peace.

NOW Lance saw that while the horsemen did indeed ride fiercely and cry out with brazen lungs, their lances remained at the stirrup, their great swords hung sheathed. He moved to Cal-thor's side, and others joined him—Frey and Turner and Leif.

It was the latter whose face expressed the greatest joy. As the horsemen drew ever closer, his blue eyes blazed with gladness, and he shook his great wide-browed head as if he too wore his hair in ringleted locks. His voice cleft the thunder triumphantly.

"These are my fathers, Lance Waldron! See, the *Einherjes* of old!"

And like "heroes of old" indeed they were. Lance, watching their approach, could understand the fine, indomitable pride of the Scandinavian race.

Now, with a final resounding scream of the trumpets, the horsemen reached the ship, wheeled and halted like a golden wave stayed at mid-crest by an invisible wall. A giant of a man, towering over even Lance and Leif by half a head, leaped from his mount.

"Welcome, O Golden-Skinned one from the West!" he bellowed. "Thy friends give thee greeting." He loosed his sword from his buckler, cast it upon the ground before Cal-thor, and followed it with a handful of crumbs dipped from a pouch which dangled at his side. "Our bread and swords are thine. Enter Bifrost at peace!"

With courtly courtesy, Cal-thor stooped, picked up a crumb of bread, and swallowed it. The sword he saluted; then handed it back hilt-foremost.

"Thy bread we will gladly accept," he said soberly, "but it is best thou shouldst sharpen thy sword. We bring tidings of a battle yet to come."

At the word *battle,* there rose a spontaneous shout from the assembled horsemen. Lance could not restrain the lifting feeling of joy within him: here was a race of men after his own heart. The Viking chieftain's laughter boomed out.

"A battle, son of Merou? The enemy will find us both ready and willing, else I am no longer Edwin of Bifrost!"

Cal-thor said gravely: "But this is not the type of battle for which thy men are justly honored, Edwin. This is a battle which must be waged by the science of Merou. I am Cal-thor, scientist of Merou, and these are my assistants."

Edwin saluted each in turn.

"Thy friends are as welcome as thyself. But tell me, Cal-thor, what manner of battle is this that is fought with weapons other than swords?"

CAL-THOR told him, then, in short, swift sentences. He spoke of the tiny white dot in the sky, and Edwin nodded comprehendingly. He told of the growing of this dot, and forecast the impending hour when it would grow to a gigantic flame of devastation. The Viking's brow furrowed. Cal-thor pointed out those things which must result from the comet's visit—the holocaust of heat, the death and destruction, the ruin of Bifrost; and Edwin frowned and shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

Then Cal-thor spoke of those who stood beside him; told of the amulet which Murian science had devised, revealed that these were visitors from a future world—

Edwin's eyes flashed angrily.

"What mockery is this, Cal-thor?" he demanded wrathfully. "Ever thy people and mine have lived in peace. But if this is some treacherous trick, some jest to belittle—"

He let the words die off in grim suggestion. Beside Lance, Auld MacHamer muttered ruefully:

"I was afraid of this! The concept is too vast for these simple fellows. Cal-thor had done better to tell them less."

"Speak, man of Merou!" roared Edwin. "Do you try to amuse me? Or—"

It was then that salvation sprang from an unexpected source. Someone brushed by Lance's elbow, stalked forward to confront the Viking ruler squarely. It was Leif Frazier, and his jaw was as hard, his eyes as burning blue, as those of Edwin himself.

"HARK ye, O my father!" he cried. "Hast ever seen me before?"

Edwin shook his head. "Nay! But thou—"

"But I am truly one of you. Is it not so? Look into my eyes, at my hair—aye, even at my very build. Am I a weakling from another race? No! I am one of you because thou art the father of my father's father a hundred times removed."

Then, gently, more pleadingly: "Believe Cal-thor, O my father. He speaks the truth. I who have come back to the world of my ancestors from a later age know that all these things are to be—unless we prevent it. Truly, a comet *is* coming. It will bring the *ragnarok*—the eternal twilight of the gods—and life will be turned to flame and ashes for thee, for my people."

He paused. For a thoughtful moment Edwin studied him—looked deep into his pale blue eyes, looked at his strong-thewed wrists and limbs. His hand reached out and touched the young man's head as if in blessing. Then—

"It is well, my son," he said simply. And to Cal-thor: "Thou hast found allies, man of Merou. Come with me. We will discuss that which must be done."

So began the final preparations for the conflict which was to alter the history of mankind.

Nor was it any too soon that they had reached this place. Cal-thor's prophecy proved true, drastically true. A tiny dot in the velvet sky but a few weeks before, the comet was now grown to a size greater than that of bright *Sirius.* The Vikings, seeing this, had the last vestige of doubt removed, and bent every effort to help the cosmic cannoneers set up their equipment.

They chose the wide plain of Vigrid as the site of their operations. The force-beam guns were set in position, a triangle

of unleashed potentiality, about an eighth-mile distant from each other. Their bases were secured with layer upon layer of stone and mortar, prepared on the spot under the supervision of engineer Joe Turner.

Braces were lashed to and against each force-beam cannon until it seemed that the motion of mountains might not budge them. But Cal-thor and Turner agreed it was necessary.

"WE'RE using Earth's mass to shove the comet," Joe grunted. "But don't forget it's kicking us back too. Newton's second law. These things have to be solid!"

With this physical labor in good hands, old MacHamer occupied himself with another project. With a crew of workmen from the city, he constructed a massive cavern which ran deep into the earth. Into this he moved food, water, equipment of all sorts. As an appendage, he constructed a second "entrance" to this cavern. A tall, chimneylike affair that was banked for rods around in each direction with mounds of solidly packed earth and stone.

Don Frey chuckled hugely at what he chose to call "MacHamer's well."

"You're all set for Santa Claus," he chuckled, "if he ever comes. That chimney must be more than two hundred feet high."

"Two hundred and fifty," agreed MacHamer placidly. "But I'm not preparing for Santa Claus, Don. This is the refuge of last resort in case anything goes wrong and the comet has its way with Earth. We should be safe in here. And the chimney will be a means of exit when Earth is deluged beneath deep layers of comet-dust."

Edwin, leader of the Vikings, saw these things; but despite his best intentions could not quite grasp the fact that the impending battle would be one of titanic forces rather than of men. He had sent forth the rallying cry to his clansmen; now each new dawn saw fresh dozens returning to Bifrost to stare in stark astonishment at the machinery of the "noble ones," and to help with the construction work.

One group, returning from the south, brought news that at any other time would have sent the warlike Vikings scurrying for shields and swords. There was an uprising, they reported, amongst the outlaw tribesmen of lower Bifrost. These sea-rovers, hated by the Vikings, had banded together under new leadership. Rumor whispered that a raid upon Vigrid was planned.

Edwin bellowed disdain at these mutterings.

"We have another task at hand now. Let them continue their plotting. When this task is completed, we will smash them—like *this!*"

And he brought his great hand down upon a hapless spider crawling on the bench beside him.

Then came—the hour!

CHAPTER XV

The Wolf and the Serpent

JOE TURNER had estimated that his force-beam's efficacy would start when the comet was within eight days or a week of its predestined meeting place with Earth. But the work of building had taken longer than anticipated. Now everything was ready, and as dusk descended over Vigrid's sprawling plain, Turner repeated for the hundredth time the plan of maneuver.

"With the coming of dark, we will take a last sighting on the comet, and apply the corrective calculations." He grinned at Cal-thor. "Got you there, friend. You didn't know about that, did you? The comet's not where it looks to be. But it took a lad from our time to figure that out—a youngster named Einstein."

Hymie Dahl beamed approvingly.

"Then," continued Joe, "I'll take over the first trick on the force-beam cannon. The rest of you better spread clear."

Cal-thor protested: "But, Joe—I think *I* should be the one to take the risk—"

"Risk?" interrupted Lance. "Is there any risk to operating the beam?"

Turner laughed negligently.

"Not very much. But if we've made any mistake in calculating the mass of the comet, the backlash may be dangerous to the operator. Still, that's a chance someone has to take.

"I'll be the one. Because I think you, Cal-thor, should stand by the second cannon. Just in case."

Lance said: "And to make it even more sure, suppose I carry on at the third?"

"O. K. But don't bring your beams in unless it's necessary. We'll save them for reserves. The rest of you hole out in MacHamer's 'well.' Enjoy yourselves. This isn't really so much a battle as it is a tough, laborious job."

Leif Frazier wondered: "Why? Do you expect it will take long to get the comet under control?"

"That depends. The nearer the comet approaches, the greater its speed will be. The 1874 comet, first seen by Coggia at Marseilles, approached within sixty thousand miles of the Sun—and at perihelion was traveling at the rate of 366 miles per second.

"If we should chance to let *our* little pet"— Joe grimaced toward the darkening northern horizon —"approach that near, we'll be battling a hunk of rock and fire moving at the rate of more than 1,300,000 miles per hour! Then *all* the force-beams will have to go to work!"

VALE'S clutch tightened on Lance's arm, and she glanced apprehensively toward the sky.

"Suppose," she ventured, "when it enters our solar system proper, it strikes, or is interrupted by, one of the other planets?"

"Such an event," Cal-thor told her, "would seriously disrupt all our calculations. But you need not fear. A greater force than ours governs the movements of the planets. And our studies prove that none of them will be affected by the comet's coming."

"Except," amended Joe, "ours. Well, folks, I guess that's all for now. Better head for MacHamer's hold."

For dark had fallen now, suddenly and completely.

With the coming of night, the sky had blossomed with an infinitude of stars. Gazing skyward, Lance saw and identified some of them as old friends. How often, under the sky of thirty millennia hence, had he watched their winking eyes with calm assurance!

Polaris, dim pinprick of silver setting the course for the drowsy steersman at the helm. Bright Rigel, sturdy foot on which the Huntsman tramps his inexorable round among the galaxies. Hot Fomalhaut and softly glowing Spica. The fiery-red Antares, arch-rival of the god of war. All shone above him now, as in another world and time. But some were changed, shifted minutely, so the eye strained to find them in unaccustomed positions.

BUT new amongst these old acquaintances was a crimson dot that with each passing day grew larger. Lance saw it now—and gasped! It did not seem possible that the comet could have spread so much in twenty-four short hours. But it had. It was double the size it had been last night. A red, unwinking eye that rose strangely from the entrails of Draco, the Dragon.

Lance was not the only one whose breath started in quick surprise at that sight. He heard the hissing intake of MacHamer's shock, a muttered exclamation from Don Frey. Vale's fingers bit into the muscles of his arm. And like a distant rumbling of cart-wheels, there came from the walled Viking city beyond the uproar of many voices.

Turner spun to his force-beam cannon.

"You see?" he cried. "Already the perihelion acceleration has begun! We must get this blaster into operation. Stand back, everyone!"

Cal-thor, a look of determination on his face, had slipped forward to the second cannon. Now Lance bent and kissed Vale tenderly, thrust her into Leif Frazier's arms.

"Take the girls to MacHamer's well, Leif."

But the fair Norwegian had other ideas. He grinned, and shook his head. "Sorry, Lance. It is not often I refuse your wishes." He too kissed and released the girl in his arms. Leyéef's flowerlike face turned to his in the dusk anxiously for a moment. Then she sighed with Oriental resignation. "Leyéef, you and Vale seek safety. I stay here with my comrades."

Thus the group organized. Joe Turner was now beside his precious force-beam cannon, and Don Frey had joined him. The two older men, Cal-thor and MacHamer, were at the second gun. Lance and Leif waited by the third. Flickering flares threw eerie illumination on the faces of the cosmic cannoneers as they waited for Turner to make his last minute computations.

He did so, scribbling in that sultry light; then he rose, shouting:

"Got it! Take bearing, you second-string powder-monkeys. Fourteen-O-O-seven with a deviation of three-O-six on the B vernier!"

Leif spun the range-finding device of his weapon with fumbling, unaccustomed fingers. He was the slowest of the three. He had expected to be. But he had not expected that which did occur. For suddenly, from the cannon before him and to his right, there came the clarion voice of Cal-thor.

"Behold, my friends! Withhold your fire. It is I who insist on being the first!"

His arm moved, a white blur in the gloom. A rush of air, crackling as a thunderburst, battered Lance's ear-drums. The ground beneath him shook, as with the trample of a thousand feet, then was steady. The air above the muzzle of Cal-thor's cannon seemed to spin and dance giddily in the sultry light of the flares—a weaving spiral, flameless, colorless, invisible save for the tortured path it cleft through the air.

Turner cried: "Cal-thor, you shouldn't have—"

And Cal-thor's voice drifted across to all of them. "But of course I should, and must have, my son. It was right that we two who are oldest and could best be spared should make the first attempt."

MacHamer's voice was glad.

"That's right, lads. But see? It seems to be working, all right. We won't know yet. Possibly not for several hours. The force-beam, traveling at the speed of light, has countless miles of space to cross—"

IT was at this moment that an unlooked-for commotion interrupted him. There came a hoarse rumble from the Viking city, the roar of strong voices raised in rage, the swift bark of commands, and the golden call of a trumpet. Then pounding hooves beat a swift tattoo on the plain, and Edwin, chief of the Vikings, rode into the encampment to bellow: "Cal-thor! My friend of the Golden Isle, where are you?"

Cal-thor cried: "Here, Edwin. What is it?"

"Come into the city at once! The rumor was true. The spawn of lower Bifrost have risen, and even now their legions march upon Vigrid!"

CAL-THOR looked desperately at his machine, then at the worried Viking ruler, then back at the cannon.

"I cannot leave here now. MacHamer—confer with Edwin. See what must be done."

Without parley, the old Scot nodded and led the way to his cavern. All the comrades, save only Cal-thor, accompanied him. And there they learned the full truth.

"My couriers say," Edwin told them, "that the dogs of lower Bifrost have formed a great army, and are marching to seize this city. Within the space of hours they will be upon Vigrid-plain. You must leave at once—come to the city. There will you be safe until my men can crush out this outlaw band."

Lance said: "But we can't leave, Edwin! Cal-thor's beam has already been projected on its way. From now on, our weapons will need constant surveillance."

"It is leave," said Edwin succinctly, "or die."

"It is death," parried Lance, "if we *do* leave! Not only for ourselves but for all of mankind. Can you not parry with these attackers? Call a truce until such time as—"

Edwin shook his head.

"There are generations of enmity between our clans. And now, my scouts inform me, a fanatic religious fervor has gripped the men of lower Bifrost. One of their hunting parties, recently returned from the island of Hel, brought back three living gods—"

"Hel!" Don Frey's teeth flashed white in the curling tangle of his beard. "Gods of muck and slime!"

More soberly, Lance said: "These three are no gods, Edwin; they are men. We know them well—to our sorrow. We should have given them their just deserts while we had the chance. But it is too late to think of that now. . . . We cannot leave the cannon. What, then, can we do?"

Edwin smiled tightly. "There is but one thing *to* do, Lance Waldron: stand by your beams. My men will hold off the enemy."

Lance hesitated: "But—their number?"

This time the Viking chieftain laughed aloud. "They outnumber us three to one. Ha! That is as it should be. An even battle!" And still roaring with lusty mirth, he strode from the hold. In a moment they heard the hammer of horses' hooves disappearing toward the city. Then the shrill welcome of trumpets. Lance shook his head admiringly.

"There goes a man!"

"We," said Frey softly, "must not be less so. Let's get back to our pits, gang, and do our share of the job."

They filed away, each taking as he went a gun and ammunition. Before returning to his own post, Lance went up to the cannon beside which Cal-thor waited patiently. He told the Murian the latest development.

"MacHamer," he concluded, "has remained back in his hold. There had to be someone left there to guard our supplies and the women. He and Hymie can hold the fort."

Cal-thor nodded. "That is right. This is bad news you bring me, Lance Waldron. And it is a weighty burden we place on the shoulders of Edwin's men.

"Now you must leave me. If I have calculated correctly, it is but a matter of seconds before the force-beam grips the comet."

LANCE said doggedly: "I'm sticking!"

"You are not, my son. Consider, if my efforts are a failure, there will be need for others to continue the task."

Confronted with that argument, Lance had no choice. He backed away. "Very well. But be careful, Cal-thor. And good luck!"

Cal-thor said: "Thank you, Lance Waldron." Then no more words were spoken. As Lance retreated to join Frazier beside the second force-beam cannon, Cal-thor bent anxiously over his own weapon, hands poised over the controls.

Lance, waiting impatiently, looking skyward, felt a mad sense of unreality sweep over him. It was too fantastic, too utterly incredible. He could not help but feel that this was all some horrible dream, that soon he would awake in his own world, far removed from these events. Here he stood on a wide, flat plain, in Stygian darkness lighted only by the spluttering flicker of torches, the dim beacons of a barbaric city, and the impassive eyes of the stars.

Millions of miles away, one of these pinpoints of light was rushing with the speed of a cosmic express toward a rendezvous in space with the earth on which he stood. If it attained that meeting, life on the earth would be crushed into a few scattered fragments. All man's culture would die. Only a handful of survivors would endure.

A sudden cry interrupted his thoughts. The voice of Cal-thor rose from the darkness, thick, choking, exultant:

"Now!"

DRAWN as if by some irresistible magnet, Lance's eyes turned to that glowing red dot in the heavens which was the comet. And what he saw proved the truth of his insane theorizing.

For at that instant he found the comet *—it moved!*

A sudden leaping, convulsive shudder seemed to pass over it. Its motion could not have been more than a mere fraction of an arc; only the keenest eye could detect a motion. But at that distance, the thousandth part of a second meant hundreds of thousands of miles! Something *had* gripped the comet; something had thrown a ponderable weight against its onrush, shaking it from its course! And that something was the force-beam!

Lance was not conscious that he had cried out, but he knew that he must have, because his throat was rasped and sore from strain, and his ears rang with the cries of his comrades. Beside him, Leif was pounding his arm in frenzied exultation. And all were watching that celestial struggle.

For struggle it was. The ruddy dot was writhing and twisting like a wild thing now. How many miles of tortured space it traversed in its ferocious leaping, no man could guess. It was a sight unparalleled in the knowledge of man. A unit of the solar system, ripped by Man from the gigantic grip of the mother Sun! Earth's mass thrown into the cosmic balance against the motion of an unwanted guest streaking in a regular orbit.

Now from the red and angry stellar eye there burst a filmy veil of white. Like a halo it encircled the comet for an instant; then it began to stream out behind like some plumy streamer of wrath.

Leif screamed in Lance's ear. "The tail! See, the serpent grows a tail!"

Lance nodded, even in that hectic moment thinking how apt a description

was the word "serpent." For the comet did resemble a serpent now—a serpent whose sole eye burned with angry fire, whose twisting body turned the dust of the cosmos white-hot for a half-million, a million, countless millions of miles beyond.

Lance broke from his own gun, raced to that beside which Joe Turner crouched, scribbling feverish computations. He clutched the young engineer's shoulder and screamed: "What do you think, Joe? Are we doing it? Are we—"

Turner continued to write madly, didn't even look up as he answered. "You bet your damn life we're doing it! Do you see its position? Three whole seconds off course! That means the acceleration has been doubled, and the beam is pushing it off orbit. If— God!"

It was not profanity. It was the heartfelt prayer of a terror-stricken heart that ripped from Turner's lips. A look of wild dismay carved his face to granite. And Lance, looking skyward again, saw why.

The comet, tortured beyond endurance by that force beating against it—had *split!*

Where there had been one eye, one tail, a moment before—now there were two flaming sparks in the fastness of the void. One writhing serpent that danced a macabre, spinning *gavotte* for an instant, then turned and shook itself like a splashed dog; the other an untailed monster of crimson that hung like a scarlet eye in space.

Turner was on his feet, screaming.

"Frey, the controls! Fasten on the round one, the wolf's eye! Cal-thor! Cal-thor, get away from your cannon! The backlash!"

In all the bedlam, Cal-thor's voice was the only sane thing.

"I will hold it as long as I can, my friends. But be swift! Or—"

TURNER pushed Lance to his cannon, sobbing. "Take a bearing at nine-seven-three. Grab that thing before the backlash gets Cal-thor—"

Lance sprang away. In seconds, he was diving into his pit beside Frazier, ramming the power controls, hearing the hum of generating power, spinning the dials to the numbers Turner had given him. He felt the gun vibrate beneath him, heard the high, thin screaming of its force-beam stream from the muzzle, dying in the heights of ultra-sonic oblivion.

Leif cried: "What is it, Lance? What is it?"

"Cal-thor! When the comet split, his force-beam was thrown back upon him. If he doesn't—"

But at that moment it came! Just as Cal-thor, having done all that could be done, scrambled from the mouth of his pit and started racing toward safety, the air was sharp with the keen bite of ozone. The heavens ripped apart, came together again with a deafening roar. Earth rumbled beneath Lance's feet, threw him sprawling.

Dazed, numb, he cried through parched lips to the Murian. But Cal-thor was doomed. A leaping white flame rose from the force-beam cannon, one single sheet of flame like the striking of a thousand thunderbolts.

Against that supernal blinding light, Lance saw Cal-thor's figure limned briefly. A step—another—another. . . . Then his charred body fell. And only a blackened hole in the ground showed where the unleashed power of the Serpent and the Wolf had struck down a hero!

CHAPTER XVI

Rent Leviathan

DON FREY was scrambling into Lance's pit; words of swift encouragement were spilling from his lips.

"Joe says we've got it licked! See, the Serpent has been thrown off its course. It won't come near us. There's just the main body now. And that little fragment."

He pointed. Lance saw that his words were true. The serpentine portion of the invader was growing smaller as he watched. Only that which they had called the Wolf still remained a threat—that and a tinier dot of fire which revolved about the main nucleus like a ruddy satellite.

"We'll get 'em, then!" he yelled. "With both cannon trained on the big one—"

"But make it fast," Don warned, "and make it accurate! When the force-beam retracted, it acted as a magnet on the Wolf. Its acceleration has stepped up. It's blasting at us at lightning speed!"

That too was true. No longer could the comet be called a dot. It had blossomed, in these few minutes' time, to a hot crimson globe. It also had developed a tail now. And with this white, blazing fan streaming behind it like a great veil,

it was literally streaking toward Earth, growing larger with each passing second.

"I've got a beam on the way!" yelled Lance. "And so has Joe. As soon as we grab it—"

BUT as if they had not enough to contend with, there came at that moment a warning cry. A figure came stumbling across the plain to throw himself into the pit beside them.

"Lance! He's coming across the plains, the army from the south with Costarno, that dog!"

Hymie was right. Even as he spoke, there came from the southern edge of the plain a skirling of trumpets. From the city behind them came the answering challenge. Then the great gates opened, voices rose in hoarse cries, and the Viking warriors flowed out upon the plain of Vigrid like an avenging host.

In the van was Edwin, resplendent in a golden helmet and mounted on a snorting stallion that he reined up as he came abreast Lance's cannon.

"They have come, Lance Waldron!" he roared. "We go to defend thee!"

He jabbed his spurs into the horse's flanks. The beast plunged forward. Lance smiled grimly.

"He'll do it, too!" he said to his companions. "He doesn't know the meaning of fear, that one!" Then an expression of horror tore from his heart. "*Edwin!* Turn back! Not that way!"

For the gloom had deceived the Viking chieftain. Blindly he had led his men straight toward the chasm riven in the earth by the backlash which had destroyed Cal-thor. An instant Edwin turned, as though his ears had caught above the din Lance's agonized voice. He waved cheerfully, gallantly. Then, too late, he saw the pit which dropped, no one knew how far, straight into the bowels of the earth. He strained back on the reins then, jerking his mount to a stop by sheer strength.

But those behind were upon him, pressing him forward. For one horrible second the golden-haired leader toppled on the brink of the chasm—then, like a chip carried before the flood, he fell. And others behind him followed.

Lance felt a hand tug at his heart, and a great sob welled in his throat. The fangs of the Serpent had struck deep. First Cal-thor, then these brave warriors and their leader, who, defying all men, had lost his life without ever facing a foe.

It was Leif Frazier who sprang to his feet, raving. "My father!" he cried. "My father! Who then will lead the men into battle?"

As if in answer to his question, a frightened horse that had somehow scrambled riderless from the brink of the pit thundered down upon them. With a cry, Leif was out of the shelter, had clutched the horse's reins in a grip of iron.

"An answer from the gods!" he roared. "*I* shall lead them! Good-by, Lance!" He spun the horse and was off, his hair as gold as Edwin's casque in the strange light of the comet. "*Ohé!* To me!"

Hymie Dahl turned a frightened face to Lance. "But leaving me in his place," he complained, "it aint no bargain. I aint no fighter, Lance. I don't know how to work the gun or nothing."

Lance said: "You'll do, Hymie. You've *got* to do! And—he was right. See, the men have rallied around him."

It was true. Their momentary panic had left them. Now, sensing a strong new leader, the phalanx of the Vikings had closed. Like a golden-capped spearhead they were lunging once more across the plain. Lance could see them clearly as they surged forward to meet another horde of riders racing from the opposite direction, a host clad in silvered mail. The two waves met and clashed! Gold mixed with silver in a frightful burst of noise; the shrieks of bloodthirsty warriors drowned the cries of the dying as those two crests smashed together. The battle was on!

But—but how was it that he could see all this so plainly? Lost in the moment, Lance had forgotten to wonder. Now he looked up—and understood why with a surge of horror. It was the comet. The Wolf! Its blood-red orb was blazing down through the heavens now, streaming behind it a tail of incandescent flame that arched the heavens. And it was half as big as the full moon!

ACROSS the plain, Joe Turner had seen this approach. Now he was spinning his verniers wildly. To Don Frey he cried: "It's shifted, Don! And its speed is terrific. We'll need both guns on it to shove it off. I'll have to tell Lance!"

He began to scramble from his shelter. Frey yelled: "You stay here, Joe. I'll tell him."

"No. Just keep the needle centered on the comet. Be right back!"

Turner dug out for Lance's pit. Frey crouched over the gun. Inexperienced as he was, he knew what Joe had meant. The comet was too near now. There was no need to make correctional calculations on sighting. A straight sight down the barrel was good enough.

HE made that sight and held it, shifting the muzzle of the force-beam cannon minutely as the range changed. The Wolf, he knew, was within the grasp of his beam. He could tell that, by the way the huge comet writhed and trembled, trying to shake free its bond. There was no need to worry about the smaller fragment which tailed its primary. That was in the grip of the Wolf. To force the Wolf into outer darkness, was to win the battle.

So far, he was holding his own. The comet was growing no larger. Neither, for that matter, was it receding. But when Lance got his beam centered—

Footsteps sounded on the parapet above him. He felt rather than saw a dark figure looming there. He shouted over his shoulder: "Tell him, Joe? O. K., pal—see if I've got this thing under control."

There was no answer. Don turned, wondering. And at that moment the visitor leaped square upon his back. Don's great shoulders shrugged. He cried, angrily, "What the—" Then the words died in his throat.

"Hermant!" he gasped. "Dutch Hermant!"

The burly one grinned a crooked smile.

"We been meaning to have this out, aint we, Frey?"

Don shouted: "Later, you damned fool! Don't you see what we're up against? That—"

He started to point at the sky. But Hermant did not bother to look. He was raising his right hand. And in that hand was a revolver. He said, gloatingly, "So long, pal—" and pulled the trigger.

Alone in the cannon-pit, Dutch Hermant laughed. But it was his last earthly sound. For at that instant Joe Turner came racing back from Lance's cannon. His lightning eye grasped the situation at a glance. He saw Don Frey's body, lying like a broken thing before the cannon, the powerful bulk of Dutch Hermant leaning over it. And his hand tugged at his holster even as rage and pain broke a bellow from his lips.

All things happened simultaneously. Hermant turned; Turner fired. The bigger man's pale eyes widened. A look of vast surprise spread over his flat features. One hand moved to his breast. Then slowly, like a tall building toppling, he lurched forward to his face.

CHAPTER XVII

RAGNAROK

JOE TURNER sprang to his gun. Precious minutes had been lost. Already the comet had shifted from its former position, and the force-beam was spending itself uselessly upon uncharted areas of outermost space.

He took a swift sight along the barrel, and spun the gun to cover the comet. His heart leaped as he saw that Lance too was evidently now bearing full upon the Wolf, because it had not gained. It was still trembling, pushing, striving to overcome that beam which pressed it away from its celestial victim.

Now, with two of them on it at last—

But he was keeping a weather eye peeled. He knew how Don had died, and he was taking no chances. That is why he was ready when he saw another form slinking against the dull glow that limned the cannon-pit. He bounced away from the gun. In a running leap, Joe collared the man. It was Lucky Costarno's other henchman—Blacky Gordham.

Gordham screamed with fear as he felt that clutch upon him. Like a trapped

rat, his arms and legs scrabbled in vain motions of escape. His frightened eyes saw the figures lying limp on the floor of the pit; identified Dutch Hermant. He squealed, "I surrender, Mr. Turner. I wasn't going to do nothing, I swear it. I give up. I—"

Turner laughed, a throaty, mirthless laugh that did not spring from his heart. His grip upon the slighter man's throat tightened.

"This time there's no Cal-thor to save you, rat!" he growled. "Thought Hermant would have this pit cleared out, did you? Well—"

He reached for his revolver. Gordham screamed again, and kicked and clawed.

"What are y' gonna do? You can't kill me? Not in cold blood? It's murder!"

"It's not murder," Joe told him grimly. "It's execution."

Then the trapped rat acted. All his strugglings and writhings had not been aimless. Now, from somewhere on his person, he drew the favorite weapon of his kind. Tawny light glinted on an edge of honed steel. Something heavy as the blow of a strong man's fist rammed Turner below the heart; a flash of fire coursed through his veins and he fell backward.

BLACKY, gasping terribly, clawed his way up, trying to escape from the pit. In his haste he made slow going of it, or he would have escaped. For Turner stood stricken, a cold numbness stealing through his veins. He said, in a strangled, shocked voice: "The—little—rat—"

Then his tightening fingers froze on the grip of the automatic, and the whole clip pounded into Gordham's struggling body. Each shot jerked Gordham like the blow of a fist. A single whimper escaped his lips before he died.

Like a man in a dream, Joe Turner looked at the sky. To fading eyes, it seemed the universe was aflood with fire. There was fire within him too, fire that strangely mingled with the numbing cold of intrastellar space. But he had one last thing he must do. . . .

On feet that dragged, he lurched to the force-beam cannon. Mechanically he took a bearing, set the controls. Then he straddled himself over the control-wheel, locking it into position. The vibration coursing through the muzzle permeated him; where his clothes touched the glowing barrel, they scorched. . . . He did not feel the pain. His head fell forward. His body stiffened, faithful unto death to the cause he had espoused.

INEXORABLY, but with infinite slowness, the comet's course shifted. Its mass was not sufficient to hold against that greater mass arraigned against it. It lurched and tottered, there above Earth. And slowly, then with gathering speed, it moved out of its course under the pressure of the force that drove it relentlessly away.

Hymie Dahl, eyes glued to the field of combat, was screaming with delight.

"Is all over, Lance! So he's licking them, and like cowards back where they came from they're running! Such a boy, Leif! He should be my son-in-law!"

Lance had another cause for joy. He was glad and proud that the Viking forces under Leif's command had completed the rout of the invaders, but of more immediate importance was that which was happening to the comet. He yelled back at Hymie: "Look up there! See that? It's going away! That means *we've* won, too!"

Then he frowned.

"But I wonder what all the fuss was about over near Joe's cannon? I hope he and Don are all right—"

Then a cool, familiar, mocking voice was in his ear.

"They're all right, cowboy. Just like you're going to be in a few minutes. Blacky and Dutch took care of them. *No*—don't go for it, Waldron!"

At the warning, Lance's hand fell away from his revolver. Lucky Costarno nodded, smiling.

"I'm not a sucker like you, pal. When I've got the drop on a guy, I don't let him get away." He chuckled. "So he can set himself up as a god, and come back and knock my ears down—like I'm going to do to *you*."

Unknowingly, Lance duplicated Don Frey's plea.

"Look, Lucky," he pleaded. "I don't give a whoop in Hades about your personal ambitions. We can discuss all that later. Right now there's more important work to be done. This comet has to be driven back into space, or—"

Lucky rasped harshly: "Don't give me any more of that stuff, Waldron. We're having our showdown right here and now. Stalling, hey? Because my army's licked, and when your men get back they can take me?

"Well, they'll never do it—alive. And you won't be alive to see them try it, either, because—"

He leveled the gun, pointed it at Lance's heart. A vast feeling of despair came upon Lance. He tried again.

"Wait, Lucky! If I wanted to make an issue of it, I'd jump you right now. Fight it out. I wouldn't take it lying down. But don't you see—"

"What I'm going to see right now," gritted Lucky, "is the best thing I've seen for a long time." And his finger tightened on the trigger. Lance dived, desperately.

But another body had moved even faster. It was the little Jew, Hymie Dahl. And as Costarno's gun exploded, Dahl had thrown himself forward, full upon the gambler, right into the bullet aimed at Lance's heart. His clawing fingers raked Costarno's arm. Lucky roared and tried to leap back.

But Lance was upon him, and his body flamed with a hatred beyond control as he picked Costarno up bodily and swung him over his head.

The racketeer cursed and kicked at Lance's head. A bombshell of pain exploded before Lance's eyes, but his rage overwhelmed it. He threw Costarno to the ground, and was upon the man before he could scramble to his knees.

His right lashed out at Lucky's face. Lucky squirmed once—and was still. Lance heaved himself to his feet, dazed, panting for breath. His gun swung in its holster, but somehow he could not bring himself to use it.

He bent over Costarno, slapped him into consciousness. Costarno came to, moaning. His eyes darkened with fear. He spat, through slashed lips, "No, Waldron. I give up—"

"Get up!" ordered Lance tonelessly. "Get up and run!"

The man cowered to the ground.

"I won't. I can't. I—"

"*Run!*" repeated Lance. There was doom in his tone.

Costarno swayed to his feet, his beady eyes roving in his head. He turned as though to move away. Then, with a desperate lunge, he turned on Lance—

Lance fired once. Lucky doubled, pitched forward, and was still.

THE sustaining flame of wrath died from Lance Waldron leaving him spent and weak. On leaden feet he moved to the force-beam cannon beside which lay Hymie Dahl. Tenderly he raised the little pawnbroker's head to his knee. His hands unbuttoned Hymie's shirt.

But the very touch, the moisture on his fingers that was not perspiration, told the story. And as he knelt there, futile before this tragedy, Hymie's eyes lifted open. There was a question in them that Lance answered with a word.

"Yes, Hymie?"

The little Jew smiled. His lips parted.

"So I got to help after all," he whispered.

"You saved my life," said Lance dully. "That shot was meant for me."

There was a long moment of silence. For a minute Lance thought his friend had gone. And then, "Is a bargain," said Hymie Dahl—and died.

OUT of the strange silence that had come with the rout of the invaders, there came a tumultuous uproar. Again there was the pounding of horses' hooves, the clash of metal upon metal, the hubbub of voices, and this time the Viking warriors—those who were left of them—were riding back.

A figure came sliding into Lance's pit, a bloody, disheveled figure of a giant whose eyes were wild, whose face was haggard.

"Lance! Lance Waldron!" Then: "Thank God you still live, my friend! Come, and come quickly!"

Leif Frazier tugged at his shoulder. Lance roused himself.

"What is it? Where are Don and Joe? What—"

"They are dead. All are dead, or soon will be. Don't you see?"

Leif pointed skyward. Lance looked, stunned, appalled. Where a short time before he had seen the last section of the comet, that which they had called the Wolf being driven off into outer space, now another flaming orb, large as two moons, was driving Earthward.

He leaped to his gun, strove with frenzied fingers to turn it upon this new monster from the void.

"The fragment! We destroyed the main body of the comet, but when Costarno attacked me, this piece—"

But even as he worked the controls, he knew his efforts were in vain. There was no power now, that could stay that demon of destruction. It was looming greater before his eyes with each passing second. Already its fiery breath was heating the air about him; he could feel the hackles of his neck rise with that scorching breath. The air was growing

thicker, sulphurous, foul with the stench of burning gases.

Leif's strong hands were at his armpits, lifting him, tugging him from the pit.

"It is no use, my friend. We have failed. Come to MacHamer's well. There we have a chance of surviving."

This time Lance heeded his warning. Leif's horse, pawing and restless, took their combined weight with a neighing whimper of panic.

How he and Leif made those last few yards, Lance never knew. He was conscious only of the throbbing of the horse's flanks beneath him, of heat that baked the sweat and dust on his back to a gritty clay. Of a growing light that crimsoned the sky. Of the howl of vast winds beating against them like fists; of the eerie, tortured wail of Earth in travail.

Then somehow, they were on the ground, and Leif was thrusting him toward an entrance that was cool and dark. He was scrambling on hands and knees; hands were outstretched to clutch his; then he in turn was drawing Leif through the opening. One other warrior made the entrance in time; then a searing blast exploded outside, and Auld MacHamer screamed madly: "The portal! Close the portal!"

Vale Marlowe pulled a lever. Tons of rock, which MacHamer had suspended above the doorway for just this moment, rumbled and crashed. Dust choked them all, and darkness deepened —but the heat died. Save for the grilled chimney above, through which filtered a modicum of sultry air, they were trapped in their underground chamber.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Twilight of the Gods

LANCE turned to MacHamer fearfully. He said, "The others? In the city? Will they—Is there a chance?"

The old Scotsman shook his head.

Lance cried desperately: "But there *must* be. We're not catching the full brunt of the holocaust. After all, we destroyed the main part of the comet, forced it back into outer space. We—"

"Come," said MacHamer quietly, "with me."

He led the way to the aperture which led to the upper chimney. Here he paused, handed a transparent envelope of mica, or some similar substance, to Lance. "Put this over your head. And breathe sparingly."

Then he led the way up the narrow rocky ladder in the side of the "chimney." It was a long climb. Fully two hundred and fifty feet had MacHamer constructed that emergency exit.

Finally they reached the small exit chamber, grilled about and protected from either side by parapets. Here MacHamer halted and motioned to Lance. "Look, son, but be careful. Look upon that which was, and is, and is to be."

Lance did not need his bidding. For already he was staring with horrified, grief-stricken eyes at the orgy of death and destruction that raged outside.

The sky was lurid with the blaze of a thousand daylights; but this was no clean illumination. It was a baleful crimson born of the comet's maw. In that evil glow all sights were stark and sere. Lance's heart sickened within him. His eyes turned northward, toward the city in the vale below.

BUT there was no city, only a flattened, glowing plain whereon rock and sand and metal ran alike in rivulets of cherry flame. Where formerly, upon the plain of Vigrid, had lain the bodies of men killed in battle, now was stark emptiness. There were no trees, no boulders standing high; all was desolate.

A ferocious tempest shrieked across this plain, and with the winds came the rain. It was no rain of life-giving water, however, but a hail of rock and fire. Shards fell like arrowheads, cutting, slashing, biting their way deep into the bosom of ravaged Earth.

And through all was the heat, the terrific, baking heat, and the ear-piercing tumult of the storm. Off to the south and westward the crimson glow was edging into a ruby-shaded blackness dotted with fiery sparks.

Lance turned away, shuddering. He said in a choked voice: "Everything—will be destroyed?"

"Everything, Lance. Man's mightiest works cannot stand against this judgment from the skies."

"And men themselves?"

"Only those who, like ourselves, sought the safety of Earth's bosom can survive." MacHamer shook his head. "I am not sure that we ourselves will live."

Lance cried: "But surely the comet has passed now?"

"Yes. Long since. And well it is, else we would not be here to speak of it.

"Had the full force of the comet spent itself on us, Earth would have been destroyed. As it was, those comrades who gave their lives succeeded, at least, in diverting the main force.

"This was only a fragment of the comet that touched us, Lance. And it did not strike us directly. It brushed across Earth on its flight to the sun. Yet this slight touch, at such transcendent speed, has wrought the havoc you see here."

Lance salvaged a shard of gladness from the moment's grim despair.

"But then, at least," he cried happily, "our efforts were not in vain? We did prevent the comet from destroying Earth—as it did aforetime? And by doing so, we have altered the history of mankind. Merou will be saved—"

MACHAMER shook his head sadly. "No, Lance. Have you not yet guessed the truth?"

"The truth?" repeated Lance wonderingly.

"Yes, my lad. The truth is—this is but the beginning of Earth's travail. Tell me, did you not see darkness gathering to seaward?"

"Yes, but—"

"And was it not you who told me of Forsythe's theory? Of the Ice Age that was caused by a terrible heat and an enormous condensation? Of the clouds, miles deep, that blanketed Earth? Of the cold that descended, the loss of Sun's rays, the great sheet that formed?"

Lance stammered: "You mean—that is now to come? We must go through that again?"

"Yes. That is what happened æons before you and I were conceived; that is what will come now."

"But MacHamer—what are we to do? About food and drink? The maintenance of life, and culture?"

"I forgot nothing when I built this refuge, Lance. MacHamer's hold will protect more than the number now below, and for many years. Have no fear of that.

"When the molten rocks of Earth have cooled, men can go forth in search of food. It will be hard to find, because everywhere, except in the lee of the sturdiest mountains, the Drift covers all. But the seeds of plants are hardy. Some moons from now they will spring again and bear. Yes, there will be food."

Lance said quietly: "We number how many below?"

"Yourself and Vale. Leif Frazier and Leyéef. Myself. Perhaps a score of the Vikings; some men, some women."

"We must not tell them," said Lance. "Not any more than is necessary."

"No," agreed MacHamer, "we must not tell them. And now, shall we go below? There is one other thing I have to tell *you*."

A gaunt-eyed crew greeted them in the cavern below. Vale Marlowe, sobbing, rushed to Lance's arms. The Vikings, stanch in the face of doom as befitted their race, asked questions with their eyes. Leif Frazier was their spokesman.

"It is as we feared it would be, Leif. History is a closed book; its Word is inflexible."

"Merou?"

Lance looked at MacHamer. The old man said gravely: "Either now, or soon, it will be beneath the sea. For that too is written on the Pages of Time."

Leif nodded, and pressed Leyéef closer to him. He said, in an unchanged voice: "Then we must stay here? Until some day—"

It was then that MacHamer said, surprisingly: "No, we need not, Leif. That is the other thing I wished to tell Lance."

CHAPTER XIX

Homecoming

EVENTS too swift for comprehension had dulled the edge of Lance's keen perception. It was a full minute before he grasped the staggering import of the old man's statement. Then his voice was high with strain as he cried: "*Need not?* What do you mean?"

"I mean that there is one final secret which you do not know, Lance. Cal-thor knew it, but like many other wonders, it was so commonplace to him that he took it for granted that we also understood. It was but recently that he told me, so recently that there was neither time nor reason for altering our plans.

"Several times you were on the verge of discovering this secret—but each time the solution was withheld."

"Speak up, man! You talk in riddles. What is it?"

"Do you not remember the time when Cal-thor told *you* that you spoke in riddles, Lance? He hinted at the secret then."

"Tell me, man!"

MacHamer spoke slowly.

"Lance Waldron, do you remember how, before we learned the language of Merou—Mu—you were several times confused by cryptic statements of Cal-thor?"

Lance smiled sadly, suddenly remembering a gallant little man whose body now lay beneath tons of rock.

"You mean the nonsense Hymie used to call 'double-talk?' Like the time Cal-thor spoke of 'long-ago-to-come?'"

"Yes, and that other time, aboard the *Naglfar,* when Cal-thor looked at you strangely when you spoke of the recurrent endings to man's civilization.

"And did you not once tell me, Lance, that Leyéef had a fantastic notion of the bloodstone amulet's powers? Did she and the dragoman, Al-Hamid, both not warn you that those who bore it when the 'Moment' came would 'cycle and fade?'"

Lance said: "Yes, but—"

"And Lance, didn't you tell me that there was within the ancient crypt wherein you found your amulet a strange device?"

"A—a wheel. Painted on the wall."

"And the hub of that wheel?"

"The bloodstone," replied Lance. "Or a replica of it. But how—?"

"Before he went forth to the battle which was to be his last," said MacHamer solemnly, "Cal-thor spoke to me of these things, and many others. I had begun to suspect the truth even then. And I wondered, so I asked.

"I learned that my suspicions were founded on fact. Lance, you acknowledge that through the power of the geodesic distortion factor, you were borne backward into Time, do you not?"

Lance said: "It would be impossible to deny it in the face of these things we have experienced."

"Hear then the greatest wonder, Lance: Your surmise is at once right and —wrong! You were drawn, not backward in time, but *forward!*"

VALE MARLOWE gasped, and an anxious look crept into her eyes. She moved to MacHamer's side.

"It is the strain, Lance. The horror of it all. It has touched his brain."

MacHamer soothed her gently.

"No, my dear. I am quite sane. It is the truth I speak.

"The wheel, Lance, is the symbol of the passage of Time, as well you know. But not without reason is its rim a circle. It is because—the history of Mankind is repetitive!

"Think you! From our own time we were drawn to a city known as Spel, in the land of Merou, an island. In our blind faith in old legends, we assumed this island was somewhere in the Pacific —and we were partly right. For the Pacific was encircling it part way. The eastern shore of Mu was lapped by the waters of the Atlantic, however!

"Did it not occur to you to wonder that our flight to Bifrost Bridge took so little time? And why? Because—"

Light dawned suddenly on Lance Waldron.

"Merou! If you are right—if we are now not only living in the past of our race but in the future as well—this Merou is—"

And Auld MacHamer nodded.

"Yes, Lance. Merou is—*America!*"

LANCE cried: "Then the Ancient Ones of whom Cal-thor boasted, those mighty men whose works still endured—they are at once our ancestors and our forebears!"

"That is the truth as I see it, Lance," MacHamer mused aloud. "There is a paradox here that only some physicist can explain. All I can see is that, somehow, Time must suffer the same warp that Einstein and his fellows taught us Space is subject to.

"It is infinite—but closed. In other words, Time is the rim of a great circle, endlessly revolving. Where it began, how it began, we cannot tell. Perhaps it got its impetus billions of aeons ago, rolled like a wheel to a certain—shall we say, Time-spot?

"There it lost its momentum. Its inertia died, and it began spinning slowly on its hub, over and over again, nevermore seeking a fresh path.

"And this spot, Lance, is that in which we now find ourselves. Mankind is trapped in the rim of a wheel that evermore repeats itself. At one extreme of the rim is Merou—at once the ancient birthplace of Man, and Man's world of tomorrow. At the nethermost rim, opposite Merou, is the day of our time—the world of the Twentieth Century."

Lance said dazedly: "The—the single-spoked wheel revolving on the amulet-hub! Through the geodesic control, we slid back to the opposite side—"

"Exactly. To begin again that never-ending cycle which Man must experience until sometime, somehow, somewhere, the wheel of Time receives fresh impetus."

"It can't be," said Lance. "And yet it must be. Mu—Merou—America—Merou: They are logical steps in a language. And we noted before that the tongue of Merou was at once a *root* and a *key* tongue. The city of *Spel*. In our day there was a St. Paul—"

He looked at MacHamer soberly. "Then what does it mean to us, MacHamer? How does this knowledge enable us to return to the other rim of the wheel?"

MacHamer led the way to a far corner of the cavern. There he drew a covering from a small box, similar in style to that which Lance had seen in Cal-thor's laboratory.

"It means we do not need the geodesic connector to return us to our time. We need only the smaller instrument, the one which was not broken. That which Cal-thor called the 'temporal deflector.'

"I have here several of the activated amulets with which the time-warp is established. By holding these, we who choose to do so may return to the Twentieth Century."

"Who *wish* to do so!" shouted Lance. "Is there any question in your mind about it? Why, we *all* do, don't we?" He turned to Leif, eyes gleaming: "Home again, Leif! Safe where we belong. With knowledge that will stagger mankind."

BUT Leif had turned a serious face to MacHamer. He indicated the score of Viking refugees with a gesture.

"These, MacHamer?" he asked. "Can *they* return?"

And MacHamer shook his head.

"No, Leif. It would be fatal for them to do so."

Leif Frazier touched Lance's shoulder.

"Then, my friend, I cannot go. These are my people; I am responsible for their safety," he said quietly.

Lance began: "*Your* people! Why—" Then the protest died on his lips. It was true. Leif Frazier was not only a son of these people, but a father of the race as well. And if his heart told him he must stay here—

He turned to Leyéef. "And you, Leyéef?"

The brown girl's eyes were deep and fathomless, but her movement was serene. She stepped once more into the shelter of Leif's arm.

"My place," she said simply, "is beside my love."

Humbly, Lance turned to Vale. "Vale—"

She smiled, and her smile was a caress. "I go with you," she said, "or I stay with you—as you desire. Like Leyéef, my place is beside my love."

Lance kissed her swiftly, turned to MacHamer.

"THEN it is the three of us. . . . Set the dials. Perhaps, when we get back to our own time, we may find some way to end forever this vicious cycle in which our race is trapped. If so, there may yet be salvation for Leif and these others.

But now the old man shook his head.

"You two, Lance," he corrected. "You and Vale. I remain here."

"But—but why?" cried Vale.

"In my own time, I was a humble pedant. But here I have found a sacred duty. Mankind's culture has been uprooted. Years hence, they will need one to lead them, like a Moses, out of the wilderness of their fear and savagery. It is a leadership to my liking." MacHamer smiled wanly. "And I will write the tale of these happenings, Lance."

Lance's eyes clouded. He said savagely: "If you stay, we stay too! Destroy the machine, MacHamer. Such comrades as we have been cannot be parted—"

"No, lad. You must go. It is your duty, just as it is my duty to stay, and Leif's. You must bear the message to the world; try to make mankind understand that which it has heretofore scoffed at. And now—the amulets—"

He handed one of the bloodstone amulets to Lance and another to Vale. Lance looked at his, nestling coldly in his hand, as if it were some vestige of a long-forgotten dream. It seemed a lifetime had passed since he had discovered that aluminum-mounted brooch in the crypt beyond Petra. Yet it had been only two or three months. He choked:

"MacHamer—you are sure we are doing the right thing?"

"I am sure, Lance. And now—good-by!"

He pressed the young man's hand warmly. Leif stepped forward too, and the warmth of his hand was a memory Lance would carry to his grave. Then Leyéef, stealing to his side like a soft brown fawn.

"Our adventure has been great, mine and thine, *ya akid!*" she whispered—and kissed him.

A tear trembled in Vale's eye. "Now, at the moment of farewell, I do not want to go," she said.

"You will find each other in another world," said MacHamer. He had finished setting the dials. Now he asked Lance: "You are ready, lad?"

"A moment." Lance turned to the group of Vikings who stood uncomprehending, watching the byplay. "Farewell, *einherjes!*"

Their answer came: "Farewell, O *asa!*"

Vale was in the circle of his arms. Her face was wet with tears, but fearless. She whispered, "Until we meet again, my love—" And her lips met his.

MacHamer pressed the switch. And once again, as long ago, Lance felt that spinning, giddy sensation of bottomlessness. A wrenching, tearing pain that throbbed through him, the dreadful cold, the sickness and nausea.

Then the sturdy, blinding glare that erased thought from his reeling brain. And—darkness.

HE wakened slowly, aware that about him was Stygian darkness, and that in his nostrils was the musty scent of air stale and befouled. Stiffly, groaning with pain that surged through his muscles like darts of fire, he struggled to his knees, to his feet.

He cried, "Vale!" and there was no answer. Echoes of his voice shattered the silence around him, rang in his ears hollowly. "Vale!" he cried again—then suddenly realization flooded back upon him.

He was in the crypt wherein Forsythe and Trumbull had met their death. The same crypt from which, months ago, he and Leyéef had made their strange escape. He could not be elsewhere. He had no torch, no flash, no matches with which to light the gloom, but he knew that about him, unless the Arabs had looted it, would be mementoes from past ages that would stagger the stodgiest pedant. And on the wall beside him, the wall his groping hand now touched, would be a painted wheel. The wheel of time whose mystery had led him through the maddest adventure man could know.

The doorway of the inner crypt was open. It had been smashed to kindling by the Arabs—how long ago? And the outer door too—that was open.

His strength was coming back to him now, and a smile touched Lance's lips. He wondered what the Arabs had thought when, upon bursting into the sealed crypt, they had found their quarry fled.

The bodies of Forsythe and Trumbull were gone. For that, Lance was grateful. The Arabs had at least given them the respect of a decent burial.

But—but now?

Lance moved to the aperture which once he and Dr. Forsythe had held against the Arabs, until Al-Hamid's treacherous truce. And reaching that portal, he found light. For looking down upon him, white and softly-glowing in the ebony sky, were the stars.

The stars! Could he ever look upon them again, he wondered, without searching the constellation Draco for a red, unwinking dot? Without remembering another sky, crimson as blood, from which rained a hail of fire and gravel that scored the earth with destruction?

Far in the lonely silence of the desert, a jackal's howl split the night with mournful longing. The cry was a bridge over which Lance's wandering thoughts returned to the present. He pushed his way through the opening, felt the night wind cool upon his brow.

Beneath his feet, coarse gravel crunched. The rose cliffs were now sheer walls of ebony, mysteriously chaste in the cold light of the distant stars. Petra—civilization, white men, trains, electricity, wireless, sanity—all these were miles away. But he knew the road. And it would not be too great a task to reach there ere dawn touched the desert with flame.

And beyond Petra—

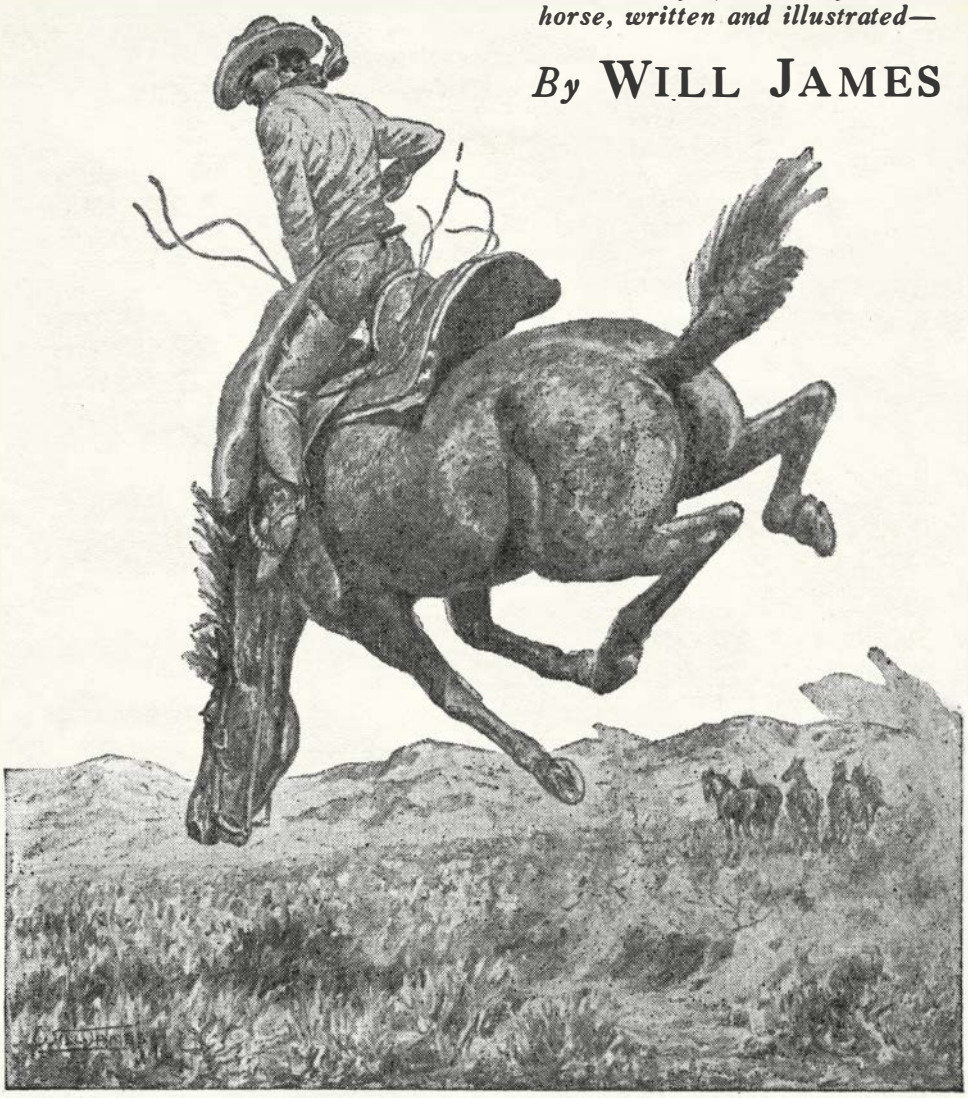
The burning need for haste stirred Lance Waldron and his thoughts leaped swiftly to another place.

ACROSS two continents and a mighty sea, in a great city miles away, was a girl who—like himself—was even now returning to reality from a portion of her life's span that evermore would seem like a ghastly dream. A girl whose eyes, Lance knew, must be turning eastward, guided by the beacon of their love.

They had an obligation, he and she. But before they could fulfill it, first they must meet. Meet and love again as they had loved in an earlier world beneath a mellower sun. And so Lance Waldron took the lonely road to Petra. But as he walked, his heart was light; the music of her name was on his lips.

A vivid story of a cowboy and his horse, written and illustrated—

By WILL JAMES

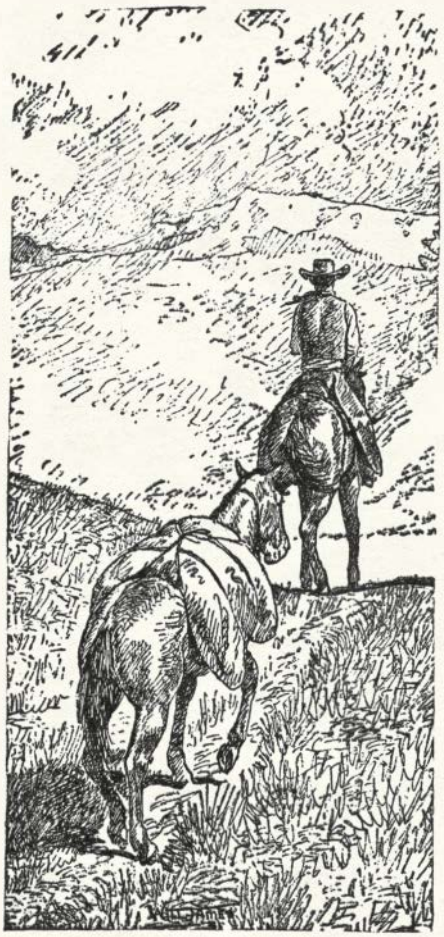


The Joker

JOKER had already been named such before he was turned over to me, and a joker he sure turned out to be. For a horse he could get himself into more predicaments that would wind up into jokes on himself, including his rider, than most humans ever do.

He was a young horse, had been rode only a few times when I slipped my rope on him and went to work for the desert cow outfit he belonged to. I'd hired out to ride for that outfit and, as the joker horse he was, he fooled me the first time I layed eyes on him.

The foreman was in the corral with me, pointing out the string of bronc's another rider had started breaking and I was to finish. Joker was one of 'em, a mighty well-set-up and good-sized blood bay, and running and snorting around the way he



was drawed my attention to him more than it did the others.

Being a stranger in that country and wanting to make a sort of acquainting conversation with the foreman, I asked him how much that Joker horse would weigh. He answered: "Make a guess."

As I've already said, Joker was a well-set-up and good-sized horse and I made my guess according to the many such size and built horses I'd handled on other ranges. After I'd caught and walked up to him I guessed him to weigh eleven hundred.

The foreman grinned some. "I weighed him at the stockyards just a few days ago," he says, "and with saddle and all, he weighed nine hundred and twenty."

Well, that was one at my expense from Joker.

It was on the next day when one of Joker's jokes turned on him. I'd made all ready the day before to hit out with a string of eight bronc's, with only one gentle horse for pack and snubbing. The foreman had left me alone at the desert cow camp, and figuring on making another such camp acrost a stretch of thirty miles and no water between (no distance for an automobile but no such country where an automobile could move).

To be sure of making that distance, along with driving my string of bronc's, I picked on one in the string which I figured would have the age, and be hard and tough enough to stand up under the long and dry ride.

After the job of saddling and topping this horse, making it as I could so's to save him and myself I opened the corral gate to start out with my string, the only gate from there to the camp I was headed for.

My string came out of the corral quiet enough, and then, a short distance down a dry wash, and all going well, this joker horse of a sudden broke loose and like a bullet hit straight out for the horse range, where I'd got him from with the others just the day before.

There was no chance of heading him off. I tried but the horse I was riding "bogged" his head (went to bucking) and then stampeded another direction, no stopping him.

After finally circling him towards where my string had been, they'd also started and going another direction from where I wanted 'em to go. With my horse now some winded, I maneuvered him so as to turn 'em. As good luck would have it, they'd stayed together. Joker being the only one missing and now very much out of sight. I had to let him go, figuring I would get him a month or so later, when I'd get back to the main camp again.

But such wasn't to be, not according to Joker, and along about the heat of noon that same day there come a streak of dust and a blood bay horse making it. It was Joker. He'd made a circle of the horse range, looking for a bunch he was used to running with, and not finding it, had returned to the string. For there was two in the string that had belonged to the same bunch.

Joker had made quite a circle and covered more than a few miles by then, and he was good to stay with the string, behaving well until camp was reached. His wild break away had turned out to be a wild goose chase and a sort of a joke. To his expense this time.

ANOTHER joke at his expense was when the foreman of this same outfit rode up to my camp and said that the owner (a mining man who knew a lot

about ore and holes in the ground but nothing about cattle) ordered him to have me move to another spring camp and run in a what he thought was a weak cow he'd drove by and seen standing in the middle of a big dry and high mesa flat, with a calf by her side, dying of thirst, he thought, and starving.

I was having my hands full with quite a few hundred head of mighty scattered cattle at the time, and the mention of having me move to another camp to take care of just one lone cow and calf more than made me and the foreman wonder and laugh some.

But orders was orders, and I sure didn't mind such an order because I'd been riding mighty hard for some time. Another rider took my place and string, all but Joker. I figured he'd be just the horse I'd need for that lone and easy job, for, with his funny and tricky ways he'd sort of keep me company.

The time being winter and no stock running in that higher country, the owner had some grub and baled hay freighted some fifty miles in to the camp for just me, Joker and cow and calf. That and my time alone cost more than the cow was worth but that wasn't considered nor any of my business, and right then I figured I'd have some easy riding for some days, at least until the owner of the outfit found out that all the cow needed was a good shove down country and where she belonged.

THE first day of my expected easy riding didn't start so good—I found the cow. She wasn't exactly in prime shape for beef. If she had she'd been easier to handle, and as she was, she was just in good shape to fight, and her husky calf was right aching for a good run.

The cow was pretty wild, and being alone with her calf that way and the sight of a rider coming up on her done everything but make her any tamer. I seen right away I'd have trouble getting that old heifer to the corral where I was to feed her and I took her as easy as possible, staying a good distance away and not turning her any more often than I could help, for, by her actions she just wanted an excuse to get on the fight, and one turn or two too many would be sure to set her off.

I let her amble on pretty well as she pleased for a ways, and being I'd started her right she headed on near the direction of the corral, only kind of at any angle. I let her amble on that direction for a ways, figuring on turning her when reaching the head of a dry wash which started from the mesa, wound through the jack pine and led on down to near where the corral was.

Spooky cattle often take to down country well, especially a wash, and if the rider sorts of keeps out of sight they'll sure ramble on in trying to lose him and not try to "brush" on him.

JOKER was working good, and when the right time come I spurted him onto her so sudden that she just like sort of fell off the rim and into the head of the wash without looking where she was going or hesitating to want to fight, and down country she went, her's and her calf's tails a-popping.

All was going fine and I kept my distance. But the fun wasn't over yet. It hadn't even started, for getting the both in the dilapidated corral that was down some miles and at the edge of the wash would still be the hardest to do. The short wings of the corral was about as good as none, and to make it still more ticklish there was some inches to a foot coating of ice at the only gate, all over the corral and on down past it a ways. That ice had formed from a spring above it, and that camp and corral seldom being used the run of the water from it took its own course.

There was a small shed at one side of the corral where the supposed-to-be poor cow and calf was to be put and it was up to me to put 'em there.

Being I hadn't crowded the cow none while she and her calf hightailed down the wash, only to get a glimpse of 'em once in a while and see that they was going right, they was sort of calmed down some when she reached the place to where I was to turn 'em towards the corral.

The cow turned easy enough and went on peaceful, until she came to the corral and the ice, and then, as I'd expected, her calf of sudden broke away and the cow also whirled to make a dash for a break. Expecting that, I of course had my loop ready. I had her too close now to let her get away. I piled it onto her as she tried to run past, at the same time put Joker to speed on through the corral gate, forgetting about the coating of ice and his getting any footing there. But with the speed we went there was no stopping, and being there was quite a slope inside the corral there was nothing for the cow to do but swap ends and follow. The shed was at the lower end of the corral. The cow,

now on the fight, even though she was sliding down on her side piled up in the shed, right with me and Joker, all on our sides.

There was a crash, bang against the log wall of the shed as the three of us hit it all in one heap. With watching the cow's horns and the slack of my rope so I wouldn't get tangled up in it I was pretty busy, and so was Joker, for he didn't neither want to be in such close quarters with that mad cow and her horns. When we all crashed into the log wall, there was enough impact so that it broke some and Joker went on halfways through. He done the rest in getting all the way through.

HE'D got his footing from the falling logs, bark and all there was under the shed and left me there with the cow. I didn't want her to go through the same hole we made, so, I dodged her horns and tied her down before she could get up, with the same rope I'd caught her with and forgot it was still hard and fast to the saddle horn.

Joker no more than got out of the shed when on slick ice he again lost his footing and slid on his side plumb to the end of the rope, drawing it tight, and now he couldn't get his feet under him so as to get up. So there he was on the outside and down and the cow inside also down.

I had a hard time standing up myself as I went along the rope to him, and the rope being so tight I seen where the only way he could get up was to uncinch the saddle and let him slide away from it to where he could get his footing.

He looked kind of foolish after that was done, and finally got to his feet again. But the only joke there was on him that time was how he sure wasn't going to bed down with that mad cow crowding him so close, and then afterwards hitting the end of the rope and get "busted" (thrown) so he couldn't get up.

Both cow and horse now taken care of I made an opening in a bare part of the corral and didn't have too much trouble getting the calf in. But I was sure to change the course of that spring water right afterwards. The ice soon got soft then and in a couple of days the most of it had melted away, leaving the corral more fit to use again.

It was in that same corral some days later when Joker, acting funny, took another bust. For having nothing to do as it was, with all the good hay he could eat, he got to feeling more rollicky than ever, if that was possible, for he always was full of the old nick and plenty of snorts.

This time I was going to catch him, figuring to ride to another spring, more to pass the time away than thinking there'd be any stock there that would need attention. I tried to stop him so I could walk up to him but there was no chance there. I made a few tries, and seeing there was nothing doing that way I went and got my rope.

Feeling as good as he did, the sight of my rope with ready loop acted sort of like a fuse to the dynamite that was in him, and before I could get to within throwing distance of him, he just sort of bounced, like a spooked antelope, and hit for dilapidated but tall corral gate. He hit it plum center and high, but not clearing it, and with the force and speed he hit it the gate crashed to splinters, at the same time, with his knees catching on the top pole that upended him to land out quite a ways and to a mighty hard fall.

It all happened so quick that all I done was stand in the corral with sudden thought that there I was without a horse, afoot, for, knowing his tricks as I did, I figured he'd jump right up and hightail it down country.

But to my surprise, when Joker jumped up, looked around kind of dazed and then spotted me inside the corral he bowed his neck and jumped right back over the gate he'd splintered just a few seconds before and into the corral again, shook his head, and snorting, stepped to within a few feet of me, facing and watching. He'd thought me responsible for the fall he'd just had, and that he'd get another if he tried to break away from me again.

WHERE he'd got that education was that, along with other happenings we'd had, and the one of just a few days before, where he'd took such a slide and hard fall had some to do to make him think he'd only get the worst of it by trying to break away. He stood quivering, but plumb still then as I walked up to him and slipped my rope over his head.

I was at that camp about a week when I took it onto myself to turn that cow and calf out and shove 'em to a country where they belonged. Where they ought to've been in the first place. Then I rode on to the main camp where I took on a fresh string of horses and went to riding from other spring camps, where a rider was really needed.

But I kept Joker in with the new string, and I was riding him along one day when

At the speed we was going we was raised high and to sail on quite a ways before landing.

I run onto a lanky steer with one horn grown bent and which was gouging into his upper jaw. That steer had been missed in quite a few round ups or that horn would of been taken care of.

I soon seen why he'd been missed, for he run alone, and soon as he seen me he was gone like a deer, hitting for a thick patch of that brushy country. But this time he was some little distance too far away from it, and before he could get to it my loop caught up with him.

But not as I wanted it to, for instead of catching him by his one straight horn and the head as I intended, the loop sailed down alongside his nose and caught him by one front foot. I didn't know I'd caught him until I pulled up on my slack, and then things happened.

It was an accident and one of the queer ones that happens with roping, but at the speed we all was going down the steep side hill, and I pulled up my slack, that steer upended to a clean turn over. He upended a second time and then as he got to scrambling to his feet, all with no let up in the speed, and neither Joker nor me expecting any such, Joker run right onto that steer's upraised rump, turning him over once more, and as that steer turned over again, Joker and me was also very much upraised by his frame, like from a prop that of a sudden come up, and at the speed we was going we was raised high and to sail on quite a ways before landing.

It was a hard landing, amongst rocks and many kinds of prickly brush. But Joker took the hardest fall, because I know we went to the end of the rope before we got back to earth again. Joker got the sudden jerk of the tied rope which flipped him to land harder. As for me I

just went sailing on, to roll over a few times and stop against a nice big boulder.

I looked back to see Joker up, all spooky from the fall. The steer was still down, with his head under him, and I tried to get at Joker before he went to the end of the rope again. But one glance of where it was and I knew what would happen. It happened during that one glance, for, as Joker got to his feet the rope was between his hind legs. As goosy as he always was, especially right then, and as he felt that rope between his hind legs was all that was needed to stir things some more. He hunched up, made a high buck jump against it and he near fell again, but this time the rope broke near the loop end, snapped back and popped him on the rump—and Joker went from there.

AS I seen him go I figured sure I was afoot this time, and so far from camp I didn't dare think about it. I didn't for the time anyway, 'cause the steer drawed my attention. He was now up, wild-eyed and looking around, aching to fight anything that moved and run to get at it. I edged to the big boulder on all fours, and as he spotted me it sure didn't take me no time to scramble up on top of it. I felt the breeze of him as he went by and thought sure he'd take a wing off my chaps with his one good horn.

He didn't go but a few yards when he turned, and seeing me on top of that boulder I thought sure he'd tackle it. I wish he had and I done everything but try to stop him from doing it. But that steer had seen and dodged plenty of boulders before, and shaking his head, like daring me to be fool enough to come down off of it, he blowed on past it again and on he went for the thick and thorny brush where he'd first headed for when my rope upended him, and as he went on that way shaking his head at every shadow as he went, still looking for something to fight, I noticed that that one bum horn of his which had been growing in his jaw had been broken off in the tumble. The work I wanted to do was done, and like yanking off a bad tooth and more, he'd now soon be all right.

I watched him go, and knowing he wouldn't return for some time I climbed down from the boulder and started on the way Joker had stampeded, not with any thought of ever finding or catching up with him, only he'd gone the direction of camp, the closest water, and a good many miles away. All I thought of was they'd sure be long ones.

I took off my chaps, throwed 'em over my back to keep the sun off, also not to hinder my walking, and as I started it was in no running walk but one set to last for some long distance, and to make it.

It was one of the very few times in my life I'd ever been set afoot. The ones before had been where I'd have to make just a few strides, and it looked like this time would sure make up for them, also any others that might come later on.

Being so all set to make the distance, I was near disappointed when going around a ledge, and not over half mile from where the steer had been well stopped, I seen Joker a-standing there, and like he was petrified.

I stood sort of petrified too, and wondering what the samhill could have stopped and was holding him. I didn't stand petrified long, and at the sight of him my disappointment soon went the opposite as I unlimbered myself towards him.

He seen me at about the same time I did him, and he didn't budge. His head was the wrong way from where he'd started, he'd turned around and seemed fixed at watching something on the ground in front of him.

I eased up then, and near had to laugh as I came near and seen what he'd been watching and seemed to hold him; it was the broken end of the rope which had got between his legs during the fall and snapped at him as he'd got up and stampeded. In his running the rope had whipped to one side and he'd turned to face it, afraid to move, for fear of getting another fall and pop on the rump.

Thinking it might spook him to another start, I didn't pick up the end of the rope as I came near him; instead I just took hold of the bridle reins, then the rope, and I never seen such a show of relaxing as I did on that horse after I'd coiled up what was left of that rope and hung it safe up on the saddle and out of his way.

THAT was another joke on Joker, for, even though it wouldn't of done him no good at the end of the long run, he could easy kept on going. Many good and well broke rope horses would have but I was mighty glad Joker had got to thinking he'd better not.

Joker played many jokes on himself and his rider that way, seldom with his knowing or meaning to. He was all life and go, and played jokes when free and amongst other horses. He was a born joker.

In Convoy

Service aboard the British escort ships in the North Sea has few dull moments.

By
"BARTIMAEUS"

(Continued from page 4)

ONE of the escort swerved off to seaward to investigate a globular floating object. There was a chatter from her Lewis gun, and the object vanished. Floating mines detached from their moorings are supposed to be safe, by International law; all the same, the German ones are better on the bottom than afloat. The sun rose, and the captain was still on the compass platform. The lookouts had not only the sea to watch, but the sky as well. One man spent his time watching the sun through a square of tinted glass. It is usually out of the sun that attacks come. The sea was gray like pewter, with little pools of brilliance, and the convoy stood out quite black against them.

About ten one of the escort far away astern opened fire with her anti-aircraft gun, and our alarm bells began a furious jangling all through the ship. Miles away in the clouds to the northeastward an enemy reconnaissance machine had been sighted, shadowing us. The guns were loaded; we exchanged our caps for shrapnel-helmets. They make your head ache after a bit, but it is astonishing how much moral support they give one.

The vigilance on the bridge became even more intensified. At intervals one of the escort astern loosed off a few rounds at the enemy, which were no more than little specks seen for an instant and then disappearing in the clouds.

The cook appeared on the bridge wearing a shrapnel helmet and a rather worried expression. The dinners were all in the oven—good hot dinners spoiling. Nobody had thought about dinner till that moment; then we all realized we were starving. Sandwiches. Can he cut sandwiches? Hundreds of them? He can. Very good.

Sounds of aircraft somewhere, and firing. The cook reappeared, carrying a tray piled with enormous corned-beef sandwiches. Like all naval cooks, he is a magician. But he still looked worried, thinking about those hot dinners that no one will eat. Everybody munched, eyes on the clouds. The loading number of the foremost anti-aircraft gun had a bit of difficulty with his sandwich and the projectile he was clasping in his arms.

One of the lookouts suddenly shouted: "Ship bearing red one O, sir." That meant that he had sighted a ship bearing very fine on the port bow. It was the leading escort of another convoy coming out of the mist to the southward. There was a curious arch of cloud and fog stretching north and south and enveloping the land. To seaward there was blue sky and extreme visibility—eight or nine miles, perhaps. The leading ship of the convoy we'd sighted passed quite close. Somebody on the bridge waved his cap. Ten minutes later our own lookout shouted:

"Plane right ahead, sir!
"Three planes!
"They're diving for us!"

THEN things happened quickly: Our foremost guns opened fire with a roar that drowned everything. The muzzles were elevated almost at the level of the bridge, and yellow flashes sprang out, obliterating the shapes of the German bombing-machines swooping over the convoy. The sea leaped up in columns where a few bombs dropped; one had an instantaneous impression of the surface of the water spurting under the hail of machine-gun bullets and falling fragments of shell, of orders shouted through the din of firing, flashes of guns in the smoke, the ship shuddering from the recoil; and suddenly it was over. The ene-

my vanished into the mist. No ship had been hit; nobody was hurt. The cook suddenly reappeared with his tray of gigantic sandwiches; we discovered again that we were ravenously hungry.

PARALLEL to the distant coast where we were steaming, the sea was bathed in sunshine—apple green to the westward, and blue to the east. The mist had rolled back over the land and hung like a wall, the color of a purple grape. It was pleasant to exchange one's helmet for a cap, and relax and smoke a cigarette. The cook reappeared with a kettle of hot sweet tea. He had evidently resigned himself to the dinners being spoiled, and looked happier.

The lookout reported an object on the bow, and presently we could make it out —a derelict ship's boat; and we knew someone had been in trouble to the southwards.

Then the lookout gave tongue again. Enemy seaplanes this time, far away to the southward. There were sounds of distant firing to the northward. Evidently another convoy was coming in for its share of excitement. The seaplanes emerged from a cloud valley and came swooping toward us.

All the guns began to fire, throwing a barrage of little black puffs in the path of the seaplanes. They banked steeply and took refuge in the clouds.

The other convoy, somewhere below the horizon, said it had beaten off a heavy attack without any casualties to the convoy. "Very good," commented the captain, watching the smoke of the barrage slowly dispersing. He had his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth.

The seaplanes reappeared, and this time they looked as if they meant business. Again the blue sky was dotted with black toadstools of smoke, and again they swerved away. Suddenly there was a shout of *"Fighters!"* And out from the land came a squadron of British fighting-planes. They flashed over our heads at three hundred miles an hour. Our gun-crews cheered them as they passed us like a swarm of infuriated wasps. The enemy seaplanes had vanished into a cloud, and the fighters dived into it in pursuit. They all disappeared. One of the escort went off to investigate a report of an enemy seaplane which had been shot down somewhere out of sight. The sun began to decline toward the land, throwing the convoy into hard relief; an escort vessel went down the line, hailing through a megaphone. None of our charges had been scratched. Not a ship lost her bearing or altered course a degree during the attack. In some indefinable way they all looked rather pleased with themselves, like perfect ladies who had passed through a pot-house brawl without so much as blinking an eyelid.

A cat with a red collar suddenly appeared, chasing a potato round the upper deck. It got tired of that in a little while, and went to sleep in the arms of one of the fire-party.

The sun sank in a great blaze of golden fire. The indefatigable cook arrived with more sandwiches, jam sandwiches this time, and more hot tea. The men had been closed up at their guns and posts for six hours. The captain had been standing by the compass for twelve hours. He gulped a cup of tea and sent down his 'baccy-pouch to be refilled.

The wind freshened, and there was a chilly nip in the air. Dusk again, and each gun-crew began passing oily cloths on the end of a rammer through their gun. Soon it was dark again. Part of the watch went below for supper.

There was a bright moon, and the captain grumbled at it; a little apologetically because it was the same moon that had shone for him over gardens in the dew, and sea-trout rivers, and the pleasant things of peace.

In war it might mean a night attack on the convoy.

BUT the night passed fairly peacefully. In the early morning light the sea became a dirty greenish yellow, with a little steep swell; we were among the shoals where no submarine and no surface ship could attack. An aërial escort took over, and our task was done.

The windows of the houses ashore were blinking like heliographs in the sun as we turned away from the convoy. The rest of the escort formed up astern of us.

In the mouth of the harbor we met an examination vessel.

The captain was still on the compass-platform with his hands in his pockets. He had at last got tired of his pipe. He bent to the voice-pipe and gave the orders for altering course, and each order was repeated by the coxswain at the wheel. His deep voice came back each time from the mouthpiece, very solemn, like the answers to a litany:

"Starboard ten!
"Midships!
"Steady!"

Rear Guard Action

An army surgeon's story

By COLONEL HENRY PAGE

IN the fall of 1899 in the city of Angeles, capital of Pampanga province in the far-away Philippines, troops were being gathered to drive Aguinaldo and his army from the Manila-Dagupan railway.

I had been ordered to serve as brigade surgeon, and my orders were urgent. I left Corregidor, where I had for a year been in command of the Corps Convalescent hospital, on an hour's notice. The launch at the dock blew an impatient blast as I hurried from my quarters, only to pause when I remembered that I had left in my room a half-pint bottle of wonderful old champagne, the last of five that had been presented to me by an English officer. Hastening back into the house, I stuffed the little bottle deep down in the haversack. Upon such trifles often hinge the destiny of men.

Finally, the brigade moved forward. At Bambam we met the enemy, and promise of a first rate battle was developing when the cavalry on the left led by the able General Bell struck the enemy flank so briskly that the native soldiers left their thin trenches and fled. At Tarlac we found deserted headquarters of the native government, and knowing that our quarry was just ahead, we pushed on in haste, following the railroad bed, which was the only part of the country out of water.

It had rained twenty hours out of each twenty-four ever since we had left Angeles, and until we reached Tarlac we had floundered oftimes waist-deep along roads impassable to all parts of our baggage train except the commissary carts drawn by water-buffalo.

It was a relief to march on the high, dry railway bank, and we progressed happily and rapidly until my satisfaction was broken by a message passed on from the rear that a man had been hurt about a mile back. Calling my orderly, I rode back with him as fast as we could, but the troops had all passed us before we reached our man. We easily located him, lying behind a fallen tree-trunk, trembling with fear and exhaustion. He was suffering from an acute dilation of the heart—which, however, did not frighten him as much as the spectacle toward which he pointed with trembling fingers: About three hundreds yards distant we saw a soldier in the hands of a howling mob of natives, who were harrying him like a group of dogs worrying a cat. He fought furiously, and a ring of prostrate natives proved his prowess; but numbers were against him, and he was literally hacked to pieces and torn limb from limb. Our sick soldier told us that the victim was a commissary sergeant who had, against orders, ranged behind the army, picking up chickens and other dainties for his officer's mess. He had been safely doing this kind of scouting for several days, but this time he had been caught.

In the distance I saw the rear guard moving between the rails, and I knew that a speedy get-away was our only chance. The mob of natives had not as yet espied us, but I knew that we could be seen as soon as we started along the elevated bed of the railroad. There was no choice, however; so we put the sick man on the orderly's pony, and the baggage behind me on my pony, and made tracks as fast as we could go. Fortunately for us, the natives did not see us until we had a long start. Then they made for us.

The rear guard was only a few hundred yards distant, but in spite of our shouts they never once glanced behind. We could have caught up with them in

a few minutes had not our progress been blocked by a railway trestle spanning a stream about ten yards wide. The army not knowing about us, had carried along with them the planks brought along to aid the horses in crossing railway bridges. Our sick man, seeing our plight, had slipped from his pony, grabbed his rifle and crossed the bridge—only to collapse on the far side. The stream below us was a sluggish pool with sharp banks which indicated depth, and before I could speak, the stampeded orderly jumped on his pony and plunged down the bank into the water, which closed over the heads of both horse and man.

HERE was a pretty kettle of fish. First the horse came up struggling with the tangled reins, which had looped over one leg. The orderly next appeared. He was not struggling, and he looked for all the world like a dead man floating in the water. I glanced behind, and with some measure of relief saw that the natives had stopped—evidently fearful of an ambush from the banks of the stream.

I plunged down the bank, just as the orderly had done, and like him, I went over my head in the water and was unhorsed. As I came up in the foam caused by the ponies, who had succeeded in getting tangled together and were kicking and plunging in their fright, I happened to get hold of my man's hair. Unlike every other drowning man I have ever seen, the orderly never struggled. He was as quiet as a log of wood, and like a log of wood he sailed to the bank and landed with his head above water.

I swam ashore and pulled him clear of the bank, and, although he gave no other sign of life, I saw that he was breathing and felt no alarm about him. What worried me was the collapsed sick man to whose side I hastened—and the natives, who still waited and watched. The bank of the stream had cut off their picture of what had been going on in the stream, and I could see them start as my head came into view. Acting on impulse, I took the soldier's rifle and fired into the mob as fast as I could pump in new shells. The natives broke and fled, and I felt that I could now perhaps save the horses. Without them, the sick man must either be abandoned or we be slain trying to protect him.

This time I removed all my equipment and swam to the ponies, who though more than half drowned, were still trying to struggle. I took my knife with me, and after some painful kicks on my legs and body, succeeded in cutting them loose. One pony swam to the bank and staggering, fell in a heap. The other did not try to reach the shore, but ceased to struggle and sank. I dived and caught one of the reins which, fortunately, was long enough to enable me to reach the bank and haul him in. I then stood to survey the scene.

It tallied somewhat as follows: one orderly lying like a dead man but breathing; one heart case as blue as indigo, apparently dying on the top of the bank; one pony very weak, but now able to stand with head drooped and trembling legs supporting him; one pony in the water with his head on the banks, rolling his eyes and ready to die; one army four hundred yards up the railway, leaving me as fast as they could tramp; one mob of natives still scattered and bluffed, but showing signs of renewed spirit.

An outsider might have painted me as one of the actors in this scene of our drama; one doctor thoroughly exhausted and thoroughly at his wits' end.

But the outsider would not have seen the ray of hope which my frugal mind had made me hide deep in my haversack—my champagne. I prayed that the bottle had not been broken, and my prayer was answered. I found it safe. With a rock I knocked off the neck and poured a few drops down the sick man's throat. Then I dosed the orderly, who revived like a man suddenly awakened from a dream. Then I tried to dose the trembling pony standing on his shaky legs, but he refused to accept my offers. Then I went to the bank, and turning over the dying pony's head, I poured down his throat a good liberal dram. The result was encouraging. The orderly was as good as new. The pony in the water dragged himself out and snorted water out of his lungs. The other pony was taking more interest in life: The man on the bank asked for another drink and seemed to be pulling up a bit.

We had not escaped from the natives, however. Realizing our peril, I rapidly loaded the sick man on the best pony, after throwing his rifle and all other impedimenta into the stream. The orderly was mounted on the other pony, and off we started. Without further incident we reached the army in safety; but at four next morning our sick man died, despite hours of watching and the best care available to a soldier marching with troops in a hostile, savage land.

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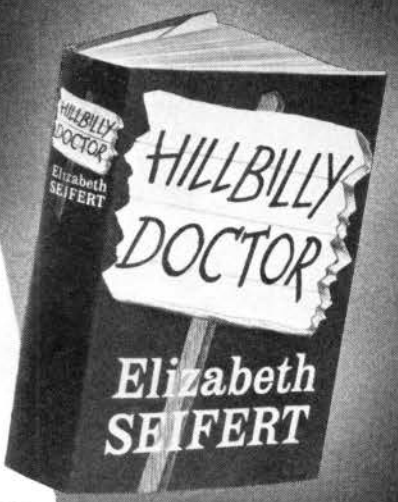

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